EFFECTS OF PARTICIPATION IN IMMIGRATION ACTIVISM ON UNDOCUMENTED STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

by

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Effects of Participation in Immigration Activism on Undocumented Students in Higher Education

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at George Mason University

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to the Dreamers who fight on a daily basis for their right to an education. I will continue to stand with you until you have the same access to education as I do.
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my dissertation committee—Dr. Joseph Maxwell, Dr. Rachael Goodman, and Dr. Paul Gorski—for their guidance, support, and thoughtful feedback throughout the course of this study. I have grown as a scholar immensely through the process of completing this dissertation, and I owe a great deal of that growth to you.

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## Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>List of Tables</td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter One: Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researcher Identity</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Context of the Study</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of the Study</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Two: Conceptual Framework</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research on Undocumented Student Activists</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research on Undocumented Students in Higher Education</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research on the Effects of Participating in Activism</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General population</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditionally underrepresented groups</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Three: Methods</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Goals</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Site</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant Selection</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Analysis</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Validity</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical Considerations</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Four: Overview of Findings</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development of Social Capital</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Political and civic development ......................................................... 137
Social-emotional benefits ................................................................. 138
  Positive identity development ....................................................... 139
  Determination ............................................................................... 140
  Self-efficacy ................................................................................ 140
  Finding someone who relates ....................................................... 141
Implications ......................................................................................... 143
Financial and academic barriers to higher education attainment ...... 144
  Social-emotional barriers to higher education attainment .......... 148
Appendix A ......................................................................................... 153
Appendix B ......................................................................................... 157
Appendix C ......................................................................................... 160
References ......................................................................................... 166
List of Tables

Table                  Page

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Participants and Their Participation in Immigration Activism.......................................................... 44
Table 2. Profile of Immigration Organizations Referred to by Participants.................. 45
List of Figures

Figure Page

Figure 1. Participant Network ................................................................. 43
Abstract

EFFECTS OF PARTICIPATION IN IMMIGRATION ACTIVISM ON UNDOCUMENTED STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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George Mason University, 2015

Dissertation Chair: Dr. Joseph A. Maxwell

For undocumented students to go to college, they need to be highly resourceful and exceptionally motivated—and that might not be enough. Society confers numerous barriers on undocumented students regarding higher education attainment. Most undocumented students, who typically come from families living in poverty, cannot afford the high cost of a college education in the U.S. Moreover, undocumented students are ineligible for federal student aid and, in most states, undocumented students pay out-of-state tuition rates. In addition to these financial barriers, undocumented students also face academic and social-emotional barriers to higher education attainment, including receiving inadequate preparation for the college application process and experiencing mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety, related to their undocumented status internalized racism and xenophobia from the broader society. As such, it is extremely difficult for undocumented students to enroll in and graduate college—which will present
future economic challenges for the nation as a whole. Previous research suggests that undocumented students benefit from social supports on campus and that student activism provides college students with numerous social-emotional benefits. A qualitative study was conducted to investigate the effects of participating in immigration activism on undocumented students in higher education. Specifically, I conducted in-depth interviews with nine undocumented student activists from the Washington, D.C. metropolitan region and found that participation in immigration activism affected the participants’ development of social capital as well as their academic, political and civic, and social-emotional development. The findings of this study suggest that participation in immigration activism may help undocumented students overcome some barriers related to higher education attainment. By understanding how participation in immigration activism provides support to undocumented students, secondary and higher education administrators, student services professionals, and educators can better serve the higher education attainment needs of undocumented students—either by welcoming or supporting immigration activism on campus, or by incorporating supportive elements of activism into other types of school or campus programming.
Chapter One: Introduction

Undocumented students in higher education are an understudied group in education research (Garcia & Tierney, 2011; Pérez & Rodríguez, 2012); however, research into this group is becoming increasingly popular (Gonzales, 2010). In some recent studies of undocumented college students, researchers have chosen participants who happen to be immigration activists—though the fact that the undocumented student participants are activists has not been connected to the central research questions or the findings of such studies (Abrego, 2006; Enriquez, 2011). In many ways, undocumented college students who participate in immigration activism are more accessible to researchers than undocumented students who do not participate in activism. Many undocumented student activists are more open about their immigration status—in comparison to undocumented students generally, who are often described as “living in the shadows” (Drachman, 2006; Garcia & Tierney, 2011; Gildersleeve & Ranero, 2010; Seif, 2011)—and thus, it is easier for researchers to find undocumented student activists as participants. Also, because self-disclosure of undocumented immigration status has been a strategy in the immigration activist movement (Galindo, 2012; Gonzales, 2012; Tareen, 2010), undocumented student activists are more likely than non-activists to disclose the details of their personal lives, including their immigration status, to strangers. As such, many studies about undocumented students in higher education tap into the
undocumented student activist network (Abrego, 2006; Enriquez, 2011), however, few studies focus on how activism impacts undocumented college students’ lives and their education.

Just like many other researchers, I did not intend to focus on undocumented student activism when I began research into undocumented students’ pursuit of higher education. What I found, however, through pilot interviews conducted with three undocumented students in higher education—two of whom were activists—is that this was a topic worth focusing on. More specifically, through in-depth interviews with the two undocumented student activists, I came to believe that participating in activism had profound and transformative effects for these students, and helped them to overcome internalized racism (Hipolito-Delgado; Padilla, 2001) from the broader society’s anti-immigrant xenophobia (Allesaht-Snider, Buxton, & Harman, 2012; Catalano, 2013; Fox, 2014; Lawton, 2013; Lipman, 2007; Pérez Huber, 2011; Santa Ana, 1999; Southern Poverty Law Center, 2014; Ybarra, Sanchez, & Sanchez, 2015). For example, one participant described to me how she used to consider herself to be “filthy” as a result of her immigration status, but realized—through her participation in activism—that her undocumented status was “not her fault.” Another participant described how she used to call herself “an illegal,” but now refers to herself as “undocumented” or as “a Dreamer.” Interestingly, the one participant I interviewed who was not an activist did not discuss a shift in her regard for herself and her immigration status. For the participants who did describe such a shift, however, I found this shift in thinking to be powerful. I became
curious about the different ways that immigration activist organizations might support undocumented students in higher education, and how this mechanism of support works.

In order to further explore some of these questions, I conducted a qualitative study for my dissertation on this topic. The purpose of this study was to explore the effects of participation in an immigration activist organization on undocumented students in higher education. As part of this study, I conducted in-depth interviews with nine undocumented student activists in higher education—from both 2-year and 4-year institutions—from the Washington Metropolitan Region. I used a Grounded Theory approach (Charmaz, 2003; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998) to code and categorize the data, and then organized the data into narrative profiles (Seidman, 2006) for selected participants, in order to bring to life the interrelatedness of different categories for individual participants. The findings of this study revealed that participation in immigration activism had a variety of positive effects for the participants in this study, related to the development of social capital, academic development, political and civic development, and social-emotional benefits. The details of this study will be discussed in the subsequent pages of this dissertation.

**Researcher Identity**

Before continuing any further, for the sake of integrity and transparency in my research, it is important to disclose my researcher identity (Maxwell, 2005), and the relationship I have with my topic. Throughout my life, I have known many documented and undocumented immigrants. I have lived and worked in diverse neighborhoods in Northern Virginia and Washington, D.C. since birth, and have been both a student with
and teacher to many individuals who have immigrated to the U.S.—with and without their papers. I have close friends and members of my family who are immigrants, and these are people that I love and care about deeply. In fact, the woman who raised me—who I consider my second mother and to this day is a close family friend—was at one point undocumented. Because of my background and relationships, issues that affect all immigrants—documented and undocumented—are of a highly personal nature to me.

My background and experiences have led me to develop a strong opinion in favor of equal rights for all immigrants. Perhaps my opinion on this topic is best described by a poster I saw plastered around my Washington, D.C. neighborhood. The poster had a large colorful image of a monarch butterfly and an inscription that read, “All humans have a right to migrate. All migrants have human rights.” I do not consider it a crime to migrate—with or without papers—and do not believe that undocumented immigrants are criminals or should be punished. Most of the people that I know who have migrated to the U.S.—with or without papers—have done so to provide better opportunities for themselves and their families or to flee from danger. To me, this is not a crime, but human nature, a survival instinct that all humans possess, and one that should be considered a human right.

In addition, I also believe that there exists structural violence against undocumented immigrants in the U.S. that is inspired by racism and xenophobia and expressed through systemic discrimination. Such violence exists in state policies and practices—from profiling, detaining, and deporting undocumented immigrants, which separates families, to blocking undocumented immigrants from access to higher
education, affordable healthcare, labor rights, and a plethora of social welfare and poverty alleviation programs. Such violence also exists in microaggressions against undocumented immigrants that occur on a daily basis in interpersonal relations.

There are both advantages and disadvantages to my experiences and convictions related to immigration. One advantage is that, for the most part, the participants in this study saw me as an activist ally—which I am. This likely helped the participants trust me and helped to cultivate open, honest, and respectful research relationships. One disadvantage is that my personal convictions could have colored my analysis of the data—consciously or unconsciously. In qualitative research, researchers are the instruments. Researchers approach their work with past experiences and opinions. This does not invalidate the research, as long as the potential biases that these might create are addressed, and the steps that will be taken to reduce threats to validity and quality are outlined (Maxwell, 2005). In Chapter 3, I will address the specific threats to validity in my research—more generally, and those related to my researcher identity—and explain how I attempted to overcome these threats.

Context of the Study

My research is situated within the larger context of a political and media frenzy surrounding immigration reform. Information on this context provides important background information about my research.

As a result of the *Plyler v. Doe* (1982) Supreme Court case, all children living in the U.S., regardless of immigration status, are eligible for free primary and secondary education. For higher education, however, there is no legal requirement for equal access
to education. Instead, undocumented students have a variety of legal and financial barriers that inhibit and complicate this access. First and foremost, until 2012, all undocumented youth were eligible for deportation upon turning 18 years of age—even though many of these youth did not know or remember their countries of origin and may not have familial connections there (Gonzales, 2009). Beyond the threat of deportation, however, there were and still are many other hurdles to undocumented students’ access to higher education. Section 1623 of the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 made it illegal for undocumented students to receive in-state tuition rates at public institutions of higher education, by banning undocumented students from any state residency benefits that non-state residents are not eligible for as well. Despite this federal restriction, states have taken action regarding in-state tuition benefits for undocumented students—to both support and extend the federal restriction, as well as to subvert it. Specifically, 20 states currently offer in-state tuition benefits to undocumented students in higher education, either through state legislation or through policies established by state university systems (National Conference of State Legislators [NCSL], 2014a). Arizona, Georgia, and Indiana bar undocumented students from receiving in-state tuition benefits, echoing the sentiment of Section 1623 (NCSL, 2014b). South Carolina and Alabama have taken the restriction one step further and have banned undocumented students from attending public universities altogether in those states (NCSL, 2014b). In the current study, participants attend institutions of higher education in Maryland, one of the states with in-state tuition benefits for undocumented students as
of 2012, as well as Virginia, a state that does not have in-state tuition benefits for undocumented students.

In addition to the federal and state restrictions regarding in-state tuition benefits and access to public institutions of higher education, undocumented students are also barred from receiving federal student aid. Considering the fact that most undocumented students come from families living in poverty, the ineligibility to receive financial aid and in-state tuition rates in most states prevents many academically qualified undocumented students from attending college (Diaz-Strong et al., 2011).

In 2001, S. 1291, the Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors Act, or Dream Act, was introduced in the U.S. Senate, which would grant legal status to undocumented immigrants in good academic and legal standing and allow them to receive in-state tuition benefits for college. With the introduction of this legislation, student organizations formed to lobby legislators and create public awareness around this issue (Gonzales, 2008). In the mid-2000s, the National Immigration Law Center (NILC) brought together a coalition of organizations to lobby for the legislation (United We Dream, n.d.-a). Further, by 2005, immigrant student groups—such as the New York State Youth Leadership Council, the Student Immigrant Movement in Massachusetts, the University Leadership Initiative in Austin, TX, and the California Dream Network—became more prominent across the country (United We Dream, n.d.-a).

Although student groups became organized in the years following the Dream Act’s introduction, the issues facing undocumented students did not receive as much public attention until another immigration-related event took center stage in the news. In
March 2006, undocumented immigrants were thrust into the national spotlight, when massive immigration protests erupted across the nation. Sparked by the passage of anti-immigration legislation in the U.S. House of Representatives, millions of protestors waved banners and flags, carried signs, and demanded equal rights and socially just immigration policies (Gonzales, 2008). This was a significant moment in the immigration reform movement, as immigrants—who had largely been hidden from the public eye—made themselves visible to news cameras across the country (Gonzales, 2008).

Following these protests, the Dream Act was brought up for consideration in the U.S. Senate in 2007, but failed to get the 60 votes needed to begin debate (“‘Dream Act’ fails,” 2007). A year later, with the help of the NILC, a coalition was formed—United We Dream—which became the largest youth-led immigration activist organization in the nation (United We Dream, n.d.-a).

In March 2010, undocumented immigrant protestors pushed the boundaries of visibility by publicly declaring their undocumented status—and risk in the process—with the slogan, “Undocumented and Unafraid” (Tareen, 2010). This event marked a critical point in the movement in which public disclosure became a central part of the strategy. According to Gonzalez (2012), the purpose of this was to put a human face on the notion of the “illegal immigrant.”

Later in 2010, the U.S. Congress considered the Dream Act multiple times. First, a revised version of the Dream Act was incorporated into the National Defense Authorization Act for FY 2011; however on September 21, 2010, a Senate filibuster—just 4 votes shy of being defeated—was upheld that blocked a Senate vote on the bill
(Barrett & Bash, 2010). A few months later, on December 8, 2010, the House of Representatives passed the Dream Act by a vote of 216-198 (Preston, 2010). When the bill reached the Senate on December 18, 2010, however, the Senate again did not have enough support to end debate on this bill (Herszenhorn, 2010). Although the bill was reintroduced in the Senate in 2011, it had no chance of passing the new Republican controlled House of Representatives (Cohen, 2011).

Although the Dream Act had not passed Congress, on June 15, 2012, U.S. President Obama’s administration passed an executive order for a new program, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) that would defer the deportation of young undocumented immigrants in good standing and allow them to apply for temporary work permits that are renewable at 2-year intervals (U.S. Department of Homeland Security [DHS], 2012). This measure was estimated to benefit up to 1.7 million undocumented immigrant youth (Passel & Hugo Lopez, 2012) and represented a significant step forward for the immigrant rights movement. In order to be eligible to apply for DACA, an undocumented immigrant must be under 31 years of age and must have arrived in the U.S. before 16 years of age, must have lived in the U.S continuously for five years and must be living in the U.S. currently; must either currently be a student, a high school graduate (or with a graduate education development certificate), or an honorably discharged veteran from U.S. military service; and must not have been convicted of a felony or significant misdemeanor offense, or otherwise be a threat to U.S. national security (DHS, 2012).
It is important to note that while this executive order granted temporary relief for law-abiding undocumented youth and young adults with at least a high school level of education, this policy did not grant undocumented youth and young adults any substantive rights, immigration status, or a pathway to citizenship (NCSL, 2014a). Moreover, because their immigration status remains unchanged, undocumented college students are still ineligible for federal student aid.

Following the institution of DACA, the United We Dream activist coalition broadened its focus from fighting exclusively for the rights of Dreamers to fighting for a path for citizenship for the families and communities of Dreamers—the 11 million undocumented immigrants who live in the U.S. (United We Dream, n.d.-a). This strategy involved pressuring Congress—through lobbying, rallies, and sit-in demonstrations—to consider comprehensive immigration reform (Preston, 2014). Frustrated that the Republican leadership in the House of Representatives would not consider comprehensive immigration in 2014, United We Dream shifted their focus to President Obama (Preston, 2014) by launching their We Can’t Wait campaign, which demanded the extension of DACA to the parents of Dreamers in order to stop the separation of families as a result of deportations (United We Dream, n.d.-b).

On November 20, 2014, President Obama announced additional executive orders on immigration that, among other initiatives, included expanding DACA to include people of any age who have lived in the U.S. continuously since January 1, 2010; extending the work authorization period in DACA from two years to three years; and allowing undocumented parents of both U.S. citizens and lawful permanent residents who
have lived in the U.S. continuously since January 1, 2010 to request deferred action, under a new program, Deferred Action for Parents Accountability (DHS, 2015). According to DHS (2015), an estimated 4.9 million individuals were eligible to benefit from these initiatives. These initiatives were put on hold, however, as on February 16, 2015, a federal district court in Texas temporarily blocked the implementation of the immigration actions, arguing that the federal government did not follow rulemaking procedures under federal law when instituting these executive actions (NILC, 2015).

It is within this broader context of politics and activism that I conducted my research into the perceived effects of undocumented college students’ participation in immigration activism. More specifically, the interviews were conducted between March 2013 and March 2014—following the Obama administration’s unveiling of DACA in June 2012, but before the administration attempted to expand DACA in November 2014. The interviews point to elements of that context—excitement and disappointment over the Dream Act’s changing status in Congress; efforts to become documented through DACA; and the movement’s change of course to begin fighting for all undocumented immigrants, not just Dreamers. Understanding the temporality of these interviews is an important part of understanding how undocumented students’ participation in immigration activism has affected them.

**Importance of the Study**

Research on the effects of undocumented students’ participation in immigration activism could help both secondary and higher education administrators, student services and student affairs personnel, and educators better support a segment of the student
population that faces systemic barriers to higher education academic attainment—which could not only help those students, but the nation as a whole. Economic studies demonstrate that the U.S. will not be equipped to meet the economic challenges of the 21st century, unless more immigrant students—including undocumented students—graduate college at a higher rate (NCPPHE, 2005; National Research Council, 1997). Yet it is extremely difficult for undocumented students to enroll in and graduate from college for a variety of reasons, including systemic financial barriers, academic barriers, and social-emotional barriers.

**Financial barriers to higher education attainment.** Most undocumented students come from families living in poverty, as a result of unjust economic and social policies. Undocumented immigrants are paid well below average wages in the U.S., with a median household income of 36,000 dollars annually, compared to the median household income of 50,000 dollars for U.S.-born residents (Passel & Cohn, 2009). Additionally, undocumented immigrants are more likely to experience minimum wage violations than other workers (Bernhardt, Milkman, Theodore, Heckathorn, Auer, DeFilippis, González, Narro, Perelshteyn, Polson & Spiller, 2009). More specifically, Benhardt et al. (2009) found that nearly 40% of undocumented immigrants had experienced a minimum wage violation in the previous week. Despite contributing billions of federal, state, and local tax dollars annually, undocumented immigrants are locked out of poverty alleviation and social welfare programs, such as the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), the Social Security retirement benefit, Medicare, non-emergency Medicaid, the Children’s Health Insurance Program, the Supplemental Nutrition
Assistance Program, and the Housing and Urban Development Public Housing and Section 8 programs (Lipman, 2007; NILC, 2011). By not receiving the EITC, undocumented immigrant families effectively bear a higher marginal tax rate than high income households (Lipman, 2007). As a result of being locked out of federal healthcare programs, 59% of undocumented immigrant adults and 45% of undocumented immigrant children had no health insurance during all of 2007 (Passel & Cohn, 2009).

Considering these conditions, the cost of college tuition is too high for many undocumented families (Abrego, 2006; Diaz-Strong et al., 2011). While most students in the U.S. finance their higher education through federal student aid, undocumented students are banned from this essential education financing program (Morse & Birnbach, 2012). In addition, in most states, undocumented students are required to pay out-of-state tuition rates at public universities and community colleges (Diaz-Strong et al., 2011). Although the research of Flores and Horn (2009) and Flores (2010) suggests that in-state tuition rates may have led to increased enrollment and retention rates in Texas, Diaz-Strong et al. (2011) interviewed students receiving in-state tuition in Illinois who explained that even in-state tuition rates were often unbearable for undocumented students and their families (Diaz-Strong et al., 2011). As a result of these factors, of the students who do start college, many drop out, or take classes sporadically, whenever they can afford to do so (Diaz-Strong et al., 2011).

**Academic barriers to higher education.** Undocumented students who pursue higher education have been described by researchers as “determined” (Contreras, 2009; Stuart-Carruthers, 2014) and “resilient” (Contreras, 2009; De Leon, 2005; Morales,
Herrera, & Murry, 2011; Perez, Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado, & Cortes, 2010). Despite possessing determination and resiliency, many undocumented students pursuing higher education are faced with systemic academic barriers that have the potential to thwart their success. As with other low-income student groups, many undocumented students attend low performing K-12 schools, which may not adequately prepare them for higher education (Conway, 2009; Garcia & Tierney, 2011; Gonzales, 2009). Additionally, some undocumented students, like other immigrant students, are English Language Learners (ELLs) and have not been adequately prepared in academic literacy—including academic reading, writing, and speaking—that is required in higher education (Curry, 2004), which may ultimately place them at a disadvantage (Garcia & Tierney, 2011). Further, many undocumented students are first generation college goers (Garcia & Tierney, 2011; Gonzales, 2009; Perez et al., 2009), and as a result, may not receive adequate or timely college preparation information and resources (Garcia & Tierney, 2011). Moreover, the college information and resources that undocumented students do receive may not be customized to their unique needs as undocumented students (Garcia & Tierney, 2011).

**Social-emotional barriers to higher education attainment.** In addition to systemic financial and academic barriers to higher education, undocumented young adults also experience social-emotional barriers to higher education attainment. Migration is a radical life change (Perez et al., 2009) that may be fraught with trauma for many immigrants to the U.S.—related to the migration process itself, acculturation, learning the English language, loss of family and community, a downturn in socioeconomic status, and many other possible stressors (Perez Foster, 2001). After arriving in the U.S.,
immigrants face anti-immigrant xenophobia, not only from extremists, such as racist nativist hate groups (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2014) and anti-immigrant grassroots mobilizations (Fox, 2014), but also from mainstream U.S. society—from racist and xenophobic discourse about immigration issues and immigrants (Allexsaht-Snider et al., 2012; Catalano, 2013; Lawton, 2013; Santa Ana, 1999) to racist and xenophobic policies, and practices of a variety of institutions (Lipman, 2007; Pérez Huber, 2011; Ybarra et al., 2015). Such conditions have negative mental health consequences on immigrant students. Exposure to racism not only causes poor mental health, anxiety, and stress in children and teenagers (Priest, Paradies, Trenerry, Truong, Karlsen, & Kelly, 2013), but also college students (Utsey, Chae, Brown, & Kelly, 2002). Exposure to racism and/or acculturation to a racist society also leads racism to become internalized (Butler, Tull, Chambers, & Taylor, 2002; Hipolito-Delgado, 2010; Padilla, 2001; Poupart, 2003; Taylor & Gundy, 1996). Internalized racism refers to the acceptance of inferior stereotypes about one’s racial group, which may reinforce self-fulfilling negative stereotypes and lead to self-destructive behavior (Padilla, 2001).

In addition to the mental health consequences of being exposed to and internalizing racism, undocumented young adults may experience mental health issues—such as depression, anxiety, stress, and feelings of hopelessness—related to a fear of deportation, financial struggles, and other issues related to their undocumented immigration status (Abrego, 2006; Contreras, 2009; Diaz-Strong et al., 2011; Garcia & Tierney, 2011; Hernandez, Hernandez, Gadson, Huftalin, Ortiz, White, & Yocum-Gaffney, 2010; Perez et al., 2011). Such mental health issues may have an effect on
undocumented college students’ academic motivation and achievement (Abrego, 2006; Garcia & Tierney, 2011). Additionally, while feeling included is an important factor of undocumented college student success (Pérez Huber, 2009), many undocumented college students feel excluded from their higher education institutions and society at large (Garcia & Tierney, 2011; Pérez Huber, 2009; Perry, 2006).

