HERNANDEZ, PAULA E., Ph.D. Maintaining the Democratic Promise: Nonprofits Supporting Undocumented Students in Higher Education. (2025)
Directed by Dr. Kathryn Hytten. 191 pp.

The purposes of this study were to determine how nonprofits and other community organizations committed to college access for undocumented populations in restrictive states work to make higher education more accessible for this population. I also wanted to know participants' understanding of democracy and how their work of fighting for educational equity for this group contributes to supporting and maintaining our democracy. In this qualitative study, I interviewed 19 employees from 18 nonprofit and community organizations housed in ten different states across the US.

In addition to interviewing participants, I also analyzed each organization's website, reviewing information about the organization's history and founding, and annual reports when available. Using this information, I answered four research questions in order to better understand the founding of the organization, struggles faced by the organization, strategies for success, and how this work helps to maintain our democracy.

Findings from this study suggest that limited resources remain a significant barrier for nonprofit/community organizations doing college access work. Additionally, cultural norms can have a negative impact on the work these organizations do. Even still, these organizations implement creative strategies to offset many of these barriers. This includes offering holistic services to address the whole student. As it relates to democracy, most participants struggled to discuss democracy with any real nuance, and they struggled to elaborate on how their organization helps to maintain our democracy.

MAINTAINING THE DEMOCRATIC PROMISE: NONPROFITS SUPPORTING UNDOCUMENTED STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

by

Paula E. Hernandez

A Dissertation
Submitted to
the Faculty of The Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

Greensboro

2025

Approved by

_____

Dr. Kathryn Hytten
Committee Chair

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation written by Paula E. Hernandez has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair

Dr. Kathryn Hytten

Committee Members

Dr. Leila Villaverde

Dr. Katherine Mansfield

Dr. Tiffanie Lewis-Durham

October 24, 2025

Date of Acceptance by Committee

October 21, 2025

Date of Final Oral Examination

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Dr. Hytten persistently and patiently reminded me that I could do this work and that I was usually in my own head. I appreciate that warm and direct guidance. She helped me see that democracy is absolutely connected to my topic, and more importantly, that documentation status should not limit who can reap the benefits of our democratic system. Thank you for reading and re-reading this dissertation, for your patience, and for your kind words.

I also must thank Dr. Lewis-Durham for her mentorship, for her guidance, and for her friendship. She made me feel like I belonged in this program and in this field. Thank you for always answering my questions and for always providing support and wisdom. I appreciate how you have always looked out for me.

And finally, to my very small but amazing family. Thank you, Daniel, for your support and your guidance. For the small acts you do and continue to do, to see to it that I am successful, and I accomplish my dreams. I could not have done this without your support. To my sweet son Miles, thank you for sharing your mommy. Thank you for understanding when I was too busy or tired to play. Thank you for being patient with me.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

An estimated 98,000 undocumented youth graduate public high school each year in the United States (Strauss, 2019). Unfortunately, many undocumented youth find themselves in a state of limbo after completing this milestone because they are not guaranteed access to a postsecondary education due to the denial of in-state tuition rates (ISTR) in most states, as well as the lack of access to federal financial aid. What further complicates this matter is that education is *not* noted to be a fundamental right anywhere in the US Constitution. These facts are inconsistent with the founding fathers' original views of the necessity of an educated citizenry. The founding fathers viewed education as the only means to ensure the general public would not be manipulated by corrupt politicians (Black, 2021). Beyond being a means to avoid this manipulation, higher education today is often viewed as a steppingstone to success.

Even as far back as 1965, former president Lyndon B. Johnson understood that a postsecondary education was essential to success in life. This is why he implemented the Higher Education Act of 1965, which granted people from the most disadvantaged populations access to both federal scholarships and loans (Johnson, 1965). Unfortunately, this would be the first piece of legislation to negatively impact college access for undocumented populations (Kim & Diaz, 2013), as one needed to be a documented US citizen to access these benefits (Enyioha, 2019). Thus, in the same year Johnson announced a postsecondary education was a must and implemented a policy to make a postsecondary education closer to a reality for all who desired it, the citizenship requirement prevented undocumented immigrants from taking advantage of this measure. Almost sixty years later, the lasting impact of not having access to in-state tuition and federal loans and grants has drastically impacted postsecondary education enrollment and successful higher education completion rates for undocumented immigrants (Gelatt et al., 2022).

Since the 1982 Supreme Court decision on *Plyler v. Doe,* no policies have been implemented in favor of undocumented youth and their right to a postsecondary education. In fact, *Plyler* only guarantees access to free, public K-12 education. Under *Plyler*, access to a free public education was viewed as a necessity, and not just "social welfare legislation" (*Plyler v. Doe*, 1982, p. 221). I have long been curious why this same line of reasoning has not been used to argue in favor of guaranteeing all youth, regardless of documentation status, equitable access to a postsecondary education.

Two laws passed under the Clinton Administration in 1996 would further challenge the ability of undocumented youth to access higher education. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) and the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) both deny undocumented populations access to public benefits, including access to ISTR and federal financial aid. A 2021 American Community Survey (ACS) found that undocumented students only make up 2% of students enrolled in higher education ("Undocumented Students in Higher Education," 2023). Arguably, the cost of out-of-state tuition rates and lack of funding have worked to discourage undocumented youth from pursuing a postsecondary education.

Statement of the Problem

Outdated legislation has made pursuing a postsecondary education almost impossible for undocumented youth across the United States. What further complicates this issue is that US higher education policies are determined at the state level. This means that states get to make their own decisions about access to public, postsecondary education (Groce & Johnson, 2021). Since 2001, individual states have made their own policies related to higher education access: some have removed barriers to college access for undocumented students, while others have

done the exact opposite. Conservative states have used the lack of federal laws and ambiguous language in existing policies to deny undocumented students access to a higher education. And then there are states that remain quiet on the issue and do nothing to actively support or deny access. Although 24 states and the District of Columbia (DC) have implemented policies which allow access to ISTR and 18 states and DC have implemented policies for access to state and/or institutional aid (Mansfield & Hernandez, 2024), most states still comply with anti-immigrant policies, which serve largely to make college unaffordable and downright inaccessible to undocumented high school graduates.

Undocumented youth around the United States receive mixed and often confusing messages about the degree to which they deserve access to a higher education. These messages create significant challenges for undocumented youth, leaving many unsure of their college options upon completing high school. Education plays an important role in the lives of individuals and in the thriving of society as a whole; I argue that everyone is deserving of equitable access to an education, regardless of their documentation status, especially undocumented youth brought here as children. Because we live in a democratic nation, I believe that we have a social obligation to care for this population, as they are citizens of our communities regardless of the legality of their status. The notion that our community thrives when the individual members of our community also thrive is consistent with democratic ideals. Undocumented youth are absolutely a part of our communities regardless of their legal status, especially youth brought here as children who have attended our K-12 public school systems and are integrated into our society. Gonzales et al. (2015) claim that public K-12 education allows undocumented immigrants to "embed themselves in social networks and become familiar with the norms and values of US society" (p. 324). Dewey (1916) claimed that democracy "is

primarily a mode of associated living" (MW 9, p. 93). To thrive as a democratic society, we must work together to ensure all our members are growing into the best versions of themselves, and the reality is that higher education has the potential to open doors for our members to succeed in their chosen vocational paths and thrive as people. Removing the barriers undocumented youth face when attempting to attend college is one of the first steps that we can take to help these young adults thrive.

While there are politicians in conservative states who take advantage of the lack of federal laws and ambiguous legal language and use that to establish anti-immigrant policies that create barriers for undocumented youth to pursue a postsecondary education, some institutions located in states without active policies on college access for undocumented groups have gone the opposite direction. Some institutions housed within states without active policies to support undocumented youth interpret the lack of these policies to mean they can create their own equitable policies to support undocumented students. This support can vary based on a student's undocumented status. For instance, there are those who are simply undocumented, meaning they have zero protections as a result of their status. Then, there are those who benefit from the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program implemented during in 2012 under the Obama Administration. If eligible for this program, young adults can get a driver's license, work, go to school, and most importantly, live without fear of deportation ("DACA," 2021b). I will refer to DACA recipients in these ways: DACA and DACAmented throughout this dissertation. I provide a brief history of DACA in the background context section of this chapter.

From previous research, I determined that at least ten states actively ban access to ISTR to undocumented youth. Although these states actively ban ISTR, there are nonprofits and other community organizations housed in these restrictive states that work to actively assist this

population with accessing higher education. Unfortunately, there is a lack of research documenting strategies of success for these organizations as they openly support their undocumented students. Knowing how these organizations created a path toward greater access for undocumented students could open the doors for other nonprofits and community organizations eager to do this work. With our current political environment, including states that once offered ISTR now revoking access to affordable tuition rates for this population, it is vital to know how these organizations were established and what strategies they use to be successful as they work to improve college access for undocumented youth in restrictive states.

Another key problem is that limiting access to higher education for an entire population also creates problems for the health of our democracy. Withholding access to an advanced education has the potential to hold an entire population back. Wilkinson and Pickett warn "if you fail to avoid high inequality, you will need more prisons and more police. You will have to deal with higher rates of mental illness, drug abuse and every other kind of problem," as this "inequality gradually corrodes the social fabric" (as cited in Nixon, 2011, pp. 116-117). I do not think we have fully assessed how limited access to a higher education harms our democracy in this way.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine how nonprofits and other community organizations committed to college access for undocumented populations in restrictive states work to make higher education more accessible for this population. I also wanted to determine participants' understanding of democracy and how their work of fighting for educational equity for this group contributes to supporting and maintaining our democracy. By analyzing the factors that influenced the organizations' founding, the struggles these organizations face, and the

strategies these organizations use to be successful, this research highlights not only why making college accessible for undocumented youth sustains our democracy, it also reveals how college access work is democratic in general. I argue why college access for undocumented immigrants is consistent with democratic ideals and how in not providing undocumented immigrants with the potential to earn a college degree, we threaten the health and flourishing of our democracy. Ultimately, I aim to add to the conversation around college access and why we should include undocumented youth in our fight for educational equity and democratic justice.

Research Questions

I designed this study to answer the following research questions:

1. What factors at the community/state level influenced the founding of the organization to help improve college access for undocumented youth?
2. What struggles do these organizations face in doing college access work for undocumented youth?
3. What strategies do nonprofits/community organizations use while working to improve college access for undocumented youth and what are their impact?
4. How does the college access work being done at these organizations help support and maintain our democracy?

Background Context

In order to better understand the contemporary landscape for undocumented students trying to access higher education, a reader needs to understand what has led to limited college access for undocumented youth across to the US. I organize this section into the following subsections: the history of immigration in the US, the history of legislation impacting college access for undocumented youth, the landscape of college access and restrictions across the US,

and how undocumented youth are painted as underserving. I also discuss information on education finance policy in order to provide a better understanding of funding in higher education. Since this study includes accounts from participants at nonprofit organizations, I also include some information on nonprofit organizations.

Brief History of Immigration in the US

The first permanent European settlement was established in 1565 in St. Augustine, Florida by Spanish immigrants (Kiger, 2025). In fact, "by the early 1600s, communities of European immigrants dotted the Eastern seaboard, including the Spanish in Florida, the British in New England and Virginia, the Dutch in New York, and the Swedes in Delaware" ("U.S. Immigration Timeline," 2025). While some were fleeing religious persecution (Pilgrims and Puritans), enslaved Africans were stolen from their native countries and brought against their will. Beyond this, most accounts of immigration in the US begin in the 1800s due to the mass migration to America during this time.

Immigration in the United States can be divided into four periods based on the drastic economic and political changes occurring in the US at the time: the first period is from 1840-1890, the second period 1891-1920, third period 1920-1965, and the fourth period from 1965 to present (Gerken, 2013). The first two periods witnessed mostly European immigrants and while the third wave experienced a rise in Mexican immigrants, the fourth and most current wave has consisted of a majority of Latinx immigrants, followed by Asian immigrants (Gerken, 2013). While the influx of nonwhite immigrants coincides with a rise in anti-immigrant legislation, it was not the first event to influence such legislation. Eligibility for US citizenship has always favored white people, and this can be traced back to the first law established on granting citizenship, the Nationality Act of 1790. Under this act, an immigrant needed to be a free white,

have good character, and have resided in the US for at least two years before being granted naturalized citizenship ("Nationality Act of 1790," 2019).

Several factors influenced the rise in immigration to the US from Mexico and other South and Central American countries. The Bracero Program was implemented in 1942 as a temporary measure to offset the agricultural labor shortage created during World War II and under this executive order, Mexican men were allowed to come to the US to work short term contracts (Library of Congress, n.d.). The Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) Commissioner argued that federal policies were to blame for the influx in unauthorized Mexican immigrants in the US, particularly terminating the Bracero Program in 1964 and implementing the US Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 which limited the number of Western Hemisphere immigrants, making it harder for those from Mexico and Central America to come here legally and for those already here to gain legal status (Macías-Rojas, 2018). According to Macías-Rojas (2018), "in the late 1960s, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) Commissioner portrayed immigrants as workers, not criminals" (p. 3). By the 1990s the rhetoric on unauthorized immigrants as workers would shift drastically.

In the 1970s though 1980s politicians found their scapegoats for social problems in the US, blaming undocumented immigrants for the rise in criminality, among other issues. They blamed undocumented immigrants for overcrowding in prisons, which researchers have shown was actually due to the tough-on-crime and mass incarceration policies enacted under the Reagan and Clinton Administrations (Kerwin, 2018). In fact, Kerwin (2018) claims that "this line of attack morphed into criticism of undocumented immigrants for crowding schools, hospitals, and other institution, and allegedly forcing US taxpayers to bear the cost" and this would ultimately lead to Clinton taking a "tougher stance on unauthorized immigration and crime" (p. 193).

Immigration reform discourse has greatly been influenced by neoliberal ideologies. This is especially evident in the reform tactics used in 1995-1996 which depicted immigrants as potential risks of welfare abuse, among other factors, and as a result, "the state shifted more responsibility to immigrants and their sponsors, expecting them to manage economic risks and provide financial support" (Gerken, 2013, p. 20). Undocumented immigrants were painted as undeserving of any public assistance, especially because they were *not* citizens. In fact, the *U.S. Immigration Policy: Restoring Credibility* report released by the US Commission on Immigration Reform in 1994 found immigrants to be undesirable because of their lack of a legal right to join the US labor market, making them potential financial burdens on the United States (Gerken, 2013). The commission would go on to recommend a threefold strategy to help eliminate this risk: first, establish better border management in order to prevent illegal entries; second, implement a system to verify legal work authorization; and third, ensure that undocumented immigrants do not receive publicly funded services outside of emergency care (Gerken, 2013).

Ultimately, the Clinton Administration used neoliberal ideologies to implement the two anti-immigrant policies that have impacted college access among undocumented youth the most, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) and the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA). However, prior to these two policies, the Higher Education Act of 1965 already set a foundation for making college inaccessible for undocumented college students. In the next section, I explore the history of the legislation that has directly impacted college access for undocumented youth in more detail.

History of Legislation Impacting College Access for Undocumented Youth

As I mentioned in the previous section, there are several key pieces of federal legislation that impact college access for undocumented youth. In this section, I look at four of the most important ones: the Higher Education Act of 1965, the 1982 Supreme Court case *Plyler v. Doe*, PRWORA & IIRIRA, and the DREAM Act.

Higher Education Act of 1965

The Higher Education Act was signed into law in 1965 under President Lyndon Johnson. President Johnson was alarmed at the challenges that citizens, particularly those from lower- and middle-income families, faced when attempting to advance their education (Johnson, 1965). In a message addressed to congress titled *Toward Full Educational Opportunity*, President Johnson (1965) proclaimed, "higher education is no longer a luxury, but a necessity." Of utmost importance within this speech was President Johnson's (1965) main goal to "bring better education to millions of disadvantaged youth who need it most." In this speech, he provided a detailed plan for the ways in which he would establish policies to make college more accessible for disadvantaged youth across the United States—a means *toward full educational opportunity* for *all*—by providing access to both federal scholarships and loans (Johnson, 1965).

The language President Johnson used within this speech reads as all encompassing—democratic even. He wanted full educational opportunity to be a national goal, claiming "every child must be encouraged to get as much education as he has the ability to take" and declaring this was an imperative goal for both the child and the nation's sake (Johnson, 1965). Describing the role of federal funding, President Johnson (1965) proclaimed "this expenditure is a small price to pay for developing our nation's most priceless resource," referring to the children. In fact, within this very declaration, President Johnson emphasized how not even our democratic

system of government mattered—at least not in comparison to the importance of every child being educated—because, as he stated, "for freedom is fragile if citizens are ignorant" (Johnson, 1965). This is similar to statements made by our founding fathers, as they understood all too well the chaos that could ensue when citizens were left uneducated and thus could not engage in self-governance, especially in the hands of corrupt politicians (Black, 2021).

A major caveat to accessing the federal scholarships and loans made available under the Higher Education Act of 1965 is that the Act mandated recipients be either US citizens or US permanent residents (Enyioha, 2019). In fact, the Higher Education Act of 1965 is the "first piece of federal legislation to affect undocumented students' access to postsecondary education" (Kim & Diaz, 2013, p. 80). Thus, a plan that ostensibly was implemented to ensure that *all* disadvantaged youth had access to funding for college was not in fact for *all*, as it was denied to those same disadvantaged youth if they were undocumented. Requiring people to provide proof of legal citizenship or permanent residency to access financial benefits for college has created major obstacles for undocumented high school graduates across the United States. Kim and Diaz (2013) claim that "the affordability of higher education remains a critical issue for many, but particularly for low-income students and families from immigrant backgrounds" (p. 57). A report from the Migration Policy Institute on low-income immigrants in the US found that of the more than 44 million immigrants in the US as of 2019, one-third, or 14.8 million, were low income and only 16%, or about 2.4 million, had a college degree (Gelatt et al., 2022).

Plyler v. Doe (1982)

Following the Higher Education Act of 1965, the next major federal decision to impact access to education for undocumented students was the supreme court case of *Plyler v. Doe*. In 1975, James Plyler, a Texas superintendent, claimed that because immigrant children required

special needs due to language barriers, which meant additional costs on school districts, that school districts should be allowed to charge immigrant children tuition, or worse, ban them altogether from public schools (Enyioha, 2019; Olivas, 2012). Plyler further argued that due to their undocumented status, the Fourteenth Amendment did not apply to these children (Enyioha, 2019). Seven years later the Supreme Court ruled on *Plyler v. Doe*, which would secure access to a free public K-12 education for undocumented youth. In response to Plyler's argument that undocumented immigrants should not have rights guaranteed under the Fourteenth Amendment due to their documentation status, the Supreme Court declared that "while undocumented people are not citizens they are people which means they have the protections of the Fourteenth Amendment" (Enyioha, 2019, p. 4). *Plyler* was a major victory for undocumented families, as it was the first piece of legislation that granted undocumented youth access to an education. Unfortunately, that guaranteed access was strictly for a public K-12 education, and nothing beyond.

PRWORA and IIRIRA

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) and the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) were both signed into law in 1996 under President Bill Clinton. Clinton's goal was to "end welfare as we know it" and he believed that this could only be accomplished by making people become independent and personally responsible for their actions, and limiting their access to public assistance (Gerken, 2013, p. 11). Around the time these laws were being implemented, immigrants had been framed in the media as welfare abusers, and this would greatly influence the language incorporated into PRWORA and IIRIRA in order to prevent undocumented people from receiving what some thought of as unearned benefits that should only come with legal citizenship.

The legal language of Title IV of PRWORA restricted public benefits for undocumented immigrants, stating:

> (1) it is a compelling government interest to enact new rules for eligibility and sponsorship agreements in order to assure that aliens be self-reliant in accordance with national immigration policy; and (2) it is compelling government interest to remove the incentive for illegal immigration provided by the availability of public benefits. (H.R.3734 - 104th Congress, 1995-1996)

Public benefits include access to loans, professional licenses, commercial licenses, and even a postsecondary education, among other things (Manuel, 2016). PRWORA additionally "bars the provision of 'state and local public benefits' to aliens who are 'not lawfully present in the United States' unless the state enacts legislation that 'affirmatively provides' for their eligibility" (Manuel, 2016, para. 2). Alien is an adopted legal term meaning "foreigner" or "outsider" (Scobey-Thal, 2014). This term is often used to refer to undocumented immigrants. PRWORA has served its purpose of barring public benefits to undocumented people. Today some states use PRWORA to bar financial benefits, but other more conservative states use it to bar financial benefits and even enrollment to their public postsecondary institutions overall.

IIRIRA was designed to ensure undocumented immigrants did not receive benefits that legal citizens could be denied. In fact, section 505 of the IIRIRA states,

> …an alien who is not lawfully present in the United States shall not be eligible on the basis of residence within a State (or a political subdivision) for any postsecondary education benefit unless a citizen or national of the United States is eligible for such a benefit…without regard to whether the citizen or national is such a resident… (Amuedo-Dorantes & Sparber, 2014, p. 12).

IIRIRA has primarily been used as a means to prevent undocumented students from paying in-state tuition rates based on their residency, something that would be denied to legal citizens pursuing a degree in a state other than their state of residency. However, the challenge here is that because undocumented people are here illegally, they cannot establish legal residency in their home state, no matter how long they have lived there. Even though states subsidize in-state tuition because residents pay state taxes, which support state schools, and in essence this discount is *earned* by paying these taxes, because undocumented people cannot establish legal residency, they do not qualify for this benefit (Litant, 2025). Combined, PRWORA and IIRIRA have greatly limited college access for undocumented youth across the US.

The Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act

In contrast to PRWORA and IIRIRA, there have been several federal level acts aimed to support undocumented youth, the DREAM Act and later DACA. According to Palmer and Davidson (2011), "in 2001, the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act was created to make undocumented immigrant students eligible to pay in-state tuition funds for public higher education along with putting them on the pathway to citizenship" (as cited in Enyioha, 2019, p. 3). Since this time, "at least 20 versions of the Dream Act have been introduced to Congress" ("The Dream Act," 2024, p. 2). The initial version of the Dream Act would have repealed Section 505 of the IIRIRA, which would have in turn allowed undocumented students who met certain criteria to become legal residents and provided access to federal and state funded financial aid (Kim & Diaz, 2013). Unfortunately, this act could not have been introduced at a worse time. The DREAM Act was introduced in August of 2001 and just one month later the United States would endure the terrorist attacks of September 11th. Anti-immigration sentiment followed, resulting in immigration being viewed as a homeland security

issue (Gerken, 2013). The events of 9/11 put a halt to the bipartisan support the initial version of the DREAM Act held. The failure of the DREAM Act would light the path for Deferred Action of Childhood Arrivals (DACA), which was implemented in 2012 under the Obama administration as a result of the DREAM Act failing to pass. DACA must be renewed every two years and provides temporary deportation relief to those who qualify ("DACA," 2021b).

Over 830,000 DACA recipients have benefited from the program by being able to "work lawfully, attend school, and plan their lives without the constant threat of deportation" ("DACA," 2021b). Some qualifications for DACA include being under 31 years of age as of 2012, coming to the US younger than age 16, having continuously lived in the US from 2007 to now, being currently enrolled in school or graduated, and not having been convicted of a felony offense ("DACA," 2023a). Once an individual qualifies for DACA, they can potentially benefit from postsecondary educational benefits in certain states, including access to in-state tuition rates and state-based aid (NCSL, 2021). In fact, Price and Mowry-Mora (2020) claim that being a DACA recipient is a means to accessing a higher education, especially when compared to those who are nonDACA. A 2019 national survey of DACA recipients revealed that 93% of respondents claimed they were able to pursue college as a result of DACA, something that would not have happened without the program ("DACA," 2021b). Unfortunately, DACA applications have been put on hold since July 2021. This means that no new applications are being accepted. DACA was also ruled unlawful in September 2023 by a federal judge in Texas (NILC, 2023). Additionally, because of the eligibility requirements of DACA, only a quarter of the nearly 100,000 undocumented high school graduates will be eligible ("DACA and Dreamers," 2022), which will greatly impact college access as it limits resources that are provided specifically to DACA recipients.

The DREAM Act as originally envisioned never came to fruition and unfortunately, it was the last proposed legislation of its kind, especially in terms of improving college access for undocumented immigrants. Even though the DREAM Act never officially passed, some states have enacted their own policies to allow more college access opportunities for undocumented immigrants residing in their state. I turn now to the landscape of college access and restrictions in the US.

Landscape of College Access and Restrictions

As previously noted, the *Plyler* Court's decision guaranteeing access to a free education was only granted for K-12 public schools. Since this 1982 ruling, no legislation has addressed guaranteeing educational access beyond K-12 for undocumented youth. As a result, states get free reign in the decisions they make about college access. This means states get to decide their own admission policies (Trivette & English, 2017). Additionally, because the Supreme Court has never spoken in favor or against providing in-state tuition to undocumented youth, states get to make their own policies on the matter (Lee, 2012). All in all, this means states make their own policies regarding higher education access for this population. Some states use this freedom to enact policies to positively impact college access for undocumented youth, while others do the opposite. In this section, I explore this history of what states have done to grant or restrict access to this group.

In 2001, Texas enacted the Texas Dream Act, or HB 1403, becoming the first state to provide access to in-state tuition rates to undocumented youth in their state. To qualify for this benefit, undocumented students have to meet certain qualifications, including graduating from a high school in the state or receiving their GED, residing with a parent or guardian while in high school, living in the state for at least three years, and filing for permanent residency as soon as

they are eligible (Sikes & Valenzuela, 2016). In becoming the first state to enact access to in-state tuition rates for this population, Texas set the foundation for eligibility requirements for other states that eventually enacted similar in-state tuition policies for undocumented immigrants. Other states use similar, if not the same, eligibility requirements to provide this benefit to their undocumented students. For example, California enacted the California Dream Act, or AB 540, the same year as Texas' Dream Act. California's eligibility for in-state tuition rates mirrors Texas, minus the requirement of living with a parent or guardian while in high school ("California Nonresident Tuition Exemption," n.d.). Over the course of 23 years, 24 states and DC have enacted policies allowing eligible undocumented immigrants and DACA recipients to pay in-state tuition rates (see Appendix A) (Mansfield & Hernandez, 2024).

Access to in-state tuition benefits can vary depending on whether a student has DACA or not. For instance, two states (Arkansas and Ohio) allow only those with DACA status to take advantage of in-state tuition rate benefits. In 2019, Arkansas enacted HB 1864, granting DACA recipients' access to in-state tuition rates. Arguably, state representatives allowed this because they view DACA a legalized status, even though the legal language of the bill refers to this status as "nontraditional documented immigration status" (Arkansas State Legislature, 2019, p. 1). Four states (Delaware, Iowa, Michigan, and Pennsylvania) without active policies allow access to in-state tuition rates for both DACA and undocumented students but only at specific institutions, two states (Idaho and Maine) allow only DACA recipients access to in-state tuition rates at specific institutions, ten states actively bar access to in-state tuition rates for this population, and eight states have no active policies (Mansfield & Hernandez, 2024).

In 2005, Texas amended HB 1403, enacting SB 1528 to grant undocumented youth access to state based financial aid ("TASFA," 2022). This made Texas the first state to provide

undocumented youth access to such funding. Eligibility requirements under this bill include having lived in the state at least three years before graduating high school and enrolling in a public university, as well as filing an affidavit with the school saying the student will apply to legalize their status as soon as they are eligible ("Senate Bill 1528," n.d.). Again, California followed suit, but this time it was not until 2011 and that funding was limited at first. AB 130 was enacted in 2011, granting access to "privately funded UC scholarships" and "other UC scholarships and grants;" later that year AB 131 was enacted, granting access to "Cal Grant awards and for grants and scholarships awarded by California public colleges and universities" ("AB 540 and SB 68 Eligibility," n.d.).

Since 2005, 18 states and DC have enacted policies to allow undocumented youth and DACA recipients access to financial aid. Connecticut is the only state that exclusively permits DACA recipients to access financial aid. Interestingly, Connecticut's Public Act No. 18-2 does not directly state that eligibility is based on DACA status, but the eligibility requirements are the exact same as the requirements one must meet to qualify for DACA ("Financial Aid for Undocumented Students," n.d.). Two states grant access to financial aid to undocumented youth and DACA recipients at specific institutions, eight states ban access to financial aid for both groups, and 21 states have no active policies (Mansfield & Hernandez, 2024).

Under 8 US Code §1611 undocumented immigrants are barred from accessing federal public benefits ("8 U.S. Code §1611," n.d.). "Federal public benefit" is defined under subsection B as:

> (B) any retirement, welfare, health, disability, public or assisted housing, postsecondary education, food assistance, unemployment benefit, or any other similar benefit for which payments or assistance are provided to an individual, household, or family eligibility unit

by an agency of the United States or by appropriated funds of the United States ("8 U.S. Code §1611," n.d.).

In 2006, Colorado was the first state to invoke §1611 when it became the first state to implement restrictive policies on college access, enacting HB 1023, which denied those 18 and older access to public benefits unless they could prove citizenship (Colorado General Assembly, 2006). Remarkably, Colorado is now considered a progressive state as it relates to college access as they provide both in-state tuition rates and state-based financial aid to undocumented youth residing in their state who meet eligibility requirements (Colorado Department of Higher Education, 2016; Colorado General Assembly, 2019).

Unfortunately, despite being progressive currently, Colorado set the foundation for conservative states like Alabama and South Carolina to implement restrictive policies on college access for undocumented youth. These two states have the harshest policies on college access for undocumented immigrants. In addition to barring access to in-state tuition rates and financial aid, Alabama and South Carolina also bar enrollment for this population in their public postsecondary institutions (Mansfield & Hernandez, 2024). They borrow language from §1611 to justify their actions, claiming public postsecondary institutions are a federal public benefit. Since then, eight additional states have barred access to in-state tuition rates, and six additional states have barred access to financial aid (Mansfield & Hernandez, 2024).

Now that I have detailed the history of immigration, the legislation that has impacted college access for undocumented youth, and provided a brief synopsis of the landscape of policies on college access and restrictions, I briefly address how the ways in which this population has been depicted influences us, as a nation, and our views on this groups deservingness of access to a higher education.

Painting Undocumented Youth as Undeserving

The criminalization of undocumented immigrants has worked to impact native-born and documented citizens views of their deservingness of access to public goods, and ultimately to a better life. As legal/documented US citizens are increasingly influenced by neoliberal ideals, it is easier to become more supportive of *not* providing public benefits to an entire population, especially when that population has been depicted as welfare abusers, criminals, and tax evaders. Although our founding fathers had hopes of us living in a democratic society where we were concerned for the collective and the thriving of all members (Hytten, 2017), neoliberal actions and policies have pushed us more towards individualism.

As part of a culture of individualism, we are taught (both implicitly and explicitly) to favor hardworking people who pull themselves up by the bootstraps and to disfavor those who ask for assistance. Public benefit programs were favored most when white people predominantly benefitted from such assistance and the perceptions of these programs began to change when people of color were finally allowed to access these programs (Ward, 2020). In fact, as more minorities were able to access public benefits, the Reagan Administration (influenced by neoliberal ideals) began to "tighten eligibility requirements" and make cuts to public assistance programs (Ward, 2020). Welfare reform support among Republicans, Democrats, and the public at large came with the belief that "welfare programs encouraged nonwork and induced other behavioral problems such as nonmarital births and crime among the poor" (Haskins, 2006, p. 2). Clinton, the Democratic candidate at the time, used welfare reform discourse as a means to secure his presidency.

