

IN PURSUIT OF THE DREAM: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF DREAMERS  
COMING-OF-AGE IN VIRGINIA

by

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## **DEDICATION**

This is dedicated to all the DREAMers. Your courage, your persistence, and your dreams are an inspiration.

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **IN PURSUIT OF THE DREAM: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF DREAMERS COMING-OF-AGE IN VIRGINIA**

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The purpose of this study was to analyze the acculturation, U.S. educational experiences, and civic action of unauthorized Latino young adults living in Virginia as a way of identifying concrete recommendations for educators and allies working with unauthorized students and young adults in their quest for higher education and a career. Using a narrative approach and in-depth interviewing, I examined the stories of eight unauthorized Latino young adults and their coming-of-age experiences in the Commonwealth of Virginia. I identified participant responses to being unauthorized, the emotional and psychological impact of their status, the limitations they experienced as a result of their status, and the support they needed to pursue their goals.

Keywords: unauthorized, undocumented, young adults, Virginia, educational experiences, acculturation, postsecondary education, , qualitative study

## CHAPTER ONE: BACKGROUND

*“We must ask ourselves if it is good for the health and wealth of this country to keep such a large number of U.S.-raised young adults in the shadows. We must ask what is lost when they learn to be illegal”* (Gonzales, 2011, p. 617)

With an estimated 65,000 unauthorized young adults graduating from high schools across the United States each year and facing significant obstacles in their pursuit of higher education and employment, there is a pressing need to document their struggles as a means of raising awareness and broadening discussions in the fields of policy, education, and social services. The aim of this research is to describe the coming-of-age experiences of unauthorized Latino young adults living in Virginia. This dissertation uses the terms unauthorized and undocumented synonymously.

This chapter provides a general introduction to the numbers of unauthorized immigrants in this country, as well as the educational and social challenges that they face. I focus particularly on those who are identified as part of Generation 1.5 (foreign-born individuals with immigrant parents who migrated to the United States as children). This chapter also provides an historical overview of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, as well as federal and state policies regarding access to K-12 and postsecondary education for unauthorized immigrant students. Included is a description of the 1982 U.S.

Supreme Court *Plyler v. Doe* case that ruled that, based on the Fourteenth Amendment, states are prohibited from refusing a free public K-12 education to unauthorized immigrant children. Also included is a description of the proposed Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act that aims to further the educational and professional opportunities of unauthorized students and the Deferred Action for Childhood Immigrants (DACA) program that was announced in June 2012. Following the discussion of state and federal policy is a description of the purpose of this study, the research questions, and a glossary of key terms.

### **Problem Statement**

Each year approximately 65,000 foreign-born students who have been living in the United States for five or more years graduate from U.S. high schools with unauthorized residency status. These are students who were granted access to a free public K-12 education by the 1982 *Plyler v. Doe* Supreme Court case. Moreover, most of these students are children of unauthorized immigrants who are tax-paying members of the labor force (Lipman, 2006). Each year an additional 15,000 unauthorized immigrant students reach high school age without graduating (Gonzales, 2010). Furthermore, there are an estimated 700,000 unauthorized young adults aged 18-34 who have completed high school living in the United States., However, of these, fewer than half (49%) are enrolled in college or have attended college compared with 71% of U.S.-born residents (Passel & Cohn, 2009). Moreover, far fewer numbers of these unauthorized college students graduate with a four-year degree (Batalova & McHugh, 2010). In light of these statistics, the Migration Policy Institute estimates that nearly 62% of potential DREAM

Act beneficiaries would most likely fail to gain permanent (or even conditional) status due primarily to the proposed bill's educational attainment requirements (Batalova & McHugh, 2010). The proposed DREAM Act requires that eligible students graduate from high school and then either attend college or join the military to pursue citizenship. Unable to meet this requirement, many potential DREAMers will be ineligible for citizenship.

Research in this dissertation focuses specifically on the experiences of unauthorized Latino DREAMers currently living in Virginia. According to a report by the Immigration Policy Center (2012), an estimated 25,086 DREAMers (undocumented individuals who are potentially eligible for the DACA program) live in Virginia. Of these, the majority (74%) came from North, Central, or South America. Considering both the economic needs of the state and the collective needs of Virginian DREAMers, it is critically important to examine the educational and social experiences of this population as well as the services and opportunities afforded them.

While not all unauthorized students in the United States are Latino, as is the case in Virginia, the majority are. In fact, it is estimated that 80% of all unauthorized immigrants come from Mexico, El Salvador, and Guatemala (Passel & Cohn, 2011). Documented and unauthorized Latinos now constitute over 14% of the U.S. population, and the U.S. Census Bureau estimates that this number will reach nearly 30% by the year 2050 (Cohn & Passel, 2008; Ennis, Ríos -Vargas & Albert, 2011). In terms of country of birth, educational experience, background, and skills, Latinos are a heterogenous group. However, Latino children have recently been identified as the largest group of children in

the United States living in poverty as it is defined by the United States Census Bureau based on family size and income (Lopez & Velasco, 2011). Furthermore, Latinos are much less likely than succeeding generations of other immigrant groups to surpass the achievements of their first and second-generation parents and grandparents (Rumbaut, 1995; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 1995, 2001).

In terms of educational attainment, Latino high school student graduation rates are significantly lower than those of other demographics (Department of Education, 2012). Nationally, the high school graduation rate for Latino students is 58% compared with Asian students at 79% and White, non-Latino students at 76%. Latino students in Virginia also graduate at lower rates than their non-Latino peers. In 2011 in Virginia, only 71% of Latino students graduated from high school in four years compared with an average of 82% of all students and 86% of White, not-Latino students.

While an increasing number of Latino students are now attending institutions of higher education, about 10% of all high school graduates, compared with 7% of the total U.S. population, far fewer are actually graduating with college degrees (Fry, 2002). Latino students are much more likely to attend college part-time, attend a community college, and begin college at a later age than their White peers. All of these are potential risk factors that could lead these students to drop out of college before graduating. Unauthorized Latino youth face an even greater number of challenges in the pursuit of higher education.

Unauthorized children of all nationalities and backgrounds often arrive in the United States after experiencing traumatic circumstances such as clandestine border

crossings and family separations. They then face such challenges as fears of being identified and deported, failure to reunite with family, and extended family separation, (Dozier, 1993; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). Many were brought into the country at an early age and do not know any other home. They have been raised in the United States and gone through the U.S. education system for the greater part of their lives. Their pathway to successful adaptation to their new home and social mobility depends on many factors including, not only human capital such as their skills, knowledge, and experience, but also the context of reception, how society and the government responds to particular groups (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Immigrants in general, and Latinos specifically, are often faced with negative social mirroring, which means that they can encounter a negative reception in schools, in their communities, and in society at large. Consequently, their self-esteem and future goals and aspirations may suffer over the long term. (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001).

In addition to negative stereotyping, the families of many unauthorized immigrant students face economic challenges. Passel and Cohn (2009) report that many unauthorized immigrants live at or below the federal poverty level. The average 2007 household income for unauthorized immigrants was \$36,000 compared with a \$50,000 median household income for U.S.-born residents. One third of all children of unauthorized immigrants live in poverty, compared with 18% of children of U.S.-born parents. In addition, unlike other immigrants, unauthorized immigrants' salaries do not markedly increase the longer they live in the United States.

Unequal access to higher education is one contributing factor as significant research



has shown a connection between social mobility and school performance (Kasinitz, Mollenkopf, Waters, & Holdaway, 2008; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001, 2006; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 1995; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008). Research on the education of Latinos and other immigrants, both documented and undocumented, has identified the practice of what Valenzuela (1999) refers to as *subtractive schooling*. Subtractive schooling is a practice that devalues the home language, culture, and identity of foreign-born students and creates social, linguistic, and cultural divides among students, as well as among students, staff, and teachers (Valenzuela, 1999). The experience of subtractive schooling also creates a cultural divide between Latino students and the world of school and knowledge, and sets students up to believe that their personal experiences and knowledge are lacking, whereas those of the “other” are somehow superior (Moll & Ruiz, 2002). These practices and school structures often result in de facto tracking in which Latino and other immigrant middle- and high school students are more likely to be in general education classes than college preparatory classes. This tracking makes it difficult for students to gain access to much-needed mentors and information about college preparation (Conchas, 2006; Gonzales, 2007; Gonzalez et al., 2003; Lopez, 2010).

Unauthorized students, even more than their documented peers, need access to strong mentors, information about postsecondary education and financial support, as well as lower levels of family obligations in order even to begin to think about postsecondary education (Gonzales, 2011). Due to many factors, including a lack of strong teacher-student relationships, as well as the desire to conceal their own and their family’s

unauthorized migratory status, it is unlikely these students will receive the specific information they need to apply for and then to fund a college education. Instead, left to their own devices, they end up piecing together information garnered from other unauthorized immigrants; the result is a gap-filled understanding of how to pursue an educational or career path beyond high school (Enriquez, 2011). In the end, these unauthorized students have unequal access to higher education and limited educational resources and opportunities; faced with these obstacles, many unauthorized high school graduates give up on pursuing postsecondary education (Abrego & Gonzales, 2010; Huber & Malagon, 2007). Even if unauthorized students do graduate from both high school and college, lacking legal authorization to work in the United States, their degrees do little to ameliorate their employment opportunities (Perez, 2009).

The likely outcome of such a set of circumstances is that these unauthorized students, although bilingual and often better educated than their parents, will not find more lucrative jobs than their parents or rise into the middle class (Gonzales, 2011). They are also unlikely to return to their country of birth to work. As a result, these young people are frustrated, especially those who do manage to obtain a college degree (Abrego, 2010; Gonzales, 2011). The frustration over their lack of mobility can have devastating consequences. The failure of Generation 1.5 and Second Generation youth to achieve upward mobility can result in their assimilation into an underclass, where they and their descendants lack the drive and social resources of the first generation immigrants (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001).

To aid in understanding the role policy plays in immigration, legal status and

educational opportunities for unauthorized youth, I offer an historical overview and analysis of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, aka the Hart-Cellar Act (an act, which among other things, amended the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952) and recent policy connected to the educational rights of unauthorized immigrants.

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there have been two major shifts in immigration policy. The first occurred in the 1920s when the United States began to limit the number of immigrants who were admitted to the United States and established the national-origins quota system, an allocation scheme that awarded entry visas based mainly on national origin. The second shift occurred when this system was repealed in 1965 with the Immigration and Nationality Act.

## **Recent Immigration Policy**

### **The 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act**

The 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act resulted in a substantial shift in the structure of immigration policy (Ngai, 2004). From the 1920s until 1965, the immigration quota system granted 70% of the available visas to just three of the world's over 195 countries—Germany, England, and Ireland. The Hart-Cellar Act abolished the nationality criterion and gave preference instead to individuals with specific skills or those with family ties to citizens or residents of the United States. The law's purpose was to reunite families and provide immigrants more equal access to visas. Although not expected to have significant results, it did, in fact, lead to a massive increase in immigration (both legal and illegal) and has resulted in a drastic shift in the source countries of immigration, the greatest increases coming from Asian and Latin American countries (Center for

Immigration Studies, 1995). The law has also led to an increased gap in the level of education between immigrants and native-born Americans, with adult immigrants being more than twice as likely not to have completed high school (Center for Immigration Studies, 1995).

In 1976, under the leadership of President Ford, Congress amended the Hart-Cellar Act to enforce annual country quotas of 20,000 people on countries in the Western Hemisphere. This change had the greatest impact on Mexico, considering that in the early 1960s annual legal migration included an average of 200,000 *braceros* (Mexican laborers permitted to enter the United States for agricultural work) and 35,000 permanent residency migrants. These new restrictions led to increased levels of unauthorized immigration of mostly Mexican agricultural workers and an unprecedented rise in deportations (Ngai, 2004). This dramatic shift in the numbers of unauthorized immigrants eventually led to a debate in Texas over whether the children of unauthorized immigrants should be granted the right to a free K-12 public education. This debate ultimately resulted in the *Plyler v. Doe* (1982) Supreme Court case.

### ***Plyler v. Doe* Supreme Court Ruling**

In 1982, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Plyler v. Doe* that based on the Fourteenth Amendment, states are prohibited from refusing a free K-12 public education to unauthorized immigrant children (457 U.S. 202, 1982). The Supreme Court determined that punishing children for the actions of their parents or guardians was both illogical and unjust. This ruling came in response to revisions made to Texas education laws in 1975 that denied funding for the education of unauthorized students and

permitted school districts to refuse enrollment to these students. In contrast, in 1982 the Supreme Court majority found that “unauthorized alien children cannot be denied a free, public education because such a denial would violate their constitutional right of equal protection” (*Plyler v. Doe*, 1982). The majority also observed that denying unauthorized children a proper education would likely contribute to “the creation and perpetuation of a subclass of illiterates within our boundaries, surely adding to the problems and costs of unemployment, welfare, and crime” (*Plyler v. Doe*, 1982). The U.S. Supreme Court struck down the Texas law because there was no indication that the state’s interests would be served. Of particular significance in this case is the fact that, with this ruling, unauthorized immigrants and their children were recognized as individuals protected by the U.S. Constitution, and, therefore, entitled to all protections granted by the Fourteenth Amendment.