Given this context, for undocumented students to go to college, they need to be highly resourceful and exceptionally motivated—and that might not be enough (Diaz-Strong et al., 2011). Research has shown that undocumented students also need an environment that supports them (Pérez Huber, 2009). More specifically, environmental social supports lead to greater academic resilience and success for undocumented students (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005; Perez et al., 2009). Research into other racially or economically underrepresented population groups in secondary and higher education suggests that participation in student organizations and activism, in particular, have had numerous benefits that positively impact the overall experiences of those students (Harper & Quay, 2007; Taines, 2012). Additionally, research into the general population of students has demonstrated that participation in activist organizations has provided numerous positive psychological benefits (Harré, 2007; Morsillo & Prilleltensky, 2007; Pancer et al., 2007; Prilleltensky, 2003; Watts & Flanagan, 2007). Research is needed to similarly investigate the effects of participating in student activist groups for undocumented students, and whether participation in immigration activism may provide a supportive environment to undocumented students in an otherwise hostile society. If undocumented students experience similar benefits from participating in
activist groups as their documented peers, than such participation could be used as a strategy to support undocumented students’ attainment of higher education—which could be beneficial to undocumented students, institutions of higher education, and the nation as a whole.

Additionally, research into the higher education of undocumented students has primarily been located in California, Texas, Washington, North Carolina, and Illinois and has consisted primarily of Mexican-American participants. The Washington Metropolitan Region—encompassing Washington, D.C., as well as regions of Maryland and Virginia—is largely understudied, by contrast. Yet the Washington area is a vibrant and diverse area, home to about 24,000 undocumented young adults (Immigration Policy Center, 2012b). Additionally, the undocumented population in the Washington area is unique in that it is primarily made up of Central American, South American, and Asian-American immigrants—as opposed to Mexican-American immigrants (Immigration Policy Center, 2012b). Thus, this study could have a secondary benefit of providing a glimpse into the experiences of undocumented students in this region. This could be particularly beneficial to both researchers and practitioners who work with undocumented students in the Washington area.

As described above, this study could help secondary and higher education administrators, students services and student affairs professionals—including counselors, career advisors, admissions officers, academic support services personnel, campus diversity and inclusion personnel, and others—as well as teachers and faculty, to better understand how to serve this often hidden population of students. Administrators,
personnel, and educators could use this research to better understand how secondary schools and higher education institutions may welcome immigration activism on campus and take specific positions regarding the immigration debate as ways to support undocumented students. Also, by understanding how participation in immigration activism supports undocumented students, secondary and higher education professionals can gain further insight about the support that is most needed by undocumented students, in order to provide that support through other types of school or campus programming and services.

Higher education administrators may also be particularly interested in how participation in activist organizations affects undocumented students—especially if participation in activism in any way contributes to the enrollment and retention of undocumented students. Colleges have become increasingly concerned with retention rates, due to federal and state accountability laws requiring colleges to report data demonstrating that students are completing degrees within specific time periods (Seidman, 2005). Many colleges are also concerned about enrolling economically and ethnically diverse students—or, more generally, students from lower-income families and students of color. Research shows that there are positive educational and developmental effects of racial diversity on college campuses (Chang, 2001; Hu & Kuh, 2003). Additionally, based on Pew Research’s (2007) poll results showing that 70% of the U.S. public favors affirmative action programs for jobs and education, the U.S. public favors enrolling more racially and ethnically diverse students in college. Perhaps reflecting these trends in public opinion, *U.S. News and World Report* (2013a, 2013b), which ranks
colleges annually, has measures for both economic diversity and ethnic diversity on college campuses. Since most undocumented students come from lower-income families (Diaz-Strong et al., 2011), and approximately 96% of all undocumented students are of Latin American, Asian, or African origin (Immigration Policy Center, 2012a), undocumented students would fit both economic and ethnic diversity criteria. Research into the needs and experiences of undocumented college students could help colleges meet their enrollment and recruitment goals—and could potentially lead to more effective recruitment efforts and better informed high school-to-college transition programs, which cater to historically underrepresented groups on campuses, including undocumented students.
Chapter Two: Conceptual Framework

There has been little scholarship on the effects of participating in immigration activism on undocumented students. Of the research that exists about undocumented student activists, information about the effects of participating in immigration activism is a byproduct of the study, not findings supporting a central research question. Nevertheless, this information is critical to establishing the foundation of my study and will be discussed in detail below. In addition, research into undocumented college students more broadly also provides some hints as to the effects of participating in activism. Finally, research into the effects of participating in activism on young adults from other population groups who have been traditionally underrepresented in higher education—including people of color and those with low socioeconomic status—as well as young adults from the general population, also provide some hints as to the benefits of undocumented students participating in immigration activism. In this chapter I will review the most relevant studies in each of these categories and discuss how they inform my study.

Research on Undocumented Student Activists

Research on undocumented student activists identified in this review suggests that participating in immigration activism has led undocumented students in higher education to develop positive self-conceptions (Anguiano, 2011; Corrunker, 2012; Negrón-
Gonzales, 2013); experience feelings of belonging (S.I.N. Collective, 2007; Valdivia & Valdivia, 2014); develop feelings of empowerment and political agency (Anguiano, 2011; Corrunker, 2012; Galindo, 2012; Morales et al., 2011); receive opportunities for political and civic development (Hinton, 2015; Morales et al., 2011; S.I.N. Collective, 2007); and access resources for supporting higher education attainment (S.I.N. Collective, 2007; Valdivia & Valdivia, 2014). In addition, previous research has also demonstrated that undocumented students who participated in activism experienced higher levels of academic achievement than their non-activist peers (Perez et al., 2010). Each of these possible effects of participating in immigration activism is discussed in further detail below.

As described in Chapter One, many undocumented students experience shame about their undocumented immigration status (Corrunker, 2012; Negrón-Gonzales, 2013), which reflects their internalization of racism and xenophobia from the broader society (Hipolito-Delgado; Padilla, 2001). Research into undocumented students who participate in immigration activism suggests that participation in immigration activism may help to positively construct the identity of undocumented students, improve their self-conception, and help them to overcome shame associated with their status (Anguiano, 2011; Corrunker, 2012; Negrón-Gonzales, 2013). More specifically, Negrón-Gonzales (2013) conducted ethnographic research investigating the development of oppositional consciousness among young undocumented activists and found that when undocumented students engaged with other undocumented students in community-building efforts, they began to overcome their fear and shame about their undocumented
status conferred on them by society. She further explained that engaging in activism propelled undocumented youth to take pride in the undocumented identity and provided undocumented students with opportunities for personal transformation. Corrunker (2012) and Anguiano (2011) both analyzed tactics used in immigration activism, which provided insights about how participation in immigration activism may help undocumented students develop positive self-conceptions. Both of their findings pointed to the “coming out” strategy used by the movement—or the self-disclosure of undocumented status—as enabling undocumented students to cast aside fear and shame associated with hiding their status (Anguiano, 2011; Corrunker, 2012). Anguiano further noted that in early stages of the movement, before self-disclosure of undocumented status was used as a strategy, lobbying and organizing efforts were focused on creating a positive identity of the undocumented student—in order to counter negative depictions of undocumented immigrants conveyed through the media (Anguiano, 2011). Overall, these different tactics help to explain how participation in immigration activism helps undocumented students develop positive self-conceptions.

Limited research suggests that participating in immigration activism may also help undocumented students cultivate feelings of belonging—including the feeling that they are no longer alone (S.I.N. Collective, 2007; Valdivia & Valdivia, 2014). More specifically, Diana Valdivia published a personal narrative about her pursuit of higher education as an undocumented student (Valdivia & Valdivia, 2014). In her narrative, she explained that before she began participating in immigration activism, she attended a social justice summit hosted by her university which led her to openly disclose her
undocumented status to a group of people and share her frustrations about the limitations she experienced as a result of her status. Two other undocumented students at the summit also disclosed their undocumented status to the group. In describing this experience, Diana Valdivia wrote, “I remember feeling a great sense of relief that I was not the only one” (p. 8). Diana’s experience disclosing her undocumented status to a group of people, some of whom are also undocumented, suggests that “coming out” can provide relief and comfort to undocumented students, particularly in the realization that they are not alone in their struggle. The personal accounts of undocumented student activists in California who are part of the Students Informing Now (S.I.N.) Collective (2007) also suggest that participating in immigration activism may help to cultivate feelings of belonging in undocumented students. More specifically, the S.I.N. Collective (2007) described their organization as “a family” in which members helped one another out and could share personal stories and open up about their undocumented status. Their use of the term “family” to describe their organization reinforces the collective nature of their organization and suggests that the organization provides a close knit environment in which individual members feel included in the group as a whole.

Research into undocumented student activism also suggests that participating in immigration activism provides undocumented students with a sense of empowerment (Anguiano, 2011; Corrunker, 2012; Morales, Herrera, & Murry, 2011) and helps undocumented students develop and express political agency (Anguiano, 2011; Corrunker, 2012; Galindo, 2012). Morales et al. (2011) investigated the resilience of undocumented students in a case study of 15 undocumented undergraduate students in the
Midwest. All but two of their participants were involved in immigrant rights advocacy. They found that the undocumented students who participated in immigration advocacy found a common purpose, self-preservation, and resiliency through their advocacy, which provided them with a sense of empowerment. In addition to the effects of participating in immigration activism cited by Morales et al. (2011) that contribute to activists’ empowerment, researchers also point to self-disclosure of undocumented status as contributing to empowerment and agency (Anguiano, 2011; Corrunker, 2012; Galindo, 2012). More specifically, Corrunker (2012) found that self-disclosure of undocumented status enabled undocumented student activists to feel “safer, stronger, and more empowered” (p. 160). Regarding agency, in particular, Corrunker (2012) and Galindo (2012) found that through public disclosure of undocumented status, undocumented student activists claimed their voice in the public arena—thereby expressing their political agency. Galindo (2012) used Rancière’s (1999) definition of agency, which he defined as “the capacity to carry out actions that challenge and interrupt the grounds of exclusion and that create sensory spaces in which those considered to be politically invisible and without voice make themselves seen and heard as political actors” (p. 594). This definition conveys the idea that by disclosing their undocumented status, undocumented students expressed their political agency by making themselves seen and heard. In addition to the public disclosure of undocumented status, Anguiano’s (2011) temporal analysis of the undocumented student rights movement also pointed to undocumented student activists’ increased personal and political agency through the use of civil disobedience tactics in support of the Dream Act, from May 2010 to December
2010 (Anguiano, 2011). During this time, Anguiano noted the politicized identity of the undocumented student became bolder and unapologetic, with some Dreamers developing a radicalized consciousness. Taken together, these studies suggest that immigration activism promotes a common purpose, self-preservation, and resiliency for undocumented student activists and provides activists with opportunities to publicly disclose their undocumented status and engage in acts of civil disobedience—which ultimately contributes to activists’ overall empowerment and political agency.

In addition to the development of empowerment and political agency, research into undocumented student activists suggests that participating in immigration activism contributes to undocumented students’ political and civic development (Hinton, 2015; Morales et al., 2011; S.I.N. Collective, 2007). More specifically, Hinton (2015) conducted a critical ethnography on the Improving Dreams Equality Access and Success (IDEAS) undocumented student support group at University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) to investigate how undocumented students engaged in the political process in the face of bureaucracy and marginalization, and how they demonstrated active citizenship through their activism. He found that the student-led organization constantly promoted leadership and responsibility for new members and that members engaged politically through protests, conversations with politicians, and organizing—in their communities and on campus. Hinton noted that the IDEAS members were more actively engaged on campus than many other students at UCLA, and argued that undocumented student activists should be considered assets to the campus community. Morales et al. (2011) also found that participating in immigration activism contributed to undocumented students’
political and civic development. More specifically, they found that undocumented student activists in their study were dedicated to fighting for the rights of immigrants for generations to come—even if they would not get to experience the benefits of a pro-immigrant policy change. Morales et al. (2011) identified this dedication as a responsibility felt by undocumented activists to fight for human rights, another facet of political and civic development. Furthermore, in the S.I.N. Collective’s (2007) published account documenting the origins of their student organization, the authors noted that the collective nature of the organization allowed undocumented members to safely engage in political activism, and that many of the members engaged in political activism for the first times in their lives through their participation in the organization. Overall, this research suggests that participating in immigration activism provides opportunities for political and civic development for undocumented students.

Research on undocumented student activists also suggests that participation in immigration activism may be a factor in undocumented students’ academic achievement. More specifically, Perez et al. (2010) conducted a survey of the civic engagement patterns of undocumented Mexican students ($n = 126$)—including those in high school or college, or those who had recently graduated—and found that of the 20% of the participants in their study who participated in political activism, those student activists had higher levels of extracurricular activities and academic awards than other undocumented students in the study. It is notable that participation in immigration activism correlates to academic success for undocumented students, though it is
important to point out that the study did not investigate whether or demonstrate that participation in immigration activism causes academic success.

Research into undocumented student activists also suggests that participation in immigration activism may help to connect undocumented students with resources, such as academic and financial support (S.I.N. Collective, 2007; Valdivia & Valdivia, 2014). More specifically, In Carolina Valdivia’s published personal narrative, she described her extensive participation in immigration activism and some of the activities that she was involved with, including, among other activities: establishing a scholarship fund for undocumented high school and college students; contributing information for undocumented students on her university’s official website; and creating an online blog which, among other information, included resources about scholarships for undocumented students as well as updates about immigration-related policies (Valdivia & Valdivia, 2014). Carolina Valdivia’s narrative suggests that an important aspect of belonging to a network of immigration activists is participating in an exchange of information and resources related to being an undocumented student, such as information about scholarships and immigration policies. Although the S.I.N. Collective’s (2007) description of their organization did not provide extensive details regarding the exchange of resources between undocumented students in their organization, they did note that members in their organization helped one another out with both financial and academic problems, suggesting that members may have exchanged resources and information to help members of the collective overcome financial and academic barriers to higher education attainment.
Overall, the findings from the scholarship on undocumented student activists suggest that there may be robust effects of participating in immigration activism for undocumented students. In the following sections, I will review research on undocumented students more broadly.

**Research on Undocumented Students in Higher Education**

Research into the mental health and academic wellbeing of undocumented college students and first-generation immigrant students has found that these students had greater academic resilience and success when they had greater environmental social supports (i.e., peer network, supportive family, and participation in school activities) (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005; Perez et al., 2009). More specifically, Perez et al. (2009) found in their study of undocumented college students ($n = 104$), that students with higher levels of environmental protective factors reported higher levels of academic resilience and success (measured in grade point average [GPA], school awards, and advanced courses) than similar students with lower levels of environmental resources. The authors defined environmental supportive factors as supportive parents, friends, and participation in school or volunteer activities. Similarly, in Dennis, Phinney, and Chuateco’s (2005) study of 100 ethnic minority first-generation college students, environmental social support was again found to contribute to academic success. More specifically, the authors found that lack of peer support was a negative predictor of college adjustment and GPA. Considering that participation in an activist group could represent a type of social or environmental support, these studies suggest that
participation in immigration activism could contribute to greater academic motivation, resilience, and success for undocumented college students.

There is also evidence to suggest that undocumented students who have social connections with other undocumented students are able to develop social capital unique to their needs as undocumented students, to ultimately support higher education attainment (Enriquez, 2011). Bourdieu (1986) described the notion of social capital in the following excerpt:

Social capital is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – or in other words, to membership in a group – which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a ‘credential’ which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word. (p. 248-249).

In other words, according to Bourdieu (1986), social capital refers to the set of relationships that one can draw upon. Additionally, Bourdieu theorized that social capital may be convertible into other forms of capital, such as economic capital (i.e., money) or cultural capital (e.g., institutional knowledge, advice). Using Bourdieu’s conception of social capital, Enriquez (2011) researched undocumented students in the Los Angeles area about their social capital and found that undocumented students were able to utilize their relationships with their undocumented peers—their social capital—to access informational resources (i.e., cultural capital) supporting their higher education attainment. In Enriquez’s study, informational resources included information about
California’s AB 540, a state law granting undocumented students with access to in-state tuition for public colleges and universities; information about scholarships for which undocumented students are eligible; and information about higher education faculty and staff that are friendly to undocumented students and knowledgeable about undocumented students’ needs. Several researchers have identified social capital as an important factor in leading to higher education attainment for undocumented students (Enriquez, 2011; Garcia & Tierney, 2011; Gonzales, 2010). Interestingly, while there is research into the social capital of undocumented students (Enriquez, 2011; Garcia & Tierney, 2011; Gonzales, 2010; Silver, 2012), there has been little to no research exploring how participation in immigration activism may contribute to the development of undocumented students’ social capital. While my study is not focused on the exchange of social capital through participation in immigration activism, studies on the social capital of undocumented students suggest that participating in immigration activism—and having opportunities to network with other undocumented students—may affect undocumented students’ higher education attainment.

**Research on the Effects of Participating in Activism**

While research into the effects of participating in immigration activism on undocumented students has been limited, research into the effects of participating in activism, generally, has been conducted on young adults from the general population as well as young adults from other population groups who have been traditionally underrepresented in higher education—people of color and those from low income groups. This research will be reviewed in greater detail in the following section.
**General population.** The work of Watts and Flanagan (2007) and Prilleltensky (2003) suggests that activism may have powerful effects on both individuals and groups—that participating in activities that address social ills improves both individual and collective wellbeing. Evans and Prilleltensky (2007) argue that engaging in activism provides young activists with an enhanced sense of meaning, purpose in life, and improved mental health.

Harré (2007) reviewed literature on activism and volunteering regarding the effects of participating in service and activism projects on youth. She found that scholars consistently pointed to feelings of belonging as an outcome. She also found that in one U.S.-based study, young campaigners who worked for extended periods of time formed strong bonds with the adults with whom they were working (Walter, 1995). Additionally, Harré found that participation in activism was psychologically stimulating for participants, leading participants to experience feelings of both euphoria and despair. As a result of the intensity of this activism, many youth campaigners remain activists for years to come, and consider activism as an important part of their identity (Harré, 2007). A further outcome of participation in activism is that participants learn new skills, and thus have increased feelings of efficacy. Integrity is also identified as a characteristic of those who participate in activism (Harré, 2007).

Morsillo and Prilleltensky (2007) conducted research on a group of predominantly White young adults, aged 16-21, who self-identified as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, and who participated in an activist project in the suburbs of Melbourne, Australia intending to combat homophobia. They found that through participation in this project, the young
adults experienced enhanced sociopolitical awareness, enhanced sense of control and social responsibility, and hopefulness about making change in the world. Additionally, they gained community participation skills and knowledge, confidence and independence, and cohesion and solidarity with other group members.

Pancer, Pratt, Hunsberger, and Alisat (2007) conducted a study of 880 Canadian students, in their last year of secondary school, in an attempt to evaluate the differences between adolescents who are active in community and political life and those who are not. The students came from families with a broad range of income levels as well as ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Over the course of the study, the students received two questionnaires—the first when they were a median age of 17.5 and the second when they were a median age of 19.5. The researchers found through their analysis that adolescents who were classified as activists had more frequent discussions with parents and peers, more advanced identity development, according to the four stages of identity development (Marcia, Waterman, Matteson, Archer, & Orlofsky, 1993), and better adjustment than uninvolved adolescents (Pancer et al., 2007).

**Traditionally underrepresented groups.** Research on youth and young adults from traditionally underrepresented groups in higher education—including people of color and/or from low income groups—found that participation in student organizations and activist undertakings led to a reduction in the experience of alienation (Taines, 2012), improved feelings of efficacy (Taines, 2012), improved cross-cultural communication (Harper & Quay, 2007), positive identity development (Lewis-Charp, Yu, Soukamneuth & Lacoe, 2003), and racial uplift (Harper & Quay). In Harper and Quay’s (2007) study
on African American students, their term “racial uplift” refers to uplifting the African American community on and off campus in terms of breaking down stereotypes and barriers and aiding other African American students (pp. 134-135). Further, researchers who developed a student retention model for underrepresented populations in higher education found that important criteria to aid in student retention included opportunities for students to build social networks, cultivate skills, and challenge institutional norms (Maldonado, Rhoads, & Buenavista, 2005), which may be aspects found in participating in activism.

In 1999, the Ford Foundation funded the Youth Leadership Development Initiative (YLDI), a collaborative involving 12 community-based activist organizations and the Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development, as part of an initiative to learn about civic activism as a factor in youth development. The 12 organizations that were selected addressed a range of social issues and served students of color, students from low income groups, and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer youth. Many of the youth were considered “vulnerable” or “marginalized” because they did not have ready access to mainstream institutions or programming for a variety of factors, including discrimination according to race and class (Lewis-Charp et al., 2003). The average age of the youth who were served by the YLDI organizations was 16, however, some organizations had youth in their early 20s. In a two-year evaluation of the YLDI collaborative, researchers investigated the contribution of YLDI projects on positive youth development outcomes, including the projects’ effect on identity development and the ability of youth participants to engage in positive social change and
civic life, among other outcomes. Findings from this research suggest that specific organizational practices contributed to positive identity development, in terms of ethnic, racial, or sexual identity (Lewis-Charp et al., 2003). Specific practices that contributed to positive identity development included: active engagement of community adults as mentors; celebration of culture and identity through art, dance, spirituality, and other forms of expression; critical education on the history of ethnic, racial, and/or sexual identity groups; workshops on issues of power and oppression; and support groups (Lewis-Charp et al., 2003, p. ES-3). These findings suggest that activism that includes the practices identified may contribute to positive identity development for students from vulnerable groups, such as students with undocumented immigration status.

Taines (2012) conducted a study on high school activism with 13 predominantly African American low and middle income youth from an urban area in the Midwest. She interviewed student activists over a two-year period and found that participating in high school youth activism reduced feelings of alienation among most of the participants. Further, the majority of her participants (9 out of 13) developed feelings of efficacy about their ability to influence school change. While there is no implication that this phenomenon would transfer to a new context—such as undocumented students engaging in activism at the college-level—it is possible that participation in activism could contribute to a reduction in alienation for undocumented students in higher education. The notion of alienation is particularly interesting in the context of undocumented students, considering how many undocumented students do not disclose their immigration status to their peers, and so may experience alienation and exclusion from
both their higher education institutions and from society at large (Garcia & Tierney, 2011; Hernandez et al., 2010).

Maldonado, Rhoads, and Buenavista (2005) investigated student departure and retention in higher education for predominantly middle and working class students of color at the University of California, Berkeley and the University of Wisconsin, Madison. The purpose of their study was to come up with a theoretical framework to improve retention. Drawing on theories derived from the work of Pierre Bourdieu, Frantz Fanon, and Paulo Freire, and two case studies, they argued that effective models for student retention should emphasize the development of skills, knowledge, and social networks; build community ties and commitments; and challenge social and institutional norms. This has potential implications for the role that activist groups may play on campus. Specifically, if activist organizations also possess some of the criteria established in this model—and there is some suggestion that they do (Hinton, 2015; Morales et al., 2011; S.I.N. Collective, 2007)—it is possible that they will also contribute to student retention of underrepresented groups in higher education.

Related to this topic, there is also a body of literature that examines identity formation of underrepresented groups in higher education, which may have implications for the identity formation of undocumented students, and how participation in activism may contribute that formation. Harper and Quay (2007) conducted interviews with African American male student leaders at six predominantly White universities. They found that participation in student organizations—both predominantly Black and more “mainstream” organizations—provided opportunities for identity expression and
development. Through participation in student organizations, the participants acquired cross-cultural communication skills and pursued social justice endeavors. Further, the student organizations were used as spaces for racial uplift—or for breaking down stereotypes and barriers and aiding other African American students. If undocumented student activist groups provide similar functions for the students who participate in such groups, this may also lead to the strengthening of identity and the acquisition of critical skills.