The 1990s saw a rise in undocumented immigrants being criminalized. Prior to this decade, "immigration was not yet entangled with crime in the public imagination" (Macías-

Rojas, 2018, p. 7). The Democratic Party drastically changed this perspective, especially with Clinton's tough-on-crime stance. In fact, Macías-Rojas (2018) argues that prior to Clinton, "discourse and public opinion fluctuated between being pro-immigrant or restrictive" (p. 7). Although crime rhetoric about this population was initially specifically geared towards incarcerated immigrants, "the rhetoric of 'overcrowding' in jails and prisons soon spread to the immigration arena and all aspects of public life" (Macías-Rojas, 2018, p. 8). Popular discourse has led US legal citizens to believe their hard-earned tax dollars have paid for this overcrowding and supposed overuse of social services by immigrants (Kerwin, 2018). The criminalization of immigrants persists, in spite of the fact that numerous studies have proven that "immigrants are less likely to commit serious crimes or be behind bars than the native-born, and high rates of immigration are associated with lower rates of violent crime and property crime" (Ewing et al., 2015, p. 1).

Other events have greatly impacted anti-immigrant sentiment. One major event was the September 11th terrorist attacks. These attacks increased hostility towards undocumented immigrants, further perpetuating the rhetorical connection between crime and immigration. The terrorist attacks also made immigration a homeland security issue (Gerken, 2013; Macías-Rojas, 2018). The 9/11 attacks still significantly impact immigration policies today (Chishti & Bolter, 2021). Ewing et al. (2015) claim "post-9/11 policies not only increased funding for various immigration-enforcement functions as part of the broader effort to enhance national security, but fostered an 'us or them' mentality in which 'they' are the foreign-born" (p. 15).

Apart from the anti-immigrant sentiment in the wake of 9/11, politicians have used anti-immigrant discourse to fuel their candidacy, just as former, and current, presidents have used this discourse to secure their presidency. For example, Clinton pledged to "end welfare as we know

it," pushing independence and personal responsibility, especially for undocumented immigrants (Gerken, 2013), while Trump claimed he would build a wall across the Mexico border and have Mexico fund it if elected, in order to deter criminals and rapists (Collinson & Diamond, 2016). Consistently, politicians depict undocumented immigrants and the immigration problem in ways that they think will help advance their candidacy.

One final misconception, the extent to which undocumented immigrants pay taxes, has greatly impacted the how legal US citizens view undocumented immigrants. Political candidates have depicted undocumented immigrants as tax evaders for years, using it as a means to stoke fear and anger among legal US citizens. The reality is undocumented immigrants do pay taxes. In fact, "undocumented workers [pay] billions in taxes for retirement benefits they will likely never receive" (Fernández Cambell, 2016). Additionally, Fernández Cambell (2016) claims that "[undocumented workers] also help fund public schools and local government services by paying sales and property taxes like any other resident." And George Mason University economics professor Clemens states, "undocumented immigrants pay taxes, amounting to tens of billions of dollars in local, state, and federal taxes per year" (as cited in Fichera, 2023). Fichera (2023) also adds that undocumented immigrants pay these taxes, "even though they can't access most benefits that U.S. citizens are entitled to receive."

These racist and stereotypical tactics Republicans and Democrats have used to depict undocumented immigrants as welfare abusers and criminals are similar to tactics used over the years to criminalize Black people and deny them access to public benefits (Ward, 2020). This line of attack works to create fear and apathy among other citizens who seemingly follow the rules. Ewing et al. (2015) claim "immigration policy is frequently shaped more by fear and stereotype than by empirical evidence, which is partly why immigrants are often treated like

dangerous criminals by the U.S. immigration system" (p. 3). The negative ways in which undocumented immigrants have been depicted influence both anti-immigrant policies and how legal US citizens view them as underserving.

The background context I have provided helps the reader gain a better understanding of how immigration status has evolved over the decades, changing the life trajectories of many undocumented young adults along the way. US immigration polices greatly changed as immigrant groups coming to the US changed. These changes influenced immigration policy, which has in turn greatly impacted college access for undocumented youth. I now turn to education finance policy to provide an understanding of the history of higher education funding as this also influences the post-secondary options for immigrant students.

Education Finance Policy

In order to understand the topic of college access as it relates to affording college via access to in-state tuition rates and financial aid, it is important to understand how and why policies on postsecondary education funding are implemented. Here I provide a brief overview of the history of higher education funding.

Prior to Morrill Act of 1862, funding for public colleges was "sporadic at best for postsecondary education, which relied heavily on student fees, private gifts, and grants" (McKeown-Moak & Mullin, 2014, p. 8). Justin Morrill is often credited with making higher education more accessible to all as the Morrill Act of 1862, which fostered land grant colleges, helped provide federal aid to states who established agricultural and mechanical colleges (Thelin, 2004; McKeown-Moak & Mullin, 2014). This also opened the door for more public universities. The GI Bill of 1944 would continue to make college more accessible and affordable as it provided financial aid via portable student aid grants to veterans who served after 1940 (Thelin,

2004). The Truman Commission Report of 1947 also attempted to expand education equity and access by showing how the federal government could reshape higher education via federal funding, supporting marginalized students, offering free two-year community college, and strengthening democracy by shaping students into active citizens ("President's Commission of Higher Education," 1947; Thelin, 2004). While not everything from this report was implemented, the community college system and federal aid were impacted.

Hearn and Holdsworth (2004) state, "In the early 1950s, there was virtually no federal student aid available for the masses of Americans who had not served in the armed forces" (p. 40). St. John and Parsons (2004) claim, "in the 1960s and '70s, the federal government acquired a major role in funding need-based student aid as a means of equalizing educational opportunity" (p. 2). As higher education was seen as public good because of societal and economic benefits, public investment rose significantly during this time period. The 1972 Pell Grant program, which originated out of the Higher Education Act of 1965 under President Lyndon Johnson, was implemented to increase college access for lower-income students (Parsons, 2004). During this time, there was more consensus about the social and economic benefits for the public to invest in higher education, as liberals and conservatives both supported these efforts; liberals for educational opportunity expansion and conservatives for the economic development benefits of a more educated populace (St. John & Parsons, 2004). In the 1980s, conservatives began to doubt higher education's value and instead started to view it as unproductive, and student aid ineffectual; this sentiment would erode the consensus of the two parties as "this new conservative position valued economic development over social development" and these ideals "dominated federal higher education policy throughout the early 1990s," ultimately pushing views of higher education in many states away from that of a public good and more into a private

good (St. John & Parsons, 2004, p. 3). This had a significant impact on states reducing funding for public institutions, resulting in rises in tuition costs—placing cost onto students and their families. In fact, Webber (2017) claims, "the average four-year public university has seen its per-student state/local funding drop more than 30% over the past 30 years" and these reductions in appropriations from the state are often the result of economic downturns (p. 1). Now that I have provided a brief overview of higher education funding, I provide some details on nonprofit organizations. This information is important because as federal and state funding diminishes, many students turn to non-profit organizations seeking support.

Nonprofits

Since the majority of participants in my study worked at a nonprofit that helps with immigrant access to higher education, I provide a brief definition of nonprofit organizations here. Nonprofits function for the betterment of our communities. They serve the public and social causes and income generated is then put back into the organization, not given to shareholders (Fraraccio, 2025). Funding for these organizations comes from donations, grants, and fundraising. According to the National Council of Nonprofits (2025), "[nonprofits] foster civic engagement and leadership, drive economic growth, and strengthen the fabric of our communities." Non-profit organizations often provide lifelines for members of marginalized groups, providing information, resources, and economic support. These are all critical to thriving in society, and thus they are valuable democratic assets. As I have been discussing, I think a robust vision of democracy can help us to see why supporting undocumented student access to higher education is public good. In the next section, I turn to democratic theory and how it shapes my understanding of the rights that ought to be afforded to undocumented students, and concurrently, provides the theoretical framework for my study.

Theoretical Framework: Democracy, Undocumented Immigrants, and Education

Since 1965, legislation influenced by anti-immigration policy has greatly impacted college access for undocumented immigrants. Despite research illustrating that access to in-state tuition rates positively influences enrollment for undocumented youth (Amuedo-Dorantes & Sparber, 2014; Flores, 2010), and the multiple studies that have shown that access to funding is vital for undocumented youth to attend and complete college (Diaz-Strong et al., 2011; Price & Mowry-Mora, 2020; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015), policies banning basic access still exist. These outdated, antidemocratic policies, that are fueled by racist stereotypes, intentionally leave an entire population behind. We have turned our backs on members of our own communities simply because we let their legal status delimit their full membership. For many, college is essential to accessing jobs and to securing a high-quality life. For members of minoritized groups, not just undocumented immigrants, obtaining a college degree has the power to open many doors. This is not new information. We have known this since 1965 when President Johnson declared "higher education [was] no longer a luxury, but a necessity."

Our antidemocratic and neoliberal ideologies have made us forget how this *necessity* of higher education is not simply an individualistic award to be earned—primarily through merit and legal citizenship—but that access to a higher education should be a goal of the collective, regardless of documentation status. Nixon (2011) asserts, "to flourish educationally is to grow—as a person, a citizen, and a member of an emergent *cosmopolis*—into the public good" (p. 19). We have lost sight of the fact that higher education is a public good, and how as such it benefits our communities and country as a whole, not just the individuals who receive degrees. A key argument I make in this study is that all people, regardless of documentation status, should have access to higher education if this is something they desire. Because democratic theorists are

concerned about the common good and wellbeing of others (Hytten, 2017), I use democratic theory to support this key argument and to argue for why states should provide more access to higher education opportunities for undocumented people.

There are lots of different ways to define democracy. In fact, Apple and Beane (2007) claim "we hear the democracy defense used countless times everyday to justify almost anything people want to do" (p. 6). Because of the historic ambiguity of the term democracy, it is important to clarify that the definition of democracy I use for this study is based on Deweyan ideals of democracy, and other scholars who are greatly influenced by his work. Dewey (1916) claimed that "democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" (MW 9, p. 93) and that "every generation has to accomplish democracy over again for itself…[it] has to be worked out in terms of needs, problems and conditions of the social life of which, as the years go by, we are a part…" (LW 13, 1938, p. 299). Similarly, Counts (1932) argued that "the most genuine expression of democracy in the United States has little to do with our political institutions: it has a sentiment with respect to the moral equality of men" (pp. 37-38). Hytten (2017) further argues that there are two ideas at the heart of democracy, "the fundamental right to human dignity and…that people have a responsibility to care about the common good and the dignity and welfare of others" (p. 5). Combined, these descriptions help me to define democracy as a set of habits and dispositions that support people living together, equally and in harmony, as they work together to conquer the problems of their time and live their fullest lives and care for the wellbeing of others.

Even though there are many ways to define democracy, the Deweyan approach recognizes that each member of a community is important, valuable, and deserving. Borrowing from this understanding of democracy, it would only make sense that first, we should be

concerned about all members of our society thriving, regardless of legal citizenship status, and second, legal documentation status should not affect whether someone is viewed as a citizen and equal member within our communities. Unfortunately, the "illegal immigrant" discourse has clouded the judgment of many US citizens, pushing many to accept the dehumanized consequences and ill fate many undocumented immigrants face in our country. The reality is that many undocumented immigrants have integrated into our communities. They work, go to school, and despite the common misconception, they also pay taxes. Undocumented children who have attended our public K-12 institutions have especially integrated into our communities, and they have been educated to uphold the same values, habits, and dispositions of their US born classmates and peers.

If we want to protect our democracy, we should all be concerned that undocumented youth are being pushed away from higher education; in many states this is done intentionally, in others it is a de facto result of policies and practices that limit their rights. Members of democratic societies should be concerned for the wellbeing of others, as our democracy is weakened when we lose sight of our responsibility to care for the members of our community. Not allowing undocumented immigrants to access higher education in a similar fashion as their documented peers also weakens our democracy as higher education "[contributes] to the quality of human life" (Nixon, 2011, p. 70). In making higher education inaccessible for undocumented youth, we potentially hinder their ability to thrive. And as we know, within a democracy, the thriving of our communities is based on the thriving of all its members, not just a select few.

Dewey (1938) claimed that without education, "democracy cannot endure, much less develop" (LW 13, p. 296). From this quote I pull two key arguments: 1) if democracy necessitates education, then it must follow that *access* to education for all young people who live

in this country, regardless of their legal status, is the only democratic option; and 2) the education Dewey speaks of does not stop at a K-12 education, as postsecondary education also ensures the further and more robust development of democratic habits and dispositions. As our founding fathers argued, education is key to effective citizenship, then so too must *access* to an education be, including access to higher education options for those who want them.

Our sometimes racist and antidemocratic policies paint undocumented youth as being undeserving of an advanced education and this idea risks ruining democracy as we know it. In fact, Dahl (2015) warns us of this as he proclaims, "if and when many citizens fail to understand that democracy requires certain fundamental rights, or fail to support the political, administrative, and judicial institutions that protect those rights, then their democracy is in danger" (p. 50). Throughout this dissertation, using democratic theory, I argue that college access should be considered a fundamental right. Since we in the United States claim to be a democracy, and we understand from a Deweyan perspective that this entails not only caring for the members of our communities, but also ensuring that they are thriving, it would only follow that equitable access to an advanced education is the best means to stay true to the vision of our founding fathers of maintaining an educated citizenry. Many would argue that higher education is becoming increasingly necessary to be successful in our society; it is especially vital for undocumented youth because of its potential to lead to social and economic mobility.

Dewey (1938) claims that "every generation has to accomplish democracy over again for itself" as people must work to address the needs and problems of the social life of the time (LW 13, p. 299). Over eleven million undocumented people reside in the United States, and of that figure, over 1.5 million are aged 16-24—the prime age range for those considering college or already attending college ("Profile of the Unauthorized Population," 2019). In this moment,

more than ever, we have to consider the lack college access for undocumented youth as a problem of the social life of our time. We cannot sit idly by, waiting for the US to "fix" our "immigration problem." These children are here now, and close to 100,000 undocumented children are graduating high school each year (Strauss, 2019). We must improve college access for this population now. Abrego (2008) asserts that immigration policies work only to control the immigrant, not immigration. Policies which actively deter undocumented youth from attending college work solely to control their immigrant bodies.

For the reasons I discuss throughout this theoretical framework section related to what it means to live in a democratic society, I argue that it is imperative that we improve college access for undocumented youth. I argue that drawing on democratic theory is valuable for this study because it best helps support a key assumption I make going into this study, that we cannot have a robust and thriving society when we have members within that society who cannot access the basic essentials that allow them to also thrive.

As I write this, I am also mindful of the current state of democracy. With Donald Trump in office for his second term, the idea of democracy has become very contested; many are questioning if our country should even remain a democracy and if the founding fathers got it right. The notion of being concerned about your neighbor has also begun to diminish and many do not support the idea of others' thriving being connected to their own success. Apart from this, under this administration, views of the necessity and value of higher education have been weakened, even for legalized citizens. Funding for research, grants, and financial aid have also been significantly cut. This administration has come in with a vengeful takeover of both democracy and higher education.

I also want to be mindful of the fact that when the founding fathers imagined our democratic nation, there was no intention of including women, Natives, or Black people in that vision. I am not naïve to this fact. But I also know, as Hannah-Jones (2019) so eloquently points out, that this does not mean that we cannot perfect our vision of democracy. Hannah-Jones (2019) argues that Black Americans were "foundational to the idea of American freedom…" and that "it was [Black people] who have been the perfectors of this democracy." Her words are what compelled me to consider how undocumented resistance, and those who do the work to protect undocumented populations, can be used to both perfect our democracy and to help our country live up to its founding ideals.

Significance of My Study

In order to maintain our democracy, we need an educated citizenry and providing an education to all helps ensure effective and intelligent participation among citizens. This education does not stop at K-12. College access work helps contribute to maintaining our democracy by ensuring that the most vulnerable are not deterred from pursuing an advanced education. Given the lack of commitment at the national and state levels to support undocumented student access, without nonprofit organizations that engage in this work, many undocumented youth would be left fending for themselves as they try to pursue higher education.

While much research on college access for undocumented youth specifically focuses on the struggles these youth face as they attempt to advance their education, there is not a lot of research that specifically addresses the resources that exist, like nonprofit organizations, to help this population achieve their higher education goals. Within this study I hope to unravel exactly how these college access nonprofit/community organizations are successful in helping undocumented youth go to college, including identifying the strategies they use to help mitigate

the challenges that undocumented students face. I think this is extremely important at this moment, especially as once-progressive states are beginning to undo their progressive college access policies, barring this population from going to college by stripping away resources that have been proven to help this group be successful in higher education, like access to in-state tuition rates.

This study is significant because it will help readers to understand the landscape of higher education access for undocumented students as well as provide potential resources to those looking to establish their own college access nonprofit. I highlight key strategies used by nonprofits to be successful, as well as barriers to success. Knowing both sides, how to be successful and what to look out for will help those looking to do this work be successful. It is also significant in helping readers to understand what a robust conception of democracy requires of us all, especially in terms of supporting minoritized community members.

Brief Overview of Methods

For this dissertation, I conducted a qualitative study to better understand the work that college access nonprofit and community organizations housed in restrictive states do to help undocumented youth successfully go to college. A second part of my goal was to make sense of how democracy is intertwined with this work. I recruited and interviewed 19 participants from ten different states, eight restrictive, one progressive and one state with no active policies. I based the interview questions on better understanding the organization, its history, barriers faced, strategies for success, and impact; questions were also based on wanting deeper insight into the democratic aspects of the work being done at these organizations.

I reviewed the transcripts from our recorded interviews, comparing the recording to the AI generated transcription, in order to confirm accuracy. I then shared the transcripts with

participants, asking them to ensure their accuracy. I also used this time to ask any clarifying questions. Once transcripts were approved, I began the data analysis process. During this time, I coded the transcripts and searched for patterns and categories. I then developed themes. These themes were then used to answer my research questions. I describe these methods much more fully in chapter three.

Researcher Positionality

As the research is a main instrument in an interview-based study, it is important to situate myself within this work. I have been an advocate for higher education for as long as I can remember and a large part of that is due to that fact that I am a first-generation college graduate. As such, I know all too well the struggles a person can face when they attempt to tackle the system that is higher education. In 2018, that new role would take me to a small liberal arts college in North Carolina. One of my titles in that role was Latinx Community Coordinator, and one of my many tasks within that role was being in charge of an annual conference that had been created over a decade before I landed the job, by two undocumented students who had struggled to access college themselves.

It was in this role that I learned of the struggles undocumented youth must face when they attempt to access college in the state of North Carolina. I knew firsthand that Latinx enrollment at college was low because I had not met a lot of people who looked like me during my time at my local community college, during undergrad or while pursuing my master's degree. I had no clue that my home state made it intentionally difficult for undocumented folks to attend college by banning access to federal financial aid and in-state college tuition rates. As the daughter of an immigrant, guilt, anger, and frustration fueled me and played a major role in my

decision to pursue my PhD in educational policy and researching college access for undocumented youth in the United States.

Overview of Chapters

In this first chapter, I provided a basic understanding of why my study is necessary. I summarized a brief history of immigration in the US, specifically documenting the history of legislation that has significantly impacted college access for undocumented youth. I also detailed the landscape of college access and restrictions across the US for this population. It is important for the reader to understand this information so they can truly grasp why these college access nonprofit/community organizations are necessary, and how the work they do helps to maintain our democracy.

The second chapter includes the literature review. I discuss the challenges undocumented youth have faced as they have attempted to advance their education. I explore how the bans on public benefits under PRWORA have shaped access to resources like in-state tuition rates, financial aid, and even access to professional/occupational licensure. I also detail how issues with policy implementation and dissemination can impact students, even in progressive states with progressive college access policies for undocumented populations. In addition to these issues, I detail transitional issues undocumented youth face as they attempt to shift from high school to college. This is followed by the retentional issues this population faces when they do successfully make it to college and even after they graduate. This information is significant as it helps provide context around the bulk of the barriers undocumented youth face as they attempt to go to college.

In the third chapter, I detail the methodology used for this qualitative study. As part of this study, I interviewed 19 participants from 18 nonprofit/community organizations that provide

college access resources for undocumented youth. I also reviewed their websites and resources and materials shared by participants. I recorded and transcribed these interviews. I then conducted an analysis of the data from the transcripts in order to identify patterns in responses from the interview questions. I used these patterns to address my research questions.

I share my findings from the study in chapters four, five and six all. In chapter four, I explore what impacted the organizations' founding, as well as struggles these organizations face doing college access work for undocumented youth. In chapter five, I discuss organizational strategies used to improve college access for this population. And in chapter, I uncover the democratic themes in college access work, exploring how participants defined democracy and talked about college access as a public and common good.

In the final chapter, I summarize my key findings. I do this by providing concise answers to my research questions, as well discussing their implications. I also offer recommendations for future research and practice. Additionally, I reassert how a commitment to democracy ought to entail providing better college access to undocumented youth in the US. I end with some final thoughts on this research.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

A lot of research has been conducted on college access for undocumented immigrants and the barriers that make college practically inaccessible if you are not a US citizen. The list of challenges this group faces is quite long. Within my literature review, I explore these barriers in depth. Understanding the impact of bans on college access resources is essential for the reader, therefore, in the first section I provide an overview of those bans. In the next section, I explore the research that has been done related to undocumented immigrants and college access. From there, I explore issues undocumented youth face when transitioning from high school to college. In the final section of the literature review, I explore the barriers undocumented immigrants face while in college and after graduating college.

Access Denied

A significant amount of research has focused on college access for undocumented youth. The bulk of this research points to in-state tuition rates and financial aid as crucial factors in this population accessing college (Amuedo-Dorantes & Sparber, 2014; Price & Mowry-Mora, 2020). While these two factors are most discussed in the research, other factors can contribute to the inaccessibility of college for this group. Unfriendly admission policies also serve to deter college access for this population. Southern states have the most unfriendly admissions policies in the United States. For example, Alabama and South Carolina take advantage of the ambiguous policy language of PRWORA and its ban of undocumented immigrants' access to public benefits. They consider public postsecondary education to be a public benefit and therefore ban undocumented immigrants from enrolling in their public postsecondary institutions (NCSL, 2021). Georgia bans enrollment access at specific institutions (Banks, 2013). Additionally, bans

on the types of licensure undocumented youth can obtain can also limit accessibility. In the rest of this section, I explore factors that impact college access among undocumented youth.

In-state Tuition Rates (ISTR)

Access to ISTR has been proven to increase educational attainment for undocumented populations (Amuedo-Dorantes & Sparber, 2014; Flores, 2010). Under IIRIRA, undocumented immigrants are not allowed to access benefits based on residency, nor can they access benefits that are denied to US citizens. States with ISTR policies have worked around the IIRIRA by not exclusively granting this benefit to undocumented immigrants, and by basing eligibility on matters like attending a high school in the state for a number of years (ranging from one to three years), graduating from a high school or receiving a GED within said state, and by signing an affidavit stating they will file for legal status once eligible (Flores, 2010; NCSL, 2021).

Several scholars have researched the impact ISTR policies have on enrollment for undocumented students. For instance, Flores (2010) conducted a study utilizing a cost-benefit framework to see how ISTR policies impacted enrollment rates among undocumented Latino students, comparing the enrollment rates with states that have no ISTR policies. The idea is an individual weighs out the costs and benefits of a particular situation, this case being investing in a higher education when costs have been reduced. Flores (2010) added the concept of uncertainty to this framework to make up for the many uncertainties undocumented youth must account for in earning a higher degree, like whether they will be able to use their degree when they have completed their education. Flores (2010) found that once ISTR policies were introduced, enrollment rates among Latinx noncitizens did increase, with a large percentage of this population being undocumented Latinos. While Flores' (2010) research only focuses on undocumented Latinx populations, they justify this limitation by arguing that Latinx populations

"are the most likely to be undocumented," and make up "85% of the total estimated undocumented population," and "have lower educational attainment rates than immigrants of Asian and African origin in the United States" (p. 243). Due to government agencies not counting the numerical presence of undocumented populations, it can be difficult to determine the size of this population, which is a major limitation of this study (Flores, 2010). Flores' work is crucial in identifying how ISTR impacts enrollment. A qualitative study assessing how ISTR enabled undocumented youth to enroll in college would provide greater insight into how students overcome uncertainties when weighing the costs and benefits of pursuing a college education.

Other scholars have researched the impact ISTR policies for undocumented youth have on US citizens. Amuedo-Dorantes and Sparber (2014) conducted a quasi-experimental research study using difference-in-difference estimation methodology to better understand how ISTR policies effect enrollment and found that the increase in enrollment rates of Mexican non-citizens did not reduce the enrollment rates of natives. While they did find an increase in resident tuition at flagship universities when ISTR policies existed, they found the same increase in tuition does not exist in community colleges attended by undocumented immigrants (Amuedo-Dorantes & Sparber, 2014). This is an important finding because many undocumented students opt for community college over four-year institutions due to cost (Terriquez, 2015; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015). Their data was from a Current Population Survey (CPS) with information pertaining to the whole nation, making it rather significant because a large portion of research on college access for this population occurs in specific states, typically California. Their findings on native enrollment not declining are consistent with past research and contradict conservative arguments against ISTR for undocumented students, where conservatives often claim that allowing ISTR for this population will come at a disadvantage to students who are US citizens, displacing them

with a large influx of undocumented students (Gonzales, 2007). Additionally, Gonzales (2007) claims this displacement has not happened in the states which have already implemented ISTR policies for undocumented students, going on to argue that ISTR for this group instead tend to "*increase* school revenues by bringing in tuition from students who otherwise would not be in college" (p. 8). It would be interesting to conduct a similar study following the COVD-19 pandemic to see how the pandemic has impacted enrollment among this population. Although Amuedo-Dorantes and Sparber's (2014) study was specific to undocumented Mexican students, this group makes up 48% of the undocumented population in the United States (MPI, 2019) and is therefore relevant to the topic overall.

While research shows that access to ISTR does significantly increase college enrollment among undocumented immigrant students, many critique the fact that without access to financial aid, this benefit is insufficient because many undocumented immigrants simply cannot afford to pay in-state prices out of pocket (Gonzales, 2009; Kim & Diaz, 2013).

Financial Aid

Undocumented youth are barred from receiving federal financial aid under PRWORA. Paying for college is a major barrier for most undocumented immigrants. While they cannot receive federal aid, some states do offer state-based aid, and some institutions offer institutional aid (NCSL, 2021). A major downfall to both options is that funding is limited and not guaranteed. In fact, "less than an estimated 10 percent of undocumented students are able to secure funding to cover tuition and living costs" (Dougherty et al., 2010, as cited in Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015, p. 432). Accessing private student loans is often out of the question due to their undocumented status (Z.J. Perez, 2014). The lack of access to financial aid prevents many undocumented students from furthering their education.

In studying issues of access, Diaz-Strong et al. (2011) collected oral histories from undocumented youth over a three-year period; relying on a grounded theory approach, these scholars studied how the denial of access, and specifically the denial of financial aid, impacted undocumented students' educational goals. They found that due to students not being eligible to receive federal financial aid, they had to rely on working to pay for school out of pocket and on family contributions (Diaz-Strong et al., 2011). Diaz-Strong et al. also revealed that due to paying expensive tuition costs out of pocket, many respondents had to make tough decisions, such as not purchasing textbooks or parking passes, enrolling only part-time, working more hours, and even opting to attend community college after being admitted to a four-year institution (Diaz-Strong et al., 2011). While this study was conducted in Illinois, which grants ISTR, findings are significant because they reveal that even when costs are lower because of ISTR, access to financial aid still impacts educational pursuits. Additionally, another significant finding from this study is that students struggle to persist while enrolled in college without adequate financial support, further illustrating how policies must be pushed beyond simply allowing access to ISTR.

Financial limitations are a major barrier for this group and can significantly influence how successful students will be in college. In collaboration with the Dream Project-VA, Price and Mowry-Mora (2020) conducted a study to understand the experiences of undocumented youth in Virginia who were pursuing college. They found access to financial support to be the main reason undocumented students persist in school, with 70% referencing financial assistance from scholarships or institutions, 61% identifying financial support from family and friends, 55% identifying in-state tuition rates, and 50% identifying self-support from working and savings (Price & Mowry-Mora, 2020). A major limitation to their research is that the majority of students

from this study were DACA recipients. Thus, findings about self-supporting their education via work may differ for nonDACA students who are not legally eligible to work in the United States. Findings from this study are consistent with other research that supports the need of financial assistance for undocumented youth to be successful in college.

Suárez-Orozco et al. (2015) also found that financial factors are strongly associated with college success. They conducted a study relying on an ecological conceptual framework to better understand the challenges undocumented students face in college. In using this framework, these scholars attempted to understand the influence school environment played on undocumented student outcomes. With over 900 participants in this survey-based study, they found that 95% of respondents were worried about paying for college and 90% were worried about purchasing supplies for college. An interesting finding within this study was that undocumented students in community college had more significant financial concerns than those attending four-year institutions, including private institutions, but this was due largely to community college students not having access to grants and scholarships offered at other institutions and having to instead pay out of pocket (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015). The findings from this study are very telling, especially considering they are from a national sample. Relying on the ecological conceptual framework is also significant in that it shows how campus climate can impact student outcome.

Policy Implementation and Dissemination

School leaders are essential in shaping how educational policies are implemented at the ground level. In fact, Mavrogordato and White (2020) consider school leaders to be "local arbiters of educational opportunity" (p. 5) and argue that school climate may also shape how policies are implemented on the local level. How policies are implemented also impacts how information on these policies is disseminated. While access to ISTR and financial aid positively

influence college access for undocumented immigrants, a disconnect often exists in disseminating this information to those who need it most, including undocumented students, high school counselors and college administrators. Policies can often be ambiguous and confusing for counselors to understand and share with undocumented students (Z.J. Perez, 2014). Consequently, undocumented students residing in undocufriendly states with ISTR and state financial aid often still encounter barriers. Many studies have found high school counselors and college administration often lack knowledge on educational policies related to undocumented students' status (Z.J. Perez, 2014; Gonzales & Ruiz, 2014). Some studies have even found biases among counselors and revealed how these biases impact their gatekeeping of college access information (Kim & Diaz, 2013).

California is a great example of a state with policy implementation issues, especially because California is considered an undocufriendly state (as a reminder, this means they are supportive of undocumented students). In 2001, California became the second state to allow undocumented youth who meet certain criteria to receive ISTR. By 2011, the California Dream Act passed, granting undocumented youth access to state-based financial aid (CSAC, 2023a). However, some 22 years after allowing ISTR and 12 years after allowing access to financial aid, many undocumented youth are not taking advantage of these benefits (Stavely, 2021). Forty percent of undocumented youth do not even apply for these benefits, and this is due largely to the fact that the process is overly complicated and "different colleges interpret the laws differently and have different requirements for students" (Stavely, 2021). A report issued by the California Student Aid Commission (CSAC) found that during the 2021-22 academic year, roughly only 30% of students who applied for funding via the Dream Act enrolled in school and "only 14% of California's estimated undocumented student population in postsecondary education ultimately

received state federal aid" (CSAC, para. 3, 2023b). Students often lack the necessary information and outreach to take advantage of these resources (Stavely, 2021; CSAC, 2023b). In fact, "even in states with equitable tuition stipulations, such as California, with AB 540, the ways in which the policies are enacted on the ground leaves room for erratic implementation" (Chavez et al., 2007, as cited in Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015, p. 432).

Professional/Occupational Licensure Bans

Occupational licensure is how the government ensures workers are qualified to do a job and that consumers are protected during those services (Brown, 2023). Like ISTR and state-based financial aid, licenses are mostly regulated by individual states, so regulations vary by state (Brown, 2023). For example, some states mandate those licensed to have work authorization, such as that granted under DACA, while other states have no citizenship requirements and allow people to get licensed using their Individual Taxpayer Identification Number (ITIN) or their social security number (NCSL, 2017). Under PRWORA, undocumented immigrants are barred from receiving public benefits, which can include professional and occupational licenses (Manuel, 2016). However, at least twelve states allow undocumented immigrants to access professional and occupational licenses ("Expanding Eligibility," 2019). Nonetheless, the majority of states ban access to licensure, creating an additional barrier for undocumented immigrants to enter the workforce and enter into certain fields. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, states like Colorado and New Jersey changed their policies to assist their state's economy and fill occupational shortages (Smith, 2021; "State of New Jersey," 2020).