Although *Plyler v. Doe* supported the right of unauthorized children to have a free, public elementary and secondary education, these rights did not extend to postsecondary education. Consequently, there has been extensive debate, both at the federal and state levels, about supporting or denying the access of unauthorized high school graduates to in-state tuition, federal and state financial aid, and ultimately, a path to citizenship. The Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) of 1996, signed by President Clinton on September 30, 1996, is frequently included in this debate.

### **Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA-96)**

The IIRIRA of 1996 prohibits states from granting public benefits to unauthorized immigrants and is often cited as one reason for denying unauthorized students access to

public higher education. Specifically, Section 505 of IIRIRA-96 states that unauthorized immigrants

shall not be eligible on the basis of residence within a State . . .for any postsecondary education benefit unless a citizen or national of the United States is eligible for such a benefit. . . without regard to whether the citizen or national is such a resident.

This statement does not specifically prohibit states from offering students in-state residency status, but those states that do offer in-state residency status to unauthorized students offer alternative ways to meet the in-state residency requirement, such as graduation from an in-state high school (Konet, 2007). The proposed DREAM Act would eliminate this debate.

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

The proposed DREAM Act, an acronym for Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors, is a legislative proposal first introduced in the Senate on August 1, 2001 by Senators Dick Durbin (D-IL) and Orrin Hatch (R-UT). It is a bill aimed at furthering the opportunities of unauthorized students and young adults. This proposed bill, if passed, could provide opportunities for many unauthorized students to gain access to legal residency, federal financial aid, and thus, higher education. Over the past ten years, certain members of Congress have made repeated unsuccessful attempts to vote on and pass the bill.

The most recent version of the DREAM Act was introduced on May 11, 2011 in the Senate by Senator Dick Durbin and 32 fellow senators, and in the House of

Representatives by Representatives Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL), Lucille Roybal-Allard (D-CA), and Howard Berman (D-CA) (National Immigration Law Center, 2011a.). If passed, this bill would make two changes to current immigration law, including IIRIRA-96. It would allow unauthorized students who came to the United States before the age of sixteen, who are in good legal standing and have completed high school, and who have received a general equivalency diploma (GED) or have been accepted to college, to apply for temporary legal status, which could eventually lead to permanent legal status, even citizenship, if they attend college or join the military. It also would repeal the provision that penalizes states for providing in-state tuition to unauthorized immigrants (National Immigration Law Center, 2011a).

In light of the fact that the proposed DREAM Act has not become law, many states, particularly those with large numbers of unauthorized immigrants, have responded to the needs of students within their own boundaries by passing policies addressing unauthorized student access to higher education, in-state tuition benefits, and financial aid. In addition, in June 2012, the Department of Homeland Security announced a new program for DREAM Act-eligible students and young adults called Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA).

### **Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA)**

On June 15, 2012, the Secretary for Homeland Security announced a change in immigration policy for individuals who meet requirements that are closely aligned with the proposed DREAM Act criteria. The new policy stated that as of August 2012 eligible immigrants could submit an application to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service

(USCIS) for deferred action. If the application is approved, individuals are eligible for a work permit, a social security number, and protection against deportation. This application must be renewed every two years. The process does not offer a pathway to citizenship, nor does it allow individuals with this status to petition for legal status for family members. It is estimated that approximately 1.7 million individuals qualify for deferred action.

Eligibility is dependent on certain criteria. To apply for deferred action, unauthorized immigrants must be under 31 years of age as of June 15, 2012. They must have arrived in the United States before the age of 16, and they must be at least 15 years old at the time of application. In addition, they must have lived in the United States continuously for five years between June 17, 2007 and June 15, 2012. They must be currently in school or the military, have a high school diploma or a GED, or have been honorably discharged from the U.S. Coast Guard or Armed Forces. They must also have no criminal history, including a felony conviction, a significant misdemeanor, or three or more misdemeanors of any kind.

According to data released by USCIS (2013) between August 2012 and January 17, 2013 a total of 407,899 deferred-action applications were received. Of these, 154,404 applications were approved, 13,366 were rejected, and the remaining 240,129 applications were in varying stages of being reviewed. The majority of applications (290,019) were from individuals who were originally from Mexico. Other top countries of origins included El Salvador (16,824 applicants), Honduras (10,882 applicants) and Guatemala (9,904 applicants).



## **Recent State Policies**

As this dissertation focuses on unauthorized individuals living in Virginia, it is important to compare Virginia's response to the issue of access to higher education for DREAMers with that of other states. As mentioned previously, neither IIRIRA-96, nor any other federal law explicitly outlaws the admission of unauthorized students to college or requires proof of legal immigration status for enrollment. However, IIRIRA does prohibit states from providing higher education benefits such as in-state tuition rates based on residency status to unauthorized immigrants unless they provide the same benefit to out-of-state U.S. students (National Immigration Law Center, 2011a). Thirteen states currently extend these benefits to unauthorized immigrants as a way of increasing the percentage of high school graduates who pursue a college degree, recognizing the value of an educated work force. Virginia is not one of these thirteen states.

Texas was the first state in the nation to pass a law granting unauthorized students in-state residency status. Texas law, H.B. 1403 was passed in 2001 and came about because of local efforts and advocacy (Rincón, 2008). The Dallas County Community College District (DCCCD) and the Houston Community College System (HCCS) began offering in-district tuition to unauthorized students. In addition, several local groups began pressing for a change in policy at the state level. These efforts demonstrated the strong interest in and support for expanded access to postsecondary education for all high school students (Rincón, 2008).

Since 2001, thirteen additional states have enacted legislation to provide unauthorized students access to in-state tuition if they meet specific requirements. These

states include California (AB 540, 2001), Connecticut (H.B. 6390, 2011), Illinois (H.B. 0060, 2003), Kansas (H.B. 2145, 2004), Maryland (S.B. 167, 2011), Nebraska (LB 239, 2006), New Mexico (S.B. 582, 2005), New York (S.B. 7784, 2002), Oklahoma (H.B. 1559, 2003), Oregon (H.B. 2787), Utah (H.B. 144, 2002), Washington (H.B. 1079, 2003) and Wisconsin (A 75, 2009) (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2011).

Oklahoma has since ended its in-state tuition benefits to unauthorized immigrants (H.B. 1804, 2008). Research from these states indicates that this legislation does not deprive the state of potential revenue that they might potentially earn from large numbers of students paying out-of-state tuition. Instead, it has increased the numbers of high school graduates pursuing a college degree (National Immigration Law Center, 2011b.).

There are also five states that either specifically forbid students from receiving in-state tuition and/or challenge their right to attend postsecondary institutions in their states. These include: Arizona (Proposition 300, 2006), Colorado (H.B. 1023, 2006), Georgia (S.B. 492, 2008), South Carolina (H.B.4400, 2008), and Indiana (H.B. 1402, 2011) (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2011). Virginia currently has no law either to allow or deny unauthorized students access to higher education, but there has been significant discussion of the issue during the past decade.

### **The Commonwealth of Virginia**

For the past ten years, the Virginia legislature has been engaged in considerable debate over the issue of unauthorized immigrant student access to higher education and in-state tuition benefits. The issue first became an item on the state's public policy agenda in 2002. In 2003, two very different bills were put before the House: H.B. 1562

and H.B. 1610. The first was submitted by Delegate John Reid (R-Henrico) and the second by Delegate Karen Darner (D-Arlington). . Both of these bills, along with S.B. 753, similar to H.B. 1562, were tabled.

H.B. 1562 proposed that no public institution of higher education could knowingly accept the enrollment of any illegal alien, and if such an individual were to be discovered attending a public college or university, immediate dismissal would ensue. In contrast, H.B. 1610 proposed that unauthorized immigrants who had graduated from a Virginia high school and had lived for at least two years in the United States would be eligible to receive in-state tuition at public institutions of higher education.

In 2007, immigration again became a significant issue for the State Committee of Higher Education of Virginia (SCHEV) (Janosik & Johnson, 2007). During the 2008 session, H.B. 123, H.B. 425, and H.B. 1010 were incorporated into H.B. 14. H.B. 14 (2008) stated that “an alien who is unlawfully present in the United States shall not be eligible for admission to any public institution of higher education in the Commonwealth.” In February 2008, H.B. 14 was passed by the House of Delegates with a vote of 73 to 26 and referred to the Senate Committee on Education and Health where it was defeated by the committee (passed-by indefinitely).

During the 2011 session, two additional bills concerning unauthorized immigrant students were introduced and voted on in the Virginia House of Delegates. H.B. 1465, very similar to H.B. 14 bill, discussed above, mandated that the boards of public, postsecondary institutions adopt written policies forbidding the enrollment of unauthorized immigrants. The second bill, H.B. 1775, required local school boards to

collect data on the number of students unable to provide a birth certificate at registration. Both bills were passed by the House and ultimately referred to the Courts of Justice by the Senate. No further action has been taken as of December 2012. However the discussion on unauthorized students continues.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The primary purpose of this research was to analyze the acculturation, U.S. educational experiences, and civic action of unauthorized Latino young adults living in Virginia as a way of identifying concrete recommendations for educators and allies. This research will enable educators and allies working with unauthorized students and young adults to more effectively support the educational and professional goals of Virginia DREAMers, as well as empower the DREAMers and their supporters to work for social change. Although there is a growing body of research about the experiences of unauthorized high school graduates as they mature into adulthood, the majority of this research has been focused on immigrants living in states with legislation that provides them access to in-state tuition benefits and higher education, such as California, Texas, New York, and Washington (Abrego, 2006; Gonzales 2007, 2008, 2010, 2011, Olivérez, 2006, Rodriguez Jr., 2010). No such research has been carried out in Virginia.

In order to contribute to the discussion on the experiences of unauthorized youth in Virginia, I conducted a qualitative study using narrative research methods to examine the experiences of eight unauthorized Latino immigrant young adults living in Virginia, a state in which there has been significant debate about this issue. Through in-depth interviews with participants, I examined how the participants described their experience

of being unauthorized particularly connected to their patterns of incorporation, educational experiences, and postsecondary and career paths. My work was guided by the following research questions.

### **Research Questions**

The guiding research question was: What is the participant's understanding and experience of being an unauthorized Latino young adult in Virginia? I also sought to answer the following sub-questions:

1. How has being unauthorized shaped the participant's educational and career path since high school?
2. How has the participant's narrative been shaped by his/her experiences, achievements, challenges and interactions with others while living in Virginia?
3. What types of support benefited the participants in his/her postsecondary journey, and what additional supports could have benefited him/her more?

### **Glossary**

The following terminology is used commonly when discussing immigrants and immigration, education of immigrants, and critical theory. This section will aid readers in understanding how I understand and make use of these terms in my dissertation.

#### **a) Generation 1.5:**

Generation 1.5 consists of children of immigrant parents who were born abroad and brought to the United States at an early age (usually before the age of 12). Rumbaut and Ima (1988) coined the term to describe refugee youth from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. They explain that these children are not part of the first generation of their parents

who made the decision to leave their homeland and have been, to some extent, shaped by that decision and their need to justify it. Neither can they be considered part of what is termed *the second generation*, that is, children who are born in the United States and who only understand the homeland through memories their parents share with them. The term Generation 1.5 is in widespread use now, including individuals with a great variety of distinct experiences and backgrounds.

**b) Acculturation:**

“The internal process of change that immigrants experience when they come in direct contact with members of the host culture” (Padilla & Perez, 2003, p. 35).

**c) Agency:**

“A person’s ability to shape and control his or her own life by freeing the self from the oppression of power” (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 42).

**d) Assimilation:**

The merging of foreigners into the host culture through the adoption of the language, customs, and attitudes of the mainstream population. Both social theory and public discourse make clear that assimilation is the expected path of immigrants in the United States (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001).

**e) Counternarratives:**

Stories that offer alternative explanations to the hegemonic and commonly shared social beliefs (Giroux, Lankshear, McLaren, & Peters, 1996). The goal of these counternarratives is to bring the stories of the marginalized into the mainstream dialogue.

**f) DREAMers:**

Unauthorized immigrants who are eligible for the proposed DREAM Act or DACA. This term is also used frequently to describe the participants in this study.

**g) Narrative analysis:**

Methods for interpreting texts that have a storied form (Riessman, 2008). In particular I use this term to designate the study of lived experiences (Polkinghorne, 1983; Clandinin, 2007).

**h) Structure:**

Institutional mechanisms that impede or enhance individuals' social mobility at both a societal and an institutional level (Conchas, 2006).

**i) Social capital:**

Relationships with family, peers and teachers that can be used to gain access to economic or cultural capital (advice, resources, and skills) and ultimately to produce human capital such as educational success and credentials (Bourdieu, 1986; Enriquez, 2011).

**j) Unauthorized/undocumented immigrants:**

These terms designate immigrants who live in the country without legal authorization (Motomura, 2008). These individuals are not U.S. citizens and do not have permanent or temporary resident visas or work permits (Passel & Cohn, 2011). In the past few years, some authors have chosen the term *unauthorized* rather than *undocumented* to designate those immigrants who have some form of documentation but may be awaiting a formal legal outcome (Suárez-Orozco, Yoshikawa, Teranishi, Suárez-Orozco, 2011).