**Conclusion**

In summary, the literature suggests that adolescents’ and young adults’ participation in activism may help their overall wellbeing and contribute to their social-emotional development—particularly related to positive identity development, as well as feelings of efficacy and belonging. In addition, the literature suggests that participating in immigration activism may provide undocumented students, specifically, with opportunities to cultivate political agency and to build social capital. The development of social capital, in particular, may ultimately lead undocumented students to acquire financial and informational resources to support college attainment. Overall these effects could contribute to higher education attainment for undocumented students and provide them with fulfilling academic experiences and opportunities for personal development.
Chapter Three: Methods

In order to investigate the effects of participation in immigration activism on undocumented students in higher education, I conducted a qualitative study for my dissertation on this topic. In this study, I conducted nine in-depth interviews with undocumented student activists from the Washington Metropolitan Region. I used a Grounded Theory approach (Charmaz, 2003; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998) to code and categorize the data from the interview transcripts, and then organized the data into narrative profiles for selected participants in order to bring to life the interrelatedness of different categories for individual participants. The specific methods that I used to conduct my research are detailed in the following chapter.

Research Goals

As stated in Chapter 1, when I initially began my research, I did not intend to focus on the effects of participating in immigration activism on undocumented students in higher education. More specifically, I began my research looking at factors that contribute to undocumented students’ pursuit of higher education. I conducted a short pilot study with three undocumented college students, two of whom happened to be immigration activists. I conducted in-depth interviews with each participant that prompted the participants with questions about their academic, extracurricular, and personal lives. What I found was that of the three undocumented students that I
interviewed, the two activists seemed to have a much more positive outlook about their future than the non-activist. Additionally, the two activists also credited their participation in different immigration activist organizations as supporting them in various ways—related to their self-concept, their agency, their ability to network, their knowledge about scholarships applicable to undocumented students, and other ways. The non-activist did not identify any similar organizations or structures that provided the same kind of support to her. I began to think that immigration activism served as an important support structure for undocumented students and identified this topic as one worthy of investigation. As discussed in Chapter 2, I looked to the literature to identify if there was any research documenting the effects of participating in immigration activism on undocumented students. Although I found no studies that specifically investigated this question, there were a few studies on undocumented student activists more generally that noted, as a byproduct of the study, effects of participating in activism. The findings of those studies suggest that there may be numerous benefits to participating in immigration activism for undocumented students—related to the exchange of social capital, the cultivation of political agency, an improved self-concept, and other effects. Additionally, research into both the general population and other underrepresented groups in higher education suggests that participating in activism has powerful effects for young adults. To investigate this topic further, I conducted a qualitative study to learn about how participation in immigration activism affected undocumented students in higher education.
Undocumented students have unique needs, related to their legal status and the stigma that many in the U.S. associate with undocumented immigration. The findings of my pilot study and the literature suggest that participating in immigration activism may provide unique benefits to undocumented students, which may impact their higher education experiences. As such, I wanted to learn what these benefits are, and to what degree these benefits impact the lives of undocumented students. And if there are benefits, I wanted to learn what it is about activism, specifically, that leads to these benefits.

**Research Questions**

The research questions guiding my study are as follows:

1. What are the effects of participating in immigration activism for undocumented students in higher education?
   a. What is the nature of these effects – psychological, social, academic, or other?
   b. How does activism affect these students? Is it the connection to an organization, the goal of the activism, or some other aspect?

**Research Site**

The location where I conducted my research is the Washington, D.C. Metropolitan Region, an area of the U.S. with a large and diverse population of undocumented immigrants. I have defined the Washington Metropolitan Region as Virginia Congressional Districts 10, 8, 11; the Washington, D.C. District; and Maryland Congressional Districts 4, 8, 5—which covers the following cities and counties: Loudon,
Prince William, Manassas, Manassas Park, Arlington, Alexandria, Falls Church, Fairfax, Washington, D.C., Prince George’s, Montgomery, Charles, and St. Mary’s. Using the Immigration Policy Center’s (2012b) population estimate broken down by congressional district, I added the totals from the districts named above to calculate a total of 24,170 undocumented children and young adults living in this metropolitan region. In total, there are an estimated 1.7 million undocumented young adults in the U.S. To better contextualize the number of undocumented students in the Washington Metropolitan Region, if this region was a state, with 24,170 undocumented students, it would be the 12th most populous state for undocumented students in the country (Immigration Policy Center, 2012a). In addition to this sizable number, the demographic makeup of undocumented students in this region is different from the country as a whole. Of this population, an estimated 3,190 are originally from Mexico; 10,830 are originally from North and Central America (other than Mexico); 4,730 are from South America; 4,030 are from Asia; 550 are from Europe; and 1,820 are from other regions. In comparison with the nation as a whole, the Washington, D.C. Metropolitan Region has a higher proportion of undocumented immigrants from Central America, South America, and Asia than from Mexico, which is overall the number one sending country for undocumented immigrants (Hoefer et al., 2010). The sizable population and unique demographic makeup of undocumented students in this region justifies the significance of studying this regional population.

**Participant Selection**

I selected participants for my study based on the following requirements:
1. The participants had to live in the Washington Metropolitan Region. Since there is a dearth of research into the undocumented population in this area, I intentionally sought out participants living in this region. I did make one exception for a participant who had just recently moved to New York, but whose primary experiences as an undocumented student and activist took place in this region.

2. The participants had to participate in an immigration activist organization on a somewhat regular basis. Participation in such an organization could include attending meetings or activities; in-person or online communications; joining in on a variety of immigration activist events, such as marches or rallies, lobbying efforts, or other events attempting to advocate on behalf of undocumented immigrants; or any mentoring activities to support other members of the organization.

3. The participants had to be currently enrolled in a 2-year or 4-year college, intending to enroll in the next year, or had to have left such an institution within the last three years.

4. The participants had to be between 18 and 29 years old at the time of the interview.

5. Although this was not an official delimitation, I aimed to interview a diverse selection of participants, in terms of gender, country of origin, race, and ethnicity.
I found all of my participants using snowball sampling. There were two key individuals that I met who introduced me to my participants. The first was an older undocumented activist who was a keynote speaker at an immigration event I attended in the Washington Metropolitan Region. Following the event, I spoke with her and told her about my research interests. She told me to email her and she said she would let me know if any of her contacts would be interested in meeting me. I followed up with her and she connected me to my first participant, Amanda, who ended up connecting me to two more participants, Daniela and Lizeth. Those participants connected me to additional participants as well. Another key individual that I met who introduced me to a participant was a fellow education researcher who had recently completed a study on undocumented students. She reached out to the participants in her study to see if any would be willing to speak to me. One participant, Andrea, volunteered to do so. Although Andrea did not have many close ties with other undocumented immigrants, and so did not connect me to any other participants, she went to the same college as some of the other participants in the study and attended university-based immigration events with them. She also knew the first key individual who introduced me to my first participant. Ultimately, all of my participants were interconnected in the same broader activist network. *Figure 1* shows the relationships between different participants.
By using snowball sampling to find new participants, my research relationships were based on someone else vouching for me, and on participants believing in my study and wanting to help me with my research. I only met new participants through a mutual connection, and as such, it is likely that new participants began their interactions with me
with the expectation that I am an ally, and am trustworthy. As such, I have attempted to
honor my research relationships by being transparent with the participants about my
objectives, allowing opportunities for participants to co-construct research findings, and
ensuring the participants’ confidentiality.

In total, I interviewed 9 participants in this study from the Washington
Metropolitan Region, as documented in Table 1.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Country of Origin</th>
<th>Type of higher education institution</th>
<th>Level of Participation in Activism</th>
<th>Type of Participation</th>
<th>Type of immigration activist organization(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amanda*</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Bolivia</td>
<td>2-year</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Leadership role</td>
<td>Dream Alliance*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniela*</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Colombia</td>
<td>4-year</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Leads an organization</td>
<td>Dream Alliance*, University Dreamers*, and We Are Dreamers*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lizeth*</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Bolivia</td>
<td>2-year</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Founded and leads an organization</td>
<td>Dream Alliance* and We Are Dreamers*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrea*</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Honduras</td>
<td>4-year</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Occasional participant</td>
<td>University Dreamers* and Dream Alliance*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oscar*</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>2-year</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Leadership role</td>
<td>Dream Alliance*, We Are Dreamers*, and Education First*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erwan*</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>4-year</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Founded an organization</td>
<td>College Dreamers*, Safe Haven*, and United We Dream</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The participants in this study described different immigration activist organizations in the Washington, D.C. Metropolitan Region with which they are associated. These immigration organizations include those that are dedicated specifically to activism for immigration reform as well as those that are dedicated to providing support to undocumented students. The organizations referred to in this study are described in Table 2. The names of small organizations will not be used to protect the identities of participants.

Table 2
Profile of Immigration Organizations Referred to by Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name/Type of Organization</th>
<th>Purpose of Organization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dream Alliance*</td>
<td>Immigration advocacy/activism at the state level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University Dreamers*</td>
<td>Immigration advocacy/activism in the campus community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College Dreamers*</td>
<td>Immigration advocacy/activism in the campus community</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
We Are Dreamers*  Programmatic support for undocumented students (e.g., mentoring) with an advocacy/activist component for state-level immigration reform.

Education First*  Programmatic support for Latino students, including Latino undocumented students

Safe Haven*  Programmatic support for immigrants with an advocacy/activist component for state-level immigration reform.

Center for Social Justice*  Community-based social justice organization that addresses many social issues, including immigrant rights.

United We Dream (large, national organization with local affiliates)  Immigration advocacy/activism for reform of federal and state immigration laws.

*pseudoynyn

Data Collection

I chose to pursue a qualitative study for a number of reasons. This topic has been researched minimally and so a qualitative study, which can be exploratory in nature, was an appropriate fit. Additionally, from a practical standpoint, it would have been difficult to access a large enough number of undocumented student activists to merit a quantitative study. Finally, and most importantly, I set out to collect rich data from participants about how their activism affects them. Qualitative research was most appropriate for generating this kind of rich data, as well as data about meaning, process, and context.

I interviewed nine undocumented student activists (the first two participants were also part of the pilot study). The interviews, on average, lasted between 1 and 2 hours in length and were audio recorded. All participants were informed about the study and asked to consent to participate (see Appendix B for informed consent form). I began the
interviews by collecting standard demographic data about the participants and then 
moved on to semi-structured interview questions to learn more about the participants’ 
personal and educational experiences as undocumented students, the role that activism 
has played in their personal and academic lives, and how activism has affected them (see 
Appendix A for interview guide). The pilot study that I conducted helped me to refine the 
terview guide significantly.

I conducted the interviews in private rooms and spaces—study rooms in 
university and community libraries, a conference room at an apartment complex, a 
conference room at an office, a picnic table outside of an apartment building, and in one 
case, via Skype. Because the interviews were on such a personal—and potentially 
emotional topic, I wanted the participants to feel as comfortable as possible discussing 
personal stories. In addition, I set out to identify private rooms and spaces that were 
convenient locations for the participants, since most of the participants did not have a 
driver’s license or a car.

Data Analysis

My analysis began informally, while I conducted the interviews. During each 
interview, I took notes. Then, immediately following each interview, I wrote down initial 
thoughts and observations about the participants and the interview. Next, I transcribed all 
of the interviews, and continued to write down my thoughts on the interview in short 
memos, which included ideas about coding categories. Once I finished transcribing, I 
used a Grounded Theory approach (Charmaz, 2003; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & 
Corbin, 1990, 1998) to inductively code each interview, using codes that I had identified
previously while transcribing the interviews, as well new codes—all of which related to my research questions or that stood out to me for some reason. I used both emic and etic codes, depending on the data; however, I attempted to use emic codes as much as possible in order to preserve the participants’ own language. I coded a first interview, then made a long list of codes for that interview, and then abstracted and reduced these codes in order to produce broader categories. I moved on to the next interview and tried to approach it with fresh eyes, but found that some of the categories that I had identified for the previous interview seemed to relate to the second interview as well. I took note of this whenever it occurred, while also searching for new codes. After taking note of new codes, and distilling those codes into broader categories, I added the new categories to an ongoing list of categories. Most of these categories took on an etic quality, as they represented my attempt to connect the participants’ words to the research questions.

Although I continued to find new codes and categories as I analyzed each of the interviews, I found that many of the categories identified in the first and second interview applied to the remaining interviews as well. As I went through each interview, I questioned whether my understanding of codes and categories was consistent across the interviews or whether it was evolving with each interview. After identifying codes and categories for the last interview, I decided to spot check my interpretation of categories for the first two interviews to ensure that the categories that I first identified still applied. All of the initial categories that I identified in the first two interviews still applied to those interviews. Additionally, I also checked the first several interviews to see if the categories
that were identified in later interviews applied to those earlier interviews as well. I found that in some cases they did apply, but in most cases they did not apply.

There were some instances in which I identified a category only included data from one participant. For example, the category of “Civic Duty” only includes data from Jonathan’s interview. Considering that there were just nine participants in this study, I included distinct categories of interview data that emerged from even just one participant, as such findings could provide insight about how participating in immigration activism affects the broader population of undocumented immigrants.

Through the process of coding and categorizing, I also thought about how the categories related to one another. In many cases, there was overlap between categories, and I took note of this whenever I observed it. For some categories, there was so much overlap that it was difficult to identify the boundaries of the categories—and to determine that those categories were indeed unique categories and not part of the same category. To address this, I further refined and consolidated categories and determined delimitations for categories.

While coding and categorizing, I also organized and refined the data. For each category that I identified, I selected the quotes from each interview that best represented each distinct category and listed the quotes under the category. I sought quotes that represented not only what was common across participants, but also the diversity and range of the category—to ensure diversity within a category (Maxwell, 2005). In many cases I identified longer quotes or excerpts that served as vignettes (Seidman, 2006) that not only illustrated the category, but also established the context in which the category
emerged. Being able to examine the context for a quote or excerpt enhanced my understanding of the diversity within a category. Ultimately, organizing the quotes according to each category effectively facilitated a comparison of the quotes for a category across all participants and demonstrated the rich variability that existed within a category.

In addition, order to bring to life the interrelatedness of different categories for individual participants, I identified three different participants whose interview narratives illuminated the interrelatedness of the different categories. I carefully selected quotes that represented the different categories and which told a story, with a beginning, middle, and end. Then, I linked together these quotes with my own interpretations and transitions to create narrative profiles inspired by Seidman’s (2006) notion of a profile. Seidman defines a profile as a narrative constructed out of a participant’s own words—assembled by the researcher—which has a beginning, middle and end, and some sense of conflict and resolution. Seidman argues that the structure of a story is effective for making sense of the data—for finding coherence in the data and expressing that coherence. I did not create profiles exactly as Seidman has described, as I found it necessary to use my own words to link different excerpts of the participant’s words together. Nevertheless, I did assemble the participants’ words together into a coherent narrative to show both conflict and resolution, to ultimately demonstrate the interrelatedness of the different categories. Seidman (2006) suggests that since profiles are crafted out of the participant’s words, they are windows into participants’ consciousness. Because my research is focused on participants describing their experiences in immigration activism, their perceptions are
very important to me. Thus, a data organizing strategy that enhances my ability to understand the interior lives of my participants is an ideal way to make sense of the data.

By organizing the data according to the categories—and identifying the diversity within those categories for different participants—and then linking some of the data together in narrative profiles for selected individual participants, I combined both categorizing and connecting analytical strategies (Maxwell & Miller, 2008). Using both categorizing and connecting strategies in tandem served to add dimension to and enrich my understanding of the data.

**Validity**

As described earlier in the section on researcher identity, I have a close relationship to my topic of study, and such subjectivity could raise validity issues in the study. More specifically, my role as an activist ally could have affected the creation of my interview guide, my interactions with participants during interviews, and my analysis of the data—each of which could have caused validity threats to my findings.

In order to help ensure that my interview questions did not lead participants to specific answers, I carefully checked the wording of each question to determine if a multiplicity of answers would be acceptable. Additionally, I asked the Chair of my dissertation committee to review my interview guide, as well (Appendix A). Finally, I tried to be reflective during the interview process about whether any of the questions in the interview guide seemed to lead participants to respond in a certain way. I did not find that to be the case.
In terms of my conduct during interviews, I was highly reflective about my interactions with participants during interviews and wrote short memos following each interview regarding my verbal and nonverbal communication with participants. In writing these memos, I attempted to analyze whether my communication with the participants may have caused reactivity (Maxwell, 2005) in the participants. More than anything, I found that I displayed signs of empathy to the participants, by nodding in agreement or expressing concern when they described a situation that was difficult for them to handle. On two occasions, the participants began to cry during interviews, which caused me to cry as well. Although my empathetic behavior was driven by a genuine desire to be supportive of the participants, and not motivated by a desire to help ensure validity in my study, I believe that my display of empathy helped the participants to see me as an ally, which enhanced their level of comfort in sharing their stories with me. Overall, writing reflective memos about my verbal and nonverbal communication with participants helped to enhance what Lincoln and Guba (1986) refer to as “authenticity.” Lincoln and Guba (1986) argue that researchers should be reflexive—aware of their own perspectives and the perspectives of others—and writing these memos was one way to enhance reflexivity and authenticity.

Another potential threat to validity during the interview was that the participants may not have been totally honest in their responses to my questions because they did not feel comfortable disclosing certain personal—yet relevant—details. In order to mitigate this threat to validity, I made my best attempt to ensure that the interviews were held in private and comfortable locations, and reminded participants that their responses would
be kept confidential and that their identities would be kept anonymous. As described previously, I believe that empathetic verbal and nonverbal communication cues also helped the participants to feel comfortable sharing personal details in the interview.

Regarding my analysis of data, I used member checking to help ensure that my interpretations of the participants’ words were valid (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Specifically, I shared with the participants my written interpretations of excerpts from their interviews and, as applicable, their participant profiles, and then had 30-minute phone calls with the participants to discuss their reactions to my findings. During the phone calls, I confirmed with the participants that their words matched what they had intended and, as applicable, that the narrative profiles reflected the participants’ experiences (Polkinghorne, 2007). Seven out of nine participants—including Daniela, Amanda, Samuel, Oscar, Erwan, Jonathan, and Andrea—participated in member checking. Lizeth and Rosa did not respond to my invitation to participate in member checking, which was possibly related to the fact that I was not ready to invite the participants to help with member checking until approximately 1 ½ to 2 years following the interviews. The participants who did help with member checking were all in agreement with my interpretations. One participant noted that while my interpretations were correct, she was surprised at how she used to feel about particular political issues, and was reminded of how easily upset or offended she used to feel. Another participant said that he must have been nervous during the interview since he used “like” and “you know” so frequently. Overall, of the participants who did help with member checking, I
believe that they felt empowered to be active participants in the research process—rather than passive objects of study.

In addition to working with participants to reduce threats to validity, I also collected rich data and searched for discrepant and negative cases, as suggested by Maxwell (2005). More specifically, when identifying interview excerpts that illustrated categories, I sought out rich interview excerpts that included contextual elements—to provide the reader with greater ability to evaluate my interpretations. Additionally, while all of the participants described how participation in immigration activism had benefited them in various ways, I also sought to determine if participation in immigration activism had negatively impacted the participants. One participant, Lizeth, described a decline in her grades as a result of her participation in immigration activism, which I noted in my findings. Additionally, when conducting the member checking phone calls, I also confirmed with the participants whether or not they believed that their participation in immigration activism had impacted them in the ways described, or whether there were other factors. Of the seven participants who helped with member checking, all seven participants said that they believed that activism had helped them in the various ways discussed in my findings.

**Ethical Considerations**

In terms of ethics, I attempted to place my participants at the center of my concerns, as described by Luttrell (2010) and Maxwell (2013). In doing so, I kept the wellbeing of my participants in the foreground of all of my decisions made in the research process: from my research questions, interview guide, participant and site
selection, research relationships, data collection, and data analysis. Although it is important to maintain ethical standards that respect participants in all research, I felt the need to be extra vigilant in this particular study since I worked with a vulnerable population. For example, while all researchers must be very careful about keeping their participants’ identities confidential, and so must guard their data carefully and use pseudonyms and other measures, this is particularly important when working with undocumented immigrants. If such information was ever released it could not only be a major violation of privacy, but it could also lead to the detention and deportation of these participants—and their families. As such, I did not ask my participants to state their names in the interviews, and invited them to use pseudonyms throughout all of their communications with me if they preferred to do so (see Appendix B). Additionally, because undocumented immigrants are an economically, politically, and—in many cases—socially marginalized group in the U.S., I was careful that my own research decisions did not take advantage of this marginalization, or in any way further this marginalization. Like Luttrell (2010), I set out to conduct research that not only respected my participants, but also that empowered them.
Chapter Four: Overview of Findings

This chapter presents the themes that emerged across the interviews related to perceived effects of participating in immigration activism. The findings presented here were generated from the Grounded Theory data analysis strategy described in Chapter 3. Overall, the participants primarily identified positive effects—or benefits—to participating in activism. These benefits may be grouped into the following categories: development of social capital; academic development; political development; and social-emotional development. Each of these categories will be discussed in greater detail below. Pseudonyms are used for names of participants, other individuals that they reference, schools, and small or local organizations, in order to protect the anonymity of participants and their respective communities.

Development of Social Capital

According to Bourdieu (1986), social capital refers to the set of relationships that one can draw upon, which may ultimately be convertible into other forms of capital, such as economic capital (i.e., money), or cultural capital (e.g., institutional knowledge, advice). All of the participants in this study explained how, through their activist work, they developed relationships with high-profile figures, professionals from organizations that support undocumented students, and other undocumented student activists—which ultimately led them to acquire economic and informational resources.
One form of social capital that one of the participants in this study developed was interactions with high-profile politicians. In describing her work with a state-wide immigration activist organization, Daniela explained how her lobbying efforts led to interactions with Virginia-based politicians: “I’m actually…invited to a brunch this Saturday with Senator Mark Warner. So he’s gonna be there, and I have met people like Tim Kaine… We do talk to a lot of higher power politicians and everything.” In addition to encounters with politicians, immigration activist work also led Daniela to meet Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook, and discuss immigration reform with him. Overall, networking with high-profile figures likely provided the least amount of economic and informational resources of the various types of social capital referenced by participants. More specifically, this form of social capital did not directly provide Daniela with specific information or resources, however it is possible that her interactions with high-profile figures could provide her with greater clout, particularly if she were to openly share information about those interactions with others—in job or internship interviews, in scholarships or graduate school application essays, or other venues. If this were to occur, improved clout could provide Daniela with opportunities to acquire economic or cultural capital, such as offers of jobs, scholarships, internships, or admissions to universities.

Although interactions with high-profile politicians and other public figures is a form of social capital that could benefit anyone—not just undocumented student activists—most of the other forms of social capital identified in this study were specific to the needs of undocumented students in higher education. For example, five of the participants described how their participation in immigration activism led them to
network with professionals from different community organizations that support undocumented students. The ability to network with these particular professionals is a form of social capital that uniquely benefits undocumented students, as these professionals ultimately offered to connect the participants to resources to support their needs. For example, Amanda described how through her activist work, she met one of her county’s school board members who introduced her to professionals from Education First, an organization that provides scholarships, tutoring, and college preparation mentoring for Latino/a students in the broader community. She explained,

Because I’ve been volunteering, I’ve met a lot of people… You know Rosa Gonzalez [School Board Member]? …She has really helped a lot in that community… actually working really close to a lot of organizations, with… Education First. So I meet a lot of people that… I can talk to them and they say if you need help in anything, I can email them.

Similarly, Jonathan’s volunteer work at We Are Dreamers also provided him with networking opportunities with adults at the organization that have led to him learning about internships. He described,

As a tutor, I am also still in connection with We Are Dreamers, whether it be Cecilia Morales [the director of the mentoring program] or any other adults there. There has sort of been the connection for me to stay involved not only in terms of advocacy work but also in connections of career paths. For example, the internship… I found it out through Cecilia. She… told me about the organization
and I looked them up and that is how I learned about the internship… So just the networking that I have developed at We Are Dreamers as a mentor is crucial.