Relying on data from the Current Population Survey (CPS), Brown (2023) conducted a study to better understand the outcomes of granting occupational licenses to DACA recipients. Brown (2023) found that with access to licensure, employment likelihood increased by 3.6%,

and that it is likely to also increase hourly wage, as well as the possibility of employment. This study is significant in that it is one of the first of its kind, addressing issues related specifically to access to professional and occupational licensure. Brown (2023) acknowledges that one gap with this research is its lack of understanding the impact of granting this population access to professional licenses, especially as it relates to natives seeking licensure in the same fields.

Transitional Issues from High School to College

Many undocumented immigrants fall through the cracks when transitioning from high school to college. While several factors impact this transition, poverty is most often identified as a key barrier. Fear of disclosing status can also impact the resources undocumented youth are provided that are specific to their status (Nienhusser et al., 2016). In what follows, I explore factors that impact undocumented youth as they attempt to transition from high school to college.

Socioeconomic Status

Socioeconomic status greatly impacts undocumented students' transition from high school to college. Abrego and Gonzales (2010) claim that geographically speaking, undocumented immigrants tend to reside in "de facto segregated areas of dense poverty" (p. 147). As a result of this, undocumented students often attend poorly funded and under-resourced schools. This is important because educational engagement is often negatively impacted by "substandard resources, attention, support, and preparation that these schools provide" (Henig et al., 1999, as cited in Olivérez, 2007, p. 91). Z.J. Perez (2014) claims that "high poverty rates and the need to work" are additional barriers undocumented immigrants endure (p. 17).

To better understand the barriers that undocumented youth encounter while attending four-year colleges, P.A. Perez (2010) conducted a mixed method study using a social networks theoretical framework. All participants from this study were from low socioeconomic status and

identified cost and affordability as two key factors in determining the institutions they attended. In fact, participants chose their institutions based on it being "closer, cheaper, and convenient" than other options (P.A. Perez, 2010, p. 23). Respondents also revealed one means of saving money was by not applying to institutions they thought they would not be accepted into. P.A. Perez's work is significant in showing what measures undocumented students of low socioeconomic status will take in order to afford college.

Generational Status and Age of Arrival

Generational status impacts college access for undocumented youth, especially if their parents have not attended college. In fact, research finds that "parental educational levels are correlated with students' college aspirations and educational attainment" (Feliciano, 2006, as cited in Kim & Diaz, 2013, p. 49). Undocumented students are typically first-generation college students who often struggle to access information on pursuing a postsecondary education (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015; Trivette & English, 2017). However, although undocumented immigrant families often lack the resources to provide information about accessing college to their children, several studies have found how significant family is in encouraging undocumented youth to go to college (Price & Mowry-Mora, 2020; Trivette & English, 2017).

Age of arrival also impacts college enrollment among undocumented immigrants. Banks (2013) claims "those who arrived before the age of 14 are more likely to have completed high school and to attend a college or university" (p. 1451). Z.J. Perez (2014) claims that age of arrival also impacts high school completion among this group, as nearly half of this population does not complete high school if they are 14 or older upon arrival to the United States. While there is not a lot of research on how age impacts completion of high school and college, one implication is that children who arrive at a younger age are better able to assimilate into schools

and understand the necessity of a higher education. In fact, Gonzales et al. (2015) claims that public K-12 education allows undocumented immigrants to "embed themselves in social networks and become familiar with the norms and values of US society" (p. 324).

High School Counselors

High school counselors play a major role in providing resources to youth about accessing college (Olivérez, 2007; Belasco, 2013). Unfortunately, undocumented students often face numerous barriers with accessing their high school counselors. Undocumented students often encounter counselors who do not understand how immigration policies impact their enrollment process, and who do not understand the challenges that undocumented students face (Trivette & English, 2017; Ballerini & Feldblum, 2021). Additionally, undocumented students often experience counselor bias, which can negatively impact their college access (Kim & Diaz, 2013). Many undocumented youth report having to find the answers to questions about post-secondary education themselves. For instance, A DACA recipient interviewed on the *How to College* podcast stated that she "felt [she] had to be the holder of knowledge and was informing counselors and the people in charge of financial aid about [her] situation and what the current policies were" (Mendoza, 2020, 34:36). Furthermore, these students are forced to work to support their families while in high school, further limiting their ability to access resources and impacting their chances of attending college (Trivette & English, 2017).

Additionally, due to their socioeconomic status, these youth often attend poorly funded schools where they have limited access to counselors (Gonzales et al., 2015). Belasco (2013) argues that counselors often lack both the time and skills needed to assist students of low socioeconomic status. In fact, Belasco (2013) conducted a study guided by human and social capital to better understand the influence of school counselors on postsecondary enrollment for

students of low socioeconomic status. The researcher concluded that student-counselor interaction positively impacts college attendance and suggests that when additional resources and time are invested in this group, students are more likely to enroll in four-year institution instead of two-year institutions (Belasco, 2013).

Social Capital

Social capital is linked to the networks one has that can ultimately help or hinder the ways in which people advance in life. McDonough (1997) was the first to explore how social capital could influence college choice decisions; she claimed that a student's social capital "will affect the level and quality of college education that a student intends to acquire" and that a student's relationship with friends and family would ultimately impact their college choice (as cited in Trivette & English, 2017, pg. 864). Unfortunately, undocumented immigrant students often lack the social networks necessary to successfully pursue and complete a college education (Price & Mowry-Mora, 2020). Price and Mowry-Mora (2020) state, "even if undocumented students have the resources to attend college, they often lack role models or social networks to assist them in achieving higher education" (pg. 442). Jose Vargas, the founder of the nonprofit *Define American* and an undocumented man himself, while being interviewed on *dotEDU* podcast, proclaimed that mentorship had "been its own passport, it's like a green card that doesn't have an expiration date" and that it was a big part of why he succeeded in college (Fansmith et al., 2020, 35:57).

Trivette and English (2017) borrowed from Perna's conceptual framework to understand what influenced college choice among undocumented youth. This framework is constructed on four contextual layers: social, economic and policy context; higher education context; school and community context; and habitus context. The researchers interviewed participants attending

Freedom University, a nonprofit based out of Georgia that assists undocumented immigrants in accessing higher education. Perna's conceptual framework relies heavily on social capital and its impact on college choice (Trivette & English, 2017). Trivette and English found that social capital was critical in helping undocumented students access college, especially because faculty at Freedom University supplied this group with resources that might not otherwise have been made accessible.

Dual-Enrollment Programs Accessibility

Dual-enrollment programs enable high school students to earn college credits for free. Research shows that students who enroll in dual-enrollment classes are more prone to both enrolling in college and graduating college when compared to their peers in traditional high school programs (Sanchez, 2023). Undocumented youth are often encouraged to enroll in dual-enrollment programs to knock out college courses for free (W. Perez, 2010). However, there are limits to their ability to do so. For example, Sanchez (2023) revealed that because dual-enrollment courses are made available via a state grant, and thus considered a public benefit, undocumented youth in the state of Tennessee do not qualify to take these classes for free. In fact, if they enroll and want to receive the college credit, they have to pay the out-of-state tuition rate for the class (Sanchez, 2023). Essentially, this makes dual-enrollment programs inaccessible to a population that needs it most. More information is needed about how other states handle dual-enrollment programs and funding for undocumented youth. This would be especially helpful, as Ngo and Hinojosa (2021) claim, because "the extent of undocumented student participation in dual enrollment programs is unknown, likely due to lack of data on undocumented students in K-12" (p. 61).

Protective Status Ends After High School

Another challenge undocumented students face is when they age out of K-12 enrollment. In 2011, Alabama attempted to make public K-12 schools report when undocumented children enrolled. Although this law was eventually overturned in 2013, this is just one example of how conservative states have attempted to go against *Plyler*, which ultimately protects undocumented children's access to public K-12 education ("Public Education for Immigrant Students," 2016). Unfortunately, protections under *Plyler* do not follow undocumented children as they transition into adulthood and into college. In fact, Gonzales et al. (2015) states, "during high school [undocumented immigrants] begin to encounter a growing number of legal exclusions" (p. 336).

Gonzales (2011) conducted a study to better understand the legal context of undocumented youths' transition into adulthood. Unfortunately, as these young adults transition into adulthood, they transition into what Gonzales (2011) refers to as a "transition into illegality" (p. 605). During their transition, they are made aware of their legal exclusions, like the prohibitions on getting a driver's license or working legally (Gonzales, 2011). It is also during this time they learn how inaccessible college can be. Gonzales (2011) conducted a study interviewing 150 undocumented Latinos from Southern California and found that of those included in the study, 30% of those who found out about their status during childhood were early-exiters "(those who left the school system at or before completion of high school)," and only about 9% were college-goers (p. 608). Additionally, of those who found out about theirs status through trying to obtain work, 57.5% were early-exiters and about 12% were college-goers (Gonzales, 2011). However, of those who found out of their status during the college application process, almost 60% still became college-goers (Gonzales, 2011). These findings reveal that learning of status from a young age can impact post-secondary educational pursuits, which is

consistent with other research. They also show that realizing a future of limited work opportunity can discourage this population from pursing a higher education. The high percentage of college-goers finding out during the application process (57.5%) is rather interesting. The implication is that regardless of their status, they still view higher education as an opportunity worth pursuing. It is also worth noting that this study was conducted in California, which is considered an undocufriendly state. Results would likely be different in a conservative state.

Abrego (2006) conducted an ethnography and interviews with undocumented, working-class Latinx populations in California to better understand their educational pursuits based on their status. This study relied on the segmented assimilation framework to better understand how human and economic capital impacts incorporation patterns among this group. Abrego (2006) found that high-achieving high school students frequently lost motivation to pursue college because of their status. Abrego (2006) argues that because this population is guaranteed access to public K-12 education, they tend to be "incorporated" into society, just like their documented peers; but this incorporation ends after finishing high school. Abrego offers, "although undocumented status leads to a decline in educational motivation for some students while still in high school, it has the greatest negative effects upon high school graduation" (p. 225). Ultimately, because these youth are unable to legally be incorporated into institutions in the US after high school, segmented assimilation theory predicts that "undocumented youth will remain in the lower segments of the economy" (Abrego, 2006, p. 226). Thus, their unprotected status leaves them vulnerable to poverty.

Retentional Issues in College

Undocumented immigrant students who successfully overcome the above-mentioned barriers and successfully enroll in college still encounter obstacles along the way. In fact,

according to Bean et al. (2011) “children of immigrants whose parents remain undocumented may further encounter financial, social and emotional hardships that limit their educational attainment” (as cited in Terriquez, 2015, p. 1305). Family financial circumstances greatly impact college retention among this population, especially because they are excluded from receiving federal financial aid (Abrego & Gonzales, 2010). In what follows, I explore retentional barriers undocumented immigrants encounter while enrolled in college.

Community College

Community college is often the best option for those with limited financial resources. As such, most undocumented immigrants attend community college (Gonzales, 2009; Terriquez, 2015; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015; W. Perez, 2010). W. Perez (2010) refers to community college as a gateway to higher education for undocumented immigrants, claiming that due to cost, many make the hard choice to attend community college even after being accepted into a four-year institution. Unfortunately, community college does not always result in a successful outcome. Terriquez (2015) asserts that community colleges “often lack the necessary resources and structures to ensure that students effectively integrate into the school, receive proper guidance and counselling, and obtain other academic support that they may need” (p. 1304).

The term “stopping out” is used to describe college students who leave school with the intention of returning and undocumented immigrants are “three times more likely than similar youth (controlling for grade-point average, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status) to stop-out,” with financial burdens being a major factor (Gonzales & Bautista-Chavez, 2014, pp. 7-8). In fact, “students who maintain continuous enrollment in college, rather than ‘stop out’…, are considerably more likely to complete their certificates, earn degrees or transfer to a 4-year university” (Crisp & Mina, 2012, as cited in Terriquez, 2015, p. 1303). Terriquez (2015)

conducted a study to assess undocumented community college student persistence, assessing how status impacts this persistence. Findings from this study support other research on stopping out, as undocumented students from this study were more likely than their peers to stop out and the reasoning for stopping out was typically financial. Terriquez (2015) argues that "illegality functions as a master status" and greatly impacts students' ability to be enrolled on a continuous basis (p. 1314). Ultimately, status impacts one's ability to remain enrolled in college.

Uneducated Administration

In high school, undocumented youth encounter institutional agents who are often ill-prepared to provide guidance and resources specific to their situation. This is often the case in college as well. Abrego and Gonzales (2010) note that "interactions with university bureaucrats" can impact undocumented students' experiences in college (p. 150). Unfortunately, some of these encounters can be with insensitive administrators (Nienhusser, 2014). Moreover, "undocumented students may also experience institutional neglect, hostile campus contexts, and difficulty accessing resources, which can decrease their feelings of belonging and compromise their persistence" (Morales-Hernandez & Enriquez, 2021, p. 320).

In a study I previously referenced with over 900 participants, Suárez-Orozco et al. (2015) found that 67% of students had been discriminated against in the past month because of their undocumented status, and one source of this discrimination was from financial aid officials. Supportive and understanding educators are essential assets for college success for undocumented students; additionally, these institutional agents are crucial in providing information about admissions processes, possible funding, and even career options after college (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015). Z.J. Perez (2014) claims that "a healthy and supportive environment can help increase graduate rates for undocumented students" (p. 26).

Continuing the theme of the importance of university support, Diaz-Strong et al. (2011) claim that "institutions must be transparent and purposefully communicate intuitional policies and available resources to faculty, staff, and feeder high schools" (p. 117). In asking undocumented students how institutions can do better, Suárez-Orozco et al. (2015) found that students really need institutional agents to realize undocumented students are enrolled in their schools and the challenges this population often encounters. Common themes from this study included "(1) listen and learn; (2) empathy; (3) train staff; (4) equitable treatment; and (5) respect privacy" (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015, p. 449).

Limited Mobility After Graduation

Upon graduating from college, undocumented youth have considerably different career options based on their status. DACAmented graduates are granted work authorization, which allows them to legally work in the United States, however, nonDACA graduates are not legally allowed to be employed (Morales-Hernandez & Enriquez, 2021). This does not mean that DACAmented graduates live without concerns about their careers, as DACA does not guarantee permanent legal status. Moreover, DACA itself is not a permanent program and is often challenged at the federal level. As of now, the program is on hold after having been declared illegal and is not accepting any new applications (NILC, 2023). Researchers sometimes refer to DACA as a "form of liminal legality" because it traps students in an "uncertain status—not fully documented or undocumented but often straddling both" (Menjívar, 2006, as cited in Morales-Hernandez & Enriquez, 2021, p. 319). Gonzales (2016) claims that undocumented students who graduate college often meet the same fate as those who do not go to college, that is, they reach the same dead end.

Morales-Hernandez and Enriquez (2021) conducted a study building on the liminal legality framework to better understand how status impacts career planning and preparation for undocumented college students. Findings from this study reveal that while nonDACA graduates struggle the most, DACAmented graduates still encounter obstacles because their status is not permanently legal. Due to their status, nonDACA students may struggle to find internships and eventually transition into the job market (Morales-Hernandez & Enriquez, 2021). This study further illustrates just how much anti-immigrant policies directly impact undocumented students and their "ability to engage in opportunities and long-term planning to support their preparation for life after college" (Morales-Hernandez & Enriquez, 2021, p. 328).

Summary

Outdated anti-immigrant educational policies are pushing undocumented youth out of higher education. This population encounters many obstacles in their postsecondary educational pursuits. Many of these struggles begin in K-12 schools and are the result of ill-prepared and often biased institutional agents. Some of these obstacles push students into becoming early-exiters, while others who go to college may opt to stop out due to financial burdens and never return. Additionally, even though DACA has improved access for those who are eligible, with the program on hold, current qualifying high school graduates will not be able to take advantage of these perks. In fact, an American Community Survey (ACS) found that the total number of undocumented immigrants enrolled in US colleges went from 427,000 in 2019 to 408,000 in 2021; both the COVID-19 pandemic and the hold on the DACA program have contributed to this decline ("Undocumented Students in Higher Education," 2023).

The research illustrates that undocumented immigrants encounter many challenges in accessing a postsecondary education. While some states have supportive policies for

undocumented students, researchers note that challenges still exist in undocumented youth taking advantage of the resources these states offer. Furthermore, there is a gap in the literature of what resources are being provided in restrictive states to help ensure undocumented youth make it to college. My research addresses this gap as I explore how nonprofit/community organizations housed in restrictive states work to help undocumented youth advance their education beyond K-12. Members of this population are more than their status, and they deserve an opportunity to access and thrive in college. Abrego and Gonzales (2010) argue that undocumented immigrants will be "vulnerable to long-term poverty and extreme hardship" if not given access to postsecondary education and granted the ability to "legally participate in adult life" (p. 145). As a democratic nation, we have an obligation to care for this group, as well as fight by their side for real change. This research will serve as one step to doing just that.

CHAPTER III: METHODS

The purpose of this study was to better understand how nonprofits and community organizations dedicated to college access work help undocumented youth attend college in restrictive states in the US. I was also curious to see how stakeholders working to support undocumented immigrants defined democracy and discussed how the college access work they do helps to maintain our democracy. In this qualitative study, I interviewed 19 participants from 18 nonprofit/community organizations to learn what factors influenced their founding, the struggles these organizations face, and strategies for success. I also learned how participants who do college access work view their work in relation to democracy.

In 2024, I coauthored an article where we researched what college access looked like across all 50 states. College access includes access to in-state tuition rates and financial aid. During this research we found that 10 states have active bans preventing undocumented youth from receiving in-state tuition rates and eight states ban access to financial aid for this population (Mansfield & Hernandez, 2024). I used findings from this past study to help me determine which states I would include in this research project.

Preliminary Study

I conducted a preliminary study where I interviewed three undocumented college graduates about their experiences, all of whom graduated from a local private postsecondary institution. Two participants were DACAmented and one did not hold any status, she was simply undocumented. During this preliminary study, one of my main goals was to determine the struggles these students had encountered trying to access college, as well as what their career options looked like once they had completed their degrees. My interview questions were based on better understanding the struggles undocumented students faced transitioning from high

school to college, who participants relied on for information about college, why participants chose the postsecondary institution they chose, and what career options they had had since earning their degrees.

Initial Findings

While students did struggle initially to figure out how they were going to go to college and even pay for college, they were all able to receive some form of support in this area, either from a counselor, a teacher, or a college access nonprofit organization. Once they were able to apply to college, they were also able to secure some form of funding or funding discount to assist with their college tuition. Two students worked very hard in high school, making sure to volunteer and secure good grades, which helped them land very competitive scholarships that paid for their schooling. One of these competitive scholarships was from a college access nonprofit organization housed in North Carolina. The third student admitted she did not do well in high school and had to start at community college but because she got sponsored by her job, she was able to receive in-state tuition rates while she was at the community college, and later she received a decent financial aid package from the private institution she transferred to in order to complete her undergraduate degree.

Modifications as a Result of the Preliminary Study

What I learned from conducting this preliminary study was that it was going to be very difficult to directly interview undocumented students for my dissertation. Part of this difficulty was in being able to access undocumented students who were comfortable and willing to discuss their status and their experience, especially in a climate hostile to immigrants. Speaking to these students also made me very interested in the resources that do exist to help members of this population in restrictive states. Ultimately, this pushed me to want to understand more about the

nonprofit organizations that do college access work. I wanted to better understand why they came to be, the barriers they face doing college access work for undocumented populations, and their strategies for success.

Research Questions

Four research questions guide my study:

1. What factors at the community/state level influenced the founding of the organization to help improve college access for undocumented youth?
2. What struggles do these organizations face in doing college access work for undocumented youth?
3. What strategies do nonprofits/community organizations use while working to improve college access for undocumented youth and what are their impact?
4. How does the college access work being done at these organizations help maintain our democracy?

Methodology

I conducted a basic qualitative study, as the goal of this research was to "know more about the phenomenon" that is college access work (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 3). My goal was to understand how nonprofit/community organizations housed in restrictive states work to help undocumented youth access college and to best make sense of this, I used interviews as my core methodological approach.

Initially, I researched what nonprofit organizations existed in the ten restrictive states I had uncovered in a past study (Mansfield & Hernandez, 2024). From there, I conducted an internet search of the state name and some variation of "undocumented college access nonprofit." I then made a list of organization names and searched their website for contact

information. I emailed these organizations to recruit participants and included my recruitment flyer, recruitment script, and the approved research information sheet. Once I conducted my initial interviews, I also asked initial participants to share my recruitment information with other potential study participants in order for them to participate in my study.

I interviewed 19 participants from 18 nonprofit/community organizations across the US. One organization from this group was housed in Michigan, a state without active policies on college access for undocumented youth. Two organizations included in this study were housed in Virginia, a newly progressive state that allows access to in-state tuition rates and financial aid. One of the organizations housed in Virginia works at the national level, providing resources to students in both restrictive states and states with progressive policies. The remaining 15 organizations included in this study were specifically housed in restrictive states. Interviewing participants from states with different policies on college access for this population allowed me to draw comparisons between the three different policy terrains: progressive, restrictive, and open. For the purposes of this study, progressive states are states that offer college access resources to undocumented youth, like in-state tuition and/or financial aid; restrictive states are states that ban access to these resources and open states are states that do not have active policies for or against college access resources for this population.

After participants expressed interest in participating in my study, I shared more details about my study and reshared my research protocol that was approved by the University of North Carolina Greensboro's (UNCG) Institutional Review Board (IRB). Participants were not required to sign a consent form because of the limited risks associated with the study and per the IRB they were only required to give verbal consent to participate once they had read my study's information sheet. However, because this is such a sensitive topic, I did have multiple

participants who requested to meet with me to discuss my study in more detail prior to agreeing to participate in the study. I even had one program director email me to confirm his employee's status would be protected if they participated in my study. After I participated in these meetings and responded to the concerned email, all participants who I was able to successfully connect with agreed to participate in my study.

Sample Population

All 19 participants I interviewed for this study were current employees for the nonprofit/community organization they represented; two interviewees participated from the same Missouri organization, but for all the others I interviewed just one representative. All but one participant were women; there was one male. Most participants in this study agreed to use their real names and the real name of their organization, with the exception of two participants and a third who later chose to redact their identifying information. Prior to this request, I was already considering not using identifiable information for the participants in this study due to the current political climate around undocumented immigrants. Pseudonyms were used for all participants' names and the names of the organization they represented. Participants for this study spanned across 10 states. Two states included in this study do not have active bans around college access for undocumented youth. Michigan has no active policies, and Virginia became a progressive state as it relates to college access for this population in 2020. When the study started there were 10 states across the US with active policies banning college access for this group. As a reminder, ISTR stands for in-state tuition rates and FA stands for financial aid. And mixed-status families refer to families that have multiple documentation statuses, some documented and some undocumented. I share summary information about the organization, the person(s) I interviewed,

the state policies on college access, and the resources offered by each organization in the chart below before offering some narrative descriptions of each organization.

Table 1 *Organization, Participant, State & Policies, and College Access Resources Offered*

Organization	Participant	State & Policies	College Access Resources Offered
AL Can	Emma	AL - Restrictive: bans ISTR, FA, and enrollment in public institutions	-info on financial aid resources (including specific to undocumented youth) -professional development training for educators -public online toolkit of college options and access resources -college application resources -FAFSA application support -resources for mixed-status families
Adelante Hispanics & Immigrants (AHI)	Gloria	AL - Restrictive: bans ISTR, FA, and enrollment in public institutions	-one-on-one coaching (providing college options & access info) -info on financial aid resources -provide list of undocufriendly postsecondary institutions -postsecondary planning -Elevar Program -college and career readiness workshops at local high schools with 11th & 12th graders -parent workshops to educate and get parents involved with college process -partnerships & technical assistance with neighboring postsecondary institutions -AHI scholarship
Liberating You	Lolita	GA - Restrictive: bans ISTR, FA, and enrollment in most competitive schools	-free college preparation courses -emergency financial assistance -educator trainings for those working with undocumented students -policy change, especially as it relates to the right to an education -college prep summer retreat -mental healthcare
Inmigrantes Lideran	Blanca	GA - Restrictive: bans ISTR, FA, and enrollment in most competitive schools	-college preparation -weekly meeting with mentors -assist with college searches -assist with college application process and essays -assistant with finding college scholarships -ACT/SAT Test prep

			-FAFSA application support -tutoring -Immigrantes Lideran scholarship -graduate student scholarship -mental healthcare
IN Alianza	Lucia	IN - Restrictive: bans ISTR & FA	-IN Alianza scholarship -social justice mentorship program -education workshops -pair students with formally/currently undocumented community members who are in their profession -emergency funding
IN Avanzando	Maria	IN - Restrictive: bans ISTR & FA	-Avanzamos Program: preparing high school students with academic, social, college and career readiness skills. -Meet weekly with students starting in 9th grade and all through high school to develop skills -college prep workshops -college exposure -leadership development -mentorship -SAT/ACT prep -parental involvement -scholarship guide -Summer leadership program -IN Avanzando Scholarship
MI Goes to College Tambien	Alora	MI - No active policies, institutions make their own policies	wraparound services including: -financial resources to cover tuition and other fees associated with enrollment -academic success resources -wellness resources -professional development -institutional resource guides -support grants for non-tuition related expenses

			-coaching incentives
KC Avanzando Hispanos	Maya & Claudia	MO - Restrictive: Bans ISTR & FA	-KC Avanzando Hispanos Scholarship -college family ready program -college advising -family college workshops -scholarship workshops -family outreach -college campus visits -FAFSA application support -online college toolkit with info about college access and resources
MS Servicio Comunitario	Megan	MS - Restrictive: Bans ISTR & FA	-college access workshops -educational empowerment workshops
NC Tiene Potencial	Linda	NC - Restrictive: Bans ISTR & FA	-provides free online tools for college planning -provides details of frequently asked questions for teachers, counselors, students and families -newsletter on national policy updates related to documentation status and education -college admissions info -FAFSA resources for mixed-status families
NC Academico	Gemma	NC - Restrictive: Bans ISTR & FA	wraparound services including: -full ride scholarship -career coach all four years with monthly check-ins -career planning -professional development training -mentorship -community building -summer internships -summer retreats -match with undocufriendly schools -alumni support services

Iluminar NC	Anna	NC - Restrictive: Bans ISTR & FA	-leadership fellowship program -K-12 educator allied training -educational policy advocacy -some college advising for students -college advising training for leaders
SC Hispanos Unidos	Carlos	SC - Restrictive: bans ISTR, FA, and enrollment in public institutions	-Lunch & Learn session -postsecondary partnerships to improve enrollment, retention and graduation rates -community collaborations -scholarship database -community resource guide -student leadership program -provide college access resources at local high schools -annual education fair -SC Hispanos Unidos Scholarship
SC Alianza Lingüística (SCAL)	Kim	SC - Restrictive: bans ISTR, FA, and enrollment in public institutions	-publish educational and instructional content -outreach and support -professional development -advocacy workshops
TN Educación Libera (TNEL)	Nora	TN - Restrictive: bans ISTR & FA	-college application assistance -scholarship application assistance -FAFSA application support -school matching -one-on-one coaching sessions -mentor sessions with someone who shares the same identity
TN Somos Líderes	Juliana	TN - Restrictive: bans ISTR & FA	-career readiness skills -professional development -communication skills -teamwork skills -critical thinking & problem-solving skills -college to career transition prep -career mapping

			-mentorship -networking -resume building, cover letter writing, and LinkedIn profile setup -community building
Si Podemos VA	Hana	VA - Progressive as of 2020, offering ISTR & FA	wraparound services including: -college and career success services -career support & services -provide scholarships in states that have no college access resources and states that do offer ISTR to undocumented students -academic support resources -graduate loan programs -emergency grants -internships & fellowships -professional conference visits -entrepreneurship resources -on campus resources including housing and meals -mental health services
VA Dreamers Can	Kadie	VA - Progressive as of 2020, offering ISTR & FA	wraparound services including: -scholarship -freshman coaching -emergency loans -computer aid -mentorship -career placement support -scholar, alumni, and family support

AL Can was established in Alabama in 1993. They work to break down barriers through education, collaboration, and advocacy. Some funding comes from private grants and individual donations. This organization is not specifically for immigrants and is open to Alabama students of all documentation statuses. This team is made up of five staff members.

Adelante Hispanics & Immigrants (AHI) was established in 1999 in Alabama. They work to build community and advocacy around economic equality, civic engagement, and social justice for Latino and immigrant families in the state. In addition to educational resources, this organization provides citizenship and immigration resources, economic development, and family services. AHI is funded by donations from individuals, organizations, businesses, fundraising events, and some federal and state funds. AHI is open to Latinos and immigrants of all documentation statuses. The team is made up of 30 staff members.

Liberating You was originally established in 2011 in Georgia. They work to educate and empower undocumented students. In addition to educational resources, this organization does "Know Your Rights Trainings," policy work, and direct-action work for change. Liberating You is funded by generous foundations, individual donations, and grants; this organization is open to all undocumented immigrants. This team is made up of eleven staff members.

Inmigrantes Lideran was established in 2014 in Georgia. They work to help ensure immigrant students and citizens from mixed-status families have access to higher education. This organization is volunteer based. Some funding comes from fundraisers, generous donors, and small grants. It is open to undocumented immigrants and students from immigrant families. Their team is made up of eleven staff members.

IN Alianza officially became a nonprofit in 2015. Their mission is to empower undocumented communities and assist with achieving higher education. In addition to

educational resources, they also provide support services, engage in policy work, and educate the community on just causes. Initially the organization was volunteer based, but they recently received a grant that will help pay some employees. They also receive funding from individual donations and fundraisers.

IN Avanzando was established in 1971 in Indiana to address the needs of the growing Latino community in the area. The organization currently works to empower and strengthen Latino communities in the area. In addition to providing educational resources, the organization provides health, workforce development, and social service supports. Funding comes from partnerships and sponsors from local businesses, including some banks, community foundations and human rights organizations. It is open to Latinos of all documentation statuses. This team is made up of fourteen staff members.

MI Goes to College Tambien was established in 2021 in Michigan, though funding for this program was limited and has dried up, so the organization no longer exists. The goal of this organization was to provide financial assistance and other resources to frontline workers, those working directly with the public during the COVID-19 pandemic, who wanted to pursue a two-year degree or certificate, specifically those who were ineligible for federal financial aid because of their documentation status. This organization did some advocacy work and even had an Advocacy Day. It was funded by private donors and philanthropic organizations.

KC Avanzando Hispanos was established in 1983 in Missouri. It began as a means for the Hispanic community to take control of the philanthropic resources in their own community. It is funded through a combination of grants, fundraising campaigns, and donations and open to Latinos of all documentation statuses. This team is made up of nine staff members.

MS Servicio Comunitario became an official 501(3)C in 2008 in Mississippi. They work to serve the needs of migrant communities. This organization works primarily to provide immigration services, advocacy, community outreach and counseling, and language services. They also provide very limited educational access resources. Some funding comes from donations. It is open to immigrants of all documentation statuses. This team is made up of eight staff members.

NC Tiene Potencial was established in 2020 in North Carolina and unlike the majority of the other organizations in my study, it is not a nonprofit and instead is a sole proprietorship, which is an enterprise run by one person. The goal of this organization is to provide college access resources to undocumented students and families and to educators. This organization is supported by community volunteers and higher education institutions and affiliates who provide their expertise and leadership council.

NC Academico was founded in 2013 in North Carolina with the goal of helping undocumented youth afford college and improve their economic mobility. This organization also does advocacy work. Funding comes from donations and corporate partnerships. This organization is open to all undocumented students residing in three states: NC, GA, and SC. This team is made up of six staff members.

Iluminar NC was founded in 2018 in North Carolina and works to empower Latino advocates and allies, dismantle educational barriers, and advance Latino leaders and learners. In addition to educational resources, Illuminar NC helps raise awareness about the challenges the Latino community faces in hopes of making policy changes. The organization is funded via donations, grants, and sponsorships. While they do some college access work for students, most

of their work is geared towards working with and educating teachers and educational leaders. This team is made up of eleven staff members.