**k) Young adults:**

Includes individuals ages 18 to 34. In the Commonwealth of Virginia, individuals reach adulthood at the age of 18.



## CHAPTER TWO: CONCEPTUAL MODEL AND LITERATURE REVIEW

*“Citizenship is man’s basic right or it is nothing less than the right to have rights. Remove this priceless possession and there remains a stateless person, disgraced and degraded in the eyes of his countrymen.”* (Chief Justice Warren, *Perez v. Brownell*, 1958).

Globalization in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the technological advances and formidable immigration movements that characterize it, have resulted in what has been metaphorically described as a “shrinking world,” and this phenomenon has led to some surprising consequences. Greater movement of people and information across borders has given rise to some deep-rooted, anti-immigrant and nationalist sentiments in the United States. Robert Suro and Marcelo Suárez-Orozco (2011) describe the distinction between U.S. views of immigration historically and the fear provoked by current immigration trends, specifically unauthorized immigration. They write, “Americans are very capable of exalting immigration in the past even while fearing it in the future. But we need to move away from that paradox in order to manage immigration in the present” (para. 3). A clearer view of the contemporary documented and undocumented immigration process requires an understanding of the heterogeneous immigrant population currently residing within U.S. borders, a closer look at the economic and political forces and foreign

policies that brought these immigrants and their families here, and the rights that all immigrants should be granted based on the U.S. Constitution.

In 1982 the Supreme Court with its *Plyler v. Doe* decision regarding the K-12 education of unauthorized children determined that the rights guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment extended to “anyone, citizen or stranger, who is subject to the laws of a State.” The Court also argued that to deny education to unauthorized children imposed “a lifetime hardship on a discrete class of children not accountable for their disabling status,” and that “the deprivation of education takes an inestimable toll on the social, economic, intellectual, and psychological well-being of the individual, and poses an obstacle to individual achievement” (*Plyler v. Doe*, 1982). If this argument is extended to postsecondary education, then, the absence of a legitimate pathway to higher education for unauthorized immigrant students is a denial of their human rights, one that can have a lasting impact on the unauthorized students’ emotional development, mental and physical health, and academic and professional goals.

This dissertation is intended to add to the discussions about the contemporary experiences and roles of immigrants, particularly unauthorized Latino immigrant students living in the Commonwealth of Virginia, as we contemplate what it means to be a global citizen in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and the rights and responsibilities that accompany that concept. In the following sections, I give a detailed description of my conceptual framework, which includes a discussion of the fluid nature of citizenship and the use of counternarratives in critical inquiry. To provide readers with a broad understanding of the ways in which unauthorized immigration is described, I give an overview of the dominant

narratives told about unauthorized immigrants, as well as some of the powerful counternarratives, which give an alternative perspective.

The second part of this literature review focuses on 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century immigration scholarship following the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 (Hart-Cellar Act)). In seeking to understand the experiences that have the greatest impact on unauthorized immigrant acculturation and academic and professional achievement, I draw on three areas of research: immigrant perceptions and acculturation, educational experiences, and civic action. I view these three components to be central to understanding how unauthorized immigrants integrate into the larger community and achieve access to educational and professional opportunities, as well as how they describe their own experiences. The research highlighted in this chapter has been crucial to the design of my research plan and the formulation of my interview questions.

Although growing, the body of research in each of these areas that focuses solely on unauthorized immigrants is limited, and I have integrated this research into the most appropriate sections that follow. In addition, because of the limited research available, I have also included seminal research that focuses more broadly on contemporary Latino immigrant experiences.

### **Conceptual Framework**

This research is a form of critical enquiry that focuses on social justice and is change-oriented and collaborative in nature. I draw on principles from critical theory, critical pedagogy, feminist theory, and constructivist theory to shape my conceptual framework.

## **Critical Pedagogy and Critical Inquiry**

In this study, critical pedagogy and critical inquiry theory are the basis of the conceptual framework that I use in analyzing the educational rights and opportunities available to unauthorized students living in Virginia. Applied to the education of unauthorized students, critical pedagogy provides a way for educators to bridge critical theory and practice by placing issues relating to social justice and democracy at the core of the curriculum and practice. Similarly, critical inquiry provides a way to bridge research and social change.

In developing a framework for my research, I use Kincheloe and McLaren's (2005) list of nine key concepts of modern critical theory. This list is intended to guide critical researchers and offers some significant insight into how to understand the experiences of marginalized groups. They recognize that critical theorists define their field in many different ways and that these definitions are continually changing and evolving. In developing this 2005 list, Kincheloe and McLaren were informed by a variety of discourses that emerged following the work of the Frankfurt School, a theoretical tradition developed by a group of scholars connected to the Institute of Social Research at the University of Frankfurt that focused on how injustice and subjugation impacted society during the late 1920s and 1930s (Kincheloe, 2008). I used a variant of Kincheloe and McLaren's key concepts, combining the three connected to power to produce this list of five concepts that I believe to be most relevant to my research:

1) *Critical Enlightenment* explains competing power interests between groups and individuals and identifies who gains and who loses in specific contexts. This concept also

covers the idea that maintaining the status quo is in the best interest of the privileged groups, or those in power.

2) *Critical Emancipation* is the use of critical research to “expose the forces that prevent individuals and groups from shaping the decisions that crucially affect their lives” (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005, p. 308). Discussion indicates that many see condescension in the idea of one group “emancipating” others. To the contrary, I understand this concept as a means of raising awareness rather than an assumption that I will be allowing participants to free themselves from ideas that keep them oppressed.

3) *The Concept of Immanence* is the concept of seeking to connect theory with concrete social reform. With this concept, Kincheloe and McLaren (2005) draw on the work of Freire (2001) and the idea of envisioning new ways to ease human suffering as well as building relationships among diverse groups.

4) *A Reconceptualized Critical Theory of Power: Hegemony, Ideology, and Linguistic/Discursive Power* attempts to explain how power operates in complex ways, including the hegemony of our fields of knowledge. This theory recognizes that we are shaped by dominant ideological practices and linguistic discourses.

5) *The Role of Cultural Pedagogy in Critical Theory* is the understanding that specific cultural agents, such as mass media, produce particular hegemonic ways of interpreting the world.

Thus, to summarize, my conceptual framework has enabled me to recognize the power imbalances that exist in U.S. society based on class, race, gender, sexual orientation, and nationality and to acknowledge the extent to which this unequal

distribution of power is both oppressive and frequently hidden. Furthermore, I view knowledge to be socially constructed and hold that certain types of knowledge are given greater validity in our society. Because we can only understand reality based on what we have encountered, it is difficult to highlight the extent to which oppressive practices serve to maintain the status quo. To work for change, we must reveal power imbalances, bring new perspectives into the general discourse, and call attention to the ways in which language serves to perpetuate the status quo.

Through my research of Latino DREAMers living in the Commonwealth of Virginia, I strive to help unauthorized young adults in Virginia be heard by sharing their diverse and complex stories and highlighting the social, political, and educational structures in place that limit them. At the same time, I examine who benefits from the marginalized status of this group by questioning the very notion of legality and illegality and exploring counternarratives.

### **Notions of Legality and Illegality**

In an era of globalization, some scholars such as Coutin (2000), Gonzales (2011), Menjívar (2006), Ngai (2004), and Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (2001) are now advocating for a broader understanding of citizenship and investigating how immigrants and unauthorized immigrants, in particular, experience belonging as well the specific structures in place that produce and perpetuate migrant illegality. In addition, there is recognition that feelings of inclusion or exclusion are dependent on time and context (Coutin, 2000; Gonzales, 2011; Menjívar, 2006; Ngai, 2004; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). Four scholars, in particular, Coutin (2000), DeGenova (2002), Gonzales

(2011), and Menjívar (2006) in their documentation of the impact of legal status on individuals, have sought to highlight the fluid nature of citizenship, legality and illegality, and the extent to which this fluidity shapes identity development. This body of research is particularly relevant to this study in thinking about identity formation and the emotional impact of unauthorized status on the lives of immigrants in Virginia, particularly PK-12 and university students, as well as in considering the extent to which politics shapes immigration policy.

**The Central American crisis of the 1980s.** The foundations for this research grew out of the experiences of Central Americans, particularly Salvadoran and Guatemalan immigrants (documented and unauthorized) who migrated to the U.S. in the early 1980's to escape civil wars in their countries. As part of an extension of Cold War politics, the Reagan administration backed the Salvadoran and Guatemalan military governments and denied their connection to the massive human rights violations that were actually taking place in those countries (Gzesh, 2006). Furthermore, the Reagan administration classified the displaced Salvadorans and Guatemalans not as refugees, but rather as unauthorized economic migrants. Eventually, the widespread understanding that foreign policy was determining the fate of individual asylum seekers led to great debate and support for these individuals in the form of the sanctuary movement (religious congregations and other community organizations sought to shelter these refugees). Finally, in 1990 Congress passed legislation allowing the President to grant *Temporary Protected Status* (TPS) to certain groups in need of a temporary safe haven. TPS is the statutory embodiment of safe haven for those aliens who may not meet the legal

definition of refugee but are nonetheless fleeing—or reluctant to return to—potentially dangerous situations. The first TPS legislation (never codified as part of the Immigration and Nationality Act) explicitly designated Salvadorans for TPS. As indicated in its name, this legislation grants a temporary status that offers no long-term guarantee of citizenship; it is one of the many ways that U.S. immigration policy fosters uncertainty and insecurity in the lives of immigrants.

**Impact of migrant status.** Menjívar (2006), in her examination of the impact of legal status on the lives of Guatemalans and Salvadorans developed the term *liminal legality* to represent the ambiguous situation of being neither documented nor undocumented but sharing characteristics of both. She explained that liminal legality is not a linear process. As an example, Central Americans might be given TPS permits, which allow them to work and live in the United States legally, but temporarily without access to social services. However, if these permits expire, these immigrants are once again unauthorized. She further stated that:

[The state and] contemporary immigration law create and recreate an excluded population and ensure its vulnerability and precariousness by blurring the boundaries of legality and illegality to create gray areas of incertitude, with the potential to affect broader issues of citizenship and belonging (Menjívar, 2006, p. 1002).

Menjívar also argued that this TPS situation is not unique to Central Americans and that, in fact, increasingly restrictive immigration policies are used for citizens of other nationalities to keep these immigrants in the margins of society for long periods of time.



Consequently, these policies could have lasting implications for assimilation, citizenship, and political empowerment.

Further research on the experience of Salvadoran immigrants during the past three decades illustrates how the monitoring of legal and undocumented immigrants has filtered into other parts of society outside of legal agencies. For example, Coutin (2000), in her discussion of Salvadoran immigrants' experiences, described how the idea of illegality is reproduced in everyday life well outside the realms of immigration law and government policies. The policing of immigration has been passed down from federal agencies to local and state police and citizens, such as employers. This phenomenon now extends to some of the most recent state anti-immigration policy that requires schools, churches and neighborhoods to be responsible for monitoring immigration (Coutin, 2000).

The idea of legality and illegality is further complicated by societal perceptions of unauthorized immigration. Coutin (2000) identified the contradiction between the physical presence of undocumented immigrants and their "illegal" identity that renders them socially invisible and excluded, for example, in their inability to get a driver's license.

DeGenova (2002), building on the work of Coutin (1998, 2000; Coutin & Chock, 1995), highlighted a key misconception about illegal immigration: that it is the immigrants themselves who are solely responsible for their move across borders. In his discussion of migrant "illegality," he discussed the extent to which migration is "produced and patterned," rather than self-generating and random (DeGenova, 2000, p.

424). He explained that illegality is a product of immigration laws and that the criminalizing of unauthorized migrant labor has resulted in a denial of fundamental human rights and access to social entitlements, as well as a vulnerable and cheap reserve of human labor. Speaking specifically about Mexican immigrants, he explained that Mexico-U.S. border policies and the defining of the Mexico border as a “crisis” have resulted in “Mexican” being synonymous with “illegal” (DeGenova, 2002, p. 436). This example highlights the power of negative labels and how one narrative can come to be widely perceived as “the truth.”

These paradoxes and perceptions regarding illegal immigration dramatically impact unauthorized Latino students’ sense of vulnerability and confusion over identity. In his research on the process unauthorized youth go through in coming of age and taking on the challenges of what it means to live in the United States, Gonzales (2011), drawing on the work of Menjivar (2006), challenged us to look beyond the simple labels of “legal” and “illegal.” He explained:

This deliberate shift in focus allows us to pay attention to the effects laws have on migrants’ day-to-day lives, revealing the ways in which unauthorized persons experience inclusion and exclusion and how these experiences can change over time, in interactions with different persons, and across various spaces. It also points to the two-sided nature of citizenship, which can allow the same person, citizen or not, to experience belonging in one context but not in another. (Gonzales, 2011, p. 606)

Gonzales’ discussion clearly applies to the ways in which unauthorized youth grow up

protected by *Plyler v. Doe* (1982) and become integrated into U.S. schools, but, as they face graduation and adulthood, have to grasp the very real meaning of what it means to be unauthorized in the United States.