In his statement, Jonathan acknowledged the importance of the networking opportunities that have been made available to him through his participation in immigration advocacy organizations, which demonstrates his savvy for recognizing opportunities to increase social capital.

Beyond networking with professionals from community organizations, however, participation in immigration activism led all of the participants to network with other undocumented students, a form of social capital that ultimately provided the most extensive economic and informational resources referenced by the participants in this study. More specifically, all of the participants in this study cited their ability to access informational and economic resources supporting their attainment of higher education through connections with other undocumented student activists. The informational and economic resources accessed through other undocumented students included: information about scholarships and internships open to undocumented students; financial support for college; information about applying to college as an undocumented student, and legal information supporting undocumented students and their families. Examples of how interactions with other undocumented students ultimately led to these types of informational and economic resources will be discussed in further detail below.

**Scholarships and internships.** Participation in immigration activism led six of the undocumented student activists in this study to learn about scholarships that cater specifically to undocumented students. Lizeth describes how her organization, We Are
Dreamers, not only conducted research to develop a database of scholarships available for undocumented students—to benefit undocumented students in the community—but she herself also benefited from one of these scholarships, as she described in the following excerpt:

That first year we began We Are Dreamers, aside from doing fundraising, we were looking into doing scholarships. We had… I think we had an intern specifically looking at scholarships for a database, to create this database of scholarships. So we found this one database—it was already created. And there was this new scholarship… specifically for undocumented—Dream leaders—is what they would call them… and I was actually able to get it… That was 5,000 dollars… I wouldn’t have had those open doors for me if I wasn’t involved.

As a result of being awarded the Dream leader scholarship, Lizeth was nearly able to pay for full-time, out-of-state tuition at her community college.

As a requirement of the Dream leaders scholarship that Lizeth was awarded, Lizeth had to intern at different organizations dedicated to progressive causes. For each of the three years that she received the scholarship, she interned at Education First, the National Education Association, and the Federation of Labor Organizations (AFL-CIO).

These internships represent a form of cultural capital that Lizeth ultimately developed as a result of her connections to the immigration activist network. Lizeth’s internships provided her with professional skills to ultimately supplement her résumé. Lizeth explained that some of the professional skills that she acquired in her first year interning at Education First in the following excerpt:
That was the first door that was opened for an internship position and I was getting paid for it to go to school. So I got a lot of skills with answering phones; I was…it’s hard to pick up a phone and say, “How can I help you?” even though it sounds easy. But I got that and I actually did a lot of work in Spanish, which was great for me.

Lizeth believed that the experience that she acquired in her first summer internship helped improve her candidacy to the program during the second summer. She described, “I definitely applied all of the skills that I learned in the first summer to be able to qualify for the next summer…”

The scholarships collected and shared by We Are Dreamers, as referenced by Lizeth, benefited other participants in this study as well. Both Rosa and Jonathan also referenced We Are Dreamers’ database of scholarships in describing the benefits that they received from participating in immigration activism. Rosa stated,

I think We Are Dreamers made a database of scholarships that we could apply to. So like the senior year…the spring, they focus on scholarships and helping us filling out scholarships and essays and all that… When I applied to the scholarships I got a little bit more than one third of the tuition…

Jonathan also explained the importance of We Are Dreamers in the following quote:

We Are Dreamers gave me a lot of scholarships that I can qualify as a Dreamer. So she sort of helped me and the other mentees find those scholarships that we qualified for… So We Are Dreamers allows mentees that network that they wouldn’t have normally have received and that network sort of connects them to
other scholarship opportunities that they probably wouldn’t have found out had they been on their own.

Lizeth, Jonathan, and Rosa all referred to the same database of scholarships, open to undocumented students, which they found out about through their connection to We Are Dreamers. This emphasizes the way in which informational and economic resources are exchanged through the activist network, and how building social capital through immigration activism can ultimately help connect undocumented students with other forms of capital—such as scholarships and internships—to support their needs.

**Financial support for college.** Participation in immigration activism led one participant in this study, Samuel, to receive unexpected financial support for college from his network of supporters at College Dreamers. In the following excerpt, Samuel describes how he was short tuition funds and one of his fellow undocumented student organizers—and friends—provided him with the money he needed.

…Everyone who I have had the privilege of meeting in the movement has been someone who I could call lifelong friend and they have been able to help me. For example… in the fall of 2012, I was short a few hundred dollars on my tuition and this was the last day it could’ve possibly been due, otherwise they drop classes, and my friend actually covered that for me. And so I was like is there any way I can pay back. He said "No, just head forward," and I was like "Oh! Okay."

In his statement, Samuel described the generosity of his friend and fellow undocumented student activist, who did not wish to be repaid. This act of generosity demonstrates another way that undocumented student activists may acquire capital—and indeed build
solidarity—through their social connections—by belonging to an organization in which members help out one another.

**Information about applying to college.** Four participants described how they received information about colleges that they should and should not apply to as undocumented students from a network of students connected to We Are Dreamers. Rosa described the information that she received from this network in the following excerpt:

We Are Dreamers…helped me get in contact with the colleges to see if... because there are certain colleges that right out don’t accept undocumented students so like they don’t even look at your file. One college that I know for sure is Logan State University. I don’t know about now but they used not to accept at all. So we would just not apply to them because that is just more money. So they [We Are Dreamers] would help me kind of gear towards what colleges I should apply to...

When I was a senior, it was still like the students before me—so when I was a junior, they were seniors—the group was finding out what it [the college application process] was [as undocumented students] and everything. So they applied to very rich schools and private schools but then it turned out completely different, like, because they applied to such high colleges and everything—because they knew like public schools weren’t going to help, right? Because you would have to pay out-of-state here. So they were accepted to some but then they still couldn’t pay and then they were considered as international students for some and basically all these colleges that they applied to, they are basically not going to any of them. So then they had to find colleges on a billing basis. And so now I
know that two students went to Texas because that is where they helped the most. So when I was a senior, a lot of them…thought that Beltway University had the potential, it can possibly help you and if you go here you don’t necessarily have to live on campus...

Rosa’s statement explained how she learned strategies for applying to college from the experiences of older undocumented students, and that these strategies evolved over time. Having an organization keep track this evolving information is valuable and benefits younger students. Jonathan was also connected to We Are Dreamers and benefited not only from the mentoring program run by the organization, but also from the experiences of older undocumented students regarding information about colleges. He said,

    So my senior year I started going to the mentoring program and it was crucial for me because…We Are Dreamers gave me a lot of college advice that my counselor in school didn’t… They provided the college help, specifically for being a Dreamer that I wouldn’t have received in the AVID [Advancement via Individual Determination] program or [a college preparatory program in his school district] just because they were focusing on the general high school students going to college, they weren’t specific to undocumented students going to college… We Are Dreamers sort of provided that guidance that I feel counselors should be giving a lot of the students in high school. The majority of the time a lot of the ways that Dreamers get the information about going to college is through word of mouth about applying, about how to fill out the application; it is those little conversations that all students have to go by because
the administration in the high school and college can’t really say, “Apply this way,” because it is not a really detailed system. Even at Beltway, there is not a system of how Dreamers should apply for college.

Like Rosa, Jonathan received key information unique to his needs as an undocumented student from his network of other undocumented students and We Are Dreamers, which supports that network.

**Legal information.** Two participants described how they received legal information through their participation in immigration activism. Daniela described how she tapped into her network of undocumented student activists and allies to gain access to information about affordable lawyers—a form of social capital unique to her need as an undocumented student. When her parents insisted that they hire a lawyer for her DACA application, she found an affordable lawyer through her network of undocumented student activists and allies, which she described in the following excerpt:

I told my parents I’m fine to just send it in by myself, like I know people who have done it and have gotten it. It’s ok. And they’re like no, we’re actually going to go to this lawyer, and they were going to pay a thousand dollars to have him review the application and I was like ok, well if you have to have a lawyer look over it then let me like make some calls. So I talked to We Are Dreamers…like the founder…she’s very nice, so I talked to her about it and she said to just go to Community Justice. Community Justice is a law firm, and they do help with DACA applicants. They even offer some scholarships if they can, if people can’t pay the fee, which is 485 dollars total. So, I went to Community Justice and they
reviewed it for fifty dollars, so, you know, my parents were happy, and I was happy that they weren’t spending that much money.

In this quote, Daniela demonstrated her awareness of the resources and support associated with belonging to a network of immigration activists. With her statement, “Let me make some calls,” she also demonstrated that she was savvy enough to capitalize on such resources and support.

Erwan also described how his network of immigration activists provided him with legal information; however, in his case, he received specific information about his rights in a “Know Your Rights” training. An interview excerpt revealing how Erwan received this information is as follows:

I was introduced to Irma Ramirez from United We Dream… So first time ever in my life, I think right before I started my freshman year at community college, she had invited me to these meetings and there I met other undocumented kids…She really opened my eyes when she did this…[Know Your Rights] training... In the training she went over if ICE ever comes to your door, you ask them for their warrant. You make sure that they even have the authorization to look at your house, and I looked at that and I thought, had I been more involved in my community, had I been more plugged in with my local organizations, you know, my parents still might have been here…

In this excerpt, Erwan described how he believed that the legal information he received from the training could have possibly prevented the deportation of his parents. If such legal information could truly prevent or delay a deportation, such information could be
converted into economic capital when considering an undocumented immigrant’s earning potential in the U.S. versus other countries. More than an acquisition of economic capital, though, if such legal information could prevent or delay a deportation, it could serve to keep families together for longer—an effect that could have tremendous emotional benefits to the individuals involved.

Overall, the development of social capital was an important benefit of participating in immigration activism to the participants in this study. It ultimately led all of the participants to acquire other forms of capital, including cultural capital and economic capital. Although all forms of social capital cited by participants—interacting with high-profile figures, networking with professionals from organizations supporting undocumented students, and networking with other undocumented student activists—ultimately contributed to the participants’ acquisition of economic and informational resources, the form of social capital that led the participants to acquire the most resources was interacting with other undocumented student activists.

**Academic Development**

Six participants described effects of participating in immigration activism that related to their academic and career development, a category which includes participants’ reflections on their academic experiences and plans for their academic and professional futures. Overall, this category includes any changes in participants’ academic motivation, skills, performance, or path, which were cited as being related to or a result of their participation in activism.
Motivation in school. Two participants, Oscar and Rosa, described how their participation in immigration activism shaped their motivation in school. For Oscar, his motivation stemmed from being around other undocumented student activists who persevered in the face of obstacles. He described,

Some of the… students that I know throughout…immigration activism, they go to school, they go to college, they pay out-of-state tuition, they don’t give up. So I’m like, why should I too, you know? Like I said, I feel like… I should do the same thing, you know? I shouldn’t quit school… And yeah, being surrounded by people that—that are really positive, that helped me a lot to keep going through school and always stay focused.

Oscar’s experience suggests that being part of a group that is driven towards academic success, despite obstacles, may serve as a form of positive peer pressure which encourages other members of the group to similarly maintain academic motivation.

Rosa also connected her motivation in school to her participation in activism, which she explained in the following quote,

It [participation in immigration activism] has greatly influenced my academics. It has made me more determined academically. I am a very responsible and studious person and I know that with all the hard work that I put in, it will pay off later on. So I know what I want towards my academics and I work hard towards getting the grades that I want as well. Because when you do activism you have to have the determination and the feeling that you want to be there, right? So you are determined to continue to create awareness for Dreamers and with that it is kind
of related to education because with your academics…you want to be here, you want to study, you know what it is going to mean after so you are determined to get those grades.

In this quote, Rosa connected the determination she experienced as a student to the determination she experienced as an activist, as if the determination she experienced in one area of her life carried over to another. In addition, the Dream movement is about providing undocumented students with equal access to education—so that undocumented students may thrive academically to achieve their dreams. Through Rosa’s work to help create awareness for Dreamers, she is motivated to be a strong student herself—perhaps as another way to demonstrate her commitment to her education as an undocumented student.

**Academic skills development.** In addition to increased academic motivation, five participants described how their participation in immigration activism led to their acquisition of new academic skills, such as note taking, active reading, research, time management, and public speaking. For example, in the following quote, Oscar explained how his participation in activism led him to develop note taking, research, and active reading skills which not only impacted his activist work, but also carried over to his work in school:

I would say that it [participation in immigration activism] helped me a lot with…note taking, since when Dream Alliance has meetings, I have to take notes. And before I didn’t know how to take notes. I’d just take a couple of things. Now, like some of the Dreamers are older than me so they teach me things also, note
taking, research, what else? …Just like focus on reading I could say. Like whenever we’d have like a big article that we’d have to read, I get lost. I just read words sometimes. But now I can highlight it, put a side note on the things. So, things like that…things that I use on a daily basis at school.

Erwan similarly carried over the skills he learned through his participation in immigration activism into his daily life, which he described in the following quote:

Time management and organization—that is something I have really worked on because advocacy, of course, you are working around other people's schedules, so one of the skills I have developed is just finding out my day every week. So using a calendar, so like today [referring to his interview] for instance, if this was two years ago I might have not included this in my calendar… So, I mean that has definitely helped. I am much more organized now.

Of the five participants who identified how their participation in immigration activism specifically led to the acquisition of academic skills, four of those participants identified public speaking as one of those skills. For example, Jonathan said that in addition to learning about immigration policy, “the biggest thing” that his participation in immigration activism helped him in was in both his public speaking and communication skills. Oscar explained that We Are Dreamers provided him with opportunities to practice public speaking. He said that even though these “practices” had “nothing to do with immigration,” he felt it was “a good thing to always have—to be able to talk to people.” Rosa described in more detail how her work with We Are Dreamers led her to overcome her difficulty in speaking in public. She said,
Well, first thing I had really a hard time...public speaking...We Are Dreamers do a lot of sharing your story at different events, so that type of thing I have helped with them, I have helped them and I shared my story at various events... Since it is so personal that has helped me a lot... At first I would be nervous and shy at doing the things that I was doing, but then, after you do it, you feel so great and you feel like you can do anything. I like that feeling of the ‘after.’ I, myself, have to prepare myself before I go to speaking and everything but I do feel confident. I know if I do this, I will do it great...I think that getting involved with other organizations that I have been involved with, they have helped a lot building up that confidence.

In this passage, Rosa explained that as a result of having to speak publicly at immigration events, she developed more confidence in her public speaking ability, a skill that could transfer to the academic and professional areas of her life, as well.

**Impact on grades.** Although most of the effects of participating in immigration activism described thus far have been positive, one participant’s busy schedule as a result of her heavy role in an activist organization led to a decline in her grades. Lizeth explained this decline in the following excerpt:

...school automatically just became... a second thing. It’s always been about putting my activism first and my school just became the second thing... Even though... most people take three years [to finish an associate degree], I was able to finish in two. But it was...at the risk of my grades because I didn’t finish with like a 3.5 or something. It was barely a 3.0, which is... which I think if people
would see, oh, she’s just studying and she got a 3.0, it’s kind of bad because what else are you doing? But I have activism work, my sisters, and I do so many things that it almost balances out in my mind… Some days it was interview at six in the morning, school from eight to twelve and then twelve thirty you have to come back because you have some press conference and then after that you might have lunch, but then you have work, so you can’t really do that. There was little time… for me there was always time for family, I would never miss dinner, that’s something sacred to us, but school just was last. It just happened to be the last thing to do… It started becoming that ‘C’s were okay because at first…‘B’s are almost unacceptable to my parents… My mom was just a brilliant student… For her it’s how can’t you get an ‘A’, like a ‘B’? Because she’s like, “I worked hard to bring you here,” things like that. But now she understands that it’s something really important to me and not everybody can pull off 4.0s and still do a lot of things.

For Lizeth, participating in activism was a balancing act that caused her to make hard choices about her time, and as a result, school became a lower priority.

**Academic path.** Participation in immigration activism led two participants to pursue an academic path that related to immigration advocacy. For Samuel, his participation in immigration activism served to inspire him to apply to graduate school and conduct research on the intersections between immigration, philosophy, and law. More specifically, when asked if his participation in activism had influenced his academic path, Samuel explained,
Yes. Yes. For example, right now I am applying to a program where I get to develop a research proposal that I could use for my dissertation as I head to grad school, and what I have decided that my research focus is going to be is, I am looking… finding a way to mix philosophy with immigration and sort of any philosophical concepts that are in endemic to the issue. For example, the ideas of consent or laws, because I have been studying philosophy, law, and immigration and finding a way to just roll them together.

Lizeth also described how her participation in immigration activism affected her choices about her academic path. More specifically, her activist work caused her to switch her academic focus from architecture to graphic design so that she could use graphic design a part of her immigration activist work. She explained,

Initially my dream really was to become an architect…and I really was focusing on designing. I took architecture classes in high school and I got all As in all my courses… my Dad… always used to show me these models and stuff that he would make, so I was like, I’m gonna do this someday, it’s gonna be pretty awesome… And then all of a sudden, I just felt I couldn’t see myself doing that anymore because I had become active in advocating for immigrants’ rights and my rights and undocumented people. So I switched my major to become a graphic designer… because I saw that there weren’t a lot of people doing art for immigrants and there wasn’t a lot of “artivism”—now there’s a word for it—it’s activism and art, which is artivism.
Lizeth explained how she changed her academic path to focus on graphic design as she saw, through her activist work, a need for more art in the immigration reform movement.

**Political and Civic Development**

All nine of the participants described effects of participating in immigration activism that fit into a larger category of political and civic development. In this category, the term “political development” refers to a participant’s evolving role as a political actor, as well as a participant’s evolving ideas about political leaders, political parties, and political beliefs—particularly related to the immigration reform debate. The term “civic development,” on the other hand, refers to a participant’s evolving character or conduct as a member of society. Overall, this category includes the evolving political and civic beliefs, awareness, roles, and actions as a result of participating in immigration activism, including: development of political agency, tolerance of conflicting political beliefs, awareness of privilege, sense of a civic duty, and political training and coaching.

**Development of political agency.** Agency refers to the capacity of individuals to think and act independently—either collectively or individually—in order to affect social change (Sewell, 1992). All of the participants in this study expressed agency, and in particular, political agency—either by speaking up against injustices or taking actions to bring about change—as a result of their participation in immigration activism. This is described in further detail below.

**Learning to speak up.** Through their participation in immigration activism, six participants described how they learned to speak up in order to stand up for their
communities and the immigration reform movement more broadly. For example, Amanda described how she learned to speak up through her activist work:

Getting involved in the Dream Alliance, also trying to help my community, I learned to speak up and not just be shy…because I learned if you don’t speak up, no one is going to listen to you because everybody is just in their own thing. Unless you speak up, they will pay no attention to your situation. By conveying the idea that unless a person speaks up, no one will pay attention to his or her unjust situation, Amanda expresses her belief that speaking up as essential to bringing about change.

Samuel also described how his participation in immigration activism helped him to learn to use his voice to speak up, despite any reticence he had at the start of his activist work. He said,

It [participation in immigration activism] has made me really principled as to what I stand for and how to go about fighting for what I stand for. So, it has just allowed me to be a person with a much stronger character than I would have had otherwise… I wouldn’t ever have considered myself someone who would lead actions or any sort of events regarding migration. It just wouldn’t have been my role to do that, but now I feel like I can do that and I can do it extremely well. I definitely don’t have any fear using my voice because I know that I have a very strong network at my side and so I guess that reticence that I had starting out—it is not there.
In his quote, Samuel connects his ability to use his voice to fight for his beliefs to the network of other immigration activists that he has by his side. In this way, Samuel expresses political agency that is collective in nature.

In contrast with some of the other participants, Andrea was only minimally involved in immigration activism. That said, she does credit her connection to other undocumented student activists as her inspiration to use her voice to express her political beliefs, which she explained in the following excerpt:

Since I started going off to college, I started searching for help online mostly. Like I said, I am kind of secluded, I try to stay on my own, kind of shy. So I looked online for help and I stumbled upon the Dream Act and Dream Activist and all those websites, Dream, anything Dream-like related. So I follow them...everybody posts about activities, or rallies or calls and petitions—things like that. So I have done that...it was good to see people who travel all the way from New York or hear about the Dream Walkers, they walked from Miami to Washington D.C for the rally. That was exciting. Just following them, being part of it, seeing people coming from California although it is far away, seeing...[them] like encourage[s] me to keep on going, if they can do it, or if they have the will and went through that danger...it keeps me going, thinking, well if they did that I can try to tell people more about it even though I am...undocumented. I can still tell people “Hey! You want to go to this rally about this, this and that?” So I started talking more about the Dream Act and not really relating it to me, but I will be
like “Oh, yeah, this is Dream Act…” Because most people…when I tell people, they agree or they want to help.

As with Samuel, Andrea’s agency is connected to the work of other undocumented students, suggesting that her agency is also collective in nature.

**Taking action to bring about change.** Five of the participants described how through their participation in immigration activism, they took actions in order to change immigration policies. For example, in the following excerpt, Jonathan described how when he felt powerless regarding his undocumented status, he took small actions to bring about change:

There is nothing in my power that I can do [about my undocumented status] and the fact that there is nothing in my power really frustrated me because I felt like someone else was determining my future and I don’t like that. I like to work hard and put my effort and receive the outcome through my efforts, and so being undocumented, that is not the case… I wasn’t sad or mad or anything, I was frustrated because there was nothing I could do at the time. But now I realize there is a lot I can do. So I feel more comfortable sharing my story, I am comfortable with that identity of being undocumented because I know that the more I share, the more chances there are to change that.

For Jonathan, being open about his undocumented status and sharing his personal story is one way that he can take action to bring change to the immigration policies that affect his life, and the lives of other undocumented immigrants in the U.S.
Daniela also described how instead of focusing on the limitations imposed by her undocumented status, she needed to work with her fellow activists to take action, in order to ultimately change immigration policy. She said,

We do have to be strong, because we are leaders for Virginia. So we don’t have time to go and cry about it together instead of…talking about the agenda and what we’re going to do…about good law, or what our next step is gonna be, or what our next event is gonna be.

Daniela’s quote expresses her political agency in the face of the obstacles imposed by her undocumented status.

Like Daniela, Lizeth similarly described not having time to cry in the face of obstacles related to her undocumented status. More specifically in the following excerpt, when the Dream Act did not pass in the Senate in 2010, Lizeth explained how she needed to act, instead of cry:

The Dream Act didn’t pass but I was able to be there to witness it and I was able to go to the Senate… but what was really important to me was: what are we going to do now? Because it didn’t pass. Yeah it was heartbreaking; it was really emotional and heartbreaking for everyone who worked on it and I realized at the point that there was like this national—it’s not just about DC—there’s this national movement, and it opened my eyes. Because when I was there I met people from everywhere… And there was these people chanting and there was people leading the chants and I was so interested cause they were so powerful, I mean they could lead so many people to become one that I was like, wow, this is
crazy… I had never chanted in my life until I went to the Senate hearing… it was a revealing moment in my life, actually, because that was the day that I was like, I’m not gonna give up fighting for this. I don’t care if the entire world gives up on this. I’m gonna fight every single day so that something happens. And I’m not the only one that will receive this; it’s gonna be thousands of students and families that are gonna benefit… And even though it was devastating, I think I was one of the few people that didn’t cry, because I was like, we can’t—there is no time to cry right now. We have to act. And people were super sad because all of our work and everything that we’re doing, but I’m like, you have to keep going—this is not over. And I think it echoed… We’re not gonna give up. We gathered in the center of the Senate Gallery and then I don’t even know if you’re supposed to huddle, but we huddled and were like, this isn’t over, and that’s when we chanted, “Undocumented and unafraid!”

In this passage, Lizeth described the energy in the Senate gallery when the Dream Act failed to pass. She and her fellow activists expressed their collective agency through their chanting.