SC Hispanos Unidos was established in 2008 in South Carolina. They work to help the Latino community thrive by connecting them with people, resources, and cultures. In addition to educational resources, SC Hispanos Unidos offers financial, health, and legal resources. It is funded via grants, individual donations, and matching funds of various local business partners. This organization is open to Latinos of all documentation statuses. This team is made up of eight staff members.

SC Alianza Lingüistica (SCAL) was officially established in 2019 with the aim of supporting educators of multilingual learners. While this organization does not work specifically with undocumented youth for the purposes of college access, they do some limited college access work for this population. The organization is funded via donations and partnerships. This team is made up of twenty-one staff members.

TN Educación Libera (TNEL) was founded in 2023 in Tennessee with the goal of providing mentorship and college access resources to Latino and immigrant communities in the state. This organization is run on a volunteer basis. This organization is open to immigrant students and children of immigrant families.

TN Somos Líderes was founded in 2011 in Tennessee, with the goal of diversifying economic development by creating strong Latino professionals and community leaders. Funding for this organization comes from sponsorships, grants, donations, and employer advisory board member fees. This organization originally started specifically for Latino students but transitioned to include first-generation college students of all ethnicities because of the need in the area. This team is made up of seven staff members.

Si Podemos VA was founded in 2014 in Virginia. The goal of this organization is to provide college access resources to Dreamers (DACA recipients) at the national level. More recently, the organization expanded to help students who are completely undocumented as well. This organization offers resources to undocumented students who live in states with restrictive college access policies specific to this population. In addition to educational resources, Si Podemos VA offers mental health and immigration support. Because of the limitations that nonprofits have in the policy arena, they advocate for immigrant communities by contributing their data on academic successes and the impact of providing resources for this population to successfully attend higher ed, which is very impactful and telling. They are funded via philanthropic and business leaders, individuals, corporations, and foundations.

VA Dreamers Can was founded in 2010 in Virginia with the goal of helping undocumented Virginians access college. In addition to educational resources, VA Dreamers Can also provides housing support, mental health support, community support, legal referral assistance, and addresses food insecurity. They do advocacy work and helps students learn how to advocate for themselves. They are funded by donations, grants, and fundraising. It is open to all undocumented immigrant students in the state of VA. This team is made up of ten staff members.

Although their missions vary in some ways, as do their primary goals, each organization shares the purpose of helping vulnerable populations thrive. Sixteen of the eighteen organizations included in this study work specifically to help undocumented students and students of immigrant families; and while two organizations (AL Can and SC Alianza Lingüística) do not offer services specifically for this group, they have been inclusive in the resources they provide to ensure that their services are useful to undocumented families.

Collectively these organizations are doing the work to help undocumented youth access higher education.

Data Collection Methods

I interviewed 19 participants from 18 nonprofit/community organizations. Interviewees participated in a semi-structured, one-hour interview via Microsoft Teams. These semi-structured interviews allowed for more flexibility in the structure of the interviews, as well as the responses (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). After I did an initial web-based search of each of the organizations, I wanted to learn about how these organizations came to be, the barriers they face doing college access work for undocumented populations, strategies used for success and how they believe their work helps to maintain our democracy. I include a copy of my interview guide in Appendix B.

I asked all participants some form of the questions from my interview guide and incorporated follow-up questions for clarity and out of curiosity depending on responses. I conducted interviews virtually, recording and transcribing them via Microsoft Teams, a UNCG approved video conferencing tool. I then reviewed the transcriptions from Teams, as the AI can sometimes be inaccurate, pairing them with the video recording to ensure complete accuracy. While reviewing the transcripts I wrote brief memos as well. Once I completed reviewing the transcripts for accuracy, I sent copies to the participants to review for accuracy. During this time, I requested participants correct any issues and let me know if they had misspoken at any point so I could redact it from the interview. I also asked them if they wanted to clarify or elaborate on any responses. From there, I uploaded the transcripts to ATLAS.ti, a computer software used to help with qualitative data analysis. I used this software to help me keep track of all my coding for recurring themes.

Prior to each interview, I used information I had gathered from each organization's website, primarily their history and mission statement, to help formulate the introductory questions geared toward the organization's history and founding. Doing my own homework on each organization prior to the interview was especially helpful, as it saved time with some of the questions from my interview guide. This also helped me get a feel of the type of democratic work these organizations do. This became very helpful when participants struggled to define and discuss how their work was democratic. After the interviews, I revisited their websites to flesh out responses to questions that participants didn't address fully during the interview. I also relied on annual reports found on these organization's websites to gather additional data, including specific details like how many students they may have helped in the year.

Data Analysis Strategies

I conducted a basic qualitative research study to make sense of the college access work being done at nonprofits/community organizations. Specifically, I wanted to understand what factors influenced their founding, barriers faced, and strategies of success within these organizations. I analyzed the data from these interviews via a multi-stage process where I transcribed, coded, categorized, and developed themes from my data.

I conducted interviews via Microsoft Teams. Via the Teams platform, I was able to record both audio and video, as well as transcribe the interviews using Teams AI. Once Teams completed the transcription, I reviewed the transcription verbatim with the video recording and updated each transcript for accuracy. I also made sure to review the transcripts promptly after each interview, writing notes to myself, so as not to forget key moments and ideas I had during the interview.

Once I reviewed the transcripts, I used ATLAS.ti, a data analysis software to help organize my coding. I used inductive codes, as my codes came directly from the data (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Once I identified a number of codes, I grouped them into broader categories, and from there I developed themes. An example of this would be creating a code for "wraparound service" and "resources offered," then grouping these two into categories and converting them into the theme "strategies for success."

Although interviews were my primary data source, I also analyzed data found on the organization's website when available. I used this information primarily to fill in gaps in the interview transcripts or to help me to understand the organization prior to the interview, including reviewing organizational missions and funding sources.

Trustworthiness

I used multiple strategies to ensure the trustworthiness of my study, including member checks, multiple data sources, and maximum variation. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) describe member checks as taking findings back to participants so they can confirm their accuracy. I did this by providing transcripts to participants for review, allowing participants to clarify and redact statements as necessary, and allowing them to add additional thoughts that may have escaped them during the interview. I also contacted participants via email for clarity to ensure I interpreted their thoughts accordingly. An example of this is when I reached out to Si Podemos VA to make sure I understood their concern about the challenge of working with partner institutions that may not be equipped with the proper knowledge when working with undocumented youth and their career options.

I also used multiple data sources to help ensure trustworthiness. In addition to utilizing interviews as my primary data source, I also relied on information found on the organization's

website to help me make sense of all the work the organization does to help undocumented youth successfully access college. I researched the mission and values of the organization, read student testimonies, and reviewed documents like vision statements, profiles of success, and annual reports. All this material combined helped me gain a better understanding of the organization as a whole, as well as the work that they do.

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) describe maximum variation as "seeking variation or diversity in sample selection to allow for a greater range of application of the findings by consumers of the research" (p. 259). I did this by including states in my sample that were not just restrictive, and instead included some additional organizations from both progressive and restrictive states. While most organizations included in this study were housed in restrictive states, I did include an organization from a progressive state and an organization from a state without active policies. I think that this variation helped show that the issues of college access expand beyond restrictive states when it comes to helping undocumented students.

Limitations

There are a few limitations to my study worth noting. One limitation to my study was that in all but one interview, I only spoke with one person at the organization. Being able to speak to more people within the organization could have added more nuance to the conversation, especially considering participants had different roles within their organization, and could have had limited knowledge in some areas. Another limitation is that all the restrictive states included in my study were in the South, which is arguably more anti-immigrant than other areas. There were two restrictive northern states I wished to include in the study but was never able to get in contact with anyone. I think a northern perspective on what college access work looks like would have complimented this study. I also only had one opportunity, one interview per organization,

to really try to gather as much information as I could, in about one hour. This made it difficult to gain a real sense of the ins and out of the organization as a whole. Finally, because this was an interview-based study, I rely on self-report from individuals who may have been selective in what they chose to share.

Summary

In this chapter I described the methods used to conduct my study. I provided details of the preliminary study I conducted that helped lead me to my final study. Additionally, I discussed my sample population, the methods used to conduct the study, and how I analyzed my data. In chapters four, five, and six, I detail the findings from my study. In chapter four, I discuss key events that impacted the founding of the nonprofit/community organizations included in the study, as well as struggles these organizations face doing college access work for undocumented youth. In chapter five, I detail strategies used by these organizations to help improve college access for this population. In chapter six, I cover the democratic themes in college access work, starting with how the organizations define democracy, what they leave out of their definition, and how college access is a common good, or at least should be seen that way. In the final chapter, I answer my research questions and draw conclusions about the findings of my study and more broadly about college access work as a democratic good. I also make recommendations and reflect on the study overall.

CHAPTER IV: ORGANIZATION FOUNDING AND STRUGGLES

As I analyzed the interview transcripts, I identified five themes related to the factors at the community/state level that influenced the founding of the organization to help improve college access for undocumented youth, addressing my first research question. Across all of the 18 organizations that I included in this study, their founding reflects a commitment to maintaining our democracy, particularly in terms of how they address the needs of vulnerable members of the population and in their advocacy and commitment to disrupting policies that directly harm this group. In the first part of this chapter, I share the five themes I noticed in discussion of establishing the organization. I then turn to exploring the struggles these organizations face in doing college access work for this population; this information helps me to answer my second research question about the challenges of college access work in our current times.

Themes Related to the Founding of the Organization

Although participating organizations spanned across seven southern states and three midwestern states, their encounters with college access for undocumented youth appeared to be rather similar, especially as it relates to the reasoning for their organization being founded. For this reason, I was able to organize the data I collected on the factors at the community/state level influenced the founding of the organization into five overarching themes: address immigrant needs, impact systematic change and policy reform, response to anti-immigrant legislation, result of community leaders hearing undocumented students' stories, and response to immigration raids. Below I discuss these themes in more detail, providing examples from the interviews I conducted.

Address Immigrant Needs

Various participants referenced immigrant needs as the main reason for their founding. These needs typically included the essentials one would need to thrive, such as access to food, community, legal help, and education, among other resources. Below I discuss two organizations, both in Midwestern states, established 50 years apart to assist the immigrant population access basic needs, including access to a better education. The reasons for the founding of these organizations are similar across other organizations in this study. I chose these two organizations to discuss because I think it is rather significant that even after being founded 50 years apart, the need for organizations doing this work still exists. Additionally, I think these two organizations are exemplary in the work they do to help their immigrant communities.

Located in Indiana, IN Avanzando was established in the 1970's by community leaders, including a city official, to address the needs of the growing Hispanic community in the area. Maria offered that the organization was established to address the basic needs of the community, providing resources and offering English and citizenship classes. Maria described the organization as a "first stop where a new immigrant could go to...kind of get oriented...to navigate the United States." In the late 1980's, the Education Center was established as a separate entity and then merged into IN Avanzando in 2004. Maria described the goal of the Education Center as helping low-income Latino and first-generation students graduate high school, acknowledging that the dropout rate for this population was "astronomical" at the time of the Center's founding nearly 40 years ago. Ultimately, the aim of the Education Center is to provide resources to help this population graduate high school and go to college. The organization I describe next was established half a century later and continues the effort of helping Midwestern undocumented immigrants go to college.

The state of Michigan created two educational programs to help make two-year associate college degrees and certificate programs more affordable for essential workers (e.g., nurses, other health care workers, police and government officials, food service and childcare providers) and for those over 25 years old, following the COVID-19 pandemic. Over time, state advocates noted that certain groups were not eligible for this program: those who did not have a social security number or were not eligible for federal financial aid. To fill this gap, MI Goes to College Tambien was created and housed under MI Goes to College, a broader college access program in the state, to help those originally not included in the first two programs to afford to pursue a two-year degree or certificate. This program provides full services including paying tuition and all fees associated with enrollment. This was made possible by community members, including those at the state level, finding private funders, including as Alora described it, "wonderful organizations [and] wonderful people who were invested in the idea."

All but two of the 18 organizations in my study were founded with the direct goal of addressing immigrant needs. Although the need to access an education may not have been the first reason on the list of resources offered by these organization to address immigrant needs, over time this resource was added. The direct connection between addressing needs and the role access to an education plays in that work is very evident. In fact, AL Can, which I discuss in the next section, focuses specifically on the connections between education and poverty rates.

Impact Systematic Change and/or Policy Reform

Six participants discussed their organizations having the goal of impacting systematic change and/or policy and that being a key reason why they were founded. Below I discuss two organizations established 25 years apart that were founded for this purpose. Participants at these two organizations spoke specifically about their goals of impacting systematic change and policy

reform. I picked these two organizations to reflect how educating the people—whether it be sharing data on the correlation between education and poverty or enlightening educational leaders on undocumented students' struggles—can impact real change.

In the early 1990's, AL Can was formed by a group of concerned citizens, including educators and leaders, as a means to better understand poverty in the state, as well as to impact systematic change and policy reform for the poorest citizens of the state. They soon realized the correlation between obtaining an education and poverty rates. Emma discussed the role education plays on poverty, reflecting on the work the organization has done for over 30 years and their understanding of "what a big driver educational attainment is on poverty and your ability to earn a higher income and accumulate wealth." While the organization focuses on other "barriers to prosperity," including things like food insecurity and health insurance coverage, they primarily "focus on postsecondary [educational] access and success." While AL Can is not directly an immigrant serving organization, they do provide services for this population. Emma noted that most of their services for the immigrant community involve helping mixed-status families; these are typically students who are citizens but have undocumented parents. This work often involves helping these families complete the FAFSA application, as it can be "incredibly complicated" to complete the form as a citizen when your parents lack proper documentation and other forms. Next, I discuss an organization established more recently that works to train educational leaders on the struggles their undocumented students face, in hopes of making real change starting in the classroom.

Located in North Carolina, Iluminar NC was founded by Latino community leaders and was originally started as a student serving organization, working directly with high school students to meet their needs by providing college access resources like college advising and

FAFSA support. Anna noted that following the COVID-19 pandemic, they noticed different needs and their mission evolved. They began to understand the necessity of working directly with—and training—education leaders, recognizing the greater reach those leaders can have once they have the accurate information to share with students. They realized that by ensuring that educational leaders were trained to be culturally responsive and educated on the barriers immigrant communities face, they would be able to make more progressive change in and out of the classroom. Describing the founders of this organization, Anna noted that they

> Saw that in order to make the kind of systemic difference to have these culturally sustaining classrooms that were meeting the needs of immigrant students and immigrant families, [the outreach] needed to be bigger. It needed to be multi-level support, you know, like high school, college, young professionals and so forth.

She added, "We need our K-12 educators to understand this [undocumented immigrant student] experience. So, we have really invested in K-12 educator ally[ship] training."

Although not every participant discussed their organizations' founding being associated with impacting systematic change and policy reform, in analyzing the data I noted that in total, ten organizations either do direct policy work for immigrant communities or advocacy work of some kind for this population. This can range from getting allies of their organization to support legislative actions that align with the organizations goals, to getting postsecondary institutions to change their policies to be more inclusive and accommodating to undocumented students.

Response to Anti-Immigrant Legislation

Four participants I interviewed referenced some form of anti-immigration legislation passing, or pro-immigrant legislation failing to pass, as a key factor that influenced their founding. In this section, I discuss three organizations housed in three different states: Georgia,

Virginia, and Indiana. I chose these three organizations because I think they are powerful examples of how the community can come together, even in the worst of times, to make change happen, especially when it becomes obvious that these necessary changes are not going to happen through legislative action.

In 2010, an undocumented student being pulled over for a minor traffic violation resulted in the University System of Georgia Board of Regents reviewing their policies on undocumented admission and residency determination; this review resulted in the Board barring undocumented students from enrolling in their most competitive postsecondary institutions (Banks, 2013). At this time, Georgia only banned undocumented youth from accessing in-state tuition rates. The final report found that of the 310,000 students enrolled that fall in the University System of Georgia (USG), only 501 were undocumented and that they were accurately being charged the out-of-state tuition rate (USG, 2010). Additionally, it was noted that of the 501 enrolled undocumented students, only 27 were enrolled in the intuitions deemed most competitive (USG, 2010). The Georgia nonprofit, Liberating You, formed in response to the state barring undocumented youth from enrolling at these competitive institutions. Founded by undocumented students, documented allies, and professors, this organization aims to empower undocumented youth and support their higher education access. A year after this incident prompted even more anti-immigrant legislation in Georgia, undocumented immigrant communities across the nation would continue to be disappointed because of a pro-immigrant legislative act, the Dream Act, failing to pass.

After the Dream Act failed to pass in 2011 by Congress, VA Dreamers Can was formed by concerned parents, students, community leaders, and educators to help ensure that undocumented status did not prevent these students from accessing college. Originally

introduced in 2001, one goal of the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act was to assist undocumented students with college access by providing for in-state tuition rates at public postsecondary institutions (Enyioha, 2019). Since 2001, Congress has been presented with over 20 versions of the DREAM Act ("The DREAM Act," 2024). In fact, 2010 was the closest the bill had ever come to passing, just shy of five votes that it needed to move on to the Senate ("The DREAM Act," 2024). It was this very failure that triggered the formation of this nonprofit in Virginia. Kadie commented on the reactions from the community when the DREAM Act was so close to being passed and still failed and how this failure inspired the community to come together because they realized that the Legislature was not going to resolve the real issue at hand. The parents were able to create their first VA Dreamers Can Fundraiser, raising funds by selling homecooked meals. By the first year they were able to award four scholarships to undocumented students.

In 2020, Virginia passed HB 1547, which granted access to in-state tuition rates for those who met certain criteria (LIS, 2020). A year later Virginia passed SB 1387, which grants eligible undocumented youth in the state access to state financial aid (LIS, 2021). Prior to this progressive shift, Virginia was a restrictive state. As a result of these progressive rulings, Virginia is now considered a progressive state as it relates to college access for undocumented youth. Even though this state is now more progressive, VA Dreamers Can continues to offer college access resources for undocumented youth seeking a higher education in the state, particularly because many struggle to persist in higher education due to their undocumented status. These resources include scholarships, mentors, and career placement support, among others. Despite their more progressive status, Kadie nonetheless discussed the struggles the organization continues to face even with progressive state policies on college access for this

population. One of the big challenges these students face is finding employment after college due to their documentation status. The same year the DREAM Act failed, Indiana also introduced harmful legislation for immigrant population, leading to the creation of another organization in my study.

In 2011, the Indiana Legislature approved various anti-immigrant laws, including a law which barred in-state tuition rates for undocumented youth. This anti-immigrant legislation resulted in undocumented students holding a peaceful sit-in at the Indiana Statehouse (Vogt et al., 2018). After this sit in, a group of students got together and began engaging in various actions to support each other and raise funds, which eventually paved the way for the creation of a youth-led organization. IN Alianza was created with the mission of empowering members of undocumented communities in Indiana. In discussing the beginnings of this organization, Lucia stated, “at that time, it wasn't like an official nonprofit. It was just like a group of youth coming together doing fundraisers, garage sales to help pay for their tuition and for their friend’s tuition.” These student leaders applied for the organization to become an official nonprofit around 2015 and today hosts “upscale fundraisers” and even has “an established scholarship.”

Anti-immigrant legislation influenced these organizations to create their own avenues and open their own doors for college access, and it has fueled the organizational goals of creating equitable educational access for undocumented youth. I think these three organizations are powerful examples of how people coming together as a community to overcome oppressive legislation can have a significant impact. Lolita from Liberating You proudly spoke of their success, stating “...that’s when you know you’re doing good work, is like when Georgia Legislature starts legislating against your success.”

Result of Community Leaders Hearing Undocumented Students' Stories

A couple of participants referenced community leaders learning of the struggles undocumented youth face when attempting to access a higher education and how that impacted them coming together to create a path for easier access for this group. The two organizations I profile below are good models of how kindhearted entrepreneurs and philanthropists can share the wealth as part of supporting marginalized community members.

The founder NC Academico was not aware of the struggles undocumented students face when they want to go to college until he learned that the son of a woman who worked in his home was not going to be able to attend college due to the out-of-state tuition cost. He paid for her son to go to Harvard. Upon finding out there were many more undocumented students impacted by these restrictions on in-state tuition rates and financial aid, he founded this North Carolina based organization, which assists students attending college in North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia by providing comprehensive services including full-ride scholarships and a career coach all through college, among other resources. His goal was to impact economic mobility for undocumented youth. Similarly, another southern organization was formed when a Virginia leader learned undocumented students' challenges when they try to go to college.

One of the founders of Si Podemos VA, a national organization housed in Virginia, was already involved in college access work when he heard directly from Dreamers themselves about their struggles accessing college. After hearing these stories, Hana described how this founder became "very passionate about playing a role in supporting and expanding college access for Dreamers." He and three other founders created Si Podemos VA to address college access concerns for this population. Although this organization is now considered one of the nation's largest college access programs for undocumented youth, Hana asserted that the organization

started as “a small project to help maybe a couple hundred Dreamers go to college because the expectation was that Congress would act and provide in-state tuition for undocumented students and hopefully pathways to permanent residency.” To date they have over 4,000 graduates who have been helped by the Si Podemos VA.

In the examples in this section, we see wealthy leaders have put their money to good use, attempting to help those who would have very limited options to pursue their dreams of a higher education otherwise. Both organizations offer wraparound services. This means that they provide comprehensive college access resources like scholarships, academic support, career services, and other supports to address needs that arise like mental health, for instance. Because of these resources, their scholars have had much success in college.

Response to Immigration Raids

Other organizations were founded in responses to actions in their communities. Two participants discussed the impact immigration raids had on their community and how those raids ultimately led to the founding of their nonprofit. In this section I discuss these two organizations, which are housed in two very restrictive and conservative states in the US, South Carolina and Mississippi.

SC Hispanos Unidos, a South Carolina organization, works to connect Latinx community members to resources and helps to assist in helping its members thrive. Carlos described how this organization was founded: “in 2008 [there] was a big [immigration] raid of a chicken farm where they detained over 300 different individuals and [they] were pretty much placed on deportation proceedings.” The community responded to this immigration raid by helping those families. Carlos spoke about how the work of helping reunite these families turned into an organization that shifted into a nonprofit that focuses on legal help, healthcare, financial stability

and equal access to higher education. Mississippi also suffered a similar fate over a decade later, also resulting in an organization being created to help this population.

The first branch of this Mississippi organization opened as a response to the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Megan spoke about the 2019 immigration raids that impacted the second branch, MS Servicio Comunitario, opening in central Mississippi. Seven poultry plants were raided by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in August 2019 and almost 700 workers were arrested (Martínez-Betrán, 2024). Shapiro et al. (2019) claim this raid was the "biggest workplace immigration raid ever in a single state." As a result of these raids, and as an attempt to help the undocumented population of this community, this branch of MS Servicio Comunitario was opened. This organization provides legal services, ESL courses, and a community health worker program, among other services. Megan stated, "we are here to respond to the needs in the community."

While only two participants referenced immigration raids influencing their organizations' founding, these were both major raids that had significant impact on the immigrant communities in these two states. In a time of great devastation, these community members came together to offer resources to this population to help them thrive. The founding of the organizations in this study was a first step to helping the undocumented population, though these organizations still face many challenges. I turn to that next.

Struggles Faced by Organizations

Apart from understanding what factors influenced the founding of the nonprofit/community organization, I also wanted to understand what struggles the organization faces in doing college access work for undocumented youth. Across all ten states, similar organizational struggles emerged. While participants discussed many different struggles, I focus

here on the top six struggles that I heard from multiple participants: limited funding, overworked, political climate, fully undocumented vs DACA, misinformed educational leaders, and cultural norms.

Limited Funding

Several interviewees referenced funding as a key struggle that their organization faces. This is not surprising for non-profit organizations who have to apply for grants and rely on the generosity of the corporate world to fund their efforts. Without sufficient funding, these organizations are limited in the number of students they can assist with scholarships and other resources and limited in terms of staff they can employ. Both these difficulties can complicate their organization remaining open. In describing funding challenges, I focus on organizations in Indiana and Michigan because the staff there talked about them thoughtfully during our interviews. Their comments reflect the difficulties that can arise when organizations are not well funded.

Maria from IN Avanzando stated that the lack of funding is a major struggle that her organization faces. Maria mentioned that if they had access to more funding, they could potentially provide full-ride scholarships to their undocumented students. IN Avanzando offers weekly classes and workshops to high school students to help prepare them for college and develop leadership skills. They also offer a summer leadership program. Limited funding also impacts who they are able to hire to teach their students in these programs. Maria admitted that low funding means they cannot hire the most highly trained educators. She confessed, “trying to compete with salaries...teacher salaries and also benefits of having like summers off and like certain breaks, we can't really compete with that. So, we're always hiring younger, like recently out of college grads.” Maria disclosed that IN Avanzando does not have its own space either and

so they have to rely on renting space for their community events. This can become a major inconvenience for the organization, especially when it impacts when and where they can schedule community events and the number of community workshops they can offer. These events and workshops include SAT/ACT Prep and parental involvement workshops on the college process, among strategies and resources for college access and success. Maria added, "there's like a lot of resources or workshops that we wish we could offer, and even after hours or on the weekend, but we're kind of limited because of the space that we're restricted to." Maria was not the only participant who discussed the issue of not owning a physical building for their organization. Lucia, from IN Alianza, the youth-led organization in Indiana, also mentioned this concern.

Lucia described how limited funding, and the overwhelming need, creates obstacles for the organization to do this work. IN Alianza relies on funding from individual donations and fundraisers, but Lucia did note that their organization had just been awarded a grant. Lucia discussed the difficulties of finding ethical sources of funds, especially as a grassroots organization. She stated, "we don't cater to a political party, nor an agenda, nor funders who have historically harmed our community. So, for trying to find like ethical ways to get funding is sometimes hard." Even when you do have supporters, that funding can always run out. This was the case for MI Goes to College Tambien.

Alora at MI Goes to College Tambien shared how their limited funding prevented them from offering students resources beyond community college. In addition to this limited funding, Alora lamented that the program was actually in the process of coming to an end. She stated "our scholarship program is a fixed term program in the sense that it is only in existence until our funding is gone and we are getting towards the end of the program here." In fact, they are no

longer accepting applications, and they are currently helping students navigate the next steps for their education and funding for that education.

Limited funding was mentioned by multiple participants. Funding impacts every aspect of the organization and has a major impact on the work these organizations can accomplish. It is rather disappointing to see an organization like MI Goes to College Tambien run out of funds and be forced to end this important work.

Overworked

Many participants in this study spoke of the general overwhelming needs that people in the communities they serve face and how that often impacts staff and their work. Limited funding often means limited staff and what generally follows is staff being overworked or having to be very selective with what they can manage. And yet, other factors can also influence being overworked, like feeling an obligation to always make oneself available because that is the safest option for the students, especially when students do not feel safe sharing their status because of fear of deportation. Below I discuss three different organizations in exploring this issue more in detail, located in Indiana, Missouri, and North Carolina. I chose these organizations because they reflect how time consuming this work can be and how much more of a need there is for organizations like these and people doing this work.

Maria from IN Avanzando mentioned the challenges and pressures their organization faces as they are one of the only organizations in the state that does this work, offering resources like college prep workshops, scholarships, and SAT/ACT prep, among other things. She talked about clients driving 2-3 hours to come to their events for services. While they want to share their resources with all who need them, having to support students outside of their district adds a

lot of extra work. Maria also discussed their limited staff and how they are often overworked and burned-out. She asserted:

> We have two college and career readiness specialists [who] help with these one-on-one education consultations for community members, but we just, it became overwhelming to them. They were just work[ing]—seeing family after family. But in addition to that, they also have to implement the [Avanzamos] program and you know, prep for the workshops. And we also work on the weekends...so it became a lot, so burnout.

The Avanzamos program helps prepare high school students with academic, social, college, and career readiness skills. The burnout from doing this work can greatly impact outcomes and potentially impact employee retention. The participants from the Missouri organization also discussed how being overworked impacts their work.

Claudia from KC Avanzando Hispanos spoke about the two people who are in charge of handling the 509 scholarships their organization distributed that year. She expressed that because there are just two of them in the advising department, that they must "be very tactical about who [they] reach out to and advise." Claudia clarified that they were able to break down the 509 scholarship recipients into groups so that each person had about 80 students on their caseload that they worked with directly and advised, which is still a rather significant amount for just one person. This means that they are not able to work directly with all 509 scholarship recipients, which impacts the relationships they are able to build with those remaining students. She offered, "It's hard and it's sad that we can't reach all 509, but we don't like push them away if they reach out to us...we still go ahead and, like, set them up with an advising meeting..." Even when working with an already large caseload, Claudia and her colleague still make sure to be available

when other students reach out. This desire to always be available often results in being overworked, something Gemma from the North Carolina organization also discussed.

Gemma from NC Academico spoke about how she makes sure to always be available for her students, at a mentor capacity, even though she is not supposed to work with so many students at one time. Gemma admits that she always makes herself available, even if students just need someone to talk to because the "[students] don't have anybody in school that they can talk to and our students unfortunately do not feel safe saying...'I'm undocumented and this is a problem that I'm facing' because they're concerned they could be removed. ICE is a big thing." Burnout, alongside the constant felt need to be available, can also be very overwhelming and straining on staff. And yet, Maria from the Indiana organization believes that their organization's mission is what helps retain their staff, even when they could potentially get better paying jobs.

Political Climate

Several participants referenced the political climate and its sometimes challenging impact on their work. Unfortunately, anti-immigration policies have impacted college access since the Higher Education Act in 1965 was signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson (Kim & Diaz, 2013). Anti-immigration discourse is nothing new and has had lasting effects on immigrants and their capacity for success for more than a century. Below I discuss how the current political climate has impacted different organizations located in Georgia, North Carolina and South Carolina. Georgia and South Carolina are two of the three most restrictive states for undocumented students, so I thought they were rather significant examples to share in this section.

Housed in Georgia, Lolita reflected on the "high-risk" work Liberating You does, including providing free college preparation courses for students. It is important to note that this

organization operates underground. This means that they do not publish their address, and they go through extreme measures to maintain their and their students' safety. Lolita offered,

> That's why we don't publish where we meet. That's why my parents don't know where I work, and that is just how we have to operate…since DACA was repealed in 2017, virtually all of our students are fully undocumented. We have to train and vet drivers to pick up students...and bring them to and from class. So, it's a very labor-intensive operation to begin with, plus the political hostilities and environment in which we work makes it very specific.

Lolita also admitted to receiving threats online and even in person for doing this work.

Gemma shared some similar challenges to Lolita. NC Academico partners with higher education institutions to sponsor undocumented students. Once students are awarded a scholarship by this organization, they can only attend schools that are partnered with the organization. Due to strict policies on in-state tuition rates and financial aid, public schools are limited in how they can allot their funding. This means that undocumented students admitted into their schools are not allowed to receive institutional funding due to their status. This is why many undocumented students opt to go to private postsecondary institutions. Private schools are not held to the same policies and have more freedoms than public postsecondary institutions, especially as it relates to distributing their funding (Vedder, 2018). This often allows these private institutions to provide institutional funding and other scholarships to undocumented students. Gemma asserted, "unfortunately, with the political climate that we're in, less schools have funding to get to receive undocumented students. If you see our list of colleges, they're all private because they have funding specifically for undocumented students." In fact, private institutions often classify their undocumented students as domestic students "and/or have

identified specific institutional funds, external scholarships or other donor funds to support undocumented students" ("Higher Ed Guide to Tuition," 2021, p. 4). Gemma further stated, "there's other schools, unfortunately, that they just simply do not accept our students and it's unfortunate, but that's a reality that we face."