This change requires a dramatic shift in how these students see themselves. Gonzales (2011) labeled the transition from favorable to unfavorable contexts “the transition to illegality.” He explained that this step into a stigmatized identity, like that of their parents, has negative implications not only for the students’ academic and career objectives, but also for their social goals. Unlike their documented school classmates, an unauthorized student often cannot prolong the transition to adulthood through parental dependence and additional education. Even the high-achieving college students who—through the help of mentors, financial support, and lowered family obligations—manage to earn a college degree, must eventually take on the illegal status. Gonzales (2011) thus recognized that as long as state and federal policy remain unchanged, only limited discussions about intergenerational mobility connected to education are possible.

This analysis of the language used to describe various groups of immigrants and the identification of the way in which particular labels point blame in only one direction is an essential part of constructing a counternarrative about the unauthorized student experience and ultimately of working for change. Therefore, a second theoretical tool I will use in this research is an examination of the majoritarian or dominant narratives about unauthorized immigration in the United States and some of the counternarratives offering alternative viewpoints.

## **Narratives and Counternarratives**

As defined in the list of key terminology provided in chapter one, counternarratives are stories that offer alternative viewpoints to the hegemonic and dominant narratives widespread in society (Giroux et al., 1996). The goal of counternarratives is to bring the stories of the marginalized (in this case, Virginian DREAMers) into the mainstream dialogue. Through this study, I seek to do this both by drawing out my participants' narratives and by positioning their stories within a broader social and political context.

As more and more unauthorized immigrants and their advocates and allies speak out, the perceptions of unauthorized immigrants in the United States, and of DREAMers in particular, has shifted. Nonetheless, the participants in this study still felt the effects of the negative social stigma attached to their unauthorized status. Therefore, in this section, I have included research identifying some of these negative perceptions as well as shifts in state policy to respond to unauthorized immigration as a way of highlighting the majoritarian or dominant narrative. I have also included four examples of counternarratives: 1) A description of the goals of counternarratives based on Tara Yosso's (2006) research of the educational experiences of Chicana/Chicano youth. 2) An analysis by Alejandra Rincón (2008) of current immigration policy and access to higher education. 3) The counternarrative journalist Jose Antonio Vargas has made available through his personal essay, his interviews, and his website *Define American* (<http://www.defineamerican.com/>). 4) Research conducted by Jocelyn Solis (2004) at an advocacy organization supporting unauthorized immigrants, which speaks to how

individuals can develop a counternarrative through discussions and interactions with others.

**Majoritarian narratives about unauthorized immigrants.** To better understand perceptions about current immigration, it is necessary to distinguish between immigration prior to the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act and more recent immigration. Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (2001) explain that scholars refer to the large wave of immigration beginning in the 1960s and rapidly increasing through the 1990s as the “new” immigration. These new immigrants are seen to be falling short of earlier waves of immigrants: concerns center around cultural integration, loyalty to the United States, increased crime, and lack of jobs. However, Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (2001) also point out that this new wave of immigrants stands out because of their skin color in a way that previous Western European immigrants did not. This color issue is particularly pertinent when considering how unauthorized Latino immigrants currently living in Virginia are perceived.

Research has looked at distinctions drawn in society between documented and undocumented immigrants. Espenshade and Belanger (1998) examined public opinion about immigration and illegal immigration by synthesizing data from the Public Opinion Location Library (POLL) database, a comprehensive online retrieval system for polling data provided by the Dialog Information Services and compiled from survey data collected by the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research at the University of Connecticut. Espenshade and Belanger explained that while economic concerns about immigration relate to fears that immigrants are taking jobs from citizens, lowering wages

and being a burden to taxpayers, their research findings did not confirm those views: only a minority of respondents felt that immigrants were taking jobs from American citizens and over half felt that immigrants were doing jobs Americans did not want to do. However, when the question was rephrased to include the term “illegal,” between 50-70% of respondents felt that unauthorized immigrants were competing with American-born workers. When asked about the fiscal effects of immigrants, a slight majority viewed immigrants as a burden on the United States. When respondents were asked to identify the degree to which they saw immigration and/or illegal immigration as a problem, they were more than twice as likely to identify illegal immigration as a problem, with 66% saying that illegal immigration was a major problem (Espenshade & Belanger, 1998).

In their discussion of results, Espenshade and Belanger (1998) found that while there is great ambivalence over immigration, key words carry significant meaning for individuals and can result in sharply contrasting responses. The differing responses to legal and illegal immigration highlights the negative perception that illegal immigration has in U.S. society. In the past few years these negative perceptions of undocumented immigrants have led to changes in state policies.

For example, in 2010, Arizona Governor Jan Brewer signed into law S.B. 1070, the nation’s strongest anti-immigrant legislation up to that time. Since then, thirty-six other states have attempted similar legislation. In October 2011, Alabama legislators passed one of the toughest immigration laws in the country, H.B. 56, also known as the Beason-Hammon Alabama Taxpayer and Citizen Protection Act (ATCPA) (Immigration

Reform Law Institute, 2011). This state law made it a criminal offense for an unauthorized immigrant to get a driver's license, pay a utility bill, or rent property. It also criminalized anyone who hires, shelters, or signs a contract with an unauthorized immigrant. The dominant narrative of supporters of this legislation is that it will help lower the nearly 10% unemployment rate in Alabama and put a stop to unauthorized immigrants taking jobs away from legal citizens. Because of the impact that majoritarian narratives have on local, state, and federal policy, there is a significant need for the construction and dispersion of counternarratives.

**The construction of counternarratives.** Academics, social organizations, and unauthorized immigrants themselves are developing powerful counternarratives about their experiences to combat the dominant and often untruthful narratives now circulating, to gain agency, and to work for social change by sharing their personal stories.

A fundamental goal of counternarratives is building community and support for social change. Tara Yosso (2006) shared what she called *critical race* counterstories in addressing the educational experiences of Chicana/Chicano students from elementary school through graduate school. She explained that the goals of these stories are to:

1. Cultivate community among socially and racially marginalized groups,
2. Challenge the perceived wisdom of majoritarian stories,
3. Nurture community memory and resistance, and
4. Encourage readers to continue working towards social and racial justice with determined urgency (p. 165).

Through these counterstories, Yosso (2006) shared the message that while the

majoritarian story blames the discrepancy in academic success between Chicanos and Whites on the Chicano students, their parents, and their communities, the hidden story is one of large-scale institutional failure and society's acceptance of this failure.

Similarly, those building a counternarrative for unauthorized immigration have explained how society uses labels as a way of overlooking the social structures that keep unauthorized immigrants marginalized. Rincón, in her 2008 book *Undocumented Immigrants and Higher Education*, documented the struggle to secure access to higher education for unauthorized students. She argued that the struggle for unauthorized immigrant rights is a question of civil rights, comparable to the struggle for the civil rights of Blacks in our country. Seen from this perspective, those states legislating in-state tuition fees for all students—legal or not—are upholding the Constitutional rights of unauthorized students, as guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. Furthermore, she described the needs for unauthorized youth to build coalitions with other groups who are underrepresented in colleges and universities such as minority students and less affluent students. Through her research and writing Rincón built a counternarrative of exclusion, injustice, and racism.

Jose Antonio Vargas has also been working to expose a similar counternarrative about unauthorized immigrants through his *New York Times Magazine* article and his *Define America Movement* (Gross, 2011b; Vargas, 2011). Vargas began developing a counternarrative from the very moment he understood what it meant to be unauthorized. In an interview with Terry Gross on National Public Radio's (NPR) *Fresh Air*, he described his own response to the term *illegal alien* in which he thought to himself, "I'm



not illegal as a human being, and I am not an alien” (Gross, 2011b). Now Vargas, through his writings, interviews, and webpage, seeks to broaden the discussion about illegal immigration and the proposed DREAM Act and introduce a counternarrative. He explained the work of the Define America movement in this way:

It’s really more elevating and reframing the conversation, meaning that when people say a path to citizenship, the first word that doesn’t come to mind is amnesty... I think in many ways what Define American seeks to do is really kind of broaden the conversation around immigration and take it out of the ghetto that it’s been in. A lot of people seem to think most people in America think that undocumented immigrants just take resources and not give anything back. Well, that’s just not the truth. A lot of people seem to think that undocumented immigrants do not want to assimilate to America or do not want to learn English. Well, that’s just not the truth. (Gross, 2011b)

Vargas has taken his message to the streets, into schools, and to other organizations. While Vargas’s Define America organization is seeking to get an alternative narrative into the public sphere, other organizations are working with unauthorized immigrants to define their own circumstances.

The extent to which unauthorized immigrants develop their own counternarratives can be significant in terms of creating personal and social empowerment. Solis (2004) explored how Asociación Tepeyac, a New York City based advocacy organization that supports grassroots efforts to advocate for Mexican immigrants and their families, supported the development of a counternarrative. Solis found that because of their

involvement in this organization, many unauthorized immigrants were able to explain and defend their status in terms of human rights and social justice. She explained that “‘illegal identity’ is made available by certain material conditions and narratives in the United States that presuppose both legal and illegal subjects” (p. 182). According to Solis, when immigrants come to the United States, they must identify themselves according to terms (legal or illegal) that are already in place. Based on the counternarratives that Asociación Tepeyac and the surrounding community developed, the participants in Solis’ study learned to redefine what it means to be illegal. They learned to reject the label “illegal,” and, with it, the understanding that they were undeserving of certain rights; they learned to call themselves “undocumented” and, thus, became self-advocates for a change in status, political access, visibility, and public voice.

These counternarratives are constructed by advocates, advocacy organizations, critical researchers, academics, and the immigrants themselves. The counternarratives that unauthorized immigrants produce are impacted by their patterns of incorporation, their social and educational experiences, and their level of civic engagement.

### **Immigrant Experience, Perceptions, and Patterns of Incorporation**

The body of research on the immigrant experience and modes of acculturation is impressive. In this section, however, I draw exclusively on the work of late 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century scholars who explore the experiences of unauthorized immigrants, examine how immigrants make sense of their experiences, and study the process of acculturation that is particularly relevant to working-class Latinos and unauthorized immigrants. This research includes the work of Abrego (2006, 2008), Chavez (1991, 1992), Portes and

Rumbaut (2001, 2006), Portes and Zhou (1993), Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (1995, 2001), and Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco & Todorova (2008).

### **Unauthorized Immigrant Experience**

One of the seminal late 20<sup>th</sup> century researchers to document the experiences of this new wave of unauthorized immigrants to the United States is anthropologist Leo Chavez. To write *Shadowed Lives* (1992), he interviewed hundreds of unauthorized Mexican and Central American immigrants living in San Diego County, California about why they came to the United States and their experiences here.

Chavez (1991, 1992) highlighted that while his Mexican interviewees described coming to the United States primarily for economic reasons, sometimes because migration was a family tradition (fathers and grandfathers often came to the United States through the Bracero Program, a contract labor program, which lasted from 1942 -1964), his Central American participants were more likely to have political motives for immigration, such as political turmoil and fear for the safety of their family. Chavez explained that the United States' demand for labor brought Mexicans north and gave them an expanded view of where they might legitimately work, one that was not restricted by the U.S.- Mexico border.

Despite this voiced perception of the United States as a legitimate place for employment, Chavez's (1992) research participants clearly articulated the role that fear of discovery and deportation played in their daily lives. He detailed the metaphors of confinement that his interviewees used to describe their constant state of fear. Examples included the feelings of living in a circle, a jail, or a chicken coop. This fear kept his

participants from venturing far from their new homes and, in fact, they came to view the home as a sanctuary where they could escape public eye and be less visible. Furthermore, these immigrants appeared to frequently pass on to their children the messages of fear and the need to remain hidden.

### **Immigrant Patterns of Acculturation**

Fear of discovery and deportation is just one of the many factors that can stand in the way of undocumented immigrants' acculturation into U.S. society. The past two decades have brought a new understanding of the different ways in which various groups of immigrants assimilate; the divergences in the acculturation paths of unauthorized immigrants and those of documented immigrants (immigrants admitted to the United States as Lawful Permanent Residents (LPRs), also known as green-card holders) are particularly relevant to this study.

Portes and Zhou (1993) described a shift from the traditional understanding of the gradual acculturation of immigrants into the White middle class to what they refer to as *segmented assimilation*. They theorized that there are three assimilation patterns that recent immigrants (documented and undocumented) follow and these lead them to very specific strata of U.S. society. Unauthorized immigrant students are at risk for falling into the least favorable of these. These patterns are: 1) a gradual acculturation process, which leads to a middle class lifestyle, 2) assimilation into permanent poverty and an underclass, or 3) rapid economic advancement while preserving the home culture and values and maintaining strong solidarity with the immigrant community. Portes and Zhou (1993) explained that key factors in determining the acculturation path of a specific group

include federal policy directed at a particular group, societal reception, and the strength of the ethnic community.

The acculturation patterns of immigrant adults and their children may also differ. Chavez (1992), when discussing how and to what extent his participants were incorporated into U.S. society, underlined the role that having children played in this process. He explained that most of the parents he interviewed said that their children, who considered the United States as their home, did not want to return to Mexico or Central America. Chavez explained that this parental understanding of their children's views helped anchor the families to the United States.