Tolerance of conflicting political beliefs. Four participants described how their participation in immigration activism led them to be more tolerant of conflicting political beliefs—whether the source of those political beliefs was an opposing political party or one’s own political party. When asked if their participation in immigration activism had affected their beliefs, both Amanda and Oscar explained that through their work as
immigration activists, they had come to develop more tolerance of opponents of immigration reform, and, more specifically, the Republican Party. Amanda stated,

I just feel that even though there are some people who are against undocumented people, I feel… I used to think they are all really bad… especially if they are Republicans… then I feel they are bad. But they are not bad men, because I feel… we can’t get to know that person because we label them and so it’s really bad. But if we actually get to know those people and understand why they think that way, then we might be able to have a conversation with that person and change their life.

In her statement, Amanda expressed that she no longer considers opponents of immigration reform as “bad,” because such labeling is not a productive way to affect change. In a similar vein, Oscar also explained that his participation in immigration activism similarly changed his views about Republicans, and made him more tolerant of different views. In response to the question about whether participation in immigration activism affected his opinions or beliefs, he said,

Yeah, it made me see different things in different ways… ‘Cause… when I wasn’t really involved in immigration, I always thought that the Republican side was bad… But now that I… got into the activism… I got myself informed about things and read more, I’m like, no, they’re not bad. Maybe they just want things different… I went to the Hill two weeks ago for [a meeting with Hispanic leaders]… for the Republican side. So all of them were Republicans and like we were there sitting down and I was hearing the things they were saying. So one of
the things that really impacted me that Goodlatte said was, “We’re working through this.” What he said, in my words, “We’re going to give a path to citizenship, but you have to earn it, you know?” So that changed my beliefs and things, because I thought this guy was always a bad guy, that he didn’t want no undocumenteds in the U.S. So, being an activist, it helps…it changed my whole beliefs about different people and different stuff.

In this excerpt, Oscar explained how personally hearing a Republican Congressman speak about undocumented immigrants in a face-to-face meeting made him more tolerant of the Republican side of the immigration debate.

Jonathan also explained how his participation in immigration activism led him to develop tolerance for conflicting political beliefs. More specifically, the following statement reflects Jonathan’s ability to see both sides of the immigration debate:

I guess looking at the immigration issue and looking how controversial the issue is I have been able to see both sides of the issue. I have shared my story, I have talked to people, whether they disagree or don’t agree with the immigration movement and how it should be resolved. At the end of the day I am realizing that as a whole, it is not that we want to separate families, but it is more about how we deal about handing immigration reform as a whole. That I feel is the source of conflict in this whole immigration discussion…It is more about how we go about handling our broken immigration system and how we go about dealing with the issue that, in turn, the constant tension is causing these family separations and
lack of higher educational opportunities for students that the majority, I feel, wants.

In his statement, Jonathan expressed how his participation in immigration activism has led him to talk to people who disagree with the immigration reform movement, and find commonalities on both sides of the issue.

Daniela also became more tolerant of opposing political perspectives, but in a way that is unique from the other participants in this study. Unlike the rest of the participants, Daniela is a Republican, and as an immigration reform activist fighting for undocumented students, often finds herself in a place of conflict—with both the immigration reform movement and with the Republican Party. In the following excerpt, Daniela explained how her thinking about the undocumented population as a whole evolved through her participation in immigration activism and her interactions with other undocumented immigrants. In response to a question about whether her participation in immigration activism had affected her opinions or beliefs, she stated,

I think it has, yeah…before I—it was very theoretical because I—I did know my own case, of course, and I did have certain beliefs about the rest of the undocumented population, so…I wasn’t really in agreement with a—a reform that would include a lot of people. I thought that it would just be the Dreamers that should get it [legal residence and/or citizenship] and then maybe some people that chose to come here in certain circumstances… I know that a lot of the Dreamer activists say, don’t tear up the families… I was thinking well if the kid’s born here…then the kid’s American and the parents did something illegal so they
should be sent back. It was very dry, the way that I thought…but then after
meeting people I… start to see other families that were tightknit. I think the
reason why I thought that, I didn’t mean to reflect my own family experience on
them… And it’s not like I’m saying my parents need to be deported or something
like that… But it is a tough situation. It has definitely…shown me different parts
of people because I do see the much more humane side of the whole issue.

In this statement, Daniela described how her participation in immigration activism
provided her with opportunities to gain different perspectives on the undocumented
immigrant population as a whole, which ultimately reflected her tolerance of differing
points of view.

Just as Daniela became tolerant of opposing political views in the immigration
activist movement, she also became tolerant of incongruity in her own political thinking.
Her participation in immigration activism and experience as an undocumented student
provided her with insights and opinions about immigration issues that did not always
agree with the Republican Party’s stand on immigration. She described this disagreement
in the following excerpt:

Another thing is that you really don’t know what you can endure until you are
placed in that kind of situation. It’s not just the person-to-person interactions, and
the people that I’ve met and things that people say, like…“Oh, these…kids that
were minors when they came here, they’re still criminals.” These comments don’t
really get to me. It’s actually the people that I look up to, for example, if I go
online and I look up a speech by Romney, or something like that, and I just listen
to it for the economics aspect of it. But then they get into immigration and I’m like, okay, well here we go, this is something I disagree with. So it is tough hearing the political party that I affiliate with, that I would vote for if I was a citizen, talk about the social issues. Because I don’t agree with them in that sense.

This excerpt reflects Daniela’s tolerance for incongruity in her political thinking, as she is able to support a politician and want to vote for him or her while simultaneously disagreeing with that politician on immigration, an issue that fundamentally affects her life.

**Awareness of privilege.** One participant, Erwan, described how his participation in immigration activism led him to develop a greater awareness of his own privilege, and to become more aware of other injustices in his community. While describing the activist work of his immigration advocacy student organization, he told the following story which illustrated this point:

We formed our club and that whole fall we did door knocking, we talked at high schools, we talked to community centers, and it was pretty awesome… while you are doing the advocacy work to meet other people in the community—undocumented and not undocumented—just see this support for us. And I think one of the huge ones for me was we went to Baltimore one day to door-knock and we came across this organization… They are basically a group of young, high school Baltimore youth, inner-city youth, and the whole philosophy of the organization—these kids are so often regarded as part of the problem, but they are obviously not because they just need to be empowered and they are going to be
part of the solution. I remember the first meeting we attended, they told us why they support the Dream Act—because they know what it is like to not have that same chance, same opportunity to education because of the hardships we go through. They did great advocacy work and we are doing [it] alongside them and the Baltimore community… I think that is the one I really took to the most because these kids aren’t even undocumented. Like, I was talking to my best friend and he said, “We grew up in Montgomery County. We had K-12 education [at the] fourth best school system in the nation and these kids don’t even have it in Baltimore yet.”

In this excerpt, Erwan described how his participation in immigration activism opened his eyes to other educational injustices experienced by people in his state, which made him aware of the privilege he had by attending Montgomery County Public Schools.

Later in his interview, Erwan described his awareness of privilege more explicitly. When asked whether his participation in immigration activism had affected his opinions or beliefs, he explained his new awareness of privilege in the following response:

Oh yeah, for sure… I look at myself at school and then I feel like, oh man, this is too hard, I think about my friends who can’t go to school, and it is like, how fortunate am I to have this? How much do somebody’s kids deserve more than I do? …So, yeah, at the end of the day I think my whole situation of being undocumented has taught me to realize how much I have to realize my privilege
and to try to make sure that others in my community who don’t have it, one day get it.

Erwan’s awareness of his privilege seems to drive his desire to help others in his community also get the same privileges that he has.

**Civic duty.** One participant, Jonathan, described how his participation in immigration activism led him to better understand his civic duty as an American living in the U.S. More specifically, when asked how his participation in immigration activism had affected him, he replied,

I would say that the biggest thing it has helped me in is in being more educated in the duty that us as citizens have in advocating for an issue, whether it is immigration reform or any issue, the duty that we have as people to speak up and advocate—whether it be protest, lobbying, speaking to representatives—has really exposed me to that environment that I feel I wouldn’t have been exposed had I not been a part of a community that really is being served injustice and is in need of doing all those civic responsibilities… I would just say being involved in advocacy and the importance of advocacy work has really taught me how the responsibility I have as a citizen, whether it be a non-official citizen, but as an American in this country, the need to really speak up about issues you are passionate about.

Through his participation in immigration activism, Jonathan described how he learned that his duty as a citizen was to advocate for his beliefs. This particular effect of participating in immigration activism has an inherent irony considering that Jonathan...
does not possess U.S. citizenship in a legal sense, but in his struggle for legal standing in the U.S., he has undertaken the responsibilities of being an American citizen just the same—a phenomenon that Abrams (2014) refers to as “performative citizenship.”

Political training and coaching. Through their participation in immigration activism, two participants, Jonathan and Erwan, received political training and coaching on their work as activists. Jonathan described how he and another member of his organization went to an activist training offered by United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS), a student-led, grassroots organization that runs labor-solidarity campaigns. He described this training in further detail in the following statement:

I got to go to USAS…they had one of their trainings... It was a training about advocacy but it didn’t matter what issue you were advocating for. When we went to the USAS training we had a march in the McDonalds, it was my first march, actually. So that was an experience because we sort of did a flash mob and a march…advocating for equal pay for fast food workers, and so we marched around there.

While Jonathan received general activist training, as expressed in his statement, Erwan received more specific political coaching. In the following excerpt, Erwan explained how a youth organizer, Ana Castro, at Safe Haven coached him on starting his own student organization at his university:

Ana pushed me further because my whole mindset was I really don’t want to do this work and I still doubted myself. Whenever you are pushed out of your comfort zone, you don’t want to do that, you want to remain in your comfort
zone. So I really attribute a lot to her because she invited me to the…youth committee meetings… When I started school… [she]…really encouraged me that, “You should really start an immigrants’ rights club or something at campus…” So my friend and I… and our friend Ana, she really helped us get our club up and running and we started advocating for the Maryland State Dream Act. Before it was even passed, when it was still in committee, and we testified alongside our college president who was a champion for the cause… We organized students on campus, and I think for the first time ever, we created that space for other undocumented students to come on and share their stories.

As described in his statement, Erwan received political coaching to start a campus-based immigrants’ rights organization, which ultimately supported other undocumented students as well as the passage of the Maryland Dream Act.

**Social-Emotional Benefits**

Participants described a variety of social-emotional benefits from participating in immigration activism. In this context, the term “social-emotional benefits” refers to any positive effects of participating in activism that relate to a participant’s self-concept, personality, emotional wellbeing, or his or her relationships with other individuals and with society at large. Benefits described by participants that fall into this category include positive identity construction, determination, self-efficacy, and finding someone who relates. All of the participants in this study received some type of social-emotional benefit(s) from their participation in immigration activism.
**Positive identity construction.** Prior to their participation in immigration activism, all of the participants interviewed expressed negative feelings about their undocumented status, ranging from confusion and disappointment to depression and even to shame. Reflecting the racism and xenophobia that they had internalized (Hipolito-Delgado; Padilla, 2001) from the broader society, participants used words and phrases like “filthy,” “like you don’t deserve anything,” “I am insignificant,” and “I am not worth anything,” to describe how their status made them feel about themselves. Through participation in activism, however, seven of the participants described how they were equipped with new ways of positively conceptualizing and actively constructing their identity as undocumented immigrants. More specifically, through connections with other undocumented immigrants and immigration activist organizations, participants learned new vocabulary to describe this aspect of their identity and, in some cases, grew to feel pride about their undocumented status. Detailed examples of how this occurred for different participants are presented below.

Before her participation in immigration activism, Amanda explained how she used to refer to herself as “illegal.” Once she became actively involved in the immigration reform movement, however, she learned to use new terminology to describe her status. She described this change in the following excerpt:

> When I used to call myself illegal, it was just weird… when you call yourself illegal it’s like you put yourself in that lower place, like you don’t deserve anything, you’re doing something bad… I remember when…I went to Metro Community College and then I had to go to the admissions office… there was this
lady who asked me, “Okay, we need your Social Security,” and I said, “I don’t have Social Security,” and they said, “Okay, we need your passport,” I said, “I don’t have a passport…” And then she gave me this look I won’t ever forget…she looked at me like if I did something really, really bad. So that’s when I also started to get involved in Dream Alliance... Yeah, so that’s when…I had started to say that I was undocumented. But that didn’t make me feel less or anything… instead of that… When I…call myself a Dreamer, [or] undocumented, I feel really strong, because I know I’m having challenges and even though I’m going through a lot of challenges, I’m still going on strong.

In this statement, Amanda explained how her involvement in immigration activism helped her to start using the term “undocumented” to describe her status, which helped to improve her overall self-concept. Having an improved self-concept through new language to describe her status helped to support Amanda when facing xenophobia in the broader community, such as the Metro Community College admissions office employee that Amanda described.

Like Amanda, Erwan also learned new terms to describe his immigration status through his participation in immigration activism. In the following excerpt, he described how he learned to use different terms and how his use of these terms affected him:

Back in 2008…the term we always used is “illegal immigrant.” And, moreover, I don’t understand why my parents would ever do this, but all they listened to on the radio and news are Sean Hannity and Colmes [conservative political commentators]. And I don’t know why they had such a fascination with the talk
show, but they loved it, and you could just hear it just going on, rants about, “Oh these illegal immigrants,” but my parents loved the show, I don’t know why. So hearing that growing up, you always think, oh wow, I am insignificant. I am not worth anything. It is demeaning. The word is “illegal immigrant.” And Elie Wiesel, Holocaust survivor, he is the one who said, “No human being is illegal.” “Illegal” is the word you would use to describe actions but then why do you apply that vocabulary with human beings, you are basically dehumanizing them and that is kind of what a lot of our media tends to do—they do dehumanize us. I don’t think that is right at all. So, I mean, ever since getting involved with United We Dream, Safe Haven, and Center for Social Justice… you learn like you call yourself “undocumented.” In itself it is not even a proper word because I am very well documented. But it is a much better word than illegal…I always just say I am an undocumented minor. I don’t even use the word “Dreamer” too much, I am just an undocumented student… But for sure, it is better than looking at yourself as some illegal person who doesn’t belong here…now I know very much that I do belong here… Thinking about it in different terms, I mean, you get more satisfaction with who you are as a person when you look at yourself in the mirror you feel better about who you are. You don’t look at yourself in negative light whereas before it, it is like, wow, I am just some illegal kid. It was embarrassing, but now…that is why I don’t have any problem meeting out here with other people—because I don’t care if I call myself undocumented or not. I am proud of it. So it definitely it helps your character and your kind of internal wellbeing.
In this passage, Erwan described how using this new term to describe his immigration status helped him to improve his self-concept—to feel better about himself—and to ultimately instill him with pride about his status.

Lizeth had a similar experience to Amanda and Erwan with regard to the change in her use of terminology to describe her status as a result of her participation in immigration activism. When Lizeth’s mother first explained to her that she didn’t have her papers, Lizeth was shocked to realize that she fit into the category of “illegal alien,” a reaction which she described in the following passage:

I was like, “I’m illegal.” That’s what I thought. I’m illegal. I’m an alien. That’s because that’s what everybody said. So I was like, oh crap, I fit in this category. This is not right, like I’m not supposed to tell people. It’s like… “Hush hush, don’t tell nobody.” So that what my mom told me… She said, “We are illegal…we don’t have a Social Security Number…” So I’m like, I’m illegal, I’m an illegal alien [laughter] …I need to figure out what it means… I can’t just live with “I’m an illegal alien…” So then that’s how I told my…advisor—but the thing is I didn’t tell him, “Oh I’m illegal.” I told him, “I don’t have papers.” And so “I don’t have papers” sort of makes sense because there’s movies and things where like, “Oh, la migra [i.e., ICE], run away because you don’t have papers…” And so I realized that I was one of those people. So I was like, “I don’t have papers…” The term “undocumented” didn’t come about until later.

When asked how her use of the term “illegal” changed to “undocumented,” Lizeth responded with the following explanation:
I think it was probably through We Are Dreamers, because the Dream Act. They were like, “We should call this We Are Dreamers.” And then being present at the Senate hearing, we chanted. And it was like, “No papers, no fear, immigrants are marching here.” And then it was also like, “Undocumented and unafraid.” So then I was like, “So I’m undocumented… So that’s what it is, I’m undocumented…”

So it felt empowering. It really did.

As with some of the other participants, Lizeth experienced positive effects from using new terminology to describe her immigration status and credited her terminology change to her participation in immigration activism.

Although Daniela did not describe a change in her use of terminology to describe her immigration status, she acknowledged that her participation in immigration activism changed how she felt about her status. When she first learned that she was undocumented, she felt very ashamed about her status, as illustrated by the following excerpt:

[When I found out that I was undocumented] I just kind of set the issue aside…and I just tried to forget about it. I was very ashamed… I did tell my boyfriend after a few months, actually… I remember telling him I felt filthy or something like that… But, I didn’t feel like… [pause, deep breath] … I felt like I fit in a lot better here than in Colombia, but I felt like I didn’t belong here…

Later in the interview, when asked how her participation in immigration activism has impacted the development of her identity, Daniela replied, “Well, I’m not—I don’t feel like filth anymore, [laughter] there’s that!” With this statement, Daniela acknowledged
that her involvement in immigration activism contributed to her improved self-conception as an undocumented immigrant.

Jonathan’s relationship to his immigration status is different from some of the other participants. Unlike other participants, Jonathan did not describe feelings of shame associated with his immigration status. Although he described his status as a burden, he did not consider it a component of his identity until he went to college and began participating in immigration activism. In the following passage, he described his shift in thinking regarding his status and how his participation in immigration activism helped him to conceptualize and assume the identity of an undocumented student:

I think it [my status] has really moved into an identity…because in high school I didn’t see it as an identity, I saw it was as a burden that I had to deal with. Now, coming into college and realizing all of the accomplishments that students have accomplished because they are undocumented and also the experiences they have gone through because they are undocumented, it is sort of an identity that they have developed, and the term “identity” is something I would never connect with undocumented before I had college… The Dream Alliance and University Dreamers have really helped me in terms of how I… present myself as this identity that I have and how I should accept that identity and share that identity. So with University Dreamers and Dream Alliance, I have really been able to blend all of who I am and present that and educate others on the issue, but at the same time, on my personal story, the complete package.
Jonathan’s statement that the two Dreamer activist organizations helped him to present himself as “this identity,” demonstrates that he credited such organizations as helping him to construct his identity as an undocumented student. In this way, immigration activist organizations helped Jonathan package his identity for consumption by the U.S. public, for the larger purpose of changing immigration policy in the U.S.

**Determination.** Five of the participants in this study described how their participation in immigration activism made them more determined—not only in their activist work, but in other areas of their lives as well. For example, in the following excerpt, Oscar described how his participation in immigration activism made him more determined to work hard and to not give up both in his activist work—specifically in terms of public speaking and networking—but also in his general outlook:

I could say, personally it’s made me…inspired more to work harder… ‘Cause I see the struggle. I see the things that they [other undocumented immigrants] go through and I feel like I should work harder, also and develop my language, my—my public speaking more, my interaction with people, networking. What else... not to give up… Like I said the road will always be bumpy, but it’s not impossible. So not being a quitter is something that I have had to learn… Before I used to give up really quick. And I was like, if things don’t go my way I just walked the other way. But now it’s like, I have to go, I have to walk through this, I have to do this. It gave me more courage to do it… Becoming an activist for immigration also you see a lot of people that go through the same thing and they
never give up. So it’s contagious. It makes me feel like if they don’t give up, why should I? Why should I give up?

In this passage, Oscar explained how through his activist work, he saw other people struggling and never giving up, which he found to be “contagious,” and served as a major impetus in his own determination.

Like Oscar, Erwan was also inspired by his peers in immigration activism to develop a determined attitude that carried over into other areas of life—in his case, his school work—which he described below:

I never would have predicted any of this happening over the last three years. At the end I am very grateful because by pushing myself out of my comfort zone, I think I have learned to grow a lot as an individual, and moreover, because I got to meet these other undocumented kids, these other students who go through so much, it is their struggle that has really inspired me to work hard in school and change that old mindset that I used to carry.

Erwan’s quote demonstrates how his participation in immigration activism enabled him to meet other undocumented students whose struggle has inspired him to work harder and be more determined.

Rosa also said that her participation in immigration activism helped her to be more determined, both academically and personally. When asked how her participation in activism has affected her personal development, she responded,

It has made me more determined academically and personally. I am determined to grow as a person and learn new things. I am determined to develop my leadership
skills and just become a leader. So I know what I want and I am determined to go for it… Naturally I am a very shy person, but I know that having those [leadership] skills is very helpful and so I want to challenge myself and do things that are not in my comfort zone.

Unlike the other participants who cited determination as an effect of their participation in activism, Rosa did not credit her peers as serving to inspire her determination. Instead, she explained in a later part of her interview that she was determined to work hard not just for herself, but for her family and the people who have helped her in her community.

**Self-efficacy.** Self-efficacy refers to people’s beliefs about their ability to successfully influence events in their lives through their performance at certain tasks (Bandura, 1994). Three of the participants described feelings of self-efficacy associated with their activist work. These participants described how they believed that their actions dedicated to changing immigration policy were effective—even if, in some cases, policy had not yet changed. For example, the following quote illustrates Rosa’s self-efficacy regarding her actions to bring in-state tuition to undocumented students in Virginia: “Just knowing that by doing what I am doing, little by little we are getting somewhere. Getting in-state tuition has never been so close until now, so it is really close and it is like we are almost there.” Rosa was so confident that her actions were going to make a difference that she believed that the state was “almost there” in terms of granting undocumented students with in-state tuition. Samuel was similarly confident that the immigration activist movement—of which he was and is a part—would cause immigration reform to pass sooner, rather than later, which he described in the following quote:
You can’t really topple an organized group of people committed to something that they know is right. Even though we have had a lot of roadblocks in terms of passing immigration reforms there still this strong movement which I am confident that immigration reform is going to pass sooner rather than later.

In this quote, Samuel expressed his confidence that immigration reform was imminent, primarily because the immigration reform movement was so strong that it would ultimately be successful.

Like the other participants, Oscar also expressed his self-efficacy related to his activism, however he did so in describing a small victory—the Senate’s passage of the *Border Security, Economic Opportunity, and Immigration Modernization Act, S.744*, on June 27, 2013. He said,

The most rewarding. It’s maybe…seeing things happening…Like the bill passing. It already passed a month ago. The Senate, right…and…like that’s a reward. That’s like, “Oh, we did this.” My voice was there for it to be passed. So that means a lot. That means that I’m heard, my voice has been heard. My opinions are being heard too. My actions are being counted. So that’s what counts the most—it’s making a good outcome…and just…seeing people with joy in their faces and seeing that their fights with anything is actually making an effect. Effection, [i.e., effectiveness] you know? It’s actually working. It’s actually making things happen.
In this excerpt, Oscar expressed his self-efficacy regarding his activism by describing how he believed that his voice and his opinions were heard and his actions counted towards the Senate’s passage of the immigration reform bill.

**Finding someone who relates.** Another social-emotional benefit of participating in immigration activism, as described by the participants in this study, is that the activist organizations helped to function as support networks for undocumented students, and instill them with feelings of belonging. Seven of the participants described their activist organizations as places where they could find someone who relates to their situation. For example, Daniela described how her organization supported her in the following excerpt:

> The other people that I work with, I can definitely relate to them. And we don’t really talk about our emotions much or anything, but just having them there, just knowing that we’re all taking college courses and everything… So it is nice to have that group… I guess it’s just knowing other people that are going through the same thing that you are, if that makes sense.

In this excerpt, Daniela explained that just being around other undocumented students pursuing higher education helped to provide her with social support—and let her know that she was not alone. Later, when asked if her organization functions like a support network, Daniela replied, “Basically, yes.”