Refencing the state of South Carolina, Kim from SC Alianza Lingüística (SCAL) described how the political climate does not allow certain conversations to even take place. While speaking about how undocumented people are barred from obtaining a professional license (including in healthcare, education, and other fields) in the state, and how they have tried to raise this issue as a major concern that also hurts the state because their state has "problems in [their] workforce," Kim shared that they have continuously been shut down by their legislative representatives due to fears of amnesty. She expressed that all representatives have to do is call any progressive measure that helps undocumented people "amnesty" and that the conversation is immediately shut down. Amnesty refers to former President Ronald Reagan's Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, often known as Reagan Amnesty, in which President Reagan granted amnesty and legal residency to about 3 million undocumented immigrants who had been in the US prior to 1982 ("A Reagan Legacy," 2010). There is a fear that any mention of helping this population will result in amnesty and potentially even legal residency, an act that is often seen as rewarding criminal behavior. Kim further stated, "I'm not talking about immigration policy...I'm just talking about...we have invested in these students from kindergarten through 12th grade and we're not getting the return on our investment because we are not providing opportunities for them to stay in our state." If you cannot even bring up the issue of supporting the education of undocumented students without being shut down, how will it ever be addressed?

Eight participants referenced political climate as a struggle their organization faces, making it the most referenced struggle by members of these organizations. While the examples above are all different, they are also all specific to living in an anti-immigrant era. These political hostilities significantly impact the work these organizations do at every level. Their work is also impacted by the statuses of the students they support.

Fully Undocumented vs. DACA

In 2017, the Trump Administration rescinded the DACA program, which was established under the Obama Administration in 2012. Rescinding the DACA program meant that although current DACA recipients could renew their applications, new applications were no longer accepted (Romo et al., 2017). While DACA applications being on hold is a major issue for younger immigrants who no longer hold any status and are thus fully undocumented, the bigger issue is the lack of immigration reform in general, and specifically for these children brought to the US at a young age. Current undocumented high school graduates have aged out of the eligibility requirements for DACA and so, as Anna from the North Carolina organization, Iluminar NC, put it, "even if DACA was put in place tomorrow, they wouldn't qualify because of the age...DACA is not ever going to be reality for them unless they completely overhaul it." DACA offered more than status, it offered job security for this population. Undocumented high school students coming out of high school understand the impact of not having this security and it often impacts their level of ambition with pursuing a higher education.

Below I discuss conversations with four participants who referenced the impact of the undocumented population shifting from DACA to fully undocumented. Participants spoke profoundly about the struggles their organizations have encountered as a direct result of DACA no longer existing for this generation. One issue they encounter regularly is in helping these

undocumented students to gain employment after college. Out of 18 organizations from this study, only four organizations offer wraparound services, providing comprehensive support to ensure these students' success and retention in college. As Gemma from NC Academico stated, "We don't consider ourselves a scholarship because a scholarship just gives you the money to go to college and that's it." Beyond scholarships, these four organizations offer a range of resources like career coaches, mental health services, or emergency loans. As a direct result of DACA being on hold and the lack of immigration reform, these organizations are seeing more and more undocumented students graduate from college without any career options. This is such an intriguing and complicated fact, even when organizations and institutions provide full support and ensure undocumented students have access to earning a degree, it is still hard to predict what the outcomes will be when students obtain those degrees, especially when their status can complicate their ability to get a job.

In northern Virginia, Kadie from VA Dreamers Can described how the population shift from DACA status to fully undocumented has impacted their work. Their main mission is to help undocumented students access a higher education and while they have been successful in that regard, issues have arisen following those undocumented students earning their degrees. Kadie stated, "one of our biggest struggles is the fact that most of our students are fully undocumented." Kadie mentioned that in previous years, most of their students (95%) had DACA, making the organization's ability to support getting students into their field after graduation much easier. She asserted, "Statistically, most of our students who got a college degree and got a scholarship were…placed within their field like a year within graduation. That's very different now." Kadie reflected on how this shift impacts student mentality, noting,

> Even though our main mission is not to support them with career placement, it's something we have to deal with because we're selling a college degree. It's something our students have to struggle with. It's very discouraging as you go through school to, even if you're doing well academically, what is the point if you can't legally work in the country?

With Virginia now providing access to in-state tuition rates and financial aid for undocumented youth, these hard-fought for resources can feel very pointless when a college degree holds less weight than your documentation status, and your qualifications are not enough to secure employment. Located in the same state, Hana spoke of the same issue.

Hana's experiences mirrored Kadie's. Discussing Si Podemos VA, which serves students nationally, Hana reflected on the fact that 75% of their students enrolled in college today are fully undocumented, compared to when the organization first started in 2014 and 96% of their scholars were DACA recipients. Hana expressed that upon graduating college these students cannot easily find work due to their status. Additionally, many of these students are not eligible for internships, which also impacts career options after graduation. She stated,

> Financial need remains incredibly high, even with our scholarship. So that's the biggest challenge and that comes with career success and career development opportunities, and so it's not just for the students who are asking for more opportunities. 'I'm not eligible for internships. I don't know what I'm going to do as a fully undocumented individual after I graduate from college.' It also comes with our partnership with the specific colleges we work with, all the staff who aren't necessarily familiar with working with this population. Not necessarily knowing how to best advise them through their college and career success journey.

Apart from students' documentation status impacting their career outcomes, working with uninformed school leaders who do not know what resources exist for this population greatly impacts their career outcomes as well. Alora from Michigan also reflected on the documentation issue.

Similar to the organizations in Virginia, Alora from MI Goes to College Tambien discussed how documentation status has impacted the work that they do. She described the struggles they face in trying to navigate their scholar's documentation status while working with the higher education institutions they partner with and how documentation status constantly comes up with everything that they do, even something as simple as paying a student's tuition with their wraparound services can be risky. Alora offered, "It's just something that is unavoidable and you don't wanna jeopardize the student or put them at risk or anything like that. So, you have to be very cognizant of how you kind of navigate that situation." She commented on how she prefers the processes at some institutions over others, adding "But I'm really working with what I got here."

Even though Alora did not make a direct connection between DACA being on hold and the implications that has on the work they do at their organization, she did talk about it and how it impacts her students and their families directly. She asserted, "we went from someone having an employment authorization document to no longer being able to work...They're losing their jobs. And they're saying, 'what do I do now?' And that's the new situation that they are trying to navigate, right?" Additionally, Alora mentioned how she has also come across students who have not been able to renew their DACA applications and the impact that has on the students and their families. Financially investing in these students and providing wraparound services for degrees they might not be able to use in the future is discouraging and can feel very wasteful.

Juliana from the Tennessee organization TN Somos Líderes shared Alora's concerns. Her organization provides resources to support college success and career-readiness at multiple institutions across the state. These resources include career readiness skills and professional development. Students participate in what she described as a club to receive these benefits. The goal of this organization is to diversify economic development by creating strong Latino professionals and community leaders. Although this organization is open to all students now, it was originally created specifically for Latino students of all documentation statuses. The organization transitioned to admit all first-generation college students because they noticed there was a significant need for these resources among first-generation students as well. The shift of the population moving from DACA to fully undocumented has had an impact on the demographic of students who participate in these clubs. Juliana stated,

> I would say that our numbers of undocumented students have plummeted over the last few years...because DACA really provided a framework for students to be like well, 'I can get a job after college, so I am going to invest in my career.'

In addition to there being no guarantee of a career after earning a degree, Juliana attributed this plummet to the cost of college tuition as undocumented students must pay three to four times the tuition as typical in-state students to attend public postsecondary institutions because they don't qualify for in-state rates.

Shifts in the population transitioning from DACA to fully undocumented have had a significant impact on the work that these organizations do and the career options for undocumented students once they complete their degrees. With no immigration reform in sight, this struggle will continue to grow. This struggle is complicated by the fact that many educators

and educational leaders are unaware of the range of challenges and limitations undocumented students face.

Misinformed Educational Leaders

Participants from 15 of the organizations included in this study referenced misinformation being a major struggle for the work they do. Part of their work involves educating K-12 teachers and leaders, undocumented students, and their families, as well as correcting misinformation. This misinformation can cause significant harm as it has the potential to discourage undocumented students from pursuing a higher education, or equally as harmful, it can send students down the wrong path where they potentially enroll at non-undocufriendly schools or pursue a major that doesn't help them to secure post-college employment, costing them both time and money. Multiple participants referenced discouraged students, as well as provided examples of students being led astray by those who should have been better informed. In this section, I share insights from conversations with five participants who reflected on this matter. Two organizations are in South Carolina, one is in Georgia, one is in Tennessee, and one is in North Carolina. I chose these organizations because I think they show how dire the need is to adequately train and inform educational leaders on how to properly work with undocumented students.

Carlos from SC Hispanos Unidos discussed the impact misinformation about college options has on undocumented students. He admitted that sometimes students "are just told that they can't, and that's all they hear. And then they don't try, right?... They just hear, 'Yeah, you can't do anything,' and that's all they know. And so, it is hard, right? It is challenging." Blanca from Inmigrantes Lideran in Georgia also described how misinformation can discourage and mislead students. She stated,

> One of the biggest struggles for me today is with the school system and how they advise, or [do] not advise the students. And you know, some of them [the students] are very frustrated by the little help they receive and sometimes they give up going to college...or they may believe that they cannot go. And some other times, like the case we have now, they mistakenly, they don't receive enough advice and mistakenly choose to go to the wrong place, and they fail horribly.

The wrong place she alluded to here is a school that is *not* undocufriendly, perhaps because of institutional policies or lack of knowledge by college leaders on undocumented students and their struggles.

Kim from SC Alianza Lingüística (SCAL) also discussed the misinformation students in the state encounter, such as being told they cannot go to college after high school due to their status. She also brought up an issue I had not heard of before about misinformation on enrollment in high schools for older newcomer students. Kim discussed that older students trying to enroll in public K-12 institutions are told they cannot enroll at the school and must enroll at the community college instead. This is rather confusing, especially considering South Carolina is a state that bars enrollment at public institutions, including community colleges. Kim pointed me in the direction of Napolitano's (2024) research. Napolitano (2024) investigated 600 high schools across the US and DC to see how they would handle enrolling a 19-year-old newcomer with limited English language skills. Researchers found that "more than 300 schools refused to register him—including 204 denials in the 35 states and the District of Columbia where high school attendance goes up to at least age 20" (Napolitano, 2024). Who knows how many older students trying to enroll in public high schools have been misinformed and/or denied access?

Students in Tennessee experience similar issues with being misinformed by those who should know better. Nora from TN Educación Libera (TNEL), detailed how a misadvised undocumented student missed out on college scholarships. Nora stated, “I think the biggest thing is just like a lack of understanding at the counselor and teacher level within our district... misinformation, I would say is one of the largest challenges.” She went on to discuss the student on her caseload who graduated high school the previous year when she was fully undocumented. During that summer, the student was able to secure a work permit and reached out to the organization for assistance with college. Unfortunately, due to misinformation that the student would not have any [scholarship] options *until* she received the work permit, which was not true, she was no longer eligible for scholarships because she had already graduated from high school. Nora asserts, “It's like, truly, misinformation is half the battle.” Many participants expressed their frustration with this issue, and Gemma was no exception.

Gemma from NC Academico had strong feelings about the damage that misinformation has on students, and the work that the organization often must do to address the consequences. Regarding the issues with misinformation at the postsecondary level, Gemma passionately claimed, “if the high, top [institutional leaders] doesn’t care, nobody’s going to care!” She added, “just because [your institution has] the funding [for undocumented students] doesn’t mean you support [them]!” She detailed the work she does, educating leaders in postsecondary institutions. She then provided an example. One of their DACA scholars wanted to go to medical school following earning their undergraduate degree. Unfortunately, only select medical schools allow DACA recipients to enroll. The student’s counselor gave them a list of places to apply without doing any real research about the student’s documentation status and policies on enrollment and unfortunately the student was rejected because of their documentation status. Gemma was

furious that the counselor would waste the student's time and money, and she had to educate the counselor on information the counselor should have already known.

Unfortunately, many other of the participants I interviewed also discussed the issue of misinformation, sharing the concerns of the representatives from the five organizations I discussed in this section. Almost every participant raised misinformation from educational leaders as a struggle they have to deal with. When the majority of these organizations are dealing with this struggle, I wonder when and how this issue going to be managed at a national level.

Cultural Norms

A different struggle discussed by my participants was not about the challenges on the systemic or structural level, but about working with families who sometimes hold cultural norms and expectations that are different from the dominant culture in the United States. Numerous interviewees spoke about how cultural norms impact the work that they do while working with immigrant students and families. Specifically, they discussed how a lack of understanding by immigrant parents of the necessity of a higher education in this country often makes their work more difficult. In fact, several interviewees spoke about how immigrant students often have to choose between going to college with all the expenses that entails, or starting work right after high school and helping provide for the family. Below I discuss conversations with five participants who discussed cultural norms as a struggle. I chose these organizations because I feel they show how complicated this work can become, especially when working across different cultures norms and values.

Maria from IN Avanzando discussed a summer program they offer that focuses on leadership skills and career readiness. She mentioned that some of the students participate in their programming all year long except for summer, stating that they often cannot participate

because they must work during that time. Some of these students are citizens and as such, face pressure from their family members to get a job because as Maria claimed, “they are the ones in their family with legal status, oftentimes and they're able to get like, good or similar paying jobs as their parents.” Because of this fact, their parents pull them out of these beneficial summer programs to help the family with finances. Representatives of the other organizations brought up similar issues like this.

Carlos from SC Hispanos Unidos talked about how the lack of understanding of the importance of college impacts their work and why it is so important to also educate the families on these matters. He insisted,

> I think that a lot of times there is also like the culture side of things like we don't know the importance of school because of cost being a big deal. And so, if you were gonna go to school versus going ahead and getting a job and helping your family with your bills, with rent, with food, then that becomes a priority, right?

In this regard, it makes more sense to start contributing back to family expenses than adding more debt to those expenses by trying to obtain a college degree, especially if there is no guarantee you will be able to use that degree once you finish college because of your documentation status.

Gemma added to this discussion, focusing on how the obligation to be with family can impact student success. She mentioned the successful graduation rates of the scholars in NC Academico, claiming that about 95% of students who receive their scholarship and aid successfully graduate. When I asked her why the other 5% failed to graduate, one of the reasons she discussed was family situations, stating that “sometimes family need their children to go to work and help with paying stuff in the house.” She also mentioned how being away from family

when they need you can be difficult, especially considering most of their students must live on campus because the partner schools typically are not in the same areas as their hometowns. In fact, she claimed this is the main issue they are seeing among students who struggle to graduate: they have to leave campus to help with family.

Claudia from KC Avanzando Hispanos also discussed the cultural challenges as well as cultural close-mindedness and how it impacts their work. She suggested parents can be the most challenging part of their work because "parents are really realistic in a sense of like, 'you're undocumented. Why are you going to school if you're not going to be able to even work in that field after you graduate 'cause you don't have a social?' right?" While she did mention that their programing helps combat these cultural closed-minded ideas by getting the families involved and educating them, I think this is a powerful example of how cultural norms and ideas about college being out of reach if you are undocumented can add extra challenges for people doing college access work. Oftentimes this cultural narrow-mindedness can rub off on the students as well, as Gloria from Alabama noted.

Gloria from Adelante Hispanics & Immigrants reflected on the idea of cultural closed-mindedness influencing undocumented students too. When I asked her about the students' attitudes about the idea of going to college, she mentioned that attitudes vary because the group they work with is not specifically undocumented. While they do have students who are eager to learn the information they provide on college access, she also discussed some students who lack motivation because of their documentation status. Gloria shared some of the comments undocumented students have made about their educational futures, addressing the students who typically do not care about the college access resources their organization provides. She recalls students making statements such as "'I'm just gonna work directly after high school' or, you

know, ‘I want to go to a trade school and, you know, work in this field...but I don't have a status, and I won't be able to, what's the point?’”

Some of these examples unfortunately illustrate that it may not necessarily be the lack of understanding the significance of higher education, but rather the harmfully realistic assumptions that college is so far out of reach for this population that it is not worth pursuing, especially because of the cost and the uncertainty surrounding whether getting a degree will actually pay off.

Summary

In this chapter, I shared findings that help to address my first two research questions: what factors at the community/state level influenced the founding of the organization to help improve college access for undocumented youth and what struggles do these organizations face in doing college access work for this population. In the next chapter I bring a little more positivity to light, reflecting on the strategies used at these organizations to help this population access higher education.

CHAPTER V: STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

In the previous chapter, I answered my first two research questions, identifying the factors at the state/community level that influenced the founding of the organization and the struggles the organization faces doing college access work for undocumented youth. In this chapter, I take on a more uplifting approach, unraveling the strategies used by these organizations to ensure that the undocumented population they help is successful in pursuing a college education.

Successful Strategies Used by Organizations

The strategies used to help undocumented youth access higher education varied across all eighteen organizations that I included in this study, from providing basic informational resources on college access like how to complete the college application process or find scholarships, to providing full wrap around services, which could include a full-ride scholarship to pay for college, housing, and even campus meal plans. While participants discussed many different strategies they used in their organizations, I discuss nine key ways that the organizations work to support undocumented student college access and success: offer scholarships, provide wraparound services, adapt resources, encourage parental involvement, build community and trust, form high school partnerships, establish mentorship and leadership programs, host professional development and career support programs, and facilitate difficult dialogues. I use examples from the interviews I conducted to discuss these strategies in more detail. Each strategy I discuss enhances the possibilities for access and success of these students seeking higher education, which in turn promotes a healthier and more inclusive democracy.

Offer Scholarships

Securing funding for higher education is the biggest struggle undocumented youth face when attempting to go to college, with less than an estimated 10% of undocumented youth being able to do so (Dougherty et al., 2010, as cited in Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015). Various factors contribute to this issue, including not having access to federal financial aid (H.R.3734 - 104th Congress, 1995-1996), having to pay out-of-state tuition rates (Amuedo-Dorantes & Sparber, 2014), not qualifying for institutional aid or other scholarships, and experiencing high poverty rates (Z.J. Perez, 2014). The organizations I reference in this section provide scholarships to the students they work with to help them access college. I include an organization from each type of state in this study, progressive (VA Dreamers Can), restrictive (IN Avanzando), and no active policies (MI Goes to College Tambien) and in doing so, I paint a picture of the different ways in which scholarships have been used to help this group of students to access higher education.

VA Dreamers Can was founded partially by concerned parents who created their first fundraiser by selling homecooked meals. They have grown from their first year of providing four scholarships to undocumented students, to providing 100 renewable scholarships in 2024. Kadie mentioned that around 97% of their students are graduating, emphasizing that "if they're renewing [their scholarships, then] they're graduating." VA Dreamers Can has awarded over 400 scholarships since its founding in 2011. With such successful graduation rates, it is quite evident that the scholarship is effective. Kadie even noted that when surveyed, their scholars list the scholarship as "the most important type of support." It is crucial to note that because Virginia is a progressive state for this population (because they allow undocumented youth to access in-state tuition rates), VA Dreamers Can is able to award *more* scholarships in *lower* amounts than organizations in states with more restrictive policies, which allows them to have a bigger reach.

Many of the other organizations included in this study that are located in restrictive states that ban in-state tuition rates often must choose between awarding more scholarships at lower amounts or awarding bigger scholarships to fewer students. The Indiana organization I describe next is a good example of this.

Indiana is a restrictive state when it comes to providing access to in-state tuition rates and federal financial aid. This leaves undocumented students in the state with very limited options when it comes to paying for college. IN Avanzando awards $8,000 scholarships to eight students a year. This is significantly fewer students than VA Dreamers Can award, but the cost of out-of-state tuition rates in the state is much higher than in-state tuition rates. It is essential to keep in mind that IN Avanzando is open to students who are both documented and undocumented, but Maria mentioned that they are very strategic in how they award their scholarships because undocumented students "really don't have any other option." Maria disclosed that they "are very careful to say...'the students that [they] select [for the scholarship] are the ones with like the most financial need.'" Maria added, "I would say that about 95% of all the students who we award the IN Avanzando Scholarship to are undocumented students." Even though $8,000 may not seem like much when looking at that out-of-state bill, in a restrictive state where funding options are few and far between, it is better than nothing. And it is impactful, even if just for those few students, and even if the students need to secure other sources of funding to be able to cover all their college expenses.

MI Goes to College Tambien is another good example of how a scholarship, even when limited due to funding, can be a great strategy to help this population succeed. Their scholarship is unique because their program is specific to awarding students who want to go to community college for a two-year degree or certificate. Alora referred to their scholarship as a "stackable

credential" because their hope is that students will continue their studies and transfer to a four-year institution where they only have to pay for two remaining years of college. As a state, Michigan does not have any active policies on college access, so institutions establish their own rules about how they enroll and classify undocumented students. Alora informed me that because of this lack of policy, the scholarship amounts that they award vary because some institutions may classify their students as in-district (in-state) while other institutions may classify them as international (out-of-state). So, for students enrolled full-time who are considered in-district, they can get awarded anywhere from $3,000-$4,000, whereas students who are enrolled full-time at an institution where they are considered international may be awarded $5,000-$6,000. Throughout the duration of their program, MI Goes to College Tambien awarded 117 scholars, covering tuition and other fees associated with enrollment. As this program is coming to an end, they still have 73 actively enrolled scholars, and 44 have either graduated or transferred to a four-year institution, and some have stopped out. Stopping out means students have to leave college with the goal of returning to complete their education, but because life challenges often occur, some students never make it back to finish. While this program was limited and did not last very long, helping 117 undocumented students make it to college is a significant accomplishment.

While participants from each state offered differing amounts for the scholarships they provided, each example demonstrates how funding is crucial to helping members of this population succeed, regardless of which type of state they are located in—be it progressive, restrictive, or having no active policies. I also think these organizations are thoughtful and deliberate about the scholarships they provide. They are with how they award those funds—from how they have grown their scholarship, to how they are intentional about who they award, to

making do with the limited funding they have. Providing any amount of funding for this vulnerable population provides this group with a chance of greater access to education, opportunity, and social mobility, essential factors that increase their likeliness of being both well informed and engaged citizens. These essential factors also contribute to maintaining our democratic values as a country.

Provide Wraparound Services

Four organizations I included in this study provide wraparound services of some kind, even if they do not provide full-ride scholarships. These organizations include MI Goes to College Tambien, NC Academico, Si Podemos VA, and VA Dreamers Can. Wraparound services can include resources like mentoring, coaching, emergency funding, housing, and mental health services. These services are essential to helping college student success and retention. Below I explore each organization that offers wraparound services and describe the many resources which have helped these students' success.

MI Goes to College Tambien offers a scholarship that covers tuition, and any fees associated with enrollment like lab fees and contact hours. They also offer support grants that students must apply for which cover non-tuition related expenses like transportation, food, and housing. And they offer what Alora referred to as coaching incentives. This involves students being incentivized to explore their college and learn about all the supports in place on their campus. This is offered every semester and students must complete the assigned task to earn the incentive. Alora noted, "these [campus] resources are free to them with the tuition that they pay, so we want them to utilize them." This is a powerful way to get students engaged on campus as well, which is also bound to help with retention. Michigan is a state with no active policies on college access for undocumented students.

NC Academico offers services to students residing in North Carolina, Georgia, and South Carolina, all of which are currently restrictive states. They partner with over 20 four-year post-secondary institutions to help sponsor their scholars so they can attend those schools with the organization's scholarship. NC Academico provides various resources, including awarding 100 full-ride scholarships each year. They are able to fund these generous services via donations from corporations, foundations and individuals, as well as through partnerships with higher education institutions that provide financial aid packages to their scholars. More than a scholarship, this organization provides other vital resources to help students succeed, like career support services, mental health services, mentorship, and community building. To date, they have helped over 400 students graduate from college. Their commitment to community building is noted in the fact that many of their alumni return to work with the organization and serve as mentors to current scholars. Gemma informed me that students struggling with mental health concerns are allowed a one semester leave of absence and upon their return they provide the students with six months of free mental health support. NC Academico is known also for their career support, which I will discuss in more detail in the professional development and career supports section of this chapter.

Si Podemos VA is in a progressive state, but works at a national level to provide undocumented students access to college. They offer two different scholarships, one for students in states that offer in-state tuition rates to undocumented youth and one for students in states that restrict in-state tuition rates to this population. To date, Si Podemos VA has awarded over 11,000 scholarships and students receiving the scholarship in restrictive states have an 85% graduation rate as of 2024, compared to the national college completion rate of 62.2% (National Student Clearinghouse, 2023). In addition to this scholarship, Si Podemos VA also provides emergency

grants to scholars who are facing financial hardships that may prevent them from successfully continuing their studies. On top of that, if the scholar is from a restrictive state and must leave home to live on campus, Si Podemos VA also covers housing and meals. They provide mental health services with staff who have experience with immigrant students specifically. They also provide career services, which I discuss in the professional development and career section below.

The final example comes from a progressive state, reflected here to show how wraparound services are still extremely necessary even in a state that offers in-state tuition and financial aid resources to undocumented youth. VA Dreamers Can offers holistic services to their students and when surveyed, their students listed those services as being the second most important support provided by the organization. These services include mentoring, mental health services, and case management, which connects them with resources in the community for housing and food insecurity. They partner with a major public university in the state to help their students get access to mental health support, and VA Dreamers Can covers the cost. Students are assigned a peer coach for their first year of college, which provides them with a much-needed support system. Kadie claimed that this coaching is a "key impact" because they have seen strong high school students drop out of college their first year from culture shock and the lack of a support system. They also offer an emergency loan with a 0% interest rate that students can pay back after they graduate. This possibility is significant, especially considering undocumented people are not eligible for federal loans due to their documentation status. And they offer other miscellaneous services like a computer loan program. Kadie confessed, "[our resources] really evolve with what the needs are, but we really do try to support once we give a scholarship to a student. We try to support them as holistically as we can so that they can finish."

All these resources are vital for any student, but especially for undocumented students to successfully complete college. These wraparound services help ensure that both the academic and nonacademic struggles this vulnerable group often faces do not get in the way of their success. In providing the resources this group needs to be successful, these organizations help provide a sense of stability for these students. Additionally, by providing these resources, these organizations help these students feel like they are welcome to, and worthy of, a higher education. Equipping these students with the resources they need to thrive in college helps to promote both equity and inclusion for this group, fostering both an engaged and empowered citizenry, both of which are essential elements for a healthy democracy.

Adapt Resources

One effective strategy to help students successfully make it college and/or stay in college referenced by participants during their interviews was their commitment to adapting the resources they provide for their students when needed. Some organizations may have started off by offering small scholarships and realized later that other resources were needed, like mental health resources or emergency loans. The two examples I share in this section reveal some of the ways organizations adapted their resources to be more beneficial to their students and their goal of helping them with accessing college and college retention.

IN Avanzando had two compelling examples of how the organization has adapted their resources to ensure the success of the students they work with. The first example is how and why they redesigned their education programs. Maria briefly explained how their high school partnership worked prior to 2018, describing it as a “one and done” type program. Even though they were working with around 20 different high schools and were able to work with students for a 10-week period, it became evident that working solely with high school juniors and seniors for

that period, discussing financial aid and how to select a college, simply was not enough. She expressed that this model helped them serve over 1,000 students, but because it was the only time they saw those students, there were many missed opportunities like students meeting application deadlines, mentoring, and tutoring to help raise grades. Maria admitted that "sometimes when you reach the junior/senior [year], it's too late to raise your GPA, it's too late to do certain things," like applying for scholarships and submitting college applications.

Upon realizing this, the staff at IN Avanzando listened to the community and learned that parents, students, and school administration all wanted a more comprehensive model, and IN Avanzando was able to adapt their programming accordingly. In their new model, they work with high school students and follow them all four years of high school. Of course, this means they must work with a smaller group of students and their families than in previous years, but they are able to provide more attention and resources to those students. Maria pointed out that under this new model, they provide two-hour workshops each week with the students, where they learn skills in academics and college and career readiness, among other things. These same students also join the summer leadership program for five weeks where in addition to gaining leadership skills, they also go on career exploration field trips and college campus tours. This summer leadership program is where the second example of how they have adapted their resources comes into play.

As I noted in the previous chapter, Maria stated that some students who participate in the yearlong academic program are not able to commit to the summer leadership program because of work. I asked Maria to expand on how they overcome this cultural norm of students having to work during the summer to help contribute to their family's income. Maria informed me that in the upcoming summer they would be adding an internship component so that they can pay the

students who participate in the program, in addition to the $200 stipend the students already receive for attending the program. Five to ten students will be trained to serve as camp counselors, working with one of IN Avanzando's other summer education programs they host where they work with young students entering 1st – 8th grades to help them not forget what they have learned during the regular school year. Even though not all students who participate in this summer leadership program will be able to serve as camp counselors, this gesture helps ensure that more students are able to commit time to participating in the program so they are able to gain valuable leadership skills which will help them be even more successful when they make it to college.

MI Goes to College Tambien is another good example of an organization adapting resources for their students' success. This example is rather humbling too, especially considering this organization has run out of funding and is no longer accepting applications. Despite this, Alora disclosed that she is in the process of providing end-of-program support to the 73 remaining active students, meeting with each scholar individually to make sure they have a plan after their funding ends. Her goal is to make sure that if students are not graduating by the time the program ends that they have secured resources to complete their program. Alora confessed,

> What I don't want to see happen is, I don't want any students to have to stop out because hey, we were helping them and now we're no longer doing that. So, we're being very intentional about having these conversations with them.

This type of commitment to ensuring student success, even when Alora knew she would not be employed in a few months because her organization run out of funding, is admirable.

Both organizations have used varying methods to adapt their resources for their students' success, but these methods have involved first intentionally listening to members of the

communities they work with and then adapting those resources to the needs of the students. Dahl (2015) argued that a criterion for the democratic process involves effective participation, where "...all the members have equal and effective opportunities for making their views known to the other members..." (p. 37). In allowing those who need help a say in the ways in which they need to be helped is one significant example of being community focused and committed to the democratic process.

Encourage Parental Involvement

There is a common misconception that immigrant parents do not care about their children's education and that is why they are sometimes not involved. Significant barriers often prevent immigrant parents from being involved in their children's education, including language barriers and a lack of understanding of how the education system works in the US. Many of the participants involved in this study realized, either from their own personal experience or from listening to their community, that these barriers make it challenging for immigrant parents to be involved in their child's education in ways that are common among more privileged families and how important it is for parents to be involved in this process. In fact, in trying to better understand the methods that undocumented youth use to be successful in college, Salazar (2021) found that "families are the stimulus motivating [undocumented students] to pursue higher education, as well as the support system they can rely on to manage college barriers" (p. 1). Additionally, Salazar (2021) claims that parental involvement for this group and its connection to college success is understudied. In this section, I discuss three examples where participants specifically referenced the strategy of being intentional with engaging parents in the college access process. These examples illuminate why it is so important for immigrant parents to be involved with this process.

Representatives from many of the organizations I studied specifically referenced the strategy of being intentional with including parents and guardians in the college access work that they do. Adelante Hispanics & Immigrants (AHI) is in one of the three most restrictive states, Alabama. Unfortunately, in addition to being a restrictive state, there is also a lot of misinformation about what college options undocumented youth have in the state. AHI works to educate undocumented students about their higher education options. They are also intentional about including parents in this process, and they pitch this work as an attempt to empower both students and their parents, and as a means for parents to be actively involved in their child's educational journey. Parents are included in the college and career readiness workshops, and AHI even hosts parent workshops. Gloria stated,

> We really wanna also include the parents as much as we can because a lot of the information can come from them. A lot of the support and the motivation also comes from the parents. And so, we try our best to include them in any of the workshops or anything that we do.

Including parents is consistent with findings from Salazar (2021), who showed how this strategy helps ensure that everyone is on the same page and feels actively involved in the educational process.