However, as immigrant adults make their home in the United States, they are still very influenced by memories of their lives in their home countries. Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (1995, 2001) who have a lifelong dedication to research on the immigrant experience, and more specifically, the experiences of Latino immigrant children and adolescents, describe a *dual frame of reference* that first generation immigrants (both documented and undocumented) hold, which allows them to contrast their former lives in their home countries with their current lives in the United States. From this contrast the first generation determines that their current situation is significantly better than life in their home country. In contrast, their children, particularly those who immigrated at a young age or were born in the United States, do not have this dual frame of reference and are much more likely to see themselves as marginalized and as the objects of discrimination. They are caught between the two cultures. Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (1995) explained:

The children of Latino immigrants become the repositories of the parents' anxieties, ambitions, dreams, and conflicts. They are frequently vested with responsibilities (such as translating and caring for siblings) beyond what is culturally expected for children at their stage of psychosocial development. (p. 65).

Thus, the children of immigrants must negotiate two parallel worlds, and doing so can create feelings of confusion, anxiety and depression and, ultimately, negative assimilation patterns.

When children's pace of acculturation surpasses that of their parents, downward assimilation may ensue. Portes and Rumbaut (2001) described *dissonant acculturation*, a term they coined for a pattern of assimilation that frequently occurs when children's facility with English, adoption of American culture, and loss of home culture surpasses that of their foreign-born parents. As a result, roles are reversed: parents depend on their children to navigate U.S. society and, inevitably, lose some authority. This situation may place children at greater risk for downward assimilation, such as dropping out of school, gang involvement, and so forth. Factors that determine dissonant acculturation include the parents' human capital (educational and financial resources), family makeup, gender of the children, community support, and societal reception.

**Societal reception and impact on acculturation.** In recent years, scholars have added to our understanding of the role that societal reception plays in immigrants' incorporation patterns. Portes and Rumbaut (2001), for example, categorized the three types of reception that immigrants can receive: exclusion, passive acceptance, and active encouragement and argued that the more favorable the reception, the more rapidly the

immigrant group will integrate into the larger society. They also highlighted the role that race plays in reception, explaining that the racism and discrimination that non-White immigrants face hinder their integration into society.

Immigrants respond to discrimination in various ways. Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (2001), based on their research on children of immigrants, have also developed a conceptual model that maps reactions to *negative social mirroring*, that is, the negative attitudes that immigrants experience based on stereotypes held by society. The Suárez-Orozcos saw three specific responses to negative social mirroring: resigned, oblivious or unaware, and resistant. They explained that “whether they are resigned, oblivious, or resistant to the reflections in the social mirror, those immigrants who are able to maintain hope are in fundamental ways partially inoculated to the negative mirroring that they encounter” (p. 101). When there is hope, they are able to preserve their self-esteem and can use their energy to either focus on day-to-day coping or even to serve the community by volunteering, serving as role models, or working for social change. Without hope, students begin to internalize the outside community’s beliefs about them, which can lead to a variety of negative outcomes, such as dropping out of school, gang involvement and so forth. The Suárez-Orozcos also explained that the path of these individuals can be changed, depending on where they live, the schools they attend, the relationships that they have, and the opportunities that they encounter.

**Impact of migrant status on acculturation of unauthorized immigrants.** As previously mentioned, unauthorized immigrants and unauthorized immigration is, in general, viewed unfavorably in U.S. society; this negative stance can profoundly impact

unauthorized students. Abrego (2006) examined the role that lack of legal status has on the incorporation processes of unauthorized working-class youth. In her ethnographic study of two immigrant rights organizations in California, Abrego compared the experiences of documented Generation 1.5 Latinos and Second Generation (American born) Latinos with undocumented Latino immigrants just before and just after their high school graduation.

Building on the work of Portes and Zhou (1993), Abrego argued that unauthorized immigrants are exposed to the worst possible context of reception and that due to the lack of access to higher education and professional careers, unauthorized youth are destined to remain in the lowest strata of society. Abrego also found that unauthorized high school students were well aware of the challenges and experiences of other unauthorized students and that this knowledge contributed to their lowered aspirations and a recognition that their future prospects were unavoidably tied to their legal status. She explained that without access to the education needed to enter the upper sectors of society, it is extremely difficult for unauthorized immigrants to escape the difficult living conditions of their parents.

Promising and previously high-achieving students—many of whom have internalized the U.S. values of meritocracy and upward mobility through hard work—are forced instead to lower their aspirations, gain unlawful employment in low-wage industries, and often end their educational pursuits. (Abrego, 2006, p. 227).



These circumstances set the stage for a lifetime of frustration, low-paying jobs, and sometimes illegal behavior, which ultimately impact not only the unauthorized immigrants themselves, but also their families.

Not only can migrant status profoundly shape the experiences of unauthorized immigrants, but it also can affect their U.S.-born children. Yoshikawa's (2011) longitudinal ethnographic and survey research of 400 children of unauthorized immigrants living in New York revealed some startling facts about the implications of unauthorized status on the children. Such factors as economic hardships and low wages; feelings of depression, anxiety, and worry; and limited access to center-based childcare all resulted in lower scores on test for vocabulary and motor and perceptual skills in three-year-old children.

In summary, federal and state policies that marginalize unauthorized immigrants and deny them access to higher educational opportunities, discrimination faced in society, and weak ethnic communities can all contribute to the development of a permanent underclass. These immigrant students are people who recognize the United States as their home, but see no clear path to improving their circumstances or gaining legal citizenship or work. This state of affairs can be particularly frustrating for young adults who, because of *Plyler v. Doe* (1982), were able to attend U.S. public schools without their migrant status being an issue.

### **Unauthorized Immigrant Educational Experiences**

As previously discussed in this study, numerous researchers have studied the experiences of documented and unauthorized immigrants and Latino students, largely in

the Western and Southwestern states (Gándara, 1995; López, 2010; Stanton-Salazar, 1997, 2000; Stanton-Salazar, Chavez & Tai, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999; Yosso, 2006).

Their findings address the role that educators' perceptions of culturally and linguistically diverse students, access to social capital, school structure, and families have on student achievement. In addition to the academic challenges faced by immigrant, minority, and low socioeconomic students, unauthorized students have additional challenges connected to their status (Abrego, 2006; Dozier, 1993; Gonzales, 2007, 2010). These challenges include significant feelings of fear and isolation; a lack of information about college possibilities for unauthorized immigrants; increased challenges in creating connections with peers, teachers and others who could typically provide the social capital needed; extreme financial burdens and negative social attitudes towards them.

### **Subtractive Schooling: Attitudes Towards Biculturalism and Bilingualism**

An educational challenge unauthorized Latino students share with other culturally and linguistically diverse students is encountering the perceptions that their teachers and other school personnel have of them. Because the linguistic and socio-cultural norms guiding schools classrooms may differ from the home and community norms of these children, teachers and school administrators may view them from a deficit model perspective rather than from an empowerment/strengths model perspective. The empowerment model teaches educators to consider their students' backgrounds and then seek to meet their particular needs (Delgado-Gaitan & Trueba, 1991). In contrast, deficit model theorizing occurs when students of color, second-language students, and low-income students are identified as different; when this difference is defined as

academically deficient, these students are put at risk for academic underachievement (Grant & Sleeter, 2007).

Not only are these culturally and linguistically diverse students viewed from the perspective of what they lack, but frequently educators attempt to remove the influence of a second language and/or second culture. Education that strips students of their home culture and language and devalues the knowledge these students bring to schools has been labeled by Valenzuela (1999) as *subtractive schooling*. Valenzuela, through her work with Mexican-born and Mexican-American students in Houston, argued that schooling is actually weakening the academic status of these Mexican-born students. As they are encouraged to “de-identify” with their Mexican culture and the other Mexicans in their community, they are losing potential role models and opportunities to expand their bilingualism and bicultural competencies (p. 262).

Moll (1992), Valenzuela (1999), and Gonzalez et al. (2003) all offered solutions to deficit theorizing and subtractive schooling. In 1992, Moll coined the term *funds of knowledge* to counter this deficit perspective and to help educators identify the strengths, knowledge, and skills that students carry with them from their immigrant and/or working-class backgrounds (Moll, 1992). In addition, Valenzuela argued for the need for authentic caring and identified “sustained reciprocal relationships between teachers and students as the basis for all learning” (p. 61). The attitudes of teachers and other school personnel towards unauthorized students is particularly critical in terms of the students’ willingness to be open about their status and gain access to the information needed to pursue further postsecondary education (Gonzales, 2010).

## **School Structure and Access to Social Capital**

Social capital is a much-referenced concept in the discussions of the education of immigrants, Latinos and other culturally and linguistically diverse groups, and working-class students (Gibson, Gándara, & Koyama, 2004; Gándara & Contreras, 2010; Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2000, 2003; Valenzuela, 1999). Educators and educational researchers use this term for the connections to people and networks that can provide access to resources, support, and knowledge necessary for fulfilling personal goals. Connected to this concept is the understanding that our current educational system rewards the knowledge and culture of the White middle class (Bourdieu, 1986).

DREAMers throughout the United States demonstrate a heightened need for social capital; strong connections to teachers and other school personnel. Often the only way to meet this need is through smaller class sizes and focused programs. Gonzales (2007, 2010, 2011) has been on the forefront of research documenting the educational experiences of unauthorized immigrants. In his ethnographic study of Generation 1.5 Mexican-origin young adults in the Los Angeles Metropolitan Area, Gonzales (2007) extended the existing body of research on the impact of school structure on minority students' postsecondary goals to a focused look at the particularly vulnerable population of unauthorized immigrants. His work was unique in including both high- and low-achieving students. Based on 78 life history interviews and additional ethnographic research, Gonzales divided his participants into two categories: what he termed the *college-goers* and the *early-exiters*. The college-goers, in general, had positive

interactions with teachers, took Honors and AP classes, and were part of special programs. He described these students as “positively tracked.” Early-exiters either did not graduate from high school or graduated but did not go to college. He found that these students were in larger, general-track classes with less diversity. He labeled these students as “negatively tracked.”

Gonzales (2010) explained that, in addition to the already formidable challenges low-income students confront in pursuing postsecondary education, unauthorized youth face an additional challenges unique to their status, specifically, the fear of punishment or deportation. This fear often prevents students with unauthorized status from sharing their circumstances with teachers or other school personnel who could help them navigate the steps necessary for going to college and seeking financial support for college. Positively tracked students in Gonzales’ study were able to develop these relationships through smaller class size and ongoing college counseling. Without these relationships, unauthorized students who are academically ready for college, may not have the information they need to apply for and fund a college education.

### **School Involvement**

In addition to strong connections with teachers and other school professionals, unauthorized students also benefit substantially from involvement in school activities and volunteering. Perez, Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado, and Cortes (2009) studied 110 unauthorized Latino high school, community-college, and university students from across the country to try to understand and determine the implications of their academic resiliency. They categorized the respondents into three groups: 1) high-risk students with

low levels of protective factors (*high risk*), 2) low-risk students with high levels of protective factors (*protected*), and 3) high-risk students with high levels of protective factors (*resilient*). Only 22% of survey respondents met their definition of resilient, i.e., having high levels of personal and environmental resources. As anticipated, the *protected* and *resilient* students had significantly higher levels of academic achievement than did their high-risk peers. Most significant is that while both high-risk and resilient students reported working long hours at a job during high school, having high levels of feelings of social rejection due to their unauthorized status, and having parents with limited schooling, these resilient students, like their protected peers, described high levels of involvement in volunteering and extracurricular activities, as well as their parents' emphasis on the value of education. In fact, the strongest predictor of academic achievement among the students surveyed was their volunteerism and involvement in extracurricular activities, suggesting the pressing need for schools to seek ways for students to develop strong social networks. In addition to school structure and student involvement, family dynamics can have a significant impact on unauthorized students' ability to graduate high school and continue on to postsecondary education.

### **Family Dynamics and Educational Implications**

Although often unjustly blamed for the under-achievement and low academic performance of immigrant students, Latino immigrant parents have been found to strongly support the education of their children, recognizing the value of education in future success (Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco & Todorova, 2008; Yoshikawa, 2011). However, the parents of unauthorized children, like other working-class immigrant

parents, are often separated from their children at some point during the early stages of their immigration process. Frequently, the father comes to the United States first, leaving his wife and children behind in the home country. If and when the families are reunited, recreating the family life that existed in their home country can be very challenging. Additionally, these parents generally work long hours to support their families and often have limited understanding of the U.S. school system and of the college-application process.

These factors can present significant barriers to achieving academic success and attending college, particularly for the Generation 1.5 students. In their study of 385 recently arrived adolescents Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco and Todorova (2008) found that 79% were separated from family during the immigration process. The percentages were even greater for Central American (96%) and Mexican (80%) immigrants. While the separation was most frequently from the father, 55% of adolescents surveyed were also separated from their mother at some point. Children experiencing parental separation were more likely to have symptoms of depression than those whose families remained intact. Reunification also frequently resulted in strained family relations including, in some instances, divorce and remarriage. This prolonged emotional stress is detrimental to students' academic performance.