Erwan similarly described participation in immigration activist as being part of a network of support—regardless of the specific organization. He said,

> It is a day-to-day battle. And I think for other undocumented kids that is why it is so great to be part of a network, whether it be a local organization… or a
nationwide network where you get to meet other kids who are in that same struggle as you and whom you can share those feelings with. Because I mean, I still hang out with my best friends on the weekends, but at the end of the day, they are not going to know what it is like to come home and not having Mom and Dad there, you know… One of the things that really got me on United We Dream was that they had this little program [related to the deportation of parents]… It was started by my friends…and at that time they shared at the training…they haven’t seen their mom since six years, and to be able to connect with them and to kind of be able to connect with other youth around the nation who have had their parents deported, I think that has been really great for me… So it is like you hit them once in a while, “How are you doing? How are your parents doing?” And you just get to talk it up because I think at the end of the day…if you don’t have a support network, if you feel like your problems are too big for anyone to hold, you can crumble under and that is why you have people committing suicide… Because you don’t see hope. It is always so great to have a support network because even when you are down, they are going to keep pushing it forward…

In this passage, Erwan explained how through a United We Dream program related to the deportation of parents, he was able to connect to other undocumented youth whose parents had been deported, which was an important source of support for him.

Samuel also described his immigration activist network as a network of support, though acknowledged that much of what an undocumented student experiences is individual. He said,
If you can find a support network or people who know that you are in that kind of situation, then you are kind of relieved… A lot of experience is individual, so there are portions where you can’t really share, it is just you, but a large part of it is just being able to find someone who relates. So in terms of emotional support, just knowing that someone is there, that is just really a big part of it.

Samuel’s statement expressed how his participation in immigration activism enabled him to find other undocumented students who related to his situation, which provided him with both relief and emotional support.

Although Andrea participated in immigration activism less than the other participants in this study, she similarly found social-emotional support from her participation in activism. In the following quote, she described how her participation in a mock graduation event sponsored by a local Dreamer organization provided her with support. She said,

They have done a mock graduation and they have done that three years now in a row, I believe. I couldn’t go to the first one. I went to the second one. It was so much fun being part of something big… it made me feel good because since I went to Suburban High School, there is barely any Hispanics or anybody who is like, undocumented, or maybe I didn’t know them, because the school was so big… So I didn’t really get to meet somebody who was in my same situation… some of my close friends, they knew about it, not much we can do but, you know, we are friends, keep on studying, going through things. So I felt alone in that sense. So when I went to the rally, I saw there is other people in that same
situation, so it felt good being part of something, or not being alone any more.

Yeah. And knowing that other people in this area are in my situation, it is not just me, it is not what I thought.

In this passage, Andrea described how by attending an immigration activist event, she was able to see many other undocumented immigrants. Even though Andrea did not describe making personal connections with the other undocumented students at the event, she received social-emotional support through the visual proof that she was not alone.

Overall, the participants described how participating in immigration activism provided them with a network of support—whether they connected directly or indirectly with other undocumented students. For many of the participants, just knowing that they were not alone in their situation was an important way in which they found social-emotional support through their participation in immigration activism.

**Conclusion**

In summary, this chapter described the themes that emerged from the interviews regarding participants’ perceived effects of participating in immigration activism. The findings suggest that participation in immigration activism may help undocumented students develop social capital, which may lead to the acquisition of resources and information to support higher education attainment, such as information about scholarships and internships open to undocumented students; financial support for college; information about applying to college as an undocumented student, and legal information supporting undocumented students and their families. Participation in immigration activism may also contribute to undocumented students’ academic
development, including the development of academic skills, motivation, performance, and path. The findings further suggest that participation in activism may contribute to undocumented students’ political and civic development—related to the development of political agency, tolerance of conflicting political beliefs, awareness of privilege, and sense of a civic duty—and may also provide undocumented students with opportunities to receive political training and coaching. Finally, the findings of this study suggest that participation in immigration activism may provide social-emotional benefits to undocumented students—including positive identity development, determination, self-efficacy, and finding someone who relates. These themes were described in detail using vignettes (Seidman, 2006) to illustrate the themes in the participant’s own words.
Chapter Five: Selected Participant Profiles

In order to bring to life the interrelatedness of different categories of data presented in Chapter Four, I created participant profiles for three participants whose interview narratives demonstrated the interrelatedness of different categories. This chapter will present profiles for Daniela, Erwan, and Oscar. As discussed in Chapter Three, I reviewed each interview transcript carefully and selected quotes that represented the interrelatedness of different categories and which told a story, with a beginning, middle, and end. Then, I assembled these quotes together with my own interpretations and transitions into a coherent narrative that included both conflict and resolution. It was my intention that these profiles would showcase the interrelatedness of different categories, thereby demonstrating another dimension to the data. Pseudonyms are used for names of participants, other individuals that they reference, schools, and small or local organizations, in order to protect the anonymity of participants and their respective communities.

Daniela

Daniela has struggled with her identity as a Colombian-American, and in particular as a White Hispanic living in the U.S. She has felt that she was “too American to be Hispanic and too Hispanic to be American.” This conflict has affected her relationships in her family, at high school, and, to a lesser degree, in college, and has
been complicated by her undocumented status. This profile documents Daniela’s struggles and how her participation in immigration activism has allowed her to develop meaningful social connections to other Hispanic students. In this profile, I use the term “Hispanic” instead of “Latino/a,” to reflect Daniela’s own terminology to describe her identity.

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Daniela has pale skin and speaks English without the slightest trace of a Colombian accent. As such, most people usually assume she is from the U.S. or Europe: “People usually mistake me for being from here, or from Europe, or something. Like, usually, South America isn’t really the first thing that comes to their minds.” Perhaps because of her appearance, Daniela has been able to benefit from White privilege in ways that other Hispanic immigrants have not been able to benefit. For example, unlike other Hispanic immigrants in the U.S. who Daniela has met, she says she has never felt discriminated against because of her ethnicity:

One thing that I always hear when I talk to people that are in my situation as well is that they always felt like discriminated against or something, I personally never felt that. Even when I couldn’t speak English…I never felt like anyone was like really rude to me or anything…

While her appearance has made it easy for her to fit into the U.S., it has not always enabled her to fit in well with other Hispanics, despite her efforts to get in touch with her Hispanic heritage. In high school she tried to join a Hispanic student organization, however was not welcome into this organization as a result of her appearance:
I did try to get involved with one organization that was Hispanic-based... I went
to a meeting, and they looked at me, and they said, you’re not Hispanic! And it
was interesting... ’cause then I said something in Spanish, like, of course I am,
you know I can speak it, I moved here, I was in HILT [High Intensity Language
Training for English language learners] as well... And they were like... Oh no,
you probably learned that in Spanish class or something and I’m like... okay,
that’s nice.

She explained that perhaps one reason why she was excluded from this
organization was that the members of the organization felt oppressed by the majority
White population at their high school, which Daniela fit better into:

My school was like 75% Caucasian and everything, so I guess that they feel...
oppressed or something because they were obviously minorities. Whereas when it
comes to me, I think people are a little bit more confused... So, I guess, in high
school, I did feel that I was too American to be Hispanic and too Hispanic to be
really American, so there was that conflict going on. But, I mean, I just don’t
think about defining it anymore because it’s just... not worth it.

In addition to Daniela’s appearance allowing her to fit in better with the majority
White population in her school, her cultural preferences also allowed her to do so as well,
which caused tension between herself and with other Hispanics—including her family:

My family had always said that I was too Americanized, even when we lived in
Colombia and of course, even when I didn’t know what “American” was... I have
my preferences, I listen to different music than most of them [other Hispanics] do,
I guess I do dress differently than most of them, like even shopping for prom, my mom picked out this dress that I thought was too revealing personally, so I actually went shopping with my boyfriend’s mom [who is White Anglo-American], who’s actually very conservative and I agree with her style more…so it’s things like that…That I guess it did… it does kind of offend them [other Hispanics] sometimes, that I choose to do things differently, that I choose to go to say, a burger place versus like a Mexican place, things like that… When they ask me, oh, have you heard of this Hispanic politician, or this rap group, and I’m like well, I don’t listen to rap… Things like that…

Within the context of Daniela’s evolving struggle to connect with other Hispanics, her discovery of her undocumented status, which happened when she was 14 years old, complicated her relationship with other Hispanics, particularly her family. Daniela described how she learned from her family that she was undocumented and the subsequent fallout that occurred:

One night they [my parents] called like a family meeting and then they told me what happened… They just told me very casually. And my sister started getting…my sister’s very emotional, so she started crying. She was like, “You don’t know how hard it is for me to…deal,” ’cause she is like ten years older… But I was also mad ’cause I told her, “You were eighteen, you were aware, what were you thinking coming here, knowing that you would be undocumented? Why would you choose that for yourself?” And she was like, “Well, we couldn’t do anything else,” and I’m like, “Yeah you could, you could actually apply the right
way.” … ’Cause it’s not like we were like poor or anything, it wasn’t like…I still don’t really understand… So it was just…you know…conflict with my parents. So, when they told me. I just got mad… I don’t understand why they couldn’t do it another way. Because, I mean, I do understand that like some families, you know, they live in Mexico and the cartels are chasing them, or something like that. But we didn’t have any of that and we did have money. I could not understand why they couldn’t just…apply to be on the waiting list to come to the U.S…. So my parents said, “Well we figured that they passed an amnesty, so we figured we could just go, and not have to wait, and they would pass it again, and we would be fine…”

Daniela’s words reflected her anger towards her parents and sister for having come to the U.S. without papers. Daniela was especially angry because she believed that her family had other options since they were not poor. This distinction suggests Daniela’s belief that poverty or other dangerous situations are legitimate reasons to migrate without papers, but that because her family had other options in Colombia, they had no right to do so.

After Daniela learned about her undocumented status, she did not discuss it with anyone. Not only was her relationship with her family tense, but she chose not to tell any of her friends and just tried to forget about it. Eventually she told her boyfriend and expressed both her shame and feelings of isolation about her status:

I kept it to myself during high school…I knew statistically I wasn’t the only one… I looked up everything that I could about it and I knew that there were a couple other million people in my situation… But I didn’t feel like they would
really go to my school or anything. So I just set the issue aside and I just tried to forget about it… I was very ashamed… I did tell my boyfriend after a few months, actually… I remember telling him I felt filthy or something like that… But, I didn’t feel like, I don’t [pause, deep breath] … I felt like I fit in a lot better here than in Colombia but I felt like I didn’t belong here…

The fact that Daniela thought that she was the only undocumented immigrant at her school, and that she felt like she didn’t belong in the U.S., even though that is where she believed that she “fit in” best, reflect her feelings of isolation as a result of her undocumented status. Although Daniela told her boyfriend not to tell anyone about her undocumented status, as she felt ashamed about it, he told his parents, who then asked to speak to Daniela.

…My parents raised me to believe that if you told a Republican, they would deport you or something… And his parents are very conservative Republicans so I was really worried when he told me. And he said, “Actually they want to talk to you…” So, then I started getting really nervous. So we drove over to his parents’ house, this was junior or senior year, and we talked to them, and actually, they offered to pay for part of my college.

Daniela’s boyfriend’s parents’ offer to help her pay for college ultimately enabled Daniela to enroll in college, and was greatly welcomed by her. Nevertheless, this offer of help led to a further divide between Daniela and her parents. Her boyfriend’s parents said that they preferred that Daniela did not tell her parents about their offer and so Daniela
lied and said she received a scholarship. Daniela’s parents discovered her lie, however, which led to greater conflict that was wrapped up in issues of race and ethnicity:

His parents were like, “Don’t—you can tell them if you want, but we would rather you not.” So I was like okay, so I had to come up with some random scholarship that I got… But, when it was actually time to pay for college, I think my mom saw the check or something, and then…they did feel bad… They still don’t really understand that our tension is not… It’s because of the way that they think. They think that it’s because of the way they look; they’ve actually told me, “Oh you don’t like us because we don’t have blond hair and blue eyes.” And I’m like, that’s not the reason why…we have problems, so there is that tension still…

According to Daniela, her parents felt like she did not like them because they were not White enough—with blond hair and blue eyes—like her boyfriend’s family.

Ultimately, Daniela experienced tension related to her ethnic and cultural identity on multiple fronts: on the one hand, both her parents and fellow Hispanic students felt that she was not Hispanic enough in her looks and preferences; on the other hand, she felt “too Hispanic” to completely fit in to a dominant White American cultural norm. Her undocumented status only compounded her feelings of isolation.

Fortunately for Daniela, some of this tension related to her identity as well as her feelings of isolation began to subside once she went to college. Her boyfriends’ parents’ financial support enabled Daniela to move out of her parents’ home and into on-campus housing at her university. That alone relived some of the conflict that she was experiencing with her parents. Additionally, Daniela joined different undocumented
student activist organizations—on and off campus—which allowed her to connect with other Hispanic students and undocumented students. As a result of her participation in these undocumented student organizations, Daniela’s self-concept improved. For example, when asked her how participation in immigration activism affected the development of her identity, she replied, “Well… I don’t feel like filth anymore [laughter], there’s that.” Daniela described in further detail how this change in her self-concept occurred once she realized that there were other highly-motivated undocumented students who, like her, were “not doing anything bad”:

I didn’t really talk to anyone else in my situation until maybe a year ago… So it wasn’t until I actually started talking to people that were in my same situation… Like I’ve met valedictorians and just amazing people that are in the same boat and everything, so I guess I did feel like I wasn’t the only one that was really hardworking and that really wanted to go to college and everything. I realized, hey, these people have 4.3s [grade point average]. They have amazing grades, just like me. They’re not doing anything bad, just like me… So that’s when I it started to change, a year ago.

Being able to meet other highly-motivated undocumented students helped Daniela to realize that she, like them, was “not doing anything bad,” which ultimately helped to improve her self-concept. In addition to having an improved self-concept, Daniela described other positive social-emotional benefits she received from belonging to a group of undocumented student activists:
The other people that I work with, I can definitely relate to them. We don’t really talk about our emotions much or anything, but just having them there, just knowing that we’re all taking college courses and everything…we are continuing with a higher education… So it is nice to have that group even if we don’t really talk about that… So, I have met some pretty amazing people… I guess it’s just knowing other people that are going through the same thing that you are, if that makes sense.

Although the group of undocumented student activists to which Daniela belongs does not talk about their emotions related to their undocumented status, she benefits from knowing that other group members are going through the same thing that she is—and that she is not alone. Additionally, Daniela identified how being part of an activist group with other undocumented students helped to keep her focused on fighting for change, instead of focusing on the limitations imposed by her undocumented status—giving her a more positive outlook than a negative one:

We do have to be strong, because we are leaders for Virginia. So we don’t have time to go and cry about it together instead of talking about the agenda and what we’re going to do…about good law, or what our next step is gonna be, or what our next event is gonna be… So, I guess it is providing this kind of union for Virginia…that we’re able to really give our energy into… We’re all very passionate about it, so just seeing each other work really hard for it also inspires us.
As a result of her participation in immigration activism, Daniela went from feeling alone and isolated to being able to connect to other undocumented students who were in her situation. Additionally, Daniela was able transform the shame she experienced about her status into something productive—working to change policies to benefit all undocumented students. Overall, Daniela has evolved from being torn between feeling “too American to be Hispanic” and “too Hispanic to be really American” to being able to develop meaningful connections with other Hispanic students, and to ultimately bridge this divide in her identity:

I have felt like I’ve managed to connect with other Hispanic people more as the years progressed, so that’s good… It’s good because I couldn’t really relate to them earlier [in high school] because they were never in my classes… So I never saw them and I never really interacted with them. But now I go to… a big minority school [large public university with many students of color], so I do talk to more Hispanic people and I do feel I can connect to them better, which is good… When it comes to actually talking about school, I do feel that I am very hard working… I guess that they [other Hispanics] see that and the people that I talk to are also really focused on academics, so that’s one way that we can really connect.

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This profile on Daniela demonstrates how different coding categories connect together to tell Daniela’s unique story. For example, participating in immigration activism helped Daniela to experience a sense of belonging and to positively construct her identity. Ultimately, this helped to instill her with a sense of personal and political
agency. For Daniela, however, her struggles with her identity and to feel like she belongs are not just related to her undocumented status, but are also connected to issues of race and ethnicity. Ultimately, participation in immigration activism not only allowed Daniela to connect with other undocumented students, but also allowed Daniela to connect with other Hispanic students, and to explore the Hispanic part of her identity. This narrative helps to illustrate Daniela’s overall struggle, and how participating in immigration activism affected her struggle.

**Erwan**

Erwan is a thoughtful and reflective South Asian-American college student who was in his early 20s at the time of our interview. His parents brought him to the U.S. in 1994—where they had other relatives who were naturalized citizens—when Erwan was just a year and a half year old. They sought asylum from religious persecution and wanted to provide a better life for their son. For much of Erwan’s childhood, his parents’ asylum case was wrapped up in the U.S. legal system, and as such, his parents were granted work permits. This enabled them to have decent jobs and provide a good life for Erwan, and later, his younger brother, who was born in the U.S.

Erwan says that he did not experience much trouble assimilating since the U.S. was the first country that he knew. He learned to speak English from watching American television and playing with his American cousins. During his childhood, Erwan thought of himself as “an average middle class American kid,” and considered his childhood to be “very happy”: 
I feel like, my childhood growing up, only concerns to my parents were: Mom what’s for dinner, Dad what’s for dinner, and can I have this? Just like so many of my classmates, you know. So I admit I was never really grateful for how much my parents did for me. I don’t think I ever realized how much they did for me. I was just happy with my comfortable life… All I really cared about is doing my school, getting home, playing video games.

When Erwan was 14 years old, however, his parents’ asylum case was denied, and his life changed dramatically:

It wasn’t until 2006 when things started to change… After many years of appealing our case, Immigration [ICE] denied our case and…therefore we became…undocumented for the first time ever and for the first time I saw my parents live their life, how the majority of undocumented families lived. So my dad had to quit his job, he had to start working under the table. My mother, at the time she was a college professor, she was working on her Ph.D., she had to quit her Ph.D. studies and she just stayed at home and she either volunteered at a soup kitchen or Meals on Wheels… Then in 2008, after two years of living like this, my dad was travelling home from work one evening and he got pulled over because his rear tail light was out. And I am guessing that the police officer must have somehow pulled up the immigration records when he pulled him over in Baltimore and next thing you know, a week later…in the morning, it was a beautiful summer day, sun is just rising, and all of a sudden I hear my parents kind of whispering, kind of escalating to a panic in the next room and… I hear my
parents, “Oh my gosh! I can’t believe this is actually happening, Immigration is here.” I am just waking up from sleep so I feel like this is just a dream. Next thing you know, here is a knock on the door, my dad goes upstairs, he opens the door and behold is the immigration officer. He says, “Sir, we need to search your house…” Pretty soon they interrogate my parents. They ask my father, “Can you bring us your immigration papers?” So my dad goes on to our file cabinet downstairs, he pulls out the papers and shows them to the officers. “Sir, you do know that these papers that you have are no longer valid?” My dad is like, “Yeah, I understand.” So he is like, “I am sorry, we are going to have to take you with us…” That was the last day I saw my father. They handcuffed him and as soon as he left out the door, he just said, “You have to be strong for your mom and for your brother.” I said, “Dad, don’t worry, I will.” And that was the last thing… I was 16 at the time and my younger brother was 13…

A few days after Erwan’s father was taken into detention, he and his mother were taken into detention as well and held for several hours. After they were released, Erwan’s mother was given a one year extension to stay in the U.S. through ICE’s Intensive Supervision Appearance Program (ISAP). Six months later, in 2009, Erwan’s father was deported. After another six months, Erwan’s mother was deported as well, and Erwan was told that he would be deported as soon as he graduated from high school.

After that day [when my mother was deported], it was me and my brother and it was tough, but we prayed a lot just to ask God, “Just help us! Help us mature.” Because here I am, an average middle class American kid, all I really care about
is what Mom has for dinner, Dad has for dinner and now it is like, “How do I make my own food? How do I take care of my brother? How do I be a parent to this kid? I am only 16 and he is 13.” So I had to learn how to become a makeshift parent for him. So luckily for us though, we had great family here… We had our great uncle whom we lived with when we first came to the States and we actually ended up moving in with them and they really took us in and nurtured us… I remember I was depressed though… Over that summer, until school started, I kind of fell into a slump and I was depressed…

Although Erwan fell into a depression regarding his undocumented status and the deportation of his father, he credits the support of his family as helping him to change his outlook. Additionally, Erwan decided that he would work so hard in school that he would be too tired to be depressed:

I think junior year I kind of made up my mind. I am going to do so much in school that I will be too tired to even be depressed. So I ran cross country, I ran track and field, I took four AP [Advanced Placement] classes, yeah, I did really well in school… After my junior year, my senior year I did more of the same stuff, I ran track, I took 5 AP classes, because I have realized that, you know, even if I graduate and do well, I might not even get to go to college so I want to stay ahead of things. So I took a total of 9 AP classes, I got about 30 AP credits, so I was going to go to school [college], if I went to school [college], as a sophomore.
As Erwan’s peers began getting ready for college, Erwan was unsure about what to do. He received help from his high school’s career center specialist who encouraged him to apply to college even though he might get deported. Meanwhile, Erwan’s attorney advised him to get community support. Erwan’s friends started a petition to block his deportation and his church became active in rallying behind him as well. Erwan’s priest connected him to a community-based nonprofit organization, Center for Social Justice, which supported undocumented immigrants and helped bring media attention to Erwan’s story. As a result of this outpouring of support, Erwan was granted deferred action in 2010, prior to the Obama Administration’s executive order in 2012 supporting Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). After being granted deferred action, Erwan felt compelled to step outside his comfort zone and share his story with a broader audience—in order to support immigration reform:

So I was granted deferred action in 2010 and from there I understood that I was in a unique position. Because only a handful of people have this. And I understood that now I am in a position where I can share my personal story without having to fear being deported, because I have already been through that. And that realization gave me the strength and the motivation to push myself out of my comfort zone. Because I had social anxiety—I was not about talking to people at school. I only had a handful of friends at school; I was a very shy kid. I was like, well, if this is going to help other kids like me—because I don’t want anyone else to ever go through whatever I just went through—I will be willing to walk out of my comfort zone.
As Erwan transitioned into the world of immigration advocacy, he was sent by the Center for Social Justice to speak at events around Washington, D.C. From there, he became connected with other immigrant rights organizations and activists and Erwan was encouraged to start an immigrant rights organization, College Dreamers, at the community college that he had begun attending. Through his participation in immigration activism, he was able to meet other undocumented students who had struggled like him, which helped him cope with his own situation:

That was really comforting for me to know that there are other kids who go through the same struggle you do… I think struggles are also day-to-day struggles. It is a day-to-day battle. And I think for other undocumented kids that is why it is so great to be part of a network, whether it be a local organization…or a nationwide network where you get to meet other kids who are in that same struggle as you and whom you can share those feelings with. Because I mean, I still hang out with my best friends on the weekends, but at the end of the day, they are not going to know what it is like to come home and not having Mom and Dad there, you know… One of the things that really got me on United We Dream was that they had this little program [related to the deportation of parents]… It was started by my friends…and at that time they shared at the training…they haven’t seen their mom since six years, and to be able to connect with them and to kind of be able to connect with other youth around the nation who have had their parents deported, I think that has been really great for me… So it is like you hit them once in a while, “How are you doing? How are your parents doing?” And you just get
to talk it up because I think at the end of the day…if you don’t have a support network, if you feel like your problems are too big for anyone to hold, you can crumble under and that is why you have people committing suicide… Because you don’t see hope. It is always so great to have a support network because even when you are down, they are going to keep pushing it forward…

In addition to finding the emotional support through immigration activism that kept him “pushing forward,” Erwan also came to learn a lot about his own privilege through his activist work, which led him to become more grateful for all that he has and to become committed to working for social justice:

I mean, I was always a good student but…I think I value it more now because I realized how much I have taken it for granted in the past and now I see how many people don’t have the same privileges… I think one of the huge ones for me was we went to Baltimore one day to door-knock and we came across this [Baltimore-based youth] organization… They are basically a group of young, high school Baltimore youth, inner-city youth, and the whole philosophy of the organization—these kids are so often regarded as part of the problem, but they are obviously not because they just need to be empowered and they are going to be part of the solution. I remember the first meeting we attended, they told us why they support the Dream Act because they know what it is like to not have that same chance, same opportunity to education because of the hardships we go through. They did great advocacy work and we are doing [it] alongside them and the Baltimore community… I think that is the one I really took to the
most…because these kids aren’t even undocumented. I was talking to my best friend and he said, “We grew up in Montgomery County. We had K-12 education at the fourth best school system in the nation and these kids don’t even have it in Baltimore yet…” I look at myself at school and…think about my friends who can’t go to school and it is like, how fortunate am I to have this? How much more do somebody’s kids deserve more than I do? …So, yeah, at the end of the day I think my whole situation of being undocumented has taught me to realize how much I have to realize my privilege and to try to make sure that others in my community who don’t have it, one day get it.