Claudia from KC Avanzando Hispanos in Missouri shared one key reason that including parents has helped them be successful in the work that they do, and in turn has helped the high school students they work with be successful as well. Claudia noted how undocumented parents can often be "really protective" of having to share their personal information, like financial documents and such to complete forms like the FAFSA, keeping in mind that this organization helps undocumented students and students of mixed status families. She shared, "I think one of

the cool aspects about our [College Family Ready Program] is that we really do include the family and a lot of students are like, 'I don't know how to explain the FAFSA to my mom.'" Having someone there who can explain it, and often in their native language, really helps the parents get on board with providing the needed documents and answering necessary questions to get the college application process moving along. Documented citizens tend to underestimate the fear and challenges that can face undocumented students in what may seem like mundane application processes, including filling out a FAFSA with parents' income information. KC Avanzando naming the program the College *Family* Ready Program is significant because it shows their commitment to including the family and that this is not just for or about the student, it is about educating the whole family on this process and making sure everyone is involved.

Nora from TN Educación Libera (TNEL) helped shed light on another reason it is important to get parents involved in the college access process. Nora described a situation that happened during a one-on-one coaching conversation where they had a student who wanted to go away to college but because of cultural norms, the parents were not on board with this idea and instead wanted their daughter to stay home and eventually become a stay-at-home-mother instead. Nora acknowledged how parental engagement is an integral part of college access work and discussed how they often find themselves having to have culturally sensitive conversations with parents while at the same trying to offer support and "trying to work through some of the generational norms, traumas, [and] expectations" that non-documented families experience. Including parents in this process—parents who in most cases have not themselves obtained a higher education—can often help offer some clarity and reassurance to all involved. It can also help overcome what some would say are outdated cultural norms, like the example Nora discussed. It is important to involve the parents in the college application process, because it is

likely that they may not have accurate information about possibilities, expectations, and resources.

All parents need to be involved with their children's educational journey, and immigrant parents who may not understand the way education works in the US even more so. The fact that these organizations have been intentional with their efforts to include parents in this process further shows their commitment to ensuring these students are successful. Including the parents also boosts community engagement and helps establish trust in these institutions, both of which impact informed decision-making and democratic participation.

Build Community and Trust

Much of the work these organizations do involves building community and trust among the people they serve. Doing so goes a long way to not only ensuring undocumented youth reach college and their academic success once there, but also in helping ensure that immigrant parents are on board with the college process. I discuss some of the strategies used by these organizations to build community and trust below. All five of the organizations I cite in this section work consistently to help their members be successful, and they do this by keeping them included and comfortable with the process.

The participants at KC Avanzando Hispanos shared some interesting ways in which they build both trust and community among the people they serve. One way they do this is by having a team of advisors who are all bilingual. Maya stated, "[having bilingual advisors] opens up the door for trust right away because we can communicate with the family regardless of their status, we can meet these families where they're at." Families feel more comfortable sharing not only their status, but also information that they are generally rather protective of (like household members and financial resources), yet this is information that is needed to help students enroll in

college. They are also intentional about marketing their events, like financial aid workshops, as bilingual events. This serves two purposes, it helps Spanish speaking families feel welcome, and as Maya claimed, it is sensitive to other documentation statuses by not simply calling it an *undocumented* family event. They also ensure that their website is available in both English and Spanish. Additionally, the staff are very open about their own journeys with immigration, as Claudia shared that about half the team was either undocumented or were DACA recipients in the past. Claudia believes their willingness to share inspires students to ask for help. Claudia declared,

> ...we don't shy away from sharing our own experiences and I think that's really important when it comes to working with students and the populations that we work with, 'Cause, once you share your story, it's like opening a can of worms...once you share your story, I feel it opens students to also share their stories and then you're able to assist them better.

Being vulnerable and open is one of the best strategies this organization has for establishing community and trust among the members they serve.

Maria at IN Avanzando also discussed the significance of incorporating Spanish into their services offered. She informed me that they make sure to provide all their information in Spanish, even on social media where a lot of families follow them. In fact, she claimed that they are the most followed Latino nonprofit in the state. She added, "we highlight resources that are gonna be beneficial to them in a language that's easy to understand, in a level that they're able to understand." Maria believes that allowing the community a space to come together (e.g., in workshops or sponsored events), learn from each other and network with one another also helps build community. She remarked, "I think that we create community just by being accessible and

providing spaces for people to come together." This idea of coming together was also discussed by Lucia who was part of another organization in Indiana.

Lucia at IN Alianza reflected on how their organization helps build community. Her example mirrors a common assumption of critical and social justice-oriented forms of democracy, that those most impacted by the issue or problem need to have a say in the solution. She noted that when people come into their space and share their education related concerns and issues that "we take whatever [the] community is sharing with us, and we use that to build with them...everything is always like alongside community." For the staff at IN Alianza, it is important to include community members in whatever changes need to be made. They want feedback. They want to know that they understand the issues that immigrant students are facing. And they want the community involved, working alongside them to address challenges.

Gemma at NC Academico also shared how they build community amongst their scholars. She stated that they are intentional about building camaraderie among their scholars at their partnering schools. She mentioned that they try to send scholars in pairs to their partnering institutions so they can start together and build community. They also get students already in those schools to meet up with the new students entering that school and work to build community among them. She continued, "we bring them here once a year for a three-day summit so that they can spend three days with students that look, sound, and go through the same thing [they] do." Getting the scholars to feel connected and understood with other scholars who are experiencing the same thing is a great strategy to help these students stay motivated and to realize they have a broader support system.

Kadie from VA Dreamers Can also reflected on how they are intentional about grouping their scholars into cohorts where they go to school together, or by their professional and career

interests. She noted, “I definitely think community building is our strong point, it’s something that students consistently point to.” Additionally, Kadie referenced a conversation she had with a professor conducting similar research at a nearby university who had interviewed undocumented students from both VA Dreamers Can and Si Podemos VA. While this professor found that students from Si Podemos VA found the scholarship to be the most helpful resource, she found that students from VA Dreamers Can found the community building to be the most helpful resource. Kadie also highlighted the impact their community building has had on alumni and how it keeps them actively involved with the organization, serving as donors, board members, and even mentors for current scholars.

While these organizations have differing ways in which they establish community and trust among the members they serve, their goal is the same across the board: helping members of this population to feel seen, heard, and included. Keeping these members actively engaged in matters that directly impact them is one means of being committed to the democratic process. Additionally, the idea of coming together over shared interests and working through those matters as a community is illustrative of a healthy democracy.

Form High School Partnerships

Four participants discussed their partnerships with high schools and the college access work they do directly with high school students, Adelante Hispanics & Immigrants (AHI), SC Hispanos Unidos, KC Avanzando, and IN Avanzando. For some of the students who participate in these programs, this is the only time they have been exposed to systematic information about college. Here I discuss three of the four programs that do this work. I include these examples here to demonstrate how these intentional partnerships help create well-informed students who gain insights into their college options and future perspectives.

Gloria from Adelante Hispanics & Immigrants (AHI) spoke about their Elevar Program. This program came to exist via a partnership AHI has with a national Latino civil rights nonprofit organization which works to offer college access resources to Latino high school students. Through the Elevar Program, AHI is able to partner with three local high schools that they visit once a week. Gloria described these weekly meetings as providing college and career preparation courses that are for 11th and 12th grade immigrant and Latino students. Gloria admitted that because of how restrictive the state is, banning access to in-state tuition rates, financial aid, and enrollment into public institutions for undocumented students, these students are often misguided about their college options. She professed, "a lot of time what we've noticed is our undocumented students are not even aware of what [their college] options are." AHI educates these students and their parents on the realistic options, though limited, they actually have. As of 2024, they have prepared over 300 Latino and immigrant youth for college, all of which was made possible by having established partnerships with local high schools.

South Carolina also has the same restrictive policies as Alabama. As such, SC Hispanos Unidos partners with more than fifteen high schools in upstate South Carolina to educate Latinos and undocumented youth on their higher education options. One of the services this organization provides via these partnerships is "Lunch and Learn" sessions where students learn information about college admissions, scholarships, and career options. This organization is able to help over 500 students each year at these events. Carlos reflected on the impact these Lunch and Learn sessions have on the undocumented students they can reach, mentioning how students are often disillusioned by the idea of college based on the misinformation they have been provided in the past. He shared,

> Once we come in and we say like ‘do better,’ ‘stop fooling around,’ ‘do your work,’ ‘you can go to college,’ ‘you just gotta strive from here,’ we see that a lot of [the students] will reach out to use afterwards...ask us about the list of scholarships that we have compiled.

These partnerships allow SC Hispanos to steer these students in the direction of resources to hopefully support their college journeys.

KC Avanzando Hispanos partners with nine local high schools to help provide Latino students with resources for college via their College Family Ready Program. These nine high schools have the highest Latino populations in the area. Through these partnerships, they provide these students with a range of resources like college campus tours, FAFSA support, College Family Ready Program workshops, and college advising. Their most recent annual report notes that they were able to take over 1,200 students on college campus tours, they held 70+ program workshops and events, and they were able to help over 450 students with completing their FAFSA applications.

These three organizations offer varying resources to the students and families they serve, with the end goal being to provide these students and their families with the proper knowledge and resources needed to successfully make it to college. Accessing these students while they are still in high school is very important and beneficial to this group, especially because many of these students may not have access to this information without organizations like these. Gaining this knowledge allows students and their families to make informed decisions, and it also empowers them and gives them real autonomy—key for a healthy democracy.

Establish Mentorship and Leadership Development

Mentors can have a major impact on undocumented youth. Research suggests that the lack of social networks and role models often impacts college access and retention for

undocumented students (Price & Mowry-Mora, 2020). Mentorship has been described as its own type of green card for undocumented youth (Fansmith et al., 2020). Three participants discussed the mentorship and leadership resources that they offer to students.

Lucia at IN Alianza spoke about the social justice mentorship program they offer. Within this program, Lucia expressed that "students step into their leadership, their identities, their power, as they transition into college." They also participate in various social justice and education workshops within this program. In addition to this, they connect students with people from the community who were formally, or are currently undocumented, who are now working within their career fields, and these people serve as mentors for the students. They believe it is important for their students to see "someone like [them] do it." These mentors pass down information on the resources they have gained, and share the wealth, so to speak. Lucia stated, "we're trying to essentially eliminate the barrier of having to find your own resources."

VA Dreamers Can also has a mentorship program and it is a very popular resource that they provide. This program is open to all students, and even US citizens enroll. Kadie suggested that these US citizens sign up for their mentorship program because they value the one-on-one mentoring the organization offers. Kadie noted that the mentorship they provide is one of the most important resources they offer, especially considering their scholarship amount is lower than some other scholarship options. She mentioned that in addition to helping their scholars get into school, their mentors help students apply to and get other education scholarships as well. All 25 mentees who participated in the 2023-2024 academic year acknowledged when surveyed that they had benefitted from being a part of the mentoring program.

Gaining leadership skills is also very important for this population. Carlos from SC Hispanos Unidos discussed the competitive leadership development program they offer to high-

achieving Latino high school students. This program provides these students with guidance and support for them to use following high school, be it for college or going into their careers. These students learn about immigration policy and laws, and develop skills in public speaking, leadership, advocacy, and teamwork. They also gain insights into pursuing higher education if that is the route they decide to take. Students who participate in this program are also eligible for a college scholarship. In 2024, twelve scholars were awarded scholarships and to date, 41 students from their leadership development program are enrolled in college.

Providing mentoring and leadership development skills for this population helps empower them to use their voices, which helps ensure they are heard and represented, especially in matters that impact them directly. It also impacts the types of leaders they will be in the future and how they will uphold democratic norms. While most young adults can benefit from having a mentor and developing their leadership skills, providing these resources for this vulnerable population helps cultivate them into informed and engaged citizens, which is essential for participating in the democratic process.

Host Professional Development and Career Support Programs

In addition to their documentation status negatively impacting their career options after college, having limited access to professional development opportunities like internships can further hinder undocumented students' career options once they graduate from college. Nunley et al. (2016) claim that post-college mobility is often negatively impacted for this population because of the lack of professional development opportunities, which impacts "higher academic performance, post-graduation job attainment, and early career success" (as cited in Morales Hernandez & Enriquez, 2021, p. 321). In this section, I discuss the participants who talked about the professional development and career support programs they have implemented to help the

students they serve be more successful after college. I include these three cases here because I think they are compelling examples of the different ways organizations housed in restrictive states can operate to help ensure undocumented students are able to secure jobs after graduation.

Gemma at NC Academico discussed the career services they provide for their students to help with their post-college mobility. Starting their freshman year, scholars are assigned a career coach who meets with them on a monthly basis and works with them all four years of college. I asked Gemma which resource she felt helps the most, out of all the resources they provide. She claimed that the career coach was the most helpful because it is a very hands-on approach. These career coaches discuss students' grades and strategies for improvement, and they explore what struggles may be impacting them on campus. Gemma added, "the student career coach is one of the most, I will say, successful things that we do." Gemma reflected on scholars in the program having a 95% graduation rate. She remarked, "it's because of the student career coach help...we're there, we don't let the students fall." They also track their scholars' success upon graduation via their alumni program which sends out an annual survey to update them on where the scholars are in life, if they have enrolled in grad school, if they are working, or have been promoted; they even ask about their salary so the college bound participants can get a comparative sense of the types of employment options available and how they might be compensated if they chose particular career paths.

Juliana from TN Somos Líderes reflected on the services their organization provides for professional development and career support. One of the programs offered by this organization is their Somos Líderes program. As part of this program, students are incentivized to complete certain tasks that will significantly impact their post-college mobility. This includes things like creating a resume, writing a cover letter, and creating a LinkedIn profile. The goal of the

program is to impact career readiness and help develop the students in other areas that are essential to adulthood. Juliana proclaimed, “our goal is to ensure students graduate with a degree in one hand and a job offer in the other.” Another service they offer is two professional networking conferences every year where different companies and organizations come to network with the students in hopes of students getting internships and even landing a job. I asked Juliana about the strategies they use to help undocumented students get internships and jobs after college, knowing this is challenging because of their documentation status. She noted, “we speak with companies and organizations that know who our students are,” and they encourage students to do internships that are stipend paid or non-paid to avoid payroll for tax purposes. She continued, “we work on creating equity and so we tell the companies and organizations that we highly encourage paid internships for equity reasons.” They are also intentional about partnering with nonprofits, small businesses, and organizations that do not have requirements for verification of documentation status. Additionally, they encourage their undocumented students obtain a Federal Employer Identification Number (FEIN), like a social security number for US citizens, so undocumented students can open their own small business.

Hana from Si Podemos VA also discussed ways in which they think outside the metaphoric box to support their undocumented students. She discussed the significant changes in career resources the organization has had to make, especially once they saw a major shift in the status of their students, going from mostly DACA to the majority being completely undocumented. Hana admitted, “our growth as an organization has really been in understanding the challenges that our students face.” This has involved carefully listening to their students and adapting the career support and programming that they offer. Hana claimed that this has been their number one area of growth for the organization. Prior to this shift in demographics, students

from their 2016/2017 cohort, those who mostly had DACA and those with Temporary Protected Status (TPS), were already asking for more career support on the surveys they were taking about the organization. Earlier, these students were mostly asking about how to develop compelling resumes and requesting more career development and career success resources. This led to the organization to develop a career connections program, connecting students with coaches to help them land jobs. Now what this looks like for a mostly undocumented population is helping these students gain internships and fellowships as students with an undocumented status. Because of their status, they usually cannot be paid for these services, so Si Podemos VA partners with an organization or company, they then provide the partnering organization/company with the undocumented student intern and Si Podemos VA also provides the student with funding for the internship. Hana added, "we've had 500 students engage in internship/fellowship paid opportunities where they're getting those experiences even as a fully undocumented student." They have also been intentional about sharing resources about how to build one's own business, which is often one of the few options those who are completely undocumented have once they finish college.

Ensuring students can build their resume while still in college sets them up for success once they graduate, as it helps them gain experiences in their field and thus they will be more likely to be considered for the career of their choice. From a democratic standpoint, providing career supports to undocumented youth promotes economic mobility for this group, helping them escape intergenerational poverty, and it also encourages full participation in society.

Facilitate Difficult Dialogues

Various participants referenced having to have hard conversations with the students they work with in order to keep them grounded. These conversations came in many forms, and they

served to give these students somewhat of a reality check. I include this final theme here because I think that these hard conversations can go a long way in steering these students in the right direction. Below I discuss the participants from four organizations who mentioned the need to engage in sometimes challenging conversations with their students. Even though these are difficult dialogues, I think the participants do a good job explaining how they try to keep students hopeful while also providing alternative options when the dreams they hold are unrealistic or inaccessible because of their status.

Lucia from IN Alianza spoke about the students they work with often having big dreams and how they help those students keep those dreams but also be realistic about their actual options. She discussed how they keep their students grounded by challenging them to question their reality. Lucia highlighted how these conversations often go, "it's good to have your dreams...let's ground ourselves for a little bit and see...what is gonna realistically be your options?" She talked about how they help students pivot and be sensible about their real options, which helps save students time and perhaps even disappointment.

Maria at IN Avanzando spoke about these hard conversations as well. She declared, "I think it's important for students to remain hopeful. And to encourage them and guide them in a positive, you know, path" despite having to have these hard conversations. She discussed how she lets students understand that if they want to be a doctor, they are going to need a license for that, and that is not going to be an option currently in Indiana. Instead, she explains to the students that they need to look at all their options and explore all their skills. This helps open the doors for other possibilities.

Gemma from NC Academico brought up how difficult the conversation of wanting to pursue nursing can be for the students they work with, admitting that nursing specifically is the

most difficult of these types of conversations. Due to licensing requirements, undocumented people are not eligible to legally work in this field in the most restrictive states. Gemma stated that she has to inform the students that they will not be able to go to certain schools because of their documentation status and that they may not be able to get a license in nursing either. She also informs them that they will probably have to move to another state to work or end up being a doula or something similar. She insisted that school counselors do not have these conversations because they are hard, but perhaps also because they are not fully informed about the barriers that undocumented students face. I asked Gemma how they handle the issue of students not having any guarantee of a career once they finish their degrees. She stated that she is completely honest and transparent with them and informs them that their work life may not look "normal" as compared to others who don't have to navigate the challenges of being undocumented.

Maya from KC Avanzando Hispanos also brought up the complications with undocumented students wanting to pursue nursing. She too discussed the struggles they face as well as the hard conversations they must have with the students they work with. She stated, "I think you have to approach it and be very sensitive to the student because we're not here to kill dreams, but we also have to be realistic." She added that they do not want to lie to students and encourage them to apply for majors they may not be able to work in when they graduate, like nursing. She continued, "we still find those ways to like try to instill hope and an opportunity that there is something that they can pursue that still meets with like those goals, [but] they might have to change a little bit." Claudia also commented on the hard conversations they have with the students they work with when they discourage them from going to schools that are not undocufriendly. While it can be harsh to further limit these students' college options by

discouraging them from going to schools that do not support them, it saves these students time and money in the long run.

Facilitating these hard conversations, though difficult, helps members of these marginalized communities stay grounded and informed, which impacts their decision-making. When these students know the truth, no matter how harsh it is, they are better positioned to make important decisions about their future.

Summary

In this chapter, I shared findings that address my third research question, identifying the organizational strategies that are used to help improve college access for undocumented youth and their impact. The ability to adapt the resources they provide, and the career, mentorship, and leadership programs offered are some the most impactful strategies used. Adapting the strategies used is impactful because the resources are molded around the population's needs, which helps ensure their success. I was intrigued by this strategy because it was not something I expected. Organizations paying for their undocumented scholars to do internships at different organizations was also very surprising to me. I think it shows their dedication to ensuring these students thrive. Ultimately, these organizations use a powerful range of strategies to help students and their families feel empowered, informed, included, and like they have a sense of agency, all of which contribute to a healthy democracy. In the next chapter I turn to the topic of democracy directly, exploring how the college access work that these organizations do helps to maintain our democracy.

CHAPTER VI: DEMOCRATIC THEMES IN COLLEGE ACCESS WORK

In the previous chapter, I discussed organizational strategies that were used to improve college access for undocumented youth. In this chapter, I explore how democracy and college access work for undocumented youth are linked. In doing so, I address my final research question, unraveling how the college access work that these organizations do helps to support and maintain our democracy. I organize this chapter into three sections. In the first section, I address how participants define democracy. In the second section, I break down the democratic themes that emerged as participants discussed the work their organizations do, that they did *not* discuss as they defined democracy. In the third section, I discuss how participants described college access as a common good, which as I argued earlier in the dissertation, is a central aspect of democratic living.

Defining Democracy

During interviews, I asked participants to define democracy and how the work that their organization does contributes to supporting and maintaining our democracy. I was interested in their thoughts on democracy and if they had considered how the work that they do is directly linked to maintaining our democracy. Many were caught off guard with my questions related to democracy and had not considered the connection between the work that they do and democracy. This is not surprising, especially considering many in education struggle to see the connection between democratic life and schooling, even as schools play an important role in helping students—as citizens in the making—to understand the meaning of democracy and to develop the habits of heart and mind that make democratic living possible. After analyzing responses to this question, I found four themes for how participants most often defined democracy: public

voice, civic engagement, equal opportunities, and tools and resources. I discuss each theme below.

Public Voice

Participants most often defined democracy as everyone having a voice in the matters that impact their lives. I did not find this to be surprising as the term democracy is often used interchangeably with voice and rights, especially the right to vote. What I did find intriguing was how participants defined having a voice beyond simply voting in elections. For example, Anna from Iluminar NC highlighted their beliefs that "those closest to the problem are closest to the solution." She added, "communities are stronger when everyone is a part [and] has a voice. Decisions are better when everyone's at the table—and that everyone means *everyone*, not just folks who literally have all the power." Lucia from IN Alianza shared a similar sentiment. She reflected on the importance of community members feeling like they are *actually* being heard, not just being given a forum to speak. She stated, if a question or issue needs to be addressed, "[community member's] input is actually validated—not even just validated, but [their] input is actually like used to find the solution." Juliana from TN Somos Líderes defined democracy in terms of voice as well, offering "democracy means that we are not ruled by one figure...that the people have [a] voice, representation, and say" in decisions and policies that affect them. These examples reveal that participants view democracy as more than just voting, which is the most limited way to think of democratic life; they see it as a means for people to have a say in matters that impact them and their communities directly.

Civic Engagement

The second most referenced description for democracy by participants was being civically engaged. This fact only became more intriguing once I realized how little the term and

idea of *community* itself was used by participants to define democracy, especially considering how civic engagement is directly linked to community and being an active member in particular communities. Juliana from TN Somos Líderes spoke of the intentional work they do in creating leaders and how they "encompass civic engagement work into [their] service learning [programs]." She asserted, "we do civic engagement work so that the students understand that there are policies and laws that are implemented and are in place that can harm them." Linda from NC Tiene Potencial viewed democracy as community members "[making] a meaningful civic contribution to [their] community... [it is] people who are, you know, engaged and volunteering and trying to contribute and to lift up others in their community." Both examples demonstrate participants' understanding that effective leadership entails understanding the social and political context where you live and giving back to the community.

Equal Opportunities

A few participants defined democracy as providing equal opportunities to all. While I think this is a reasonable basic understanding of democracy, I also think the distinctions between equity and equality need to be considered more here, especially because my participants sometimes conflated these ideas. Carlos from SC Hispanos Unidos claimed that democracy was about "giving people the same opportunities that everyone has had." South Carolina is one of the most restrictive states when it comes to college access for undocumented youth, going as far as to ban enrollment at public postsecondary institutions. However, even as Carlos talked about equality of opportunity, which would entail giving undocumented youth the same resources that American citizens have, the fact that undocumented students are banned from college access is structural evidence that equality of opportunity is an illusion in such a restrictive state. Gemma from NC Academico shared a similar view, equating democracy to equality and fairness for

everyone, with no distinctions. She added, “equity across the board is what democracy means to me.” One thing that struck me with Gemma’s response is the lack of distinction between equality and equity. And I am curious how she would have responded had I asked her which term she actually meant to use, equality or equity. It is fairly common that students learning about democracy conflate equity and equality, and struggle to distinguish which one is most needed in relation to particular circumstances. Thus, it is not surprising that my participants struggled with this as well.

Tools and Resources

Some participants defined democracy as involving providing tools and resources to those who need them. For instance, Carlos from SC Hispanos Unidos argued democracy entails giving people resources and providing people with support to meet their basic needs. The next example I provide here highlights the significance of *how* those resources should be provided. Emma from AL Can defined democracy in terms of pathways to higher educational options being open, adding “a big thing for us is that whatever pathway a student wants to pursue, they’re equipped to be able to do that. And it’s the pathway of their choice.” This could mean a two- or four-year college education, or a college certificate. She spoke passionately about how those doing college access work are often stuck on this idea of “the correct pathway,” typically meaning a four-year degree. AL Can provides a range of resources so students are well-informed and making their own choices and AL Can is there “supporting them along that journey,” *not* making those decisions for students. Implicit in this understanding of democracy is that young people should take ownership over their own lives and opportunities. These responses show participants understand that in order for democracy to thrive, community members must have access to sufficient resources.

Participants called on the four aforementioned themes in describing democracy. While I think these terms make sense when it comes to defining democracy, I also think other terms could have been used. Participants struggled the most with this question during the interview and I think there are several reasons why this is the case. Two stand out: 1) our K-12 institutions have failed to equip us with a robust and nuanced knowledge of what democracy means, 2) this in turn limits how we are able to openly and comfortably discuss and even how confident we are in describing the meaning of democracy. In fact, Hytten (2017) argues that schools tend to teach us that democracy is "merely the political system that we use to make decisions by in our country. We rarely discuss deeper visions for democracy or tensions and paradoxes within democracy or even reflect on the meaning of democracy at all" (p. 8). Even as these participants engage in democratic access work on a daily basis, and their organizations have missions that encompass democracy in action, this lack of knowledge and language around this topic impacted the depth of their responses when I asked questions about democracy and the role of their organization in supporting and sustaining democratic life. This is evident in a response that Emma from AL Can gave when I asked her to define democracy. She hesitated and then stated, "I'm having trouble defining it when I feel like it's so far from our experience…I guess the thing I'm getting hung up on is just 'democracy' 'cause that's not something that we're frequently utilizing within our organizational language." She then went on to actively define a Deweyan understanding of democracy. This leads me to believe that they actually do hold and cultivate a democratic vision in their work, they just do not know how to use the language to talk about it. Below I explore themes that came up in the work these organizations do but were not used directly to define democracy.

Democratic Themes in College Access Work

In the previous section, I discussed the terms and ideas used by participants to define and unpack the meaning of democracy. Here I explore three other democratic themes that came up while participants discussed their work, but they did *not* use directly to define democracy when prompted. However, these ideas seem implicit in their work and in what their organizations try to do for undocumented youth. These themes are educational equity, empowerment, and advocacy. I discuss these themes in detail below. I include this section here because I found it intriguing that these broad ideas did not emerge when I initially asked participants to define democracy, yet it is very evident that a robust vision of democracy is ever present in the college access work that they do, even if it remains inchoate and at the implicit level. Put differently, their organizations have missions consistent with Dewey's definition of democracy as a way of life that involves certain habits and dispositions, as well as enables all people to thrive.

Educational Equity

Even though these organizations all support educational equity, not one participant referenced the idea of equity when they defined democracy. This was very surprising to me, especially considering why they do this work and because of how education and democracy are "inextricably intertwined" (Black, 2021, p.38). Despite this, throughout these interviews, I noted different comments that reflected how participants who work for these organizations believe in and help students achieve educational equity. Here I share ideas mentioned by participants that illustrate their commitment to educational equity, regardless of students' documentation status.

Gemma at NC Academico spoke about their commitment to continuing to offer educational resources to undocumented students even after DACA ended. Gemma declared,

> We could have stopped our program in 2019 when DACA was pronounced illegal because the main reason why [we] started was to help these DACA recipients that have work authorization go find jobs...and we didn't stop...students deserve an education.

She continued to point out that their documentation status, and even the fact that they may not qualify for work authorization, should not be used to deny them access to higher education. She even remarked that as they are still trying to figure out how students will earn an income without a work authorization that "[NC Academico] will continue fighting and [they are] not gonna give up." Hana at Si Podemos VA shared a similar message advocating for educational equity for all, despite documentation status. Hana asserted, "we believe that anyone, regardless of where they're born, deserves the right to an education, deserves the right for a chance to contribute back to this country. And a chance to really better their family's lives and their communities."

Other participants shared similar comments about how undocumented youth also deserve to have access to a higher education and how their documentation status should not be used against them. These examples highlight that even though participants may not have mentioned educational equity when they were asked to define democracy, being committed to educational equity, especially for undocumented youth, is democratic in that it allows this population to grow and thrive and give back to their communities.

Empowerment

Providing educational access is empowering to undocumented youth because it enables them to grow and flourish in many regards. Indeed, an understanding of the world and an ability to think critically about it are essential to taking ownership over one's life and living peacefully with others. Empowering communities via education aligns with core democratic principles because it enhances active participation in society. While participants did not discuss

empowerment when they defined democracy, it was reflected in their work. Here I explore some of the ways participants discussed educational access and the work that they do, and how it helps empower the communities they work with.

Anna from Iluminar NC spoke about education empowering people and how that allows them to be better citizens. She argued, "[education] helps folks harness power to know their own power...like develop that power and then challenge systems that weren't created for them and create new ones." Maria from IN Avanzando made a similar point as she reflected on how accessing higher education can help people gain critical thinking skills. She shared, "I feel like the work that we do tries to help people be critical and well-informed...and they can make well-informed decisions that will ultimately help them and their communities." Lolita from Liberating You in Georgia reflected on how communities can also be empowered when you treat them with dignity. She discussed how they allow the students they work with to have a say in the college preparation courses they take during the semester and how this is part of the organization's goal of being committed to democratic decision making. She added, "we treat them with dignity, which increases their participation, and I think can be expanded to how we understand democracy more broadly is there needs to be dignity and human rights in order for democracy to thrive."

The work these organizations do to empower and encourage the people they serve is very evident, but they do not always frame this work in terms of democracy. Sometimes the connections they make are more implicit than explicit, yet empowering all individuals to live meaningful and thriving lives is an important aspect of what it means to live in a democracy. Any opportunity that empowers members of a minoritized population to grow, actively

participate in the world around them, and have a say in the choices that impact them directly contributes to a healthy democracy.

Advocacy

A few participants referenced how they advocate on their community's behalf. Similar to the idea of empowerment, even though they did not mention advocacy when they defined democracy, I think it is evident that the ways in which they do this work for these vulnerable groups are democratic in nature. Here I discuss three different examples of advocacy work being done that promote democracy.

Hana at Si Podemos VA spoke candidly about how nonprofits are technically not supposed to engage in advocacy work because there are certain rules they must adhere to or they can lose their tax-exempt status. However, she shared how they do actively make their data public and the impact that it has for this population. This data is shared with higher education institutions and policy leaders. As a result of having worked with so many DACA recipients and their commitment to keeping records of the outcomes of their program, they have a lot of data that is very beneficial in understanding this groups educational and career interests, as well as their outcomes once they are done with school and stepping into their career fields. She claimed, "our data has been really instrumental...we support advocacy efforts through our data, our scholars, and our alumni." Ultimately this data is used to help support and advocate for undocumented students as it relates to educational equity and other matters that impact them.

Kim from SC Alianza Lingüística (SCAL) discussed how they actively advocate for higher education institutions to accept the Seal of Biliteracy for credit and placement. They are working with the State Department of Education in South Carolina to get this seal approved so that students can take and pass an assessment that shows students' biliteracy and bilingualism,

they then get certified and can earn college credits for foreign language, which helps them graduate sooner and saves them time and money. She spoke passionately about how white families usually benefit the most from being biliterate because they often enroll their children in foreign language classes, have more resources, and understand how the system operates. On the flip side of that, native speakers who learn foreign languages in their home from childhood often do not get the benefit from these skills, so SCAL advocates on their behalf so their biliteracy and bilingualism are recognized and rewarded.