Simply being part of an immigrant family has been found, in general, to have a significant impact on long-term school achievement (Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008). The desire of most immigrant parents for their children to do well in school and go on to college is not bolstered by an understanding of what is needed to get

admitted to college. This is especially true of parents who did not attend college themselves or even graduate from high school. Additionally, immigrant children frequently have responsibilities not typical of their American-born peers. The adolescents in Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco and Todorova's study were much more dependent on and responsible to their families than mainstream American teenagers. Many of the participants had significant responsibilities at home and were frequently expected to, when possible, contribute to the family's finances. These factors can be detrimental to school performance.

However, despite these challenges, unauthorized immigrants, like their documented peers have a strong belief in the value of education. Jesús Rodríguez, Jr. (2010) focused on the educational experiences of six unauthorized Latino high school students in Los Angeles, California. He found that children who arrived in the United States before the age of six were less likely to share the adult immigrant narrative of immigrating for a better future, as they were less capable of making comparisons to their pre-migration experience. All of Rodríguez's participants addressed the importance of caring for the family; in fact, this was the goal at the center of their educational and occupational efforts. The students spoke about education as a means of social mobility, as a moral imperative to repay their parents for their sacrifices, and as a source of pride.

In a similar study, Muñoz (2008) examined the college persistence of four unauthorized female Mexican immigrants currently attending or having attended college in Elksville, Wyoming. Muñoz learned that all four of her participants received little or no college counseling in high school and had depended on community resources and key



community members to help with their preparation for and transition to college. These women also relied heavily on their families for both emotional and financial support while attending college. She explained that while the parents frequently had little understanding of the college experience or preparation needed, they did encourage the women to seek higher education and, through their own immigration experience, served as a model of resiliency for their daughters. For many students coming from low-income families, however, the high cost of college is an insurmountable barrier to postsecondary education.

### **Financial Barriers to Postsecondary Education**

Unauthorized students, despite their high aspirations, often face significant financial barriers in the pursuit of postsecondary education and are ineligible for federal financial aid. Olivérez (2006) examined the experiences of ten college-ready, unauthorized students who sought to pursue higher education. She used a social capital framework to examine the challenges these low-income, first generation, unauthorized students face in terms of college access. The participants in Olivérez's study lacked sufficient knowledge about college requirements, and many were not even sure they could attend college. Moreover, few had information about California's Assembly Bill 540, passed in 2001, that allows unauthorized students who meet certain requirements to pay in-state tuition rather than out-of-state tuition in California's public colleges. Olivérez also found that parents and students chose institutions of higher learning based on financial considerations and that students found it very difficult to secure funds for tuition. Since the completion of this study, on October 2011, California Governor Jerry

Brown signed A.B. 131 into law; this bill provides unauthorized immigrant students who meet A.B. 540 requirements the right to apply for scholarships and receive funds derived from non-state funds. These requirements include having attended a California high school for at least three years and received either a GED or high school diploma.

Financial barriers are even greater in states such as Virginia, where there are no laws permitting in-state tuition fees for unauthorized students. Torres and Wicks-Asbun (2013), in their research of unauthorized Latino students in North Carolina, found that despite high academic aspirations, 90% of students surveyed who wanted to attend college saw educational costs as the greatest barrier to this goal. Torres and Wicks-Asbun saw the extent to which unauthorized students are excluded from opportunities and are vulnerable to deportation as evidence of liminal citizenship.

In summary, when seeking to achieve academic success, working-class unauthorized students face all the challenges of their documented peers plus myriad unauthorized-immigrant-specific obstacles, including the fear and stress of their status being exposed, which affects their ability to connect with mentors and peers; a lack of specific information about college enrollment and financing; very limited possibilities for financial aid or scholarships; and the negative attitudes toward unauthorized immigrants in U.S. society. Despite these significant barriers, some students do achieve academic success and, in the process, many become involved in the struggle for immigration reform.

## **Civic Engagement and Resistance**

Despite the possibility of deportation, discrimination, and hate crimes, DREAMers and other unauthorized immigrants across the country are joining forces to speak out about their legal status and its implications (Gonzales, 2008; Rincón, 2008). Research indicates that civic engagement benefits immigrants through the fostering of positive motivation, feelings of self-worth, a sense of purpose for the future, and valuable peer networks (Levine, 2008).

### **Civic Engagement**

The public became aware of immigrant youth's civic engagement in the spring of 2006 when students across the country joined rallies and held protests to address the need for immigration reform (Fox, 2006). Lopez and Marcelo (2008) examined the civic engagement of young immigrants, both documented and unauthorized. They compiled the results of the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement's (CIRCLE) national survey of young people and adults called the 2006 *Civic and Political Health of the Nation Survey* (CPHS). This survey detailed the civic engagement of three specific groups ages 15-25: U.S. natives (U.S.-born to U.S.-born parents), children of immigrants (U.S.-born to one or two foreign born parents), and immigrants (foreign-born to foreign-born parents). Lopez and Marcelo found that the children of immigrants are often among the most socially engaged group of young people; this finding reflects a shift from the past towards greater civic engagement in immigrant families. For the purposes of their study, civic engagement included activities such as volunteering, being a member of a political or non-political group, voting or

encouraging others to vote, donating money to a political campaign, contacting a public official, and boycotting.

The ways in which immigrants and children of immigrants have rallied in support of the passage of the proposed DREAM Act through protests, petitions, sit-ins, and letter-writing campaigns illustrates how immigration-related debate can catalyze civic engagement (Suárez-Orozco, Yoshikawa, Teranishi, & Suárez-Orozco, 2011). In the mid-1980s, college and university employees working in counseling and admission offices in California sought ways to bring unauthorized students together (Seif, 2004). From this effort and the work of advocacy organizations, unauthorized students, specifically undocumented Latino students, began to recognize that they were not alone in their struggle; they gained a working knowledge of how to organize and an understanding of the growing immigrants' rights movement. As a result, they began to speak out for themselves, rather than letting others speak for them (Gonzales, 2008). Similarly, Rincón (2008) explained that, in her opinion, "perhaps the most remarkable impact of the proposed DREAM Act is the degree to which it has galvanized immigrant students to organize under a common banner" (p. 183). She described how many immigrant advocacy groups have sprung up around the country and how, in gaining support for their access to higher education, unauthorized immigrants are becoming empowered.

Such empowerment and involvement can lead to further activism. Rincón (2008) explained that while most unauthorized immigrants in her study began their activism with a focus on educational rights, many students have been spurred to participate in activism focusing on broader issues significant to immigrants and other marginalized groups.

Gonzales (2008), through his research on the Orange County Immigrant Student Group (OCISG), found similar connections between high school involvement and future activism. OSCISG is an organization of Latino college and university students in California working to help students, educate the community, and advocate for changes in legislation. Gonzales found that many of the students in this organization had started their advocacy involvement in high school, joining multiple clubs and organizations. As they headed towards college with many of the same aspirations as their legally-statused peers, they recognized the limitations of their legal status, both for themselves and their families. Gonzales argued that it is the rights granted by *Plyler v. Doe* that have allowed these students to learn leadership and organizational skills and to develop the motivation and drive to gain access to new opportunities. They risk speaking out because the alternative—silence—could lead to denial of legal access to work and the right to live in the United States.

### **Resistance**

Even unauthorized students who are not civically active must face the reality of being unauthorized in the United States and design a path for themselves. Because this path might not be the one they prefer, and because they must face a multitude of social and legal challenges, any path they choose can be understood as a form of resistance. Resistance theories examine the ways students create meaning from their negotiations and struggles with the social and cultural structures oppressing them and how they respond to these structures (Solórzano & Delgado-Bernal, 2001).

To explore resistance tactics used by unauthorized immigrants, Lopez (2010)

conducted a critical and reflexive ethnography in which she focused on five unauthorized Mexican-immigrant, high school students and six teacher allies in North Carolina. All five of the students in her study were considered to be ready for college. She describes them as having strong academic identities and receiving strong encouragement in their education from parents and teachers

Lopez's (2010) research supported and added to previous research on unauthorized immigrant student identity, achievement, and resistance tactics. Lopez described the five participants in her study as having "smart identities," that is, for them school was a supportive place where students were encouraged to continue towards postsecondary education. However, as they approached graduation and afterwards, these students came face-to-face with the reality of state and federal policies, roadblocks to their continuing education. At this point they began to recognize the extent to which meritocracy is a myth and the limits imposed by their migratory status. Lopez explained that with this new understanding, these students rejected the label and the role of "illegal immigrants" and began to construct a new identity, that of the undocumented immigrant.

Lopez (2010) drew on and added to the work of Solórzano and Delgado-Bernal (2001), Solórzano and Yosso (2002), and Yosso (2006) in explaining the types of resistance these unauthorized students used: 1) self-defeating resistance in which unauthorized students drop out of school, 2) conformist resistance in which students succeed in school despite their unauthorized status, and 3) transformative resistance, in which students criticize current immigration policy and join protests and activities groups in an effort to change the system. Yosso (2006) coined the term *resilient resistance* to

describe immigrants' ability to survive and succeed in the educational pipeline. Lopez saw a new type of resilience appearing amongst unauthorized youth, what she terms *transnational resilient resistance* (TRR). This type of resistance is characterized by a critical stance vis-à-vis the higher education system and a pursuit of alternative paths to success, outside of the traditional educational path. Lopez explained that the students in her study rejected success being defined only in terms of postsecondary achievement, and also saw being able to provide for one's family as an indicator of success. Of the five students in her study, because of financial and institutional barriers, only one went on to attend a U.S. college. Three others began working: in food service, doing odd jobs, and as a welder. One of the students returned to Mexico.

In conclusion, unauthorized immigrants' civic action and resistance can assume a variety of forms. However, whatever form this resistance takes, if they wish to achieve some degree of success in U.S. society, unauthorized immigrants must come to terms with what their status means to them and find ways to navigate a system replete with roadblocks. The positive correlations between feelings of self-worth, motivation, and networking opportunities and community involvement and civic action suggest that such involvement is to be encouraged.

### **Chapter Summary**

To summarize, throughout this research I have used a critical inquiry lens to examine the how my participants described themselves and their experience of growing up and being educated in Virginia. In doing so, I have made connections between the narratives and counternarratives the participants shared and their acculturation process,

educational experiences, and civic action. I also examined the ways in which DREAMers' feelings of belonging and notions of legality and illegality can change, depending on their age, societal perceptions, and daily activities. The following chapter describes the research methodology that I used in this study.



## CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

*“Narrative inquirers recognize the tentative and variable nature of knowledge. They accept and value the way in which narrative inquiry allows wondering, tentativeness, and alternative views to exist as part of the research account.”* (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 25).

This dissertation is a qualitative study examining the experiences of Latino unauthorized immigrant young adults living in Virginia. I begin chapter three by restating the research questions that guided my study. Next, I describe and provide a rationale for the research design and outline the data collection methods I used to learn about my participants’ experiences. I conclude by detailing my analysis methods, explaining the boundaries of this study, and discussing issues of quality.

### **Research Design**

While there is a growing body of research on unauthorized high school and college student experiences, primarily focusing on college-ready youth, little research has been conducted to document the experience of unauthorized young adults living in states that do not offer in-state tuition benefits for unauthorized students, such as Virginia. Furthermore, there has been limited focus on how immigrants’ patterns of incorporation, academic and career experiences, and civic engagement shape the story they tell about

their unauthorized status. In addition, the researchers who have focused on unauthorized students have described the dearth of research that is available for understanding these students' experiences (Gonzales, 2011; Lopez, 2010; Olivérez, 2006). In response, I conducted a qualitative, narrative-based study examining the experiences of unauthorized immigrant young adults living in Virginia.

The guiding research question was: What is the participant's understanding and experience of being an unauthorized Latino young adult in Virginia? I also sought to answer the following sub-questions:

1. How has being unauthorized shaped the participant's educational and career path since high school?
2. How has the participant's narrative been shaped by his/her experiences, achievements, challenges and interactions with others while living in Virginia?
3. What types of support benefited the participants in his/her postsecondary journey, and what additional supports could have benefited him/her more?

### **Narrative and Narrative Methods Defined**

A narrative, in its broadest sense, can be any type of spoken or written presentation, but when connected to narrative research, it is more specifically defined as a story and the process of storytelling about lived experiences that are significant to the narrators and their audiences (Denzin, 1989; Polkinghorne, 1983). Scholars' use of narrative can range from discrete units of discourse to entire life stories. However, one characteristic of a narrative that sets it apart from other forms of talk and text is a sequential linking of ideas as well as an internal logic that makes sense to the narrator

(Denzin, 1989; Riessman, 2008). Additionally, there is a shared belief that through stories, personal experiences are understood and made meaningful (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006).

Many methods can be used to analyze narratives. However, the process of conducting narrative inquiry implies certain beliefs about the phenomenon of experience and the role of story in understanding experience (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006).

Although I used thematic analysis to analyze my data and report my findings, I have made use of narrative inquiry methods throughout the course of this study, specifically in terms of my theoretical approach to the research, my data collection, and my analysis. When applicable, I also incorporated short participant narratives that exemplify the themes in the reporting of the findings.

Within the field of narrative inquiry, there is a broad range of understandings of the phenomena being studied. One area of debate is whether the focus of the study is lived experiences as they are told through stories or rather the stories themselves that people tell about their experiences (Clandinin, 2007). In my study, I focused almost entirely on the lived experiences. I analyzed the stories of eight unauthorized Latino young adults as a means of bringing forth their complex, multilayered, and nuanced understandings of their lives and personal experiences.