Through Erwan’s participation in immigration activism, he has come to be grateful for all that he has and aware of his privilege, despite the fact that he has not seen his parents since they were deported. Additionally, his participation in immigration activism enabled him to connect with other undocumented students whose parents had been deported. Being able to connect with these students has provided him with a network of support that helps him with the daily struggles he faces. Overall, these experiences have improved Erwan’s outlook and have cemented his commitment to helping other people in his community.

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Participating in immigration activism helped Erwan to find others who related to his situation, to develop political agency, and to cultivate an awareness of his own privilege as it relates to other injustices in his community. This profile on Erwan demonstrates how each of these coding categories fit together to illustrate Erwan’s unique
story. For Erwan, a significant part of his struggle related to the deportation of his parents, and his impending deportation. This context informs how his participation in immigration activism helped him to connect with other undocumented students who have experienced similar struggles, which ultimately helped him to cope with his situation. This context also informs how grateful Erwan felt for the community support he received to block his own deportation. Feeling grateful has led Erwan to become aware of his own privilege, which has ultimately instilled in Erwan a strong sense of social justice and a desire to fight for the rights of undocumented students and others in his community that are experiencing injustice. Overall, this profile helped to depict how different coding categories were interrelated for Erwan’s story.

Oscar

Oscar is a 19 year old undocumented student activist attending his first year of community college. He emigrated to the U.S. from Mexico City just before he turned 12 years old. Currently he lives alone with his mother. His father was deported back to Mexico three and half years ago.

As a result of his undocumented status, Oscar felt his future was hopeless and struggled to find his way. He was thrust into a leadership program for Latino/a youth, Education First, and through that, became connected with other young undocumented immigrants and the immigration activist movement. Being part of this movement reoriented Oscar’s perspective on his future, and helped him to get his priorities in check.

To begin his story, Oscar provided background information on his journey to the U.S.:
I would say it’s a typical common story for Spanish people—that they [my parents] wanted a better future for me… My parents came five years earlier than I did… I was left in Mexico. And I would say that they came for better life. They wanted to do something better and they thought that the U.S. was a big opportunity and so they risked it all. They put it all on the table and they decided to come, even though it was a sacrifice to leave me behind. But, I guess I just move on from that stage… I think it was probably the best decision they could have done because Mexico doesn’t have a lot of opportunities like the U.S. does. So I guess it’s a human instinct that you always gonna go somewhere where things are gonna be better.

Despite Oscar’s belief that his parents made the right decision to immigrate to the U.S., after Oscar joined his parents in the U.S., his first year living in the U.S. proved to be a difficult transition:

It was kind of tough, let me tell you that. It was really tough. I mean, I grew up with my grandparent for five years, so getting adjusted to my mom again, it was really complicated. I was only 12, and I was like, “I already know what’s up.” So it was really hard. The language, it was just another struggle. It was really hard, to be honest. I can say I still remember some days when I would just tear down, just because I missed my grandparents in Mexico, my uncles, my family. So, [pause] I could say it was kind of depressing. But at the same time it was kind of a climax for me. It was just the time to realize that, to put me into in the mindset that I came for a better reason. It’s okay to leave things behind ’cause you know you’re
making a sacrifice for a positive outcome. So since that time I’ve started realizing that in life you’re gonna do things that—you might lose things for better things or you might put things on hold to make other things happen. So it was a tornado of emotions… So that was my first year in the U.S. Just going through, missing my parents—I mean my grandparents, but then again looking forward for a better future.

In addition to the emotional upheaval of leaving his grandparents—who had raised him for the last 5 years and who were like his parents—behind in Mexico, and trying to reconcile that this sacrifice would help, as he believed, to provide him with a better future, Oscar also struggled to communicate, as he didn’t know the language:

The transition was mostly about the language. I couldn’t communicate. I was always sitting in a classroom like, “What am I doing here?” The only thing I could do is math. I’ve always been pretty good at numbers so whenever the teacher put some things on the board, I would do it. She would understood. But I’ll also say that there were a lot of resources too. Like in the U.S., my school had a lot of resources, they had basketball teams and stuff like that, after school activities. So that was one thing. Family resources was another. Sometimes they give us therapy to help to communicate together again, something that we didn’t have in Mexico.

Once Oscar got to high school, he started interacting with more people, and also started to get in trouble:
High school was, it was more… It was good. Liked it. I really did. But then, I could say that I developed new habits and stuff like…maybe go out with my friends more often and stuff like that. ’Cause in middle school I was just like straight back and forth—go to school, go to my house, go to my house, go to school. I didn’t really hang out a lot. In high school that’s where I started opening my mind to more things. I started hanging out with more friends. Got in…um… [pause] I was a good student too. I did what I had to do when it came to school. I loved school….I feel like learning is the best thing…I always knew that I was going to graduate high school… But when things really started hitting me [about my undocumented status], my sophomore year… ’Cause I was seeing people getting their permits, getting jobs… And that’s when I was like, “Man. I don’t know that there’s any chance I’m gonna go to college.” So that’s when I started doubting myself a lot and that’s when, I got a little reckless. It’s just like, “Oh, I don’t want to read this. I don’t want to go to school. I mean, I can’t even go to college… What is the point of doing this, now, you know?” I started skipping a lot. Skipping a lot [emphasis added]. Not going to class, going to class late….stuff like that. I feel bad. I feel really bad, ’cause I was like, “I don’t know what to do in my life now…” I didn’t really talk to my parents about it, either. So I was dealing with it on my own… That’s why I started hanging out more with other people. So, I make a problem by hanging out with people…. So kind of like, distracted… That’s how I felt. I never told anyone in high school… It was just me, my problem.
Oscar’s trouble led him to get put on probation. Fortunately for Oscar, his probation officer and his school counselor cared about Oscar, and according to him, forced him into Education First, a community-based leadership program for Latino/a youth that supported undocumented students, in an effort to reorient his perspective. This ultimately led to a profound change in Oscar’s outlook about his future.

I’ll never forget this… I was a junior…when I was skipping school I got into big trouble. I was set on probation. That probation officer knew that situation ’cause she knows all my things. I had a counselor and he [also]…knew my situation, so he was like, “I’m gonna put you in this [leadership] program…” I was like, “Nahh. This some crap. I don’t want to go. I’m not gonna go.” So he was like, “You have to go…” He even dropped me off, so I would have no option [but] to go. So I’m in there, in the little session. I was like, “Man. This is crap.” So I didn’t really pay attention. But, when one of the instructors said that they gave scholarships to undocumented students, I was like, “Hold on…this is what I’m interested in.” So I listened to that whole session. I listened to what they were saying…how you can always pursue your dreams even though there are obstacles. It was such a motivating speech…made for me. ’Cause I was done by then and that speech really meant a lot. They were like, “No matter how many obstacles or struggles or things you have on your way, you always have to find your way to your dreams.” So that really got to me. That really impacted me. I was like, “Man, that’s true…I’m not gonna
waste the rest of my life, just because I don’t have this…” So, that’s when I started applying to scholarships. And then that’s when my whole world opened. I saw like, a different point of view. I met other people that didn’t have papers as well, so I interact with them. What else did I do? That program helped me a lot. I won the scholarship of the program. I was the second awarded, so I really appreciated that. The year after that I was an intern in the program. Those people were the ones that told me, “Don’t give up.” They didn’t tell me by words. They were doing it by actions… They always introduced me to people, introduced me to this and that. They were taking me to places. So, I really became an emerging leader… So they knew why I needed it, so they kind of guided me through the path… So being on probation was hell, but it helped me out a lot.

After Oscar’s worldview opened up and he began thinking positively about his future, he got further involved in activism.

Junior year, like the end of junior year when I met Education First…everything just changed… Education First was connected with We Are Dreamers, another organization that helps undocumented students to get scholarships. So I branched myself to them… I started with Dream Alliance. One of the girls that…was their intern from the We Are Dreamers invited me to the meeting to start Dream Alliance. She told me to do it, she told me, “Dude, we want to start this. We’re doing this for immigration purposes.” And I was like, “Oh, I’m down for that.” And we went to…this guy’s house and it was just six of us talking about how we
were going to develop the whole thing and that’s how I started. That’s how I became a core member…like, leader.

As a Dreamer activist for Dream Alliance, Oscar takes on various roles to support immigration-related events.

Some of the times we have events, I take care of people…stay on task…make sure that things that are done… Sometimes I have to call a lot of people so they can attend, sometimes I call people to remind them of things, I collect data, like numbers, addresses, names. Sometimes I represent Dream Alliance. So I spoke on behalf of Dream Alliance… Sometimes I organize things. Like the last big march, I went around to Hispanic neighborhoods and just knock on doors and just tell them, “We gotta go.” And get their name on that—’cause we even provide buses and everything—so encourage people to stay strong and stay together and fight for the same thing… We always switch roles…we have different tasks…different times.

Through Oscar’s connection to different Dream Alliance, We Are Dreamers, and Education First, he has received a variety of resources.

We Are Dreamers provided some resources, some ways to talk, like talking in public... Yeah it was more like practices. So those were good resources…it’s a good thing to always be able to talk to people. So I could say that that was one of my resources. Education First is the same thing. Helped me out with public speaking, helped me out with college resources, helped me out with applications, with ACT classes. I even took—thanks to them, I got a free ticket to take my
ACT… One of the girls that worked with them gave me ACT classes personally, so it was a big resource for me and that’s why…whenever they need anything I’m like, “Sure.” Thanks to them, I also got a Mexican scholarship from the Mexican embassy that…fulfilled the whole tuition [for my first year of community college]… Being a speaker for Dream Alliance you get to meet a lot of people. They always send us messages [about] internships or scholarships. ’Cause people that we met…those people actually try to help us out by sending us resources and connecting us with other people. So, I would say, yeah, they actually did help a lot.

As a result of Oscar’s connections to different Dreamer organizations, he was able to get enough scholarship funding to attend his first year of community college. Participating in immigration activism also provided Oscar with a variety of social-emotional benefits, such as being more open, having greater motivation, and feeling more self-confident.

Personally it’s [my participation in immigration activism] made me more open. I’ve always been an open kid but not as I am right now. Sometimes I feel inspired…to work harder… ’Cause I see the struggle. I see the things that they go through and I feel I should work harder and develop my language, my public speaking more, my interaction with people, networking. And just knowing people… It just…made me just stronger. Before I used to give up really quick. And if things don’t go my way I just walked the other way. But now it’s like…I have to walk through this…I have to do this. It gave me more courage to do it… It gave me more positive vibes. Sometimes I felt like I wasn’t good enough for
this…I felt like this is not me… So—self-confidence. It gave me a lot of self-confidence… Becoming an activist for immigration also you see a lot of people that go through the same thing and they never give up… It’s contagious. It makes me feel like if they don’t give up, why should I? They have…enough confidence to do it. I think I’m capable of doing it too. So I would say that…it gave me a lot of confidence… I’m not afraid now…. It gave me the confidence to be more open and share my beliefs and be able to share my thoughts to other people…the good ideas that I have in mind. ’Cause before I was just like, “No, I don’t want to share my ideas. I’m gonna keep them to myself.” But now, I’m able to talk, and see, and tell how I see things and that has helped me a lot, has helped them a lot. ’Cause I bring good ideas to the table sometimes.

In addition to the social-emotional benefits of participating in immigration activism, Oscar also described how his participation in activism helped to motivate him academically:

Some of the students that I know throughout…immigration activism…they go to school, they go to college…they pay out-of-state tuition, they don’t give up. So I’m like, “Why should I?” …I should do the same thing…I shouldn’t quit school, and plus, like I said, I really like school, so that motivates me to keep going in school. Being surrounded by people that are really positive, that helped me keep going through school and always stay focus… Not being a quitter is something that I have had to learn. Like always have that self-confidence, have that courage
to do it, have the right way to do it. So I could say being an activist, it really impacted me on my education, overall.

Oscar also credits his participation in immigration activism as having helped him to unlock his talents and is thankful that his life has happened as it has:

And I’m gonna be honest. [If I hadn’t gotten involved in immigration activism] I’d be doing my own thing… I would be somewhere else, I know for sure… But then I think that things happen for a reason, and maybe it was this, to find my self-confidence, to find all of this hidden talent that I have, to expose it… So I really thank God that it happened the way it’s happened… [Participation in immigration activism] helped me a lot.

In contrast to his feelings when he was in high school and felt that his future was hopeless, Oscar now believes he has many options for his future:

I always wanted to be an architect… build things. But after the tests I’ve taken, I found out that political science and engineering is my strongest subjects. So right now I’m more into political science… On the other hand I’m still looking at being a financial advisor too… So I’m undecided. Hopefully I’ll find my way… The road will always be bumpy but it’s not impossible.

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This profile illustrates Oscar’s unique situation, the various ways that participating in immigration activism helped Oscar to find his way, and how various coding categories were interconnected in Oscar’s story. For Oscar, an important effect of participating in immigration activist was developing self-confidence. This self-
confidence helped to improve his academic motivation, his personal determination, and his political agency. It also helped him to positively construct his identity and imagine—and take steps to realize—a positive future for himself. Participating in immigration activism helped Oscar to turn his life around, from skipping class and believing college was unattainable, to winning a scholarship that enabled him to attend his first year at community college.

Conclusion

Overall, this chapter included three participant profiles that demonstrated the interrelatedness of different coding categories that were discussed in Chapter Four. In addition to demonstrating the interrelatedness of different categories, the profiles also demonstrated how each of the three selected participants’ unique struggles and contexts ultimately shaped how they experienced the effects of participating in immigration activism. For example, while Daniela and Erwan were both able to find someone who relates and experience a sense of belonging from their participation in immigration activism, this affected them quite differently—Daniela was struggling to connect to other Hispanics and Erwan was needing emotional support to deal with the deportation of his parents. Although Chapter Four does include some context through the inclusion of vignettes, having a deeper understanding of context through these profiles adds dimension to the data and explores the diversity within and across the various coding categories.
Chapter Six: Discussion and Implications

The purpose of this study was to explore the effects of participating in immigration activism on undocumented students in higher education. To investigate this topic, I conducted in-depth interviews with nine undocumented immigrant college students from the Washington Metropolitan Region and analyzed the interviews using a Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2003; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998) approach to identify codes and categories of codes, as discussed in Chapter Three. The findings of this study reveal numerous effects of participating in immigration activism on undocumented students in higher education, including: the development of social capital, academic development, political and civic development, and social-emotional benefits. Details about each of these categories are included in Chapter Four. While each of these categories is distinct, each category is related to the other categories in unique ways for each participant, as presented in Chapter Five. This chapter will discuss the findings of the study and present implications for research and practice.

Discussion

The findings of this study, that participation in immigration activism had numerous positive effects on the undocumented students who participated in this study—related to the development of social capital, academic development, political and civic development, and social-emotional benefits—extend the findings of previous research
regarding the effects of participating in activism. Findings from each of these categories will be discussed below in the context of previous research, as applicable.

**Development of social capital.** The personal accounts of undocumented student activists suggested that participation in immigration activism helped undocumented to connect undocumented students to resources, such as scholarships and other types of financial support (S.I.N. Collective, 2007; Valdivia & Valdivia, 2014). These personal accounts did not explain, however, the mechanism in which participating in immigration activism led undocumented activists to acquire these resources. The findings of the current study help to fill this gap by demonstrating how undocumented student activists developed social capital through their participation in immigration activism—through interactions with high-profile figures, professionals who support undocumented students, and other undocumented student activists. Ultimately, all nine participants were able convert this social capital into information and resources—or economic and cultural capital—which supported their attainment of higher education. Such information and resources included information about scholarships and internships open to undocumented students; financial support for college; information and advice about applying to college as an undocumented student, and legal information supporting undocumented students and their families.

Overall, the findings of this study align with and extend Enriquez’s (2011) findings regarding the development of social capital of undocumented students. Enriquez found that undocumented students developed social capital by networking with other undocumented students, and were able to use the relationships built through networking
to access informational resources specific to their unique needs brought on by their legal status. Such informational resources in Enríquez’ study included information about policies related to undocumented students, information about scholarships that cater to undocumented students, and information about higher education faculty and staff that are friendly to undocumented students and knowledgeable about undocumented students’ needs. As described above, in the current study, the types of informational resources gained through undocumented student activists’ connections with other undocumented student activists align with and extend Enríquez’s categories. In addition, while Enríquez acknowledges that undocumented students develop social capital through their interactions with other undocumented students, and the participants in her study include undocumented students that she encountered through her participation in immigration activism, her study does not address how participating in immigration activism provides opportunities to build social capital for undocumented students. The current study helps to fill this gap and extend Enríquez’s work by demonstrating how participation in immigration activism is an important networking activity that helps to facilitate the development of social capital for undocumented students—which ultimately connects undocumented students to information and resources to support their higher education attainment.

Several researchers have identified social capital as an important factor in leading to academic enrollment, retention, and achievement of undocumented students (Enríquez, 2011; Garcia & Tierney, 2011; Gonzales, 2010). This suggests that undocumented students who participate in immigration activism, and have opportunities to build social
capital with other undocumented students, may have higher academic enrollment, retention, and achievement rates than undocumented students who do not participate in immigration activism. Additional research is needed to investigate this issue further.

**Academic development.** While Perez et al (2010) found that undocumented students who participated in activism had higher levels of academic awards and extracurricular activities than undocumented students who did not participate in activism, their findings did not demonstrate whether participation in activism contributed to adolescent or young adult activists’ overall academic development. Research into undocumented college students and first-generation immigrant students found, however, that environmental social supports (i.e., peer network, supportive family, and participation in school activities) contributed to greater academic resilience and academic success for these students (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005; Perez et al., 2009).

Considering that participation in an activist group could represent a type of social or environmental support, these studies suggest that participation in immigration activism could contribute to greater academic motivation, resilience, and success for undocumented college students. The findings of the current study, that participation in immigration activism affected six of the nine participants’ academic development, partially align with previous findings. More specifically, while two of the participants cited increased academic motivation as an effect of participating in immigration activism, which aligns with previous research (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005; Perez et al., 2009), one participant, cited a decline in her grades as a result of participating in immigration activism, which contradicts previous research (Dennis, Phinney, &
Chuateco, 2005; Perez et al., 2009). The current study also extends the findings of previous research by demonstrating how participation in immigration activism led to academic effects that were not identified in previous literature. More specifically, five participants cited the development of academic skills and two participants cited a change in their academic path as a result of participating in immigration activism. Overall, further research is needed to explore how participation in immigration activism affects the academic development of undocumented students, and, in particular, if it contributes to academic enrollment, retention, and achievement.

**Political and civic development.** Previous research suggests that participation in immigration activism contributes to undocumented students’ political and civic development (Hinton, 2015; Morales et al., 2011; S.I.N. Collective, 2007), including their development and expression of political agency (Anguiano, 2011; Corrunker, 2012; Galindo, 2012). Additionally, previous research into the general population of young adult activists suggests that participating in activism may lead to enhanced sociopolitical awareness, enhanced sense of social responsibility, hopefulness about making change in the world, and may provide opportunities to gain community participation skills and knowledge (Morsillo & Prilleltensky, 2007).

The current study aligns with these findings. All nine participants described effects of participating in immigration activism related to political and civic development, a category which includes the development of political agency, tolerance of conflicting political beliefs, awareness of privilege, sense of civic duty, and political training and coaching. Overall, while there is no evidence from the current study to suggest that
undocumented student activists’ political and civic development contributes to their academic enrollment, retention, or achievement, the findings of this study do suggest that participation in immigration activism prepares undocumented students to be active members of a democratic society. This finding is interesting, because while undocumented immigrants are excluded from many of the democratic rights that citizens possess, through their participation in activism, undocumented students are claiming their political voice and their right to participate in a democracy. Abrams (2014), who analyzed the immigrant rights movement, referred to this phenomenon as “performative citizenship.” In this way, undocumented students’ participation in a political system from which they otherwise feel excluded (Abrego, 2006; Garcia & Tierney, 2011; Seif, 2011) may help them to develop feelings of belonging. By their participation in immigration activism, undocumented student activists are asserting their right to belong. Belonging and feelings of inclusion are important factors in undocumented students’ academic success (Pérez Huber, 2009).

**Social-emotional benefits.** Evans and Prilleltensky (2007); Prilleltensky (2003); and Watts and Flanagan (2007) found that participation in activism improved overall wellbeing and mental health for adolescents and young adults. In the current study, the broader category of social-emotional benefits refers to any positive effects of participating in activism that relate to a participant’s self-concept, personality, emotional wellbeing, or his or her relationships with other individuals and with society at large. Overall, the findings of this study align with the previous research in that all nine of the
participants received some social-emotional benefit(s) from their participation in immigration activism, which likely contributed to their overall wellbeing.

**Positive identity development.** Previous research into undocumented student activists suggests that participation in immigration activism may help undocumented students overcome any fear or shame associated with having undocumented status that is conferred on them by the broader society, positively construct their identity as undocumented students, and improve their self-conception (Anguiano, 2011; Corrunker, 2012; Negrón-Gonzales, 2013). Similarly, research on youth and young adults from traditionally underrepresented groups in higher education—including people of color and/or from low income groups—found that participation in student activist organizations and undertakings led to positive identity development (Lewis-Charp et al., 2013). In addition, research into the general population found that adolescents who participated in activism had more advanced identity development and were better adjusted than uninvolved adolescents (Pancer et al., 2007). Overall, the findings of the current study fit with the previous research regarding the role of activism in contributing to positive identity development for young adults—from both general population groups and from underrepresented groups in higher education. More specifically, as discussed in Chapter Four, seven of the nine participants described how through their participation in immigration activism, they were equipped with new ways of positively conceptualizing and actively constructing their identity as undocumented immigrants. Participants described how through their connections with other undocumented immigrants and
immigration activist organizations, they learned new vocabulary to describe this aspect of their identity and even grew to feel pride about their undocumented status.

**Determination.** None of the previous research identified for this study demonstrated that participation in activism contributed to adolescent or young adult activists’ determination. The findings of the current study, which suggest that participation in immigration activism led undocumented student activists to become more determined, add to the overall body of literature about the effects of participating in activism on undocumented students in higher education. More specifically, five of the nine participants described how their participation in immigration activism led them to become more determined—not only in terms of their activism, but in other areas of their lives as well, including their academic performance and personal growth. Four of the five participants who cited determination as an effect of their participation in activist credited their increase in determination as being inspired by the struggles of their undocumented activist peers. Overall, further research is needed to explore how participation in immigration activism affects the determination of undocumented students, and, in particular, if such determination contributes to academic enrollment, retention, and achievement.

**Self-efficacy.** In her study on low-income predominantly African American youth, Taines (2012) found that participation in student activism helped the participants to experience improved feelings of efficacy (Taines, 2012). Research into the general population of young adults also identified efficacy as an outcome to participating in activism (Harré, 2007). The findings from the current study align with previous research.
Three of the nine participants described feelings of self-efficacy—beliefs about their ability to successfully influence events in their lives through their performance at certain tasks (Bandura, 1994)—associated with their activist work. These participants described how they believed that their actions dedicated to changing immigration policy were effective even if, in some cases, policy had not yet changed.