Alora from MI Goes to College Tambien shared another example of advocating on students' behalf when she discussed how they work with postsecondary institutions to try and get them to reconsider how they classify students because it significantly impacts how they charge the student, for example, listing them as out-of-district/state compared to in-district/state. She added, "it's a lot easier for a student to come up with $1,500 per semester than $6,000 per semester," alluding to the differences between in-state and out-of-state tuitions. She admitted that some institutions are more open to the idea as opposed to others. This direct advocacy is a major attempt to make college more affordable for this group.

The advocacy work that these organizations do contributes significantly to our democracy by helping members of marginalized communities have access to the knowledge and resources needed to be successful. Maya from KC Avanzando Hispanos stated something that I think really applies to the advocacy work being done by these groups. She declared, "[we] use the protection that we have because we have [legal documentation] status, because we're tied to an organization" and this protection directly strengthens our democratic system.

All three of these themes, educational equity, empowerment and advocacy contribute to our democracy by working to ensure this group has equal opportunity. While it is interesting that

these three themes were not used to directly define democracy, it is hard to deny how they push democracy forward. I believe being better equipped to understand democracy and all that it encompasses could have impacted how participants responded to the question of defining democracy. It would also have helped them to better articulate the good that college access does for everyone in society, not just those who attend college.

College Access as a Common Good

Another question I posed for participants was to explain how college access for undocumented youth could be viewed as a common good. That is, it serves not just the individual who has access, but the fact that more people having access to college is good for all of us in communities. This is because as community members we are all connected. As one of our community members grows as a person and as a citizen, our community also flourishes, which has ripple effects. For an individual to fully thrive, they must be surrounded by others who have this opportunity as well. Dewey highlighted the connections between democracy—that of "associated living" and "conjoint communicated experience" (MW 9, 1916, p. 93)—and the common good—where all thrive. He claimed that if we are to maintain democracy, we must understand the significance of our connectedness. He argued that we must work together, we must all commit to taking part in this *experiment*, of "living together in ways in which the life of each of us is at once profitable in the deepest sense of the word, profitable to himself and helpful in the building up of the individuality of others" (Dewey, 1938, p. 303). Our success ought not be seen an individual accomplishment; our success is tied to people around us thriving as well. When everyone is allowed to reach their full potential, we all benefit.

Here I explore some of the responses on how college access can be viewed as a common good. My participants discussed five different themes that point to the fact that education

provides goods beyond simply individual gains: economic gain, beneficial to all, great equalizer, dedication to serve, and alumni involvement. What I found most interesting with this question was that participants found it easier to explain how college access is a communal good than linking the work they do to democracy overall.

Economic Gain

A few participants talked about how college access is a benefit for the economy overall. There is no denying that undocumented people contribute to the economy and having access to a higher education can often be a steppingstone to higher pay, which means they can contribute even more, and help their families to do so as well. Emma from AL Can commented on the fact that access to a higher education helps families become "more financially secure and stable, and then in turn, [this benefits] our economy." She went on discuss the data they release every year that correlates poverty rate with educational attainment, she added, "it's very clear that the more education attained, the lower the rate of poverty." Gemma from NC Academico shared a similar perspective as she spoke very matter-of-factly about their track record of scholars contributing back to the economy, claiming they had even presented that data to Congress, revealing how DACA recipients impact big companies, compared to documented citizens. She asserted, "our students are in great companies. Our students are impacting the community, and we have a high number...90% of our students graduate and go and work." Everyone benefits when college is accessible, and community members can make meaningful contributions to their communities and the economy.

Beneficial to All

Documentation status aside, people are all more connected than we sometimes think. If you live in a community and you contribute to that community, then you are a part of that

community. One of the most essential things to understand about this is that as community members in a democratic society, we should be concerned about what happens to one another. Our livelihoods are intertwined. As Carlos from SC Hispanos Unidos stated, "if you thrive, I thrive...if you suffer, then I suffer." Megan from MS Servicio Comunitario commented on how denying access to higher education impacts us all as she stated, "it affects all of us, by denying children the route to higher education, you're affecting your entire community." Maria from IN Avanzando agreed with this viewpoint as she contributed, "everybody needs each other to move the needle forward...we all play an important role in our communities, in the health of our communities and how people…[and] communities can ultimately thrive." And Lolita from Liberating You made the most compelling argument for why the benefits of education extend beyond the individual. She offered,

> So much of my job is reframing this issue publicly and in people's minds, that we all benefit when all human beings are allowed to not only have access to education, but through that education realize their full human potential...when it comes to cancer, wouldn't you like all the minds that are interested and have the ability to find a cure for cancer working on it rather than arbitrarily directing some people based on how they came to these lands, funnel them into certain jobs or funnel them outside of higher education? We all benefit when everyone is allowed to pursue their interests, their passions.

What struck me more than her response was when Lolita admitted that no one had ever asked her how access to higher education is a common good. She has been committed to this work for over a decade and has never been asked to reflect on how this work is beneficial beyond the individual level. Access to higher education is a common good because we are all connected, and

allowing all individuals, regardless of their documentation status to reach their fullest potential, has ripple effects throughout the entire community and country.

Great Equalizer

Several participants viewed college access as a common good because they viewed it as a great equalizer, giving members of this population a chance to be successful, informed, and contribute back to their communities. Kadie from VA Dreamers Can declared that "education is something that, regardless of your immigration status, your background, it's a great equalizer. It helps you have a stance in the community." Juliana from TN Somos Líderes held a similar view as she considered education to be a great equalizer because "there are very few things separate to entrepreneurship that can get you the financial and economic mobility that an education can do for you." She added, "there's very few things that will give you the power and understanding of how the economy works, how government works, how systems work." When educational barriers are eliminated and undocumented youth are allowed to pursue their postsecondary goals, they are also able to become informed and contributing citizens, which benefits everyone.

Dedication to Serve

One of the most intriguing findings from this study overall was learning about the fields most undocumented and DACAmented students pursue or aim to pursue. Historically, these students are known for wanting to give back to their communities and this is often evident in the degrees they seek. Hana from Si Podemos VA mentioned that the number one major for this population is nursing, followed by education. She commented on how their scholars and alumni survey reports reveal how driven this group is to give back and how they often do so through jobs in service or helping professions. She noted that part of wanting to pursue these fields comes from being excluded from America's key institutions. Hana reflected on how both nursing

and education are two of the jobs most in need of qualified applicants right now, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic. She discussed how many undocumented students desire to pursue these professions to give back. It is important to note that Si Podemos VA is well-known for their data collection and that of all the organizations included in this study, they have supported well over 11,000 scholars, the highest number of students, so her account is quite persuasive. Pursuing these fields is a great testament to how college access in general, but especially for this population, has a broader social benefit. Pursuing these fields allows this population to be represented and empowered in those spaces and it also fills the shortages that exist in these fields.

Alumni Involvement

Participants spoke of alumni involvement with great pride. They were excited to have established a community where the scholars they had worked with in the past were eager to come back and give back to the organizations that had once helped them access a higher education. In fact, the eagerness of alumni to stay connected with the organizations that helped them is a testament to how the benefits of education extend beyond the individual to creating broader communities of support. Some ways these alumni give back are by being leaders in the community, serving on the organization's board, and providing mentorship, as is the case for TN Somos Líderes. These alumni are committed to giving back. In fact, Kadie from VA Dreamers Can shared,

> We have alumni who consistently stay involved. We have alumni who are now donors and give back to the organization and donate every year now that they're working in their professions. We have at least four board members who are alumni of our programs...they continue to advocate for students and if we have a student going through their same

> campus, they'll help. They'll mentor. They always want to kind of come back and be involved.

Blanca from Inmigrantes Lideran shared a similar sentiment as she mentioned the thing they are most proud of as an organization: that their alumni come back to help others. She explained, "[the alumni] are not only thankful to the organization, but they *know* they can do something." She added, "and that I think, that is something that is very important for the future of democracy, to know that you are part of something that has an impact." Alumni involvement helps to extend the good work of the organization more broadly because their work provides mentorship, helps fund scholarships, and promotes civic engagement. Although participants did not directly list alumni involvement as a common good, I wanted to include it here because it did come up quite a bit when they discussed their work and it is a testament to the work that these organizations do and how that work is in the interests of us all. And, I think it points to the more expansive ways in which these organizations which support undocumented students help to continue to expand their reach and build the kinds of networks and communities needed for all people to thrive.

In our current age, it is clear that college access is a common good, though many would argue that in a democratic society, it should be a right to pursue higher education. It is easy to assume that only the individual person benefits when they can attend college, but the ways in which we all benefit when those who want to attend college are able is evident, from benefitting the economy to the fields those students go into saving lives, we all benefit when education is accessible to everyone.

Summary

In this chapter, I addressed how participants viewed democracy, and other democratic themes in college access work. I discussed how access to higher education should be viewed as a

common good. One key goal I had for this study was to unveil how people who engage in college access work view and can discuss the democratic foundations and connections of their work. Yet talking about democracy was difficult for most of the participants in this study. I was not surprised that most participants found it difficult to make these connections, or to even define democracy. I was surprised, however, that most participants did understand how college access is a good that extends beyond individuals. I find it to be rather complicated, the idea of understanding that college access is *not* an individual accomplishment, and yet not understanding its connections to a robust visions of what it means to live in a democratic society. But again, this comes from not having a broader understanding of the term itself. The implications of not being able to define and discuss democracy can be dangerous. In fact, Dahl (2015) claims that "democracy is inherently also a system of rights" (p. 48). We risk losing those rights when we do not know how to define, protect, and demand them.

In the next and final chapter, I explore key findings from my study, discuss implications, offer recommendations, and provide some final thoughts. I also explore why we should fear for our democratic nation when our non-documented community members are denied access to basic goods.

CHAPTER VII: ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to better understand how nonprofit/community organizations work to help undocumented youth access higher education in restrictive states that actively ban in-state tuition rates and financial aid. The problem with banning these resources for one specific group, an already vulnerable group at that, is that it pushes this group out of higher education. Additionally, in barring this group access, we actively go against our own democratic values. Because many of us have grown immune to the harms that befall our undocumented communities, I feel we have not fully grasped how limiting the rights of the few also has a detrimental impact on us all. As a democratic nation, members of our community—regardless of legality—are owed certain fundamental rights, and when we fail to protect those rights for everyone, we put our democracy in danger (Dahl, 2015).

Summary of Key Findings

Data from this study provides some insights into the work college access nonprofit/community organizations do to help undocumented youth specifically, also unveiling how this work helps to maintain our democracy. While I unearthed interesting findings on some struggles these organizations face when doing the work they do, they work hard to offset many of these barriers with the creative strategies they have implemented and continue to implement. Even though participants engage in maintaining our democracy by providing college access resources to this vulnerable population, many were unaware of how their efforts actively contribute to such an important cause. This was an important finding because it helps highlight the fact that we need to do more work in this area, ensuring that those committed to this work know how to eloquently discuss their work in democratic terms.

Limited Resources

Limited resources remain a significant barrier for nonprofit/community organizations doing college access work for undocumented youth, especially in restrictive states. Many participants referenced having limited funding and how this impacts how competitive their scholarships have become. Undocumented students seeking funding to attend college are forced to be "superstars" while in high school, volunteering, earning perfect grades and being involved in extracurricular activities. Often they do all of these things, and also work to earn money for the family. And doing all these things still does not guarantee they will receive funding to pursue higher education because the scholarships are so competitive and limited. In fact, only one participant confirmed that students did *not* have to be superstars to receive their scholarship. Additionally, participants also referenced how this limited funding impacts staffing, like employees being overworked or not being able to hire the highest trained staff.

Cultural Norms

While I expected limited resources to negatively impact the work these organizations do, I had not thoroughly considered the impact cultural norms can play in this work. Considering there is quite a bit of newer research that suggests the positive impact family has on undocumented students pursuing and staying in higher education (Price & Mowry-Mora, 2020; Trivette & English, 2017), several participants disclosed that cultural norms sometimes had a negative impact on their work. This became evident in parents pulling their students away from beneficial programs during the summer so they could work, or opting out of college all together because of the cost outweighing the perceived value of an advanced degree. One participant even referenced how parents often deterred their children from advancing their education by influencing their children to simply accept their fate as undocumented.

Successful Strategies

Participants discussed many resources that their organizations provided, and while I thought all were very useful in their own way, some of these resources stood out for obvious reasons. Any organization covering the full cost of tuition and housing is impressive enough, but some participants reported providing services that on the surface may not seem to be related to education. Some resources provided included mental health services, mentorship programs, career support services, and even community building. Offering resources that expand beyond a student's academic needs helps ensure a student's success in life, not just in college. This holistic approach to considering a student's wellbeing overall was rather fascinating.

Participants also discussed the career services they provide to undocumented students, which were above and beyond anything I would have expected. For example, Gemma referenced students being assigned a career coach in their freshman year who they met on a regular basis to ensure their success. And Hana discussed how they had changed their model since more of their students are completely undocumented and how their status negatively impacts the internships they can pursue. Learning that Si Podemos VA partners with organizations that will hire these students as interns so they can gain experience and build their resume, while Si Podemos VA foots the bill was one of the most surprising findings from this study. It is quite uncommon, I think.

Democracy

A final finding that I was not necessarily surprised by but that does need to be discussed here is that most participants could not discuss democracy with any real nuance and they struggled to elaborate on how their organization helps to maintain our democracy by ensuring that documentation status does not get in the way of this population having access to resources

that will help them thrive and be contributing members of society. Many participants openly admitted that they had either never considered the ties between their work and maintaining our democracy, or that their organization simply did not use the language of democracy to detail their work.

Research Questions Answered

I began this study with four research questions. My first research question was what factors at the community/state level influenced the founding of the organization to help improve college access for undocumented youth? I identified five themes related to why these organizations were founded: the desire to address immigrant needs, to impact systematic change and or policy reform, as a response to anti-immigrant legislation, as a result of community leaders learning of undocumented students' struggles, and as a response to immigration raids.

The founding of each organization essentially was a means to help a vulnerable population be successful in their communities. It was also a means to protect this group. Addressing immigrant needs, for example, entailed providing essentials like access to food, community, legal help, and education. Some would view providing resources like this as a handout, as something that was underserved and not the responsibility of anyone else but the person who needed them to access on their own. One refreshing detail from this study was that participants did not have these same views. Participants spoke of these essentials as the fundamental rights that they are, not a privilege to be earned. This tendency to address the whole person, not just one particular need—say education or access to legal help—really points to a desire to ensure that the individual has the resources to thrive in all areas of their life.

Each founding reason detailed in this study reveals that participants and their respective organizations had an end goal of addressing the issue at the root of the source. This is evident in

them attempting to impact policies that directly target this group, in responding to anti-immigrant legislations, and responding to immigration raids. Providing resources for this group, in the form of building community, knowledge, funding, and even providing a safe space, all attempt to provide this group with the human rights they are entitled to, in order for them to be successful and contributing members of their community.

My second research question was about the struggles these organizations face in doing college access work for undocumented youth. Here participants referenced typical struggles one would find with any organization that relies on donations and grants, such as limited funding and overworked employees due to said limited funding. However, due to the nature of who these organizations help, they also must deal with other struggles related to those individuals' documentation status. Many participants discussed how the current political climate around immigration greatly challenges their work efforts. Lolita from Liberating You referred to this work as "high-risk" due to the political climate and even discussed how their organization operates underground for everyone's safety. Even the challenges of programs like DACA ending negatively impact the work these organizations do. Now that most students these organizations help are simply undocumented, it makes it much more difficult to provide services, especially as it relates to career and internship opportunities. And because of the political climate around immigration and the lack of universal training on how to work with undocumented students who want to go to college, many participants mentioned how misinformed leaders often provide the wrong information to these vulnerable students and often unintentionally discourage these students from wanting to advance their education or even believing college is an option for them. Cultural norms were also discussed by participants and the oftentimes negative role these outdated cultural norms can play in the work these organizations do for undocumented students.

For my third research question, I inquired about the strategies these organizations use to help them improve college access for undocumented youth. Participants discussed many strategies they have implemented over time to help the students they work with successfully attend college. Several resources expanded beyond academic resources and encompassed the whole student, addressing concerns around housing, mental health, and even educating the student's families, who may not be familiar with educational practices here in the US. A key strategy of these organizations was to adapt resources, when possible, to meet new needs as they arose. This practice of adapting needs as necessary demonstrates how these organizations are very active in listening to the people they serve and how engaged they are with the community. Another significant response to this question was understanding all the effort some organizations are putting into helping their scholars be successful after college. Mentorship and leadership development aside, finding a means to ensure undocumented students are able to build their resumes with access to internships and helping these students build their network helps to set them up for success once they complete their degrees, even without holding legal documentation status.

For my fourth and final research question, I explored how college access work implemented by these organizations helps to maintain our democracy. The short answer, I believe everything these organizations do, from the reasoning behind their founding to the strategies they use to help these students successfully access college, are democratic in nature and help to maintain our democracy. These organizations are actively working to help provide the resources needed for these community members to thrive and be successful. They are using their own protected documentation status to help make positive changes for this group. They give these students the resources and knowledge necessary for the students themselves to

actively decide if college is the right option for them, and in essence, make college an actual option for this group if that is the route they decide to take. They actively listen to the members of their community and make changes based on feedback they receive from the community they have set out to help. They include these members in the decision-making process. Ultimately, they treat this group with dignity and respect and allow them to make decisions about matters that impact them directly. Not only are the organizations democratic in their practices—especially through meaningfully including participant voices in their work—they support larger democratic values by working for equity, inclusion, and individual thriving.

Discussion

Since I began working on this study many things have changed for the worse as far as it relates to college access for undocumented youth. In June of this year Texas, the first state to implement progressive college access policies for this population in 2001, overturned the law that allowed eligible undocumented students to pay in-state tuition rates at public postsecondary institutions. Villarreal (2025) claims, "the Texas attorney general's office and the Trump administration worked together" to end these provisions. It is important to note that Texas set the foundation for other states to follow and now they have stripped this population of a key resource that has made accessing college more affordable and within reach. Earlier this year in February, Florida also repealed their in-state tuition resources for eligible undocumented students (Weissman, 2025). Texas, at number two, and Florida, at number three, are in the top five states that enroll undocumented students for college ("Undocumented Students in U.S. Higher Education," 2025). In August, Oklahoma also overturned their in-state tuition for undocumented youth, now barring this population from receiving this benefit (Broder, 2025). Many fear that other states with similar progressive policies will follow suit. As we regress on matters of college

access, three issues stood out to me from this study that need more discussion: we need to frame access to higher education as a common good, we need a better understanding of democracy, and we need more commitment to this work. I discuss each of these three issues in more detail below.

Frame Access to Higher Education as a Common Good

We must work on framing higher education as a benefit to us all. Based on my findings it would be easy to say that we must frame higher education specifically for undocumented youth as a benefit for us all, but the reality is our lack of framing it as a benefit for everyone is what makes vulnerable groups like undocumented youth fall through the cracks. We all benefit when every individual from our community is allowed to grow to their full potential, and this happens when doors are opened, when resources are provided, and when higher education is encouraged.

We must stop viewing access to higher education as a privilege to be earned or as an individualistic award. We all benefit when members of our community are the best versions of themselves, can contribute back to the community and fully participate in society. Higher education prepares individuals to do just that. Broder (2025) states, "our economic future depends on educating all young people." In fact, Broder (2025) claims that states that have adopted tuition equity policies see impacts for both undocumented immigrants and US citizens alike "by reducing the high school drop-out rates, increasing the number of graduates who pursue a college degree, raising student incomes and tax contributions, and yielding an array of other economic and social benefits." We must recognize our shared humanity and understand that we are all connected.

While I firmly believe access to higher education benefits us all and therefore everyone should have access, I also understand that anti-immigrant policies actively bar undocumented

youth from accessing college. American citizens, even poor American citizens, are not subject to these bans, as they still qualify for in-state tuition and financial aid. Because of this, I think we must all recognize how anti-immigrant policies that bar members of our community from accessing higher education are not the democratic way.

In an ideal world, all students would qualify for college access resources, including in-state tuition rates and financial aid. But I understand that many will not be sold on this concept. For this purpose, I feel it necessary to explain the limitations of who I think should qualify for in-state tuition rates, specifically, and who should even be considered for financial aid. Most states consider legal citizens to be residents for in-state tuition rate purposes if they have lived there for at least a year and this is justified because the idea is these people will have paid taxes in the state and contributed back to the state. The same rules should apply for undocumented youth. I think all undocumented youth who attend public K-12 education all thirteen years here in the US should qualify for both in-state tuition rates, and financial aid depending on their financial need. I think that undocumented students who complete all four years of high school should qualify for in-state tuition rates at the least and be considered for institutional financial aid depending on their need. Beyond these examples, I think it can become very complicated who should qualify for these resources. I think it is easier to argue for college access resources for undocumented youth who have grown up here and experienced our public K-12 schools, as they are part of our communities and have integrated into our society.

We cannot continue to let anti-immigrant rhetoric allow us to leave an entire population behind. Undocumented people are contributing members of our society. They are members who want to make a difference, and they are members who deserve to make a difference. Broder (2025) claims that the students who take advantage of tuition equity policies often “tend to be

goal-oriented, with high academic standing." The representatives from the organizations I studied described how the students they usually work with are high achievers, often considered "superstars," who regularly pursue degrees in fields that directly give back to the community, including nursing and education. Many also pursue STEM degrees. Since 1957 when the Soviet Union launched *Sputnik I* into space we have declared it a national crisis that American students fall behind in STEM fields (Donnelly, 2023). Here we have an entire group, many of whom have completed K-12 public education here in the US, who aim to pursue STEM careers, and we do not provide them a realistic pathway to help our country achieve economic competitiveness and national security. I find it most interesting that in many states, we refuse to allow this group to contribute back to our society, to fill in-demand education and nursing positions, or to pursue STEM-related careers, simply because of their documentation status. And this situation seems to only be getting worse.

We Need a Better Understanding of Democracy

I was not necessarily shocked that participants struggled to define democracy or that they had a hard time expressing how their work contributes to maintaining our democracy. What did strike me, however, are the implications of not understanding how this work contributes to maintaining our democracy. If we do not know that part of democracy is about our "commitments and responsibilities toward others" (Hytten, 2017, p.1), then it is easy not to be able to make a connection between college access work and democracy. This is unfortunate for several reasons. For one, I think it makes doing college work for undocumented youth harder. I consider what Lolita discussed from Liberating You, as she discussed receiving threats online and in person for simply doing this work. I also consider when she admitted that no one had ever asked her how the work that she does is beneficial beyond the individual level. I taught public

speaking for a few years and one piece of advice I always gave students was that you have to find a way to connect your topic to your audience. This is how you reel them in. This is how you get them concerned about what you are talking about. I think the same rule applies here. College access work has to be "sold" as benefitting us all. Selling it this way, even to the most conservative of people, would make it easier to avoid being threatened and, I would even argue it could help organizations receive more funding to continue this work.

Hytten (2017) claims that "we need to perpetually attend to the work that democracy entails, recognizing that citizenship is an action…" (p. 7). Participants from my study are better democratic citizens than most because of the work that they do, and their commitment to improving human welfare attests to that fact. These participants actively work to solve social and political problems, but they struggle to make a connection to these actions and how they maintain our democracy. They do this work daily, but because they cannot talk about democracy in any robust way, they sometimes struggle to influence others to view this work as democratic work and as work that maintains our democratic society. The irony of both doing the work and not doing the work, as they cannot speak on the matter in depth, has significant consequences. Hytten (2017) claims, "we rarely discuss deeper visions for democracy…or even reflect on the meaning of democracy at all" (p. 8). If we had a better understanding of democracy and we were better able to discuss the relationships between democracy and education, we might be able to do a better job of convincing others of how the issue of college access for undocumented youth impacts us all.

More Commitment to this Work

Another finding from this study is that we need more effort across the board in doing college access work. Specifically, this work cannot only be for nonprofits and community

organizations. This should be a commitment for everyone, especially after we recognize that college access for all who want access is beneficial to everyone. In the wake of once progressive states overturning their college equity laws for undocumented youth, I find it more imperative than ever that we commit to establishing more resources for this cause. This involves drawing more attention to this work. In an ideal world, more attention to this work and more understanding of what true democracy asks of us would help us understand that college access is an investment in everyone's future, not just the person going to college.

More commitment to this work also includes more funding for this work. While I was impressed with the organizations that were able to offer wraparound services and assist the whole student, it was very evident that this is rare. Of the 18 organizations included in this study, only four provided these services, and one of the four had run out of funding and was ending its program. It is evident that others are committed to this work. In fact, two of the organizations included in this study, NC Academico and Si Podemos VA, were founded after individuals with the means heard undocumented students' accounts of being all but denied access to higher education and they decided to contribute to the cause. Interestingly enough, these two organizations are part of the four that offer wrapround services.

I understand that not everyone has economic wealth to simply hand out, but that does not mean they cannot contribute to the cause. This is where mentorship and career development programs come into play. One of the most impressive findings from my study was learning of the mentorship and career development opportunities some of these organizations offer. In providing these students with career coaches starting their freshman year, to paying for their internships if their documentation status impacts finding a paid internship, to pairing students with undocumented mentors who now work in the field and can explore how they landed their

dream jobs, these organizations are dedicated to setting undocumented students up for success. We need more institutional support for these types of programs. In being committed to implementing these programs, we set everyone up for success.

Despite the recent setbacks of once progressive states, I believe there is still hope for change. If I learned anything from this study it is that there are many people who are committed to this work and that makes me hopeful, especially considering the majority were located in restrictive states. The bottom line is that this work has been taking place for some time, and despite our current state, those engaged in this work have painted a decent roadmap for what needs to be done as we move backwards.

Recommendations for Practice

In accordance with findings from this study, I offer recommendations for three different stakeholders. These include state departments of public instruction, policymakers, and career centers at postsecondary institutions. These recommendations can further the agenda of maintaining our democracy and are things that should already be implemented to ensure everyone's success, which operates in accordance with upholding our democratic values. I firmly believe that real change can be made based on these recommendations.

Recommendations for Department of Public Instruction

Changes need to be made in the curriculum so that students learn not only what democracy truly is, but how to actively participate in maintaining our democracy. Westheimer (2015) claims, "…choices about how we teach our children are choices about the kind of society we believe in and the kind of people we hope will emerge from our schoolhouse doors" (p. 2). In bringing democracy back into the classrooms in more robust and interdisciplinary ways, we can allow "children [to] learn about the society in which they are growing up, how they might

engage in productive ways, and how they can fight for change when change is warranted" (Westheimer, 2015, p. 3). Getting us back to our roots will help set the foundation for students to learn the habits and dispositions required to be democratic citizens. This could in turn set them up for success as we attempt to open up pathways to success for marginalized populations.

The department of public instruction could also ensure that K-12 educators and school counselors are educated on the options, laws, and college access resources available for undocumented youth. This could help limit the spread of misinformation and help students from being deterred from advancing their education. Implicit bias training about this population could also help reduce educational leaders from unintentionally misguiding this group.

Recommendations for Policymakers

Policymakers need to work to push college access as a benefit for all. One way to do this is to invest in access for everyone. This can include increasing funding and financial aid, especially for those who need it most. They can also introduce legislation that offers more funding for community college and technical degrees. Raising awareness about these matters and pushing high schools to form partnerships with community colleges so students can dually enroll in these programs can also help students knock out two years of college before having to transfer to a four-year institution. These options can also help students narrow down their career interests early, which saves them time and money in the long run. Policymakers can also push for more inclusive admissions and equity policies at postsecondary institutions. This includes having undocufriendly schools with staff who are trained on how to properly assist students with different documentation statuses. It also includes influencing these institutions to change how students are classified based on residency, which can offer a solution to these institutions offering in-state tuition rates instead of out-of-state rates. This would make college more

affordable for this population. Investing in and developing policies that focus on college access for all is one of the best ways to show our communities that college access for everyone matters and is beneficial to us all.

Recommendations for Career Centers at Postsecondary Institutions

Career centers at colleges and universities can learn a thing or two from the organizations included in this study. These centers need to focus on not only enrolling students, but also ensuring they are set up for success once they earn their degrees. Organizations included in this study that had the most success, aside from having a lot of funding, offered effective career and leadership programs. They worked with alumni to help offer mentorship and leadership services to students. They worked directly with the community to form partnerships to help students get internships. They also educated the community on how they could make these internships equitable by offering paid options. They even provided career coaches who checked in monthly with their students. The only reason my alma mater has ever reached out to me was to ask for donations. They have never asked me if I could serve as a mentor to someone who has a similar experience to me. I think this could be one of the first steps of building a career center that ensures students are able to build their resume and gain work related experience prior to graduating college. It can also ensure undocumented students have answers to questions that only those with their undocumented experience can answer.

I think these recommendations are feasible and only request that we implement matters in accordance with our democratic values. I firmly believe that if these organizations, which have limited funding, can find the means to help their students be successful, that these recommendations are not too far of a reach.

Recommendations for Future Research

Limitations from this study greatly influence the recommendations I suggest for future research. In this study, I worked directly with the organizations, and in all but one case, I interviewed only one employee from each organization. Future research could limit the number of organizations included but expand more on what these organizations are doing to help their undocumented communities be successful, for example, creating more robust profiles of successful organizations. Perhaps in addition to working directly with the organization, it would be interesting to work directly with alumni from the organizations. While I think it is important to know how the organizations do what they do, I also think it is important to get the alumni perspective and experience as they are the most well positioned to assess the impact of the work of these organizations. This could help shed light on why many alumni choose to come back to their organizations and give back, either through mentoring, donating, or volunteering for the organization.

Another topic that was mentioned a few times was simply how competitive scholarships from these organizations can be to receive. Only one organization, MI Goes to College Tambien, stated that they do not require their students to be superstars in order to qualify for their funding. I think it would be interesting to explore what these competitive qualifications look like. I would also be interested to know what students who worked hard to be superstars throughout high school end up doing once they are denied these competitive scholarships. Where do they go? What do they resort to? How are they making a life without an option for higher education?

Various participants referred to their scholars as superstars. They mentioned all the extracurricular activities these students are involved in so they can build their applications and resumes just to be considered for college scholarships. These students volunteer, participate in

leadership development programs, are involved in their communities, and are high-achievers in school. I think future research could explore everything these students do to be considered for these competitive scholarships. This research could shed light on how undocumented students who aim to be superstars are often better democratic citizens than those of us who have legal status, and how their efforts uphold our democracy.

As far as enhancing this particular study, as previously mentioned, it would be useful to limit the number of organizations included in the study and interview more than one employee from the institution. Talking to more people would have helped me paint a more robust picture of the work they do and its impact. Additionally, I think being able to spend more time interviewing participants and gaining insights on each individual organization as a whole could add some more nuance to this study. I think this could expand on what really happens behind closed doors and paint a clearer, more accurate picture of how these organizations are successful in what they do.

Final Thoughts

I was halfway through my interviews when it was announced that Donald Trump won the 2024 presidential election. The apprehension these participants expressed in discussing the possibility of him being back in office, with a vengeance, was unsettling. These participants knew the implications of Trump gaining office again, but this did not deter them from their cause. I think what I learned most from this research is that there are people out there willing to use their own protected documentation status to see to it that undocumented youth and their communities have a somewhat equal chance to access higher education. And just as courageous are the undocumented young adults who despite being all but barred from accessing college refuse to give up. It is refreshing, really, even with this current administration.