The use of narrative methods as a means of uncovering and sharing the stories of my participants and ultimately working for social justice for all DREAMers was an appropriate fit for three reasons. First, narrative research provides opportunities to gain both a holistic and complex understanding of a story as well as an insight into the daily

and cultural realities of the narrators (the participants). Second, it focuses on the relationship between the researcher and the participants. Third, it has the potential to work for social transformation.

As described in my literature review, the experience of being an unauthorized young adult is not fixed, but rather dependent on age, daily activities, family support and responsibilities, peer networks, legal status, societal opinions about immigration, and a host of other factors. Narrative research takes into account that individual lives are shaped over time and through interactions with people and society in particular places and at particular times (Clandinin & Huber, 2010), and narrative researchers “embrace the power of the particular for understanding experience and using findings from research to inform themselves in specific places and specific times” (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 24). Like many narrative researchers, I did not judge the truthfulness of my participants’ stories, but rather strove to “highlight the versions of self, reality, and experience that the storyteller produces through the telling” (Chase, 2005, p. 657).

Additionally, through the individual stories that my participants shared, I was able to gain a more holistic understanding of what it meant to be a DREAMer growing up in Virginia at this time of significant focus on immigration reform. Narrative inquiry was an appropriate choice for this type of research because of the ways in which stories can be used to give the audience (in this case me) a picture of a social or cultural reality as told and experienced by the participants, with the understanding that these stories are not static or free from the constraints of time and place (Patton, 2002; Riessman, 2008). Daiute and Lightfoot (2004) identify the holistic nature of narrative inquiry when

examining phenomena, issues, and an individual's life. They also explain that narrative research can be used in an examination of the social histories that form identity and the multiple forces that impact the relationships between individuals and their society. Thus, narrative inquiry, when well implemented, is sufficiently complex to account for the broader social context (beyond the narrator), while at the same time giving value to a specific context and story.

One of the fundamental ways that narrative researchers are able to bring out participant stories is through the focus on the relationship between the researcher and the researched. Pinnegar and Daynes (2007) in their placing of narrative inquiry historically explain that, "in the turn toward narrative inquiry, no change in direction is more important than the change in understanding of the relationship of the researcher to the researched" (p. 9). They explain that, historically, researchers, in an attempt to be objective, saw themselves as having knowledge that could be kept distinctly separate from the participants' knowledge and that both the participants and the interactions between participant and researcher could be considered static. In contrast, researchers engaged in narrative inquiry directly address the relationship between the researcher and the researched. They understand, perhaps that interpretation is enhanced by, but also limited by, their own horizons and positioning. Despite the intention to hear the "whole story," the researcher acknowledges that the analysis is never complete and that theory building is always in process.

One of the highest priorities of my work was my relationships with my participants and the connections that I made with others through my research. I concur

with Riessman (2008) who, in her discussion of interview questions, explains that some feminist researchers believe that “the specific wording of a question is less important than the interviewer’s emotional attentiveness and engagement and the degree of reciprocity in the conversation” (p. 334). As a researcher, I sought to bring multiple voices forward by listening carefully to the complex, multi-layered stories that my participants shared, by honoring their stories, and by recognizing the power that stories have to transform both the narrator and the audience. I made every effort to ask questions that presented an opening for participants to share a part of their experience rather than questions that forced a particular interview agenda.

There is a powerful potential in sharing very specific stories that goes hand-in-hand with critical inquiry and social change. Many scholars have addressed the extent to which narrative inquiry can serve as a means to pursue social transformation by challenging traditional and modern views of truth, reality, and knowledge. Chase (2005) explains that “‘giving voice’ to marginalized people and ‘naming silenced’ lives have been the primary goals of narrative research for decades” (p. 668). Chase also addresses the sense of urgency that can drive narrative research and the extent to which narratives can highlight issues of repression, poverty, exploitation, and marginality.

In addition, narratives draw in audiences in ways that other types of research cannot. And once drawn in, audiences can be affected in many respects, some far reaching. Patton (2002) speaks to the power of stories to transform organizations and individuals in ways that statistics and charts cannot. Chase (2005) argues that life history research, a form of narrative, can serve to question and de-center cultural norms, meaning

that through the sharing of individual stories the audience may end up questioning their personal beliefs and understanding of the world. Riessman (2008) explains that personal narratives can encourage others to act. “Speaking out invites political mobilization and change as evidenced by the ways stories invariably circulate in sites where social movements are forming” (p. 8).

Stories, then, can extend the impact of a particular event. Ewick and Sibley (2003), in their research examining resistance to legal authority, came to see that stories could extend the consequences of a single act of resistance. They write, “based upon the structural conditions of power and authority, stories of resistance can become instructions about both the sources and the limitations of power” (p. 1328). In this research I aimed to uncover participants’ stories of resistance: resistance to law, to labels, to expectations, to norms, and to much more, and in doing so, I sought to create knowledge outside the control of the powerful and elite, a narrative that would contribute to social transformation of the marginalized and powerless. To accomplish this goal, I drew on certain narrative approaches.

There are many different approaches for conducting narrative research. I adopted Chase’s (2005) description of a sociological approach that examines the way participants narrate their stories around an aspect of their lives. The particular aspect in terms of my research was migratory status and its impact on life experiences and choices. Unique to the sociological approach is how narrators “make sense of personal experience in relation to culturally and historically specific discourses, and how they draw on, resist, and or/transform these discourses as they narrate their selves, experiences and realities”

(Chase, 2005, p. 659).

Through my interview questions and analysis, I sought to understand how the participants viewed their status at varying points in their lives and in connection to specific events, such as their response to the 2012 DACA initiative and the 2012 presidential election. I have also sought through this research to examine how the discourse on undocumented immigration, particularly the DREAMers, is shifting. Chase (2005) describes as a goal of this approach to show “that narratives provide a window to the contradictory and shifting nature of hegemonic discourses, which we tend to take for granted as stable monolithic forces,” (p. 659). This approach connects to my interest in narratives and counternarratives.

### **Participant Selection**

A significant aspect of qualitative research, though minimally discussed in the literature, is participant selection. As described by Reybold, Lammert, and Stribling (2011) “the researcher does not just collect and analyze data; she decides *who matters* as data. Each choice repositions inquiry, closing down some opportunities while creating others,” (p. 4). They propose that researchers carefully consider the implications of their participant selection: how will selection affect and define the results? They counsel researchers to be both deliberate and transparent about these choices and the possible consequences. With this advice in mind, I carefully considered my goals and limitations regarding participant selection. I made choices about participants, and I continued to reflect on the impact of these choices throughout the research process.

My fundamental goal in determining participant criteria and participant numbers



was to reach a theoretical saturation point, that is, a point where I would gain no significant, additional insights with additional participants. However, due to constraints of time and resources, I also had to place a limit on my number of participants. I originally thought to interview six to ten immigrants and two to five advocates, and ultimately interviewed eight immigrants and five advocates. I focused on getting a varied sample of participants and working towards a deep understanding of the experiences of the participants that I selected through multiple in-depth interviews.

As explained above my participants were members of two different groups. The first group consisted of immigrant advocates selected from a variety of settings, including educational, advocacy and political organizations in Virginia. The second group was unauthorized Latino young adult immigrants living in Virginia. I used the *purposeful sampling* Patton (2002) described as “focus[ing] on selecting information-rich cases whose study will illuminate the questions under study” (p. 230). I used four techniques to find participants: 1) I sent my research information to two advocacy listservs, and requested that they disseminate my information to potential participants. 2) I contacted advocates directly and asked to interview them. 3) I asked the advocates I interviewed to share my information with possible participants. 4) I used snowball sampling, asking participants to share my information with others who met my research criteria.

I interviewed five advocates (four Latinos and one White) engaged in immigrant advocacy work. I chose to interview advocates primarily because of their role in supporting and working with unauthorized immigrants. Originally, I had thought that the advocates would act as gatekeepers, sharing my information with potential unauthorized

participants. However, this did not happen. Rather, four of the five advocates were in some way connected to at least one other participant and the stories they told provided additional data in supporting my overall understanding of the experiences of the DREAMers in this study.

I established participant selection criteria based on my interest in focusing on working-class immigrants who had completed the majority of their education in the United States. I further narrowed my focus to adults in Virginia who had attended a Virginia high school to match my interest in concentrating on a single state and, within that state, the public school experience of my target group. I interviewed eight immigrant young adults who met this specific research criteria, that is, each 1) was between the ages of 18-34; 2) had immigrated to the United States as an unauthorized minor by the age of 12, 3) had immigrated from Mexico or Central America; 4) had lived in Virginia for at least three years during high school and had graduated from a Virginia high school.

While in many ways my participants are very similar to one another in terms of age, socioeconomic status, and cultural background, within these constraints, I sought to find participants across a spectrum of educational experiences, including students with no postsecondary education, community college students, university students, and university graduates. I did succeed in composing this pool of participants with varied postsecondary educational experiences. However, their achievement in high school was fairly uniform as seven of the eight participants took two or more Advanced Placement (AP) courses and all had the goal of attending college.

## **Data Collection**

After receiving research approval from the Office of Research Integrity and Assurance at George Mason University, I began the data collection process, which included the following steps:

1. Sent introductory e-mails and a description of research to advocacy listservs and potential advocate participants.
2. Conducted interviews with two immigrant advocates.
3. Conducted interviews with six immigrant participants and one advocate.
4. Attended a DREAMers meeting and a scholarship award ceremony for DREAMers.
5. Completed initial analysis.
6. Had follow-up interviews with six immigrant participants.
7. Had two additional advocate interviews.
8. Had two additional immigrant participant interviews.
9. Completed follow-up analysis based on second interviews and additional participants
10. Had follow-up interviews with two immigrant participants.

**Participant observation.** I had an opportunity to attend a DREAMers meeting led by one of my participants. I also attended a scholarship award ceremony for DREAMers that was sponsored by an advocacy organization supporting undocumented students. Following each of these events, I wrote a memo describing my experiences.

**Interviewing.** Narrative inquiry research, based on in-depth interviewing,

requires a very specific understanding of the interview process. Chase (2005) explains that while all narrative researchers believe in the importance of the research relationship, researchers whose studies are based on in-depth interviews “aim specifically at transforming the interviewer-interviewee relationship into one of narrator and listener,” which requires a shift in the understanding of interview questions and answers (p. 660). Whenever possible, I asked open-ended questions that I had developed based on examples taken from the literature on narrative research. These questions allowed my participants to respond in a way that brought out what was most meaningful to them.

For my initial interviews with participants, I developed a semi-structured interview guide for my own use. The use of an interview guide ensured that I pursued central lines of inquiry with each participant and that the process was systematic and comprehensive (Patton, 2002). As Riessman (2008) explains, a semi-structured interview protocol with open-ended questions provides ample opportunities for the interviewees to elaborate. Because of the semi-structured nature of the interview guide, I was also able to pursue additional topics as they emerged. (See Appendices A and B for the complete interview guides.)

As I worked on my analysis, I developed a follow-up interview guide. This guide included new questions that emerged during analysis to be asked of all participants, as well as some participant-specific questions. I also included questions in my second interview guide about the recently approved DACA initiative. (See Appendix C for the follow-up guide.)

**Interview process.** I met with each advocate once and each DREAMer twice.

Prior to the meeting, I either spoke by phone or had an e-mail exchange with each to describe the nature of my research project, to share my expectations for the length of the interview, and to discuss the time and venue.

At the beginning of the first interview, I gave each interviewee an overview of the project including goals and procedures, reviewed the consent form, and emphasized how I would maintain confidentiality. I also informed participants of their right to withdraw from the study at any point. Then, I asked advocate participants to sign the consent form. I had the immigrant participants provide an audio-recorded verbal consent. I also gave each participant an unsigned copy of the consent form.

After receiving consent, I conducted an interview that lasted between 45-75 minutes for advocates and between 90-120 minutes for DREAMers. I recorded all interviews so that I was able to transcribe them later.

I had follow-up interviews with each DREAMer, which lasted between 45-60 minutes. During the follow-up interview, I: a) confirmed information from Tables 1 and 2 (see chapter 4); b) asked participants to review their participant profiles and tell me if any information was incorrect or if they felt uncomfortable with any of the information; c) asked follow-up questions; and d) asked participants if the major findings were true for them and; if not, asked them to explain what was not true for them; and asked for additional comments about the findings.

### **Data Analysis**

When conducting my data analysis, I used thematic analysis to understand the individual experience of each immigrant participant and then to make connections among

participant experiences and other unauthorized youth. The interviews with advocates were used to support and supplement my analysis. Narrative analysis begins with listening to the specific voices within each narrative before seeking to identify themes across interviews (Chase, 2005; Riessman, 2008). Thus, for the DREAMers in this study, I analyzed each case separately using the *Listening Guide* developed by Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg and Bertsch (2006). Then I looked for commonalities and differences among participants. I paid particular attention to the role of time and place in analyzing what participants were saying because of the impact of these two elements on narratives (Riessman, 2008).

After the first round of interviews, I transcribed the recordings as a way to begin thinking about and connecting with the material. Patton (2002) describes this process as “an opportunity to get immersed in the data, an experience that usually generates emergent insights” (p. 441). My first step in analysis was to use The *Listening Guide*, a well-known method of analyzing interview transcripts that specifically focuses on the voices of participants. It is a method made up of a series of specific steps “which together are intended to offer a way of tuning into the polyphonic voice of another person” (Gilligan, et. al., 2006, p. 254). These steps include: 1) listening for the plot, 2) constructing “I poems,” 3) listening for contrapuntal voices (multiple storylines), and 4) composing an analysis.

I began my analysis with three copies of the interview transcript. Step one of the *Listening Guide* requires the researcher to pay attention to what stories are being told, as well as to the contexts. As I read through the interview transcript for the first time, I made

note of repeated images, metaphors, and themes, as well as contradictions and absences (things not included in the narrative that might have been). I also focused on my responses to the narrative, my thoughts and feelings about what was being shared. After completing this step, I made a list of the repeated images and then wrote a reflective memo describing my reaction to the interview transcript.

The second step in the *Listening Guide* is to create “I poems” to ensure the researcher is listening to the participant’s first person voice and is hearing exactly how the participant speaks about himself or herself. To create an “I poems,” I underlined every use of *I* (on a second transcript) along with the accompanying verb and any other words that seemed important. Then, I copied these sentences in the order in which they appeared in the transcript onto a separate piece of paper. The researcher can choose to create “I poems” from select passages. I chose to make the poems from the complete text and then divide the poems into chunks, based on the topic. This approach helped me recognize how participants’ ways of speaking about themselves changed based on particular experiences.

The third step in the *Listening Guide* is to listen for contrapuntal voices, that is, the multiple stories that are being told. This part of the analysis acknowledges that individuals can tell their stories in many ways or voices and that, while sometimes these voices may be in harmony with one another, they may sometimes contradict or even oppose each other. During this step, I looked for participants’ descriptions of what it meant to be unauthorized; language used when describing status; descriptions of opportunities, challenges, and help received or help sought. I represented each of these

with a different colored pen, and then I analyzed the findings to see where ideas overlapped or were distinct. I then wrote an analysis memo to integrate and reflect on the findings from the previous three steps.

After having used the *Listening Guide* for each of the DREAMer interview transcripts, I reread the memos, “I poems,” and transcript notes and created a broad list of categories, which included themes, images, and metaphors. Then, I created a web to group these ideas into substantive categories, descriptions of the participants’ concepts and beliefs (Maxwell, 2005). I coded the advocate interviews and recoded the immigrant interviews using these substantive categories. Next, I created several tables to identify how each participant related to and spoke about each of these categories. I analyzed the tables to develop an outline of key themes that I shared with participants during the follow-up interviews. As I worked, I also created a list of follow-up questions.

During my follow-up interviews, I asked clarifying questions and discussed my findings with the participants. My goal for this second interview was to create a space where the participants had an opportunity to confirm or disagree with my findings. Based on these discussions, I was able to identify which findings the participants strongly supported and to eliminate those with which some of the participants did not agree or which seemed less critical to this research.

I then transcribed the follow-up interviews and coded them based on the themes I had developed, altering or reducing themes as I proceeded. I also conducted two additional interviews at this time. I revised my questions, taking into account the previous interview guides and my analysis thus far. I transcribed these interviews and coded them



based on the themes I had already identified, looking for additional themes, images or metaphors that were not already included in my work to date. I added to the tables and outline that I had created and began writing up a description of themes and responses to the research questions. As I worked, I developed another list of follow-up and clarifying questions that I asked during the follow-up interviews with my last two participants.

I completed my list of themes and answers to the research questions. Based on guidance from my committee, I reexamined the data and condensed the findings into six central themes, which I defined and then described in terms of the participants' language.

### **Limitations and Boundaries**

In thinking about the possible limitations and boundaries to this research project prior to beginning, I pinpointed two areas of concern. The first potential limitation was the cultural, linguistic, and ethnic differences between unauthorized immigrants and me. I was concerned that my participants might feel reluctant to share personal stories because of the differences in our backgrounds. To address this potential problem, I thought carefully about the language that I planned to use in the interview and how I positioned my research and myself. I also sought to build a relationship with each participant by, at all times, respecting their stories, concerns, and experiences. Ultimately, I did not find this limitation to be an issue. The participants were very receptive to my questions and research. I felt that they were interested in my findings and that they wanted the research to accurately reflect their experiences.

The primary boundary for this research became the constraints on my time and resources, which meant that I had to limit the number of participants and the amount of

time that I could dedicate to this research project. Although I sought to have participants with varied educational experiences, as discussed above, my participants were actually very similar in terms of their commitment to secondary education and their perseverance. I would have liked to include more than one participant with no postsecondary education. However, recognizing that this research project focuses on the experiences of a select number of participants; my goal is to add to the discussion of the experiences of unauthorized Latino students living in Virginia, not to argue whether these experiences apply to all unauthorized students. In addition, I believe that my last two interviews served mainly to add to the themes I already had, rather than bringing anything significantly different to the surface. I also consider that the time I spent with my participants was sufficient to obtain a rich narrative of their experiences.

### **Quality, Trustworthiness, and Ethics**

The issue of quality, validity, and trustworthiness in qualitative research is complex. Scholars conducting qualitative research have different measures for what they view as quality; many are in opposition to the more traditional measures of reliability required in quantitative research. Another layer of complexity in this discussion is the constructivist understanding of truth, advocated by many narrative researchers, which holds that all truths are always situational and incomplete.

Validity can be examined through the research process and the research results. Cho and Trent (2006) discuss two different means of responding to the question of validity in qualitative research: 1) *transactional validity*, which they define as “an interactive process between the researcher, the researched, and the collected data that is

aimed at achieving a relatively higher level of accuracy and consensus” (p. 321). Such techniques as member checking, bracketing and triangulation all fall in this category. 2) *transformational validity*, an approach that questions the very notion of validity and deems work valid only when a specific goal or ideal is achieved. Research validity, from a transformational perspective, is accounted for not through specific techniques, but rather by what results from the research. In thinking about quality in my research, I focus on both transactional and transformational validity.

In my research, I have responded to the questions of validity and researcher bias in several different ways. First, I have made methodical choices about participant selection and through in-depth interviews obtained rich data from my participants. Secondly, I have verified the accuracy of my analysis both by looking for commonalities among participant experiences and the findings of other researchers as well as discussing my findings with participants as a form of member checking. Third, I have endeavored to be as transparent as possible in my methods and analysis. Riessman (2008) explains that,

By our interviewing and transcription practices, we play a major part in constituting the narrative data that we then analyze. Through our presence, and by listening and questioning in particular ways, we critically shape the stories participants chose to tell.” (p. 50).

Sensitized to this reality, I provide an audit trail that clearly delineates my research process and my decisions concerning data collection and analysis; with this information my audience should be equipped to better understand what decisions I made and why (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Fourth, in the research write-up I was clear about

which participants shared similar experiences, identified participants' differing viewpoints, and highlighted which aspects of the research are situational. As a constructivist researcher, I also acknowledge that the stories I was told are products of particular times and places, and, therefore, function within a very specific historical, social, and cultural context.

Additionally, I have attempted to respond from a critical theorist perspective to the ultimate measure of quality in research, that of *praxis*, which seeks to raise awareness about social inequity, address issues of power in society, empower marginalized individuals, and ultimately to contribute to social change. Patton (2002) explains that the critical researcher approaches research with the “explicit agenda of elucidating power, economic and social inequities,” (p. 548). He describes consequential validity as asking who may be harmed and who may benefit from any measurement, method, or inquiry. Lather (1986) uses the term *catalytic validity*, which describes the extent to which the research is able to empower and emancipate the research subjects. In this research project, I have avoided the concept of participant emancipation, but I hope that the discussions and findings with participants have empowered both my participants and me. I have already shared some of my written work with one participant who asked to see it. Once completed, I plan to share this dissertation with all my participants with the hope that they will be able to use it in their lives. This research has shown me what I can do to better support unauthorized students in my own career and everyday life. In addition, I developed a list of recommendations for educators and allies who work with and support the empowerment of unauthorized students.

In considering research quality, the ethical implications of my research and potential impact on participants is of primary importance. In their article about ethical research of undocumented immigrants, Lahman, Geist, Rodriguez, Graglia, and DeRoche (2011) argue “if we cannot provide the fundamentals of protection to participants, then all research is eroded” (p. 305). With that belief in mind, I have worked to protect my participants in several ways. First, I gathered only minimal contact information from my participants and destroyed the participants’ last names and addresses. I used a witness consent process during my initial face-to-face conversation with the participants about my goals and procedures and their rights, but asked them to give verbal rather than signed consent. Furthermore, I used *process consent*, ensuring at each step of the process that participants still felt comfortable being part of the study. I also practiced *process responsiveness*, which entails “ensuring participants are comfortable with how the research is progressing, their information is being interpreted in a manner that makes sense to them, alternative interpretations are heard and included in the data, and they understand how the data will be used for future manuscripts and presentations” (Lahman et al., 2011).

Furthermore, I transcribed all interviews myself and assigned pseudonyms for all participants at the outset. In this way, the only record of my participants was a list of first names kept in a locked file. I also had a list of social services on file in the event that the research process raised feelings that participants needed to discuss with a professional.

## CHAPTER FOUR: PARTICIPANT PROFILES

Although it is difficult to ascertain exactly how many unauthorized children and young adults of all ethnicities and backgrounds are currently living in the United States, the Pew Hispanic Center (2012) puts the number at 1.4 million. This figure includes approximately 700,000 unauthorized immigrants, ages 18-30 who arrived in the U.S. as children and are either currently enrolled in school or have already graduated from high school. An additional 700,000 are under the age of 18 and enrolled in school. Overall, the 1.4 million estimate represents 12% of the 11.2 million unauthorized immigrants living in the United States in 2010. It is estimated that some 70% of these unauthorized individuals are from Mexico (Pew Hispanic Center, 2012).

As has been previously discussed in this dissertation, the purpose of my study was to analyze the experiences of unauthorized young adult Latinos living in Virginia in order to provide recommendations for educators and advocates working with these unauthorized young adults. The participants in this study belonged to two groups: the first, consists of eight unauthorized Latino immigrants from Mexico or Central America who had lived in Virginia for at least three years during high school and who had graduated from a Virginia high school; the second is composed of five immigrant advocates selected from a variety of settings, such as educational and political organizations, who have been in some way part of the movement to secure greater

opportunities and rights for unauthorized students in Virginia. One of the advocates is also an unauthorized immigrant.

Chapter four includes a brief overview of each of the DREAMers in my study along with two tables highlighting significant details about them, followed by a more detailed profile of each participant. This profile includes background, academic identity, and views on being unauthorized. I next provide a brief summary of the advocate participants I interviewed, a table highlighting details about their work, and a short profile of how each one became involved in working with unauthorized immigrant students.

### **They Call Themselves the DREAMers:**

#### **Unauthorized Latino Immigrant Participant Profiles**

A DREAMer, once defined as any undocumented youth who qualified for the proposed DREAM Act, now describes those individuals who qualify for the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's DACA program. However, identifying with the term "DREAMer" has even greater significance for many and implies a certain personal commitment on the part of the unauthorized immigrants to pursue the passage of the DREAM Act.

All eight of the unauthorized students I have chosen to highlight refer to themselves as DREAMers. Born in Latin America, they immigrated to the United States between six and twelve years of age and are currently living in the Commonwealth of Virginia. Their families chose to leave their home countries because of various factors such as violence, danger, or economic instability. Six of the participants were left behind

by one or both parents until the parent or parents were able to send for them later, a common trend among low-income Latin American immigrants. In addition, at some point in their early life, five of the eight participants experienced parental divorce or separation. As of today, seven of the eight participants have attended or graduated from college and these same participants have also been involved in some form of political activism such as meeting with members of Congress or attending rallies.

**Table 1: DREAMer Participant Profiles**

<b>Name and Gender</b>	<b>Birth Country</b>	<b>Current Age</b>	<b>Age Entered the U.S.</b>
<b>Alex (M)</b>	Guatemala	20	8
<b>Anna (F)</b>	El Salvador	22	12
<b>Elena (F)</b>	Mexico	27	6
<b>Enrique (M)</b>	Mexico	19	9
<b>Jacqueline (F)</b>	Mexico	21	8
<b>Melanie (F)</b>	Guatemala	21	10
<b>Michelle (F)</b>	Honduras	22	10
<b>Rose (F)</b>	Guatemala	22	11



**Table 2: DREAMer Participant Education and Employment**

<b>Name</b>	<b>College Education</b>	<b>Higher Education Funding</b>	<b>First in Family to Attend College</b>	<b>Current Employment</b>
<b>Alex</b>	Currently attending community college; business major	Scholarships, self-funded	Yes	Working part time at a restaurant as a waiter 20-40 hours a week
<b>Anna</b>	Community college one semester; currently attending a private university; business major	University grant, scholarships, private donations	Yes	No permanent position; temporary jobs only
<b>Elena</b>	Graduated from a private university; BA in social work	University grant, self-funded, private donations	Yes	Working part time at a restaurant as a waitress 20-30 hours a week
<b>Enrique</