**Finding someone who relates.** Research into the general population, Harré (2007) found that participation in activism leads young adult activists to feel a sense of belonging. In a similar vein, Taines (2012) found in a study of predominantly low-income African American youth that participation in activism led the participants to feel less alienated. Valdivia and Valdivia’s (2014) personal narratives about their respective journeys as undocumented students and activists echo these findings, as well. Specifically, Diana Valdivia described how while her undocumented status made her feel alone, participating in activism helped her to feel less alone. The current study aligns with this previous literature. More specifically, seven of the nine participants in the current study described their activist organizations as places where they could find someone who relates to their situation. Overall, the participants described how participating in immigration activism provided them with a network of support—whether they connected directly or indirectly with other undocumented students. For many of the participants, just knowing that they were not alone in their situation was an important way in which they found social-emotional support through their participation in immigration activism. As described above, feelings of inclusion and belonging are important factors in undocumented students’ academic success (Pérez Huber, 2009). Further research is
needed to investigate if participating in immigration activism, which was demonstrated in this study to provide undocumented students with feelings of belonging and inclusion, also contributes to their higher education attainment.

Overall, while these findings stem from just nine participants, this research fills an important gap by demonstrating how participation in immigration activism had numerous positive effects on the undocumented students who participated in this study—related to the development of social capital, academic development, political and civic development, and social-emotional benefits. Additional research with a larger and more geographically diverse sample size is needed to further explore how immigration activist organizations support undocumented students in higher education.

It is also important to note that the findings of this study are situated temporally within the context of the immigration reform movement more broadly. As demonstrated by Anguiano (2011), the Dream social movement has had three distinct phases, each with specific tactics regarding political action. For example, Anguiano noted that self-disclosure of undocumented status was a tactic in the second phase of the movement, from 2007 to May 2010, whereas increased personal and political agency was a noted feature of the third phase of the movement, from May 2010 to December 2010. Anguiano’s analysis of the evolving ways in which undocumented student activists conceptualize their identity and express their agency, is rooted in the temporality of the movement. As such, it is possible that some of the effects of participating in activism cited in this study—including positive identity construction and development of political agency—are also rooted in the temporality of the immigration reform movement. It is
also noteworthy to point out that when conducting member checks with participants, which in some cases occurred two years after their interviews, two participants expressed surprise about how optimistic they were at the time of their interview regarding the prospects of immigration reform. While they acknowledged that their optimism at the time of their interviews was accurate, they both noted that they now felt greater cynicism that the U.S. government would actually institute comprehensive immigration reform. This is further evidence to suggest that activists’ experiences participating in a particular movement, and the effects of their participation, are very much rooted in the temporality of the movement. Further research is needed regarding how adolescent and young adult activists more generally are affected by the temporality of the social movements in which they participate, and how those effects ultimately contribute to development of social capital as well as their academic, political, and social-emotional development.

**Implications**

As discussed previously, the findings of this study suggest that participation in immigration activism may help undocumented students develop social capital, which may lead to the acquisition of resources and information to support higher education attainment. Participation in immigration activism may also contribute to undocumented students’ academic development, instilling them with academic skills and motivation that not only affect their activist work, but their academic work as well. Further, the findings suggest that participation in activism contribute to undocumented students’ political and civic development, which may not only lead undocumented students to become politically aware and civically engaged members of U.S. society, but may also instill
them with feelings of belonging and inclusion that contribute to their overall academic success. Finally, the findings of this study suggest that participation in immigration activism may provide social-emotional benefits to undocumented students—including positive identity development, determination, self-efficacy, and finding someone who relates—which may contribute to undocumented students’ wellbeing and mental health, which may ultimately support their attainment of higher education.

Overall, these findings could help to inform the work of secondary and higher education administrators, student services and student affairs personnel, and educators as they work to support undocumented students, who are a segment of the student population that faces extraordinary hurdles to higher education academic attainment. As detailed in Chapter One, the racism and xenophobia endemic in U.S. society makes it extremely difficult for undocumented students to enroll in and graduate from college by presenting financial barriers, academic barriers, and social-emotional barriers to higher education attainment. The findings of this study will be discussed below as they relate to how undocumented students may overcome these barriers through their participation in immigration activism, and the implications that such findings have for secondary and higher education practitioners.

**Financial and academic barriers to higher education attainment.** As documented in Chapter One, racist and xenophobic laws and policies keep many undocumented immigrant families in poverty, and so the high cost of college tuition, the lack of in-state tuition available to undocumented students in most states, and the lack of federal student aid available to undocumented students, makes higher education
attainment a significant challenge to undocumented students (Abrego, 2006; Diaz-Strong et al., 2011; Morse & Birnbach, 2012). Chapter One also discussed how many undocumented students may face academic barriers to higher education, including not being adequately prepared for higher education as other student groups (Conway, 2009; Garcia & Tierney, 2011; Gonzales, 2009); not being adequately prepared in academic literacy, which presents academic challenges to many immigrant students who are ELLs (Curry, 2004); and not receiving adequate college preparation information and resources as a result of being first generation college goers (Garcia & Tierney, 2011). Another academic barrier is that the college preparation information and resources that undocumented students do receive may not be customized to their unique needs as undocumented students (Garcia & Tierney, 2011).

The participants in this study described facing these same financial and academic barriers to higher education attainment and their experiences suggest that student services personnel at the high school and college levels are not equipped to provide adequate information to undocumented students about how to apply to college as an undocumented student as well as information about resources available to undocumented students to help them financially afford their education. For example, Lizeth shared in her interview how she attended a financial aid session for a large, public university in her state. When she asked how she could apply to the university without a Social Security Number, according to Lizeth, the admissions representative told her, “Don’t come.” Later, Lizeth followed up with her high school counselor about how to apply to college and according to Lizeth, her
counselor said, “It’s really hard right now and you probably should think of other options.”

Despite the academic and financial barriers experienced by the participants in this study, however, the participants also described how their participation in immigration activism led them to access critical information and resources that was relevant to their needs—through their development of social capital—which ultimately helped them to overcome some of these barriers. More specifically, six participants described finding scholarships for which they were eligible that ultimately helped them finance their education. One participant even received money from a fellow undocumented student activist to help him finance his college education when he could not afford a tuition bill. Additionally, four participants described how they received information about applying to colleges as undocumented students from their network of undocumented student activists. As described by Jonathan in the following excerpt, the information he received from his activist network filled the gaps left by his high school and university:

…they gave me a lot of college advice that my counselor in school didn’t… They provided the college help, specifically for being a Dreamer that I wouldn’t have received in the AVID program or [a college preparatory program in his school district] just because they were focusing on the general high school students going to college, they weren’t specific to undocumented students going to college… The [Dreamer organization] sort of provided that guidance that I feel counselors should be giving a lot of the students in high school. The majority of the time a lot of the ways that Dreamers get the information about going to college is through
word of mouth about applying, about how to fill out the application; it is those little conversations that all students have to go by because the administration in the high school and college can’t really say, “Apply this way,” because it is not a really detailed system. Even at [my university], there is not a system of how Dreamers should apply for college.

Ultimately, these findings help to inform the work of practitioners who support undocumented students’ transition from high school to college, including high school counselors, career center specialists, AVID teachers, and other types of college preparation program teachers and mentors (both inside and outside of school), as well as college admissions and financial aid officers. Because there is such an information gap between high school and higher education professionals and undocumented student organizations regarding how undocumented students should apply for and pay for college, such high school and higher education practitioners should reach out to immigration activist organizations to learn about the resources available to undocumented students—including scholarships, internships, and other resources available to undocumented students, as well as specific information and recommendations about how undocumented students can apply to college. Those practitioners should then use that information to support the undocumented students that they serve. Practitioners should also refer undocumented students to immigration activist and advocacy organizations at the school, university, or the community, when students require further information. Such practitioners should additionally invite student representatives from various immigration organizations onto school or higher education campuses to share information and
resources with undocumented students about applying to and paying for college. To disseminate critical information and resources to undocumented students, high school and higher education student services practitioners should develop or share fact sheets, web pages, presentations, workshops, or other information dissemination vehicles—about how to apply to college as an undocumented student and the various private scholarships, payment plans, and other financial resources that are available to undocumented students. And then those practitioners should share such information dissemination vehicles with their colleagues and with their professional associations. In addition, at the administrative level, high schools and colleges should also institute policies and practices regarding the various types of institutional support that will be provided to undocumented students in order to support their transition from high school to college. Ultimately, student services practitioners have a responsibility to serve all of their students, including undocumented students, and so should provide undocumented students with adequate and much-needed information to support an effective high school to college transition.

**Social-emotional barriers to higher education attainment.** As described in Chapter One, many undocumented students also face social-emotional barriers to higher education attainment—including mental health issues, such as depression, anxiety, stress, and feelings of hopelessness (Abrego, 2006; Contreras, 2009; Diaz-Strong et al., 2011; Hernandez et al., 2010; Perez et al., 2010)—related to the trauma of migration, internalized racism, a fear of deportation, financial struggles, and other issues related to their status (Abrego, 2006; Diaz-Strong et al., 2011; Garcia & Tierney, 2011; Hernandez et al., 2010; Hipolito-Delgado, 2010; Padilla, 2001; Perez et al., 2009; Perez et al., 2011).
Such mental health issues may have an effect on undocumented college students’ academic motivation and achievement (Abrego, 2006; Garcia & Tierney, 2011). Additionally, while feeling included is an important factor of undocumented college student success (Pérez Huber, 2009), many undocumented college students feel excluded from their higher education institutions and society at large (Garcia & Tierney, 2011; Pérez Huber, 2009; Perry, 2006). Although the participants in this study described facing many of these same social-emotional barriers, particularly before getting involved in activism, the participants also described how their participation in immigration activism provided them with important social-emotional benefits that helped them to overcome such barriers. Such social-emotional benefits of participating in activism that were cited by the participants included positive identity construction, which helped participants to overcome shame associated with their status; feelings of determination and self-efficacy; and the ability to connect with other undocumented students who relate to their situation, which helped to cultivate feelings of belonging in participants.

Ultimately, these findings help to inform the work of high school administrators, counselors, social workers, and psychologists as well as higher education administrators, mental health providers, and student affairs professionals (e.g., student activities personnel, campus diversity and inclusion personnel). As the findings of this study suggest that participating in immigration activism supports undocumented students’ social emotional development, including positive identity construction, increased feelings of determination and self-efficacy, and to ability to find others who relate to their situation, high school and higher education practitioners can support immigration activist
organizations in schools and on campuses, as well as institute alternate programming—such as mentoring programs or support groups—that similarly bring undocumented students together to connect with one another and improve their overall social-emotional wellbeing. High school and higher education administrators can also institute school or campus policies, or make public statements, that provide support for undocumented students, and undocumented student organizations, in order to help undocumented students to feel welcome, safe, included, and supported in school and on campus. In instances in which there are so few undocumented students in school or on campus to warrant a dedicated program, organization, or group, high school and higher education practitioners can reach out to community-based organizations, and refer undocumented students to those organizations accordingly.

In summary, the findings of this study suggest that participation in activism equips undocumented students with numerous financial, academic, and social-emotional resources to help them overcome barriers to higher education brought on by the broader society’s racist and xenophobic anti-immigrant policies. These findings imply that secondary and higher education administrators and educators should not only support immigration activism on schools and campuses, but should also institute policies and practices to help equip undocumented students with similar resources to those received through participating in activism. Ultimately, providing for the higher education attainment needs of undocumented students will not only help undocumented students reach their goals but will also help the nation as a whole, as graduating more immigrants
students from college will help the U.S. become better equipped to meet economic challenges of the 21st century (NCPPHE, 2005; National Research Council, 1997).

It should be noted, though, that supporting immigration activism, and working to equip undocumented students with the types of resources derived from participating in activism, is a short-term solution to helping undocumented students overcome systemic barriers to higher education attainment. To provide social justice for undocumented students, however, we must fight to remove those systemic barriers. University of Maryland President Wallace Loh (2012), a vocal supporter of the Maryland Dream Act—which provided in-state tuition benefits to undocumented students in Maryland—set an excellent example for higher education administrators by authoring an opinion piece for the *Washington Post* declaring his support for his state’s upcoming referendum on that legislation. Similarly, George Mason University President Ángel Cabrera has also expressed support for legislation in the state of Virginia to provide in-state tuition benefits to undocumented students (“Treatment of Undocumented Students,” 2014). These are important first steps towards granting social justice to undocumented students, however these efforts do not go far enough. Ultimately, educational institutions must take a stronger stand to advocate for legal standing for undocumented students and their families, as well as undocumented students’ access to federal student aid. Even though Maryland now grants in-state tuition rates to undocumented students (Virginia still requires undocumented students to pay out-of-state tuition rates), many undocumented students will still not be able to afford tuition rates at public colleges and universities without access to federal student aid, which is only granted to U.S. citizens and
immigrants with legal standing. University leaders must continue to advocate for the justice of undocumented students and their families until they have the same access to higher education as other students in their states.

In addition, educators must continue to fight to change the culture of racism and xenophobia that pervades our society and seeps into our classrooms, and which ultimately becomes internalized in the consciousness of immigrant students. To help immigrant students overcome racism and xenophobia, educators should use critical pedagogical practices to raise students’ consciousness (Freire, 1970/2006) and show students genuine care (Valenzuela, 1999). Teacher educators and teacher preparation programs must also adequately prepare teachers to understand the ways that racism and xenophobia becomes internalized by immigrant students and students of color and to institute socially just and liberatory pedagogical practices into their classrooms. Ultimately, the responsibility for bringing justice to undocumented students does not fall on the field of education alone, however educators and educational institutions must do their part to not only help undocumented students overcome barriers to higher education attainment, but eliminate those barriers from existing in the first place.
Appendix A

IRB Approval Letters

DATE: October 1, 2013
TO: Joseph Maxwell, Ph.D.
FROM: George Mason University IRB
Project Title: [509711-1] Effects of Participation in Immigration Activist Organizations on Undocumented Students in Higher Education
SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project
ACTION: APPROVED
APPROVAL DATE: October 1, 2013
EXPIRATION DATE: September 30, 2014
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited review category #7

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this project. The George Mason University IRB has APPROVED your submission. This submission has received Expedited Review based on applicable federal regulations.

Please remember that all research must be conducted as described in the submitted materials.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the project and insurance of participant understanding followed by a signed consent form. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by the IRB prior to initiation. Please use the appropriate revision forms for this procedure.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to the Office of Research Integrity & Assurance (ORIA). Please use the appropriate reporting forms for this procedure. All FDA and sponsor reporting requirements should also be followed (if applicable).

All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must be reported promptly to the ORIA.

The anniversary date of this study is September 30, 2014. This project requires continuing review by this committee on an annual basis. You may not collect data beyond this date without prior IRB approval. A continuing review form must be completed and submitted to the ORIA at least 30 days prior to the
anniversary date or upon completion of this project. Prior to the anniversary date, the ORIA will send you a reminder regarding continuing review procedures.

Please note that all research records must be retained for a minimum of three years, or as described in your submission, after the completion of the project.

If you have any questions, please contact Bess Dieffenbach at 703-993-4121 or ediefen@gmu.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within George Mason University IRB’s records.
DATE: August 20, 2014

TO: Joseph Maxwell, Ph.D.

FROM: George Mason University IRB

Project Title: [593711-2] Effects of Participation in Immigration Activist Organizations on Undocumented Students in Higher Education

SUBMISSION TYPE: Continuing Review/Progress Report

ACTION: APPROVED

APPROVAL DATE: August 20, 2014

EXPIRATION DATE: August 19, 2015

REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

REVIEW TYPE: Expedited review category #7

Thank you for your submission of Continuing Review/Progress Report materials for this project. The George Mason University IRB has APPROVED your submission. This submission has received Expedited Review based on applicable federal regulations.

Please remember that all research must be conducted as described in the submitted materials.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the project and insurance of participant understanding followed by a signed consent form. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by the IRB prior to initiation. Please use the appropriate revision forms for this procedure.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to the Office of Research Integrity & Assurance (ORIA). Please use the appropriate reporting forms for this procedure. All FDA and sponsor reporting requirements should also be followed (if applicable).

ALL NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must be reported promptly to the ORIA.

The anniversary date of this study is August 19, 2015. This project requires continuing review by this committee on an annual basis. You may not collect data beyond this date without prior IRB approval. A continuing review form must be completed and submitted to the ORIA at least 30 days prior to the...
anniversary date or upon completion of this project. Prior to the anniversary date, the ORIA will send you a reminder regarding continuing review procedures.

Please note that all research records must be retained for a minimum of five years, or as described in your submission, after the completion of the project.

If you have any questions, please contact Bess Dieffenbach at 703-993-4121 or ediefen@gmtu.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within George Mason University IRB’s records.
Appendix B

Informed Consent Form

RESEARCH PROCEDURES

This research is being conducted to determine the perceived effects of participating in an immigration activist organization on undocumented students in higher education. If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to answer a variety of questions in a one-on-one interview lasting 1-2 hours about your academic and personal experiences related to your undocumented immigration status, your participation in immigration activism, and how that participation has affected you. It is possible that you will also be asked for participate in follow-up interview, which will last approximately 30-60 minutes, and will be for the purpose of clarifying points made in the initial interview. The follow-up interview, if needed, will be scheduled within 3 weeks of the initial interview. The interviews will be audio-recorded.

RISKS

There are no risks for participating in this research. There is a slight possibility that some participants may become upset during the interview since some interview questions may bring up sensitive topics or issues. Participants may choose to withdraw from the study at any time, or may refuse to answer certain questions.

BENEFITS
There are no benefits to you as a participant other than to further research to help us better understand the effects of participation in activism on undocumented students in higher education.

CONFIDENTIALITY

The data in this study will be confidential. You will not need to state your name in this interview or at any other point for any reason. In cases where the researcher learns of your name, the researcher will follow these procedures: Names will not be included on any of the interview transcripts or other written or verbally expressed information about the research; pseudonyms will be given. Through the use of an identification key with pseudonyms, only the researcher will be able to link interview data to participants. Only the researcher will have access to the identification key.

Pseudonyms will also be used for any school or teacher names mentioned. All interviews will be audio recorded. The audio recordings of interviews and subsequent transcripts of interviews will be in the sole possession of the researcher at all times. All physical recordings and transcripts will be secured in a locked cabinet in the home office of the student researcher, and all electronic files will be password protected on the researcher's personal computer or hard drive.

PARTICIPATION

Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason. If you decide not to participate or if you withdraw from the study, there is no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. There are no costs to you or any other party.
CONTACT

This research is being conducted by Samantha Spinney in the College of Education and Human Development at George Mason University. She may be reached at 202-725-5238 or at sspinney@gmu.edu for questions or to report a research-related problem. You may also contact Dr. Joe Maxwell in the College of Education and Human Development at George Mason University for questions or problems. He can be reached at 703-993-2119. You may contact the George Mason University Office of Research Integrity & Assurance at 703-993-4121 if you have questions or comments regarding your rights as a participant in the research.

This research has been reviewed according to George Mason University procedures governing your participation in this research.

CONSENT

I have read this form and agree to participate in this study (for nonexempt research projects, include this statement and a place for the participant's signature and the date of signature).

__________________________
Name

__________________________
Date of Signature

Version date: 8/6/13
Appendix C

Interview Guide

Research Questions

1. What are the perceived effects of participation in an immigration activist organization for undocumented students in higher education?
   a. What is the nature of these effects – psychological, social, academic, or other?
   b. What is it about activism that affects undocumented students? Is it the organization, the goal of the activism, or some other aspect?

Thank you so much for your willingness to talk to me today. I am going to ask you a number of personal questions. If you feel at all uncomfortable answering any questions at any point, you can skip the questions or stop the interview. Everything that you say to me will be completely confidential.

1) To begin, please tell me a little about yourself:

   a) How old are you?

   b) Where do you attend school?

   c) What are you studying?

   d) Do you have career plans? What are they?
e) Tell me about your family.

f) Tell me about your living situation.

g) What is your country of origin?

h) When did you first arrive in the U.S.? How old were you?

i) Why did you/your family come to the U.S.?

j) Do you remember your first impressions of the U.S.? What were they?

k) Please tell me about the first year that you lived in the U.S.

2) Now I’d like to ask you some background questions about your educational experiences.

a) Did you attend school in your home country? What was that like?

b) When did you first start attending school in the U.S.?

c) How was the transition when you first started attending school in the U.S.?

d) What was high school like for you?

e) What kinds of courses did you take?

f) What sorts of extracurricular activities did you participate in?

g) Overall, what was your social life like in school?

h) Do you have any good stories about your life during high school that will help to illustrate to me what your life was like then?

i) At what point did you realize you wanted to continue your education after high school?

j) Why did you decide to go to college?

k) What is your major? What are your educational and career plans?
1) How is your college life different from your high school life?

3) Tell me about your undocumented status and how this has affected your educational plans.
   a) When did you first learn that you were undocumented? How did you find out? Did you understand what that meant?
   b) How did you feel when you learned this information?
   c) When you were still in high school, did you ever talk about your immigration status with anyone outside of your family? Who? What was the context?
   d) Did you have any support structures or resources that helped you figure out how to continue your education after high school with your undocumented status? Please describe these.
   e) Did your undocumented status serve as an obstacle at all for you to continue education? How so? Have you had to delay your college education at all?
   f) How do you finance your education?
   g) Are there any other challenges that undocumented students, in your experience, face in college? Personal/emotional challenges? How do you deal with these challenges? Do you ever seek outside support to help you deal with these challenges?
   h) In your current school, does anyone know you have undocumented status? Who have you decided to tell? Why did you decide to tell these particular people?

4) The next set of questions is about your participation in immigration activism.
a) What types of social organizations or networks have you been involved in, either in or out of college?

b) Are you at all involved in immigration activism, such as activism in support of the DREAM Act or comprehensive immigration reform? If so, please tell me about your role in this activism.

i) How did you first decide to participate in immigration activism?

ii) How did you get involved? When?

iii) Tell me about your organization – is it campus-based? Or community based?

iv) Tell me about your level of participation (i.e. how often do you attend meetings?).

v) What kind of related activities you participate in?

vi) What is your role in your organization? Do you have a leadership role of some kind?

vii) What are the other activists in your organization like?

viii) Do you have many friends who also participate in activism?

ix) Have you introduced new people to your organization?

c) What is it that motivates you to be an immigration activist?

d) How does participation in activism affect you?

e) Has this activism in any way affected your personal development? How so?

i) The development of your identity

ii) Development of beliefs or opinions

iii) Your ability to use your voice to express your beliefs or opinions
iv) Your self confidence

v) Your feelings regarding your undocumented status

f) Has this activism in any way affected your academic development?
   i) Motivation in school
   ii) Academic path (i.e. your major)?
   iii) Academic skills (writing, public speaking, research, policy)
   iv) Decisions to continue enrollment, transfer schools, etc.

g) Has your participation in an activist group introduced you to any people or resources that have offered practical help or advice about being an undocumented student in college? If so, please describe this in more detail.

h) Has your participation helped you learn about or find new scholarships or sources of funding for your education?

i) What do you think you have learned most from your experience as an undocumented student activist? How has this shaped your identity, and the personality that you have today?

j) What do you find most rewarding about your participation in an immigration activist organization? (i.e. is it the fact that you’re with a group of other undocumented students; that you’re fighting for what you believe in; etc.).

5) At this point, I think you must know the kind of information that I’m looking for in this interview --- information about how your participation in immigration activism has affected you. Is there anything that we have not yet talked about that you think might be relevant?
Thank you so much for your cooperation in answering these questions! This information is really helpful—both to me personally, and to the public more generally.

Do you have any questions for me?
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168


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175


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