Even when I feel hopeful reviewing my findings and seeing all the hard work these participants are doing to ensure this community is successful, ultimately, I still feel frustrated as I get to the end of this study. To actively watch once progressive states reverse their equitable policies just to pacify an aspirant dictator says so much about the current state of our democracy. When I started this study, there was still more hope in the air. Now it feels like we are just moving backwards. To see Texas, the state that set the foundation for college access policies for undocumented youth, reverse these decisions speaks volumes. We have always been told that money makes people act, but right now it seems like fear and hatefulness are more impactful than money. And I say this considering just how much money Texas will lose out on now that they are blocking access for a great portion of their population. In fact, it is reported that repealing college access for this population will have severe economic consequences for the state, resulting in a loss of "$461 million annually in economic activity, including $244.4 million in lost wages and $216.9 million in diminished spending power" (Frantes, 2025). Kramer (2025) states, "in 2021 alone, [undocumented college students] contributed $81.6 million in tuition and fees to Texas colleges and universities." The loss of this revenue had no impact on our anti-immigrant and antidemocratic administration, who seems hellbent on targeting and harming undocumented communities any way possible. It is important that we fully consider the implications of allowing the current administration to block undocumented immigrants of their democratic and human rights.

Historically, immigration has been framed in terms of an us versus them dichotomy. Stanley (2018) claims that "the role of political propaganda is to conceal politicians' or political movements' clearly problematic goals by masking them with ideals that are widely accepted" (p. 24). An example of this would be how the Trump Administration has framed immigration as a

threat to national security. And because of this, we overlook all the harm that has been inflicted on this population because of harmful anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies. Stanley (2018) continues, "political propaganda uses the language of virtuous ideals to unite people behind otherwise objectional ends" (p. 24). Moreover, political propaganda also unites people behind ideals that will actively harm them in the end as well. It is virtuous to want to protect the US from national security threats. But where is the virtue in wanting to deter members of our community from being the best versions of themselves? Where is the virtue in wanting to prevent this group from contributing back to our society?

The Trump Administration has played a significant role in states repealing tuition equity for undocumented youth this year. His current aim to is bar undocumented children from pursuing Head Start, using the same Clinton legislation, Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), that has been implemented to ban undocumented youth from college access resources, claiming these resources are federal public benefits ("Judge Blocks Trump Policy," 2025). The Trump Administration is also trying to bar this population from accessing "substance abuse services, mental health resources in schools, career and technical education, and job training opportunities" ("Judge Blocks Trump Policy," 2025). When we consider how undocumented immigrants have been painted as a national security threat, and how K-12 public education goals have "shifted away from preparing active and engaged public citizens" and instead shifted "toward more narrow goals of career preparation and individual economic gain" (Westheimer, 2015, p. 17), and when we consider how students are not being taught how to think critically or to explore democratic responsibilities in any real depth, then we can begin to shed some light on why anyone could be okay with these abhorrent anti-immigrant policies that do nothing to curb national security threats but instead inflict significant harm on

immigrant bodies and minds. We can also understand why they would accept these policies as virtuous and as helping our communities, instead of weakening our democracy overall. When we possess real critical thinking skills, we are able to see this push for anti-immigrant policies for what it really is, a means to inflict great harm on members of our community who only want what we all want, a chance at a better life for themselves and their children. We can see that all these anti-immigrant policies put forth by the Trump Administration are a means to create extreme economic inequality. Stanley (2018) states, "ever since Plato and Aristotle wrote on the topic, political theorist have known that democracy cannot flourish on soil poisoned by inequality" (p. 76). These policies harm us all as they risk democratic erosion.

When I began this study over a year ago, college access seemed to be a very important subject, but as I reflect on where we are today as a country, where families are actively being torn apart and undocumented people are being kidnapped by masked Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), the idea of accessing college does not seem as relevant. I find it hard to argue about equitable college access for this population when I cannot even guarantee these children will be allowed to stay in the country, in *their* country. I know that college is important, and I know that these children deserve to go to college. But I question if access to higher education is the *most* important issue right now, during this current anti-immigrant rampage. The participants from my study would push back. They would say that it is most important for this group to continue their studies. Several participants expressed that education was the one thing that no one could take away from you. Hana, from Si Podemos VA stated, "now is the time to go to college." She expressed that "any type of immigration reform has always required a higher education eligibility requirement." Even as I struggle to find hope that college access should matter right now, in their eyes, I know it matters.

College access for all impacts each and every one of us. When we fail one member of our community, we fail our whole community. It goes against our democratic ideals to intentionally make accessing college harder for undocumented youth. It is antidemocratic to label an entire population as unworthy of advancing in their education. Making college inaccessible also works to prevent this group from becoming responsible and contributing citizens. Stanley (2018) advises, "jointly mobilizing for better conditions for everyone brings us together in ways that enable us to recognize a common humanity despite differences in appearance, ethnicity, religion, disability status, sexual orientation, and gender" (p. 182). Here I want to add documentation status to the list. Despite these differences, we must understand that we need one another to be successful. We simply cannot thrive when we allow members of our community to suffer and deny them access to opportunities to better themselves and give back to their communities and the country. We must come together. We must recognize our common humanity. Stanely (2018) continues, "fascist politics preys on the human frailty that makes our own suffering seem bearable if we know that those we look down upon are being made to suffer more" (p. 183). Immigrant populations do not deserve to suffer more just because of their documentation status. They do not deserve to be pushed out of education just because of their documentation status either. We simply must do better. Our democratic society relies on it. I end this section with a final word from Stanley (2018) as he demands, "democratic citizenship requires a degree of empathy, insight, and kindness that demands a great deal of all of us" (p. 184).

REFERENCES

8 U.S. Code §1611: Aliens who are not qualified aliens ineligible for federal public benefits. (n.d.). Legal Information Institute: Cornell Law School. https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/8/1611

A Reagan legacy: Amnesty for illegal immigrants. (2010, July 4). *NPR*. https://www.npr.org/2010/07/04/128303672/a-reagan-legacy-amnesty-for-illegal-immigrants

AB 540 and SB 68 eligibility. (n.d.). University of California at Berkeley. https://undocu.berkeley.edu/legal-support-overview/ab540-eligibility/

Abrego, L.J. (2006). "I can't go to college because I don't have papers": Incorporation patterns of Latino undocumented youth. (2006). *Latino Studies, 4*(3), 212–231. https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.lst.8600200

Abrego, L.J. (2008). Legitimacy, social identity, and the mobilization of law: The effects of assembly bill 540 on undocumented students in California. *Law & Social Inquiry, 33*(3), 709–734.

Abrego, L. J., & Gonzales, R. G. (2010). Blocked paths, uncertain futures: The postsecondary education and labor market prospects of undocumented Latino youth. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk (JESPAR)*, *15*(1–2), 144–157. https://doi.org/10.1080/10824661003635168

Amuedo-Dorantes, C., & Sparber, C. (2014). In-state tuition for undocumented immigrants and its impact on college enrollment, tuition costs, student financial aid, and indebtedness. *Regional Science and Urban Economics*, *49*, 11–11.

Apple, M. W., & Beane, J. A. (Eds.). (2007). *Democratic schools: Lessons in powerful education* (2nd Ed.). Heinemann.

Arkansas State Legislature. (2019). *HB 1684*. https://www.arkleg.state.ar.us/Bills/Detail?ddBienniumSession=2019%2F2019R&measureno=HB1684

Ballerini, V., & Feldblum, M. (2021). Immigration status and postsecondary opportunity: Barriers to affordability, access, and success for undocumented students, and policy solutions. *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, *80*(1), 161. https://doi.org/10.1111/ajes.12380

Banks, A. M. (2013). Members only: Undocumented students & in-State tuition. *Brigham Young University Law Review*, *2013*(6), 1425–1455.

Belasco, A. S. (2013). Creating college opportunity: School counselors and their influence on postsecondary enrollment. *Research in Higher Education, 54*(7), 781–804.

Black, D. W. (2021). Old ideas, not new ones, are the key to education - and democracy. *Phi Delta Kappan*, *102*(5), 38–41. https://doi.org/10.1177/0031721721992564

Broder, T. (2025). *Basic facts about in-state tuition for undocumented immigrant students*. National Immigration Law Center. https://www.nilc.org/resources/basic-facts-instate/

Brown, X. (2023). Labor market impacts of state-level occupational licensing of undocumented immigrants. *Research in Economics, 77*(4), 478–496. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rie.2023.08.001

California nonresident tuition exemption. (n.d.). California Student Aid Commission. https://www.csac.ca.gov/post/california-nonresident-tuition-exemption

California Student Aid Commission (CSAC). (2023a). *California Dream Act FAQ's for students and parents*. https://www.csac.ca.gov/sites/main/files/file-attachments/california_dream_act_faq.pdf?1694549553

California Student Aid Commission (CSAC). (2023b). *Renewing the dream: Improving financial aid and college affordability for California's undocumented students*. https://www.csac.ca.gov/renewingthedream

Chishti, M. and Bolter, J. (2021, September 22). *Two decades after 9/11, national security focus still dominates U.S. immigration system*. Migration Policy Institute. https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/two-decades-after-sept-11-immigration-national-security

Collinson, S., & Diamond, J. (2016, September 1). Trump on immigration: No amnesty, no pivot. *CNN*. https://www.cnn.com/2016/08/31/politics/donald-trump-immigration-speech/index.html

Colorado Department of Higher Education. (2016). *Frequently asked questions regarding Senate Bill 13-033*. https://cdhe.colorado.gov/sites/highered/files/2020-03/assetfaq_03262016.pdf

Colorado General Assembly. (2006). *House Bill 06S-1023*. https://leg.colorado.gov/sites/default/files/images/olls/2006b_sl_13.pdf

Colorado General Assembly. (2019). *HB19-1196: Financial aid for students with in-state tuition*. https://leg.colorado.gov/bills/hb19-1196

Counts, G.S. (1932). *Dare the school build a new social order*? Sothern Illinois University Press.

DACA and Dreamers: What you need to know. (2022, November 7). Presidents' Alliance. https://www.presidentsalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/2022-11-07-DACA-Stats-for-Info-Sheet.pdf

Dahl, R. A. (2015). *On democracy* (2nd ed.). Yale University Press.

Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). (2023a, September 19). Immigration Equality. https://immigrationequality.org/legal/legal-help/other-paths-to-status/deferred-action-for-childhood-arrivals-daca/

Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA): An overview. (2021b). American Immigration Council. https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/deferred-action-childhood-arrivals-daca-overview

Dewey, J. (1916). The democratic conception in education. In J.A. Boydston, (Ed.), *John Dewey: The middle works, 1899-1924* (Vol. 9). Electronic edition. Southern Illinois University Press.

Dewey, J. (1938). Democracy and education in the world of today. In J.A. Boydston, (Ed.), *John Dewey: The late works, 1925-1953* (Vol. 13). Electronic edition. Southern Illinois University Press.

Diaz-Strong, D., Gomez, C., Meiners, E. R., & Luna-Duarte, M. E. (2011). Purged: Undocumented students, financial aid polices, and access to higher education. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*, *10*(2), 107–119. https://doi.org/10.1177/1538192711401917

Donnelly, M. (2023). STEM fields and STEM education. *EBSCO Knowledge Advantage*. https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/education/stem-fields-and-stem-education#research-starter-title

Enyioha, J. C. (2019). College access for undocumented students and law. *Educational Considerations*, *45*(1). https://doi.org/10.4148/0146-9282.2168

Ewing, W.A., Martínez, D.E., & Rumbaut, R.G. (2015). *The criminalization of immigration in the United States*. American Immigration Council. https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/criminalization-immigration-united-states

Expanding eligibility for professional and occupational licensing for immigrants. (2019). Presidents' Alliance. https://prezstaging.wpengine.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/2019-09-Expanding-Eligibility-for-Professional-and-Occupational-Licensing-for-Immigrants.pdf

Fansmith, J.; Gunja, M.; Spreitzer, S.; and Vargas, J. (Hosts). (2020, Sept. 17). Dreamers and immigration policy: Past, present, future (No. 28) [Audio podcast episode]. In *dotEDU*. American Council on Education 2019. https://www.audacy.com/podcasts/dotedu-28384/episode-28-dreamers-and-immigration-policy-past-present-future-337953092

Fernández Cambell, A. (2016, September 12). The truth about undocumented taxes. *The Atlantic*. https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2016/09/undocumented-immigrants-and-taxes/499604/

Fichera, A. (2023, September 21). Immigrants pay taxes and houses costs, regardless of status. *AP News*. https://apnews.com/article/fact-check-immigrants-taxes-rent-vaccine-requirements-98303592994

Financial aid for undocumented students. (n.d.). Southern Connecticut State University. https://www.southernct.edu/undocumented-students/financial-aid

Flores, S. M. (2010). State dream acts: The effect of in-state resident tuition policies and undocumented Latino students. *Review of Higher Education, 33*(2), 239–283.

Frantes, C. (2025, May 1). Opposition mounts against TX HB 232 and SB 1798 repeal of in-state tuition for undocumented Texans. *TexasGOPVote*. https://www.texasgopvote.com/economy/opposition-mounts-against-tx-hb-232-and-sb-1798-repeal-state-tuition-0016246

Fraraccio, M. (2025, March 17). Nonprofit vs. not-for-profit vs. for-profit: What's the difference? *US Chamber of Commerce*. https://www.uschamber.com/co/start/strategy/nonprofit-vs-not-for-profit-vs-for-profit

Gelatt, J., Lacarte, V., & Rodriguez, J. (2022). *A profile of low-income immigrants in the United States*. Migration Policy Institute. https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/low-income-immigrants

Gerken, C. (2013). *Model immigrants and undesirable aliens: The cost of immigration reform in the 1990s*. University of Minnesota Press. https://uncg.on.worldcat.org/oclc/862745938

Gonzales, R. G. (2007). *Wasted talent and broken dreams: The lost potential of undocumented students*. American Immigration Council. https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/sites/default/files/research/Wasted%20Talent%20and%20Broken%20Dreams.pdf

Gonzales, R. G. (2009). *Young lives on hold: The college dreams of undocumented students*. College Board. http://professionals.collegeboard.com/profdownload/young-lives-on-hold-college-board.pdf.

Gonzales, R. G. (2011). Learning to be illegal: Undocumented youth and shifting legal contexts in the transition to adulthood. *American Sociological Review, 76*(4), 602–619. https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122411411901

Gonzales, R. G. (2016). *Lives in limbo: Undocumented and coming of age in America*. University of California Press.

Gonzales, R. G., & Bautista-Chavez, A. M. (2014, June 16). *Two years and counting: Assessing the growing power of DACA.* American Immigration Council. (Ser. Special report). https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/sites/default/files/research/two_years_and_counting_assessing_the_growing_power_of_daca_final.pdf

Gonzales, R. G., & Ruiz, A. G. (2014). Dreaming beyond the fields: Undocumented youth, rural realities and a constellation of disadvantage. *Latino Studies*, *12*(2), 194–216. https://doi.org/10.1057/lst.2014.23

Gonzales, R. G., Heredia, L. L., & Negrón-Gonzales, G. (2015). Untangling Plyler's legacy: Undocumented students, schools, and citizenship. *Harvard Educational Review, 85*(3), 318–341.

Groce, L.L, & Johnson, L.V. (2021). School counselors igniting the hope of undocumented students in college access. *Journal for Specialists in Group Work*, *46*(1), 128–142. https://doi.org/10.1080/01933922.2020.1856256

H.R.3734 - 104th Congress (1995-1996): Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996. (1996, August 22). https://www.congress.gov/bill/104th-congress/house-bill/3734

Hannah-Jones, N. (2019). America wasn't a democracy, until Black Americans made it one. *New York Times.*

Haskins, R. (2006). *Work over welfare: The inside story of the 1996 welfare reform law*. Brookings Institution Press.

Hearn, J.C., & Holdsworth, J.M. (2004). Federal student aid: The shift from grants to loans. In Editor, E.P St. John, & M.D. Parsons (Eds.), *Public funding of higher education: Changing contexts and new rationales* (pp. 40-59). The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Higher ed guide to tuition, financial aid, & other funding for undocumented students. (2021, July 29). Presidents' Alliance. https://www.presidentsalliance.org/higher-ed-guide-to-tuition-financial-aid-other-funding-for-undocumented-students-2/

Hytten, K. (2017). Oxford research encyclopedia of education. In *Democracy and education in the United States*. Oxford University Press.

Johnson, L. B. (1965, January 12). *Special message to the congress: Toward full educational opportunity*. The American Presidency Project. https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/special-message-the-congress-toward-full-educational-opportunity

Judge blocks Trump policy barring undocumented kids in Head Start. (2025, September 11). *Education Week*. https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/judge-blocks-trump-policy-barring-undocumented-kids-in-head-start/2025/09

Kerwin, D. (2018). From IIRIRA to Trump: Connecting the dots to the current us immigration policy crisis. *Journal on Migration and Human Security*, *6*(3), 192–204. https://doi.org/10.1177/2331502418786718

Kiger, P. J. (2025, May 27). How St. Augustine became the first permanent European settlement in America. *History*. https://www.history.com/articles/st-augustine-first-american-settlement

Kim, E., & Diaz, J. (2013). *Immigrant students and higher education: Ashe higher education report 38:6*. John Wiley & Sons, Inc. https://uncg.on.worldcat.org/oclc/829459943

Kramer, C. (2025, May). *Yesterday, the Texas Senate Committee on Education advanced SB 1978—a bill that would repeal the Texas Dream Act* [Post]. Linkedin. https://lnkd.in/p/eFYbHKky

Lee, J. J. (2012). In-state tuition for undocumented students: Fueling the state-federal battleground. *Virginia Journal of Social Policy & the Law*, *19*(3), 365.

Legislative Information System (LIS). (2020). *HB1547: Higher educational institutions, public; eligibility for in-state tuition*. https://lis.virginia.gov/bill-details/20201/HB1547

Legislative Information System (LIS). (2021). *SB1387: Students; eligibility for in-state tuition*. https://legacylis.virginia.gov/cgi-bin/legp604.exe?211+cab+SC10201SB1387+RCSB3

Library of Congress. (n.d.). *1942: Bracero Program*. https://guides.loc.gov/latinx-civil-rights/bracero-program

Library of Congress. (1982). *U.S. reports: Plyler v. Doe, 457 U.S. 202*. https://www.loc.gov/item/usrep457202/

Litant, L. (2025, February 13). A guide to in-state vs out-of-state tuition. *Sallie*. https://www.sallie.com/resources/colleges/in-state-vs-out-of-state-tuition#:~:text=What%20is%20in%2Dstate%20tuition,they%27ve%20earned%20a%20discount.

Macías-Rojas, P. (2018). Immigration and the war on crime: Law and order politics and the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996. *Journal on Migration and Human Security, 6*(1), 1-25.

Mansfield, K.C. & Hernandez, P. (2024). Higher education access for undocumented students in the United States: Mapping the policy terrain. *International Journal of Multicultural Education.*

Manuel, K. (2016). Unauthorized aliens, higher education, in-state tuition, and financial aid: Legal analysis. *Congressional Research Services*. https://uncg.on.worldcat.org/oclc/1097520827

Martínez-Betrán, S. (2024, December 9). Mississippi communities scarred by ICE raids fear future under Trump. *NPR*. https://www.npr.org/2024/12/09/g-s1-35931/mississippi-ice-immigration-workplace-raid-deportation-poultry

Mavrogordato, M., & White, R. S. (2020). Leveraging policy implementation for social justice: How school leaders shape educational opportunity when implementing policy for English learners. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 56*(1), 3–45. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X18821364

McKeown-Moak, M. P., & Mullin, C. M. (2014). *Higher education finance research: policy, politics, and practice*. Information Age Publishing Inc. http://site.ebrary.com/id/10857455

Mendoza, N. (Host). (2020, Dec. 19). DACA—What it means for undocumented first gens. (No. 22) [Audio podcast episode]. In *How to College: First Gen*. 425304.

Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (Fourth edition). John Wiley & Sons. https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=1022562

Migration Policy Institute (MPI). (2019). *Profile of the unauthorized population: United States*. https://www.migrationpolicy.org/data/unauthorized-immigrant-population/state/US

Morales-Hernandez, M., & Enriquez, L.E.. (2021). Life after college: Liminal legality and political threats as barriers to undocumented students' career preparation pursuits. *Journal of Latinos & Education*, *20*(3), 318–331. https://doi.org/10.1080/15348431.2021.1949992

Napolitano, J. (2024, June 17). Hundreds of U.S. high schools wrongfully refused entry to older, immigrant student. *The74*. https://www.the74million.org/article/hundreds-of-u-s-high-schools-wrongfully-refused-entry-to-older-immigrant-student/

National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL). (2017, January 17). *Professional and occupational licenses for immigrants*. https://www.ncsl.org/immigration/professional-and-occupational-licenses-for-immigrants

National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL). (2021, March 1). *Tuition benefits for immigrants*. https://www.ncsl.org/immigration/tuition-benefits-for-immigrants

National Student Clearinghouse. (2023, November 30). *Progress in national college completion rates continue to stall, with declines at four-year institutions*. https://www.studentclearinghouse.org/news/progress-in-national-college-completion-rates-continue-to-stall-with-declines-at-four-year-institutions/

Nationality Act of 1790. (2019). Immigration History. https://immigrationhistory.org/item/1790-nationality-act/

National Council of Nonprofits. (2025). *What is a "nonprofit"?* https://www.councilofnonprofits.org/what-nonprofit

National Immigration Law Center (NILC). (2023, September 13). *DACA*. https://www.nilc.org/issues/daca/

Ngo, F., & Hinojosa, J. K. (2021). Supporting undocumented community college students. *New Directions for Community Colleges*, *196*(196), 57–68.

Nienhusser, H. K. (2014). Role of Community Colleges in the Implementation of Postsecondary Education Enrollment Policies for Undocumented Students. *Community College Review*, *42*(1), 3–22. https://doi.org/10.1177/0091552113509837

Nienhusser, H. K., Vega, B. E., & Carquin, M. C. S. (2016). Undocumented students' experiences with microaggressions during their college choice process. *Teachers College Record, 118*(2), 1–33. https://doi.org/10.1177/016146811611800208

Nixon, J. (2011). *Higher education and the public good: Imagining the university*. Continuum International Pub. Group.

Olivas, M. A. (2012). *No undocumented child left behind: Plyler v. Doe and the education of undocumented schoolchildren*. New York University Press. https://uncg.on.worldcat.org/oclc/772593022

Olivérez, P. M. (2007). A perilous path: Undocumented immigrant students and the college pipeline. *Metropolitan Universities, 18*(4), 87–101.

Parsons, M.D. (2004). Lobbying in higher education: Theory and practice. In Editor, E.P St. John, & M.D. Parsons (Eds.), *Public funding of higher education: Changing contexts and new rationales* (pp. 215-230). The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Perez, P. A. (2010). College choice process of Latino undocumented students: Implications for recruitment and retention. *Journal of College Admission*, *206*, 21–25.

Perez, W. (2010). Higher education access for undocumented students: Recommendations for counseling professionals. *Journal of College Admissions, 206*, 32-35

Perez, Z.J. (2014, December 5). *Removing barriers to higher education for undocumented students*. Center for American Progress. https://www.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2014/12/UndocHigherEd-report2.pdf

President's Commission of Higher Education. (1947). *Higher education for American democracy: Report*. Washington, U.S. Gvt.

Price, M., & Mowry-Mora, I. (2020). DACA and the differentiated landscape for college access: Experiences from a new destination state. *Geographical Review, 110*(4), 437–456. https://doi.org/10.1080/00167428.2020.1773267

Profile of the unauthorized population: United States. (2019). Migration Policy Institute. https://www.migrationpolicy.org/data/unauthorized-immigrant-population/state/US

Public education for immigrant students: Understanding Plyler v. Doe. (2016, October 24). American Immigration Council. https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/plyler-v-doe-public-education-immigrant-students

Romo, V., Stewart, M., & Naylor, B. (2017, September 5). Trump ends DACA, calls on Congress to act. *NPR*. https://www.npr.org/2017/09/05/546423550/trump-signals-end-to-daca-calls-on-congress-to-act

Salazar, C. (2021). "I knew it was gonna be hard, but I always knew I dad support from my parents": The role of family on undocumented students' college aspirations and persistence. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*. https://doi.org/10.1177/15210251211018826

Sanchez, O. (2023, August 24). Undocumented students priced out of dual enrollment. *The Hechinger Report*. https://hechingerreport.org/newsletter/undocumented-students-priced-out-of-dual-enrollment/

Savin-Baden, M., & Major, C. H. (2013). *Qualitative research: The essential guide to theory and practice*. Routledge.

Scobey-Thal, J. (2014, August 27). *Illegal alien: A short history*. Foreign Policy. https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/08/27/illegal-alien-a-short-history/

Senate Bill 1528. (n.d.). South Texas College. https://studentservices.southtexascollege.edu/finaid/SB1528/

Shapiro, A., Contreras, G., & Blanchard, D. (2019, November 17). Months after massive ICE raid, residents of a Mississippi town wait and worry. *NPR*. https://www.npr.org/2019/11/17/778611834/months-after-massive-ice-raid-residents-of-a-mississippi-town-wait-and-worry

Sikes, C., & Valenzuela, A. (2016). *Texas Dream Act [House Bill 1403]*. Texas State Historical Association. https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/texas-dream-act-house-bill-1403

Smith, M. (2021, April 22). Colorado Senate passes bill allowing undocumented immigrants to earn professional licenses. *Denver 7*. https://www.denver7.com/news/local-news/colorado-senate-passes-bill-allowing-undocumented-immigrants-to-earn-professional-licenses

St. John, E.P., & Parsons, M.D., (2004). Introduction. In Editor, E.P St. John, & M.D. Parsons (Eds.), *Public funding of higher education: Changing contexts and new rationales* (pp. 1-16). The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Stanley, J. (2018). *How fascism works: The politics of us and them* (First edition). Random House.

State of New Jersey. (2020, September 1). *Governor Murphy signs legislation expanding access to professional and occupational licenses*. https://nj.gov/governor/news/news/562020/approved/20200901c.shtml

Stavely, Z. (2021, November 30). Challenges remain for undocumented students to tap financial aid in California. *EdSource*. https://edsource.org/2021/challenges-remain-for-undocumented-students-to-tap-financial-aid-in-california/664079

Strauss, V. (2019, April 26). Report: Nearly 100,000 undocumented immigrants graduate from U.S. high schools each year. *The Washington Post*. https://uncg.on.worldcat.org/oclc/8083458362

Suárez-Orozco, C., Katsiaficas, D., Birchall, O., Alcantar, C., Hernandez, E., Garcia, Y., Michikyan, M., Cerda, J., & Teranishi, R. T. (2015). Undocumented undergraduates on college campuses: Understanding their challenges and assets and what it takes to make an undocufriendly campus. *Harvard Educational Review, 85*(3).

Terriquez, V. (2015). Dreams delayed: Barriers to degree completion among undocumented students. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 41*(8), 1302–1323. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2014.968534

Texas Application State Financial Aid (TASFA). (2022). Wayland Baptist University. https://www.wbu.edu/admissions/financial-aid/tasfa.htm

The Dream Act: An overview. (2024). American Immigration Council. https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/dream-act-overview

Thelin, J.R. (2004). Higher education and the public trough: A historical perspective. In Editor, E.P St. John, & M.D. Parsons (Eds.), *Public funding of higher education: Changing contexts and new rationales* (pp. 21-39). The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Trivette, M. J., & English, D. J. (2017). Finding freedom: Facilitating postsecondary pathways for undocumented students. *Educational Policy*, *31*(6), 858–894. https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904817719526

U.S. immigration timeline. (2025, May 28). *History*. https://www.history.com/articles/immigration-united-states-timeline

Undocumented students in higher education: How many students are in U.S. colleges and universities and who are they? (2023, August 2). Presidents' Alliance. https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/undocumented-college-students-2023

Undocumented students in U.S. higher education. (2025, August 12). Presidents' Alliance. https://www.presidentsalliance.org/undocumented-students-in-us-higher-education-june2024/

University System of Georgia (USG). (2010, October 13). *Regents adopt new policies on undocumented students*. https://www.usg.edu/news/release/regents_adopt_new_policies_on_undocumented_students

Vedder, R. (2018, April 8). There are really almost no truly private universities. *Forbes*. https://www.forbes.com/sites/richardvedder/2018/04/08/there-are-really-almost-no-truly-private-universities/

Villarreal, A. (2025, August 21). What's happened since Texas killed in-state tuition for undocumented students. *The Hechinger Report*. https://hechingerreport.org/whats-happened-since-texas-killed-in-state-tuition-for-undocumented-students/

Vogt, W., Alonso-Ceron, P., & Pimentel-Solano, G. (2018, January 31). UndocuHoosiers: Resist and persist in the era of Trump. *Society for Cultural Anthropology*. https://culanth.org/fieldsights/undocu-hoosiers-resist-and-persist-in-the-era-of-trump

Ward, M. (2020, August 11). *How decades of US welfare policies lifted up the white middle class and largely excluded Black Americans*. Business Insider. https://www.businessinsider.com/welfare-policy-created-white-wealth-largely-leaving-black-americans-behind-2020-8

Webber, D. A. (2017). State divestment and tuition at public institutions. *Economics of Education Review*, *60*, 1–4. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2017.07.007

Weissman, S. (2025, February 20). Has Florida sparked a trend of ending in-state tuition for undocumented students? *Inside Higher Ed*. https://www.insidehighered.com/news/government/state-policy/2025/02/20/florida-ends-state-tuition-undocumented-students

Westheimer, J. (2015). *What kind of citizen? Educating our children for the common good*. Teachers College Press.

APPENDIX A: STATE LEVEL COMPARISON ON COLLEGE ACCESS

	ISTR for DACA & Undocumented	ISTR for DACA Only	ISTR for DACA & Undocumented at Specific Institutions	ISTR for DACA only at Specific Institutions	Ban ISTR for DACA & Undocumented	No Active ISTR Policies	Financial Aid for DACA & Undocumented	Financial Aid for DACA only	Financial Aid for DACA & Undocumented at Specific Institutions	Ban Financial Aid for DACA & Undocumented	No Active Financial Aid Policies	Ban DACA & Undocumented Enrollment	Ban DACA & Undocumented Enrollment at Specific Institutions
AL					●					●		●	
AK						●					●		
AZ	●						●						
AR		●									●		
CA	●						●						
CO	●						●						
CT	●							●					
DE			●						●				
FL	●										●		
GA					●					●			●
HI	●						●						
ID				●							●		
IL	●						●						
IN					●						●		
IA			●								●		
KS	●										●		
KY	●										●		
LA						●					●		
ME				●							●		
MD	●						●						
MA	●						●						
MI			●						●				
MN	●						●						
MS					●					●			
MO					●					●			
MT						●					●		
NE	●										●		
NV	●						●						
NH					●						●		
NJ	●						●						
NM	●						●						
NY	●						●						
NC					●					●			
ND						●					●		
OH		●									●		
OK	●									●			
OR	●						●						
PA			●								●		
RI	●						●						
SC					●					●		●	
SD						●					●		
TN					●					●			
TX	●						●						
UT	●						●						
VT						●					●		
VA	●						●						
WA	●						●						
WV						●					●		
WI					●						●		
WY						●					●		
DC	●						●						

Note. Data are from Mansfield, K.C. & Hernandez, P. (2024). Higher education access for undocumented students in the United States: Mapping the policy terrain. *International Journal of Multicultural Education.*

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interview Questions:

Strategies, struggles/barriers, impact, history

- How/what factors influenced the founding of this organization?
- How does this organization help undocumented youth access college?
- What struggles does this organization face in attempting to help undocumented youth access college?
- What strategies does the organization use to get around those struggles/barriers?
- What is the main struggle the undocumented students you deal with face when attempting to access a higher education?
- What impact does this organization have on college access?
- What impact does this organization have on changing policy?

Partnerships:

- Do you all have a partnership with any high schools or higher education institutions?
- What does that partnership consist of?
- What is the goal of the partnership?

Democratic aspect of the work done by the organizations:

- How would you define democracy?
- How does this organization help with building community and ensuring the thriving of its members?
- How does your organization view access to a higher education as a common good?
- How does the work you do specifically contribute to maintaining our democracy?

Closing Questions:

- What advice do you have for those trying to help undocumented youth access a higher education?
- What advice do you have for undocumented students attempting to advance their education?
- Are there any organizations that you can think of who should participate in my study and would you be willing to connect me with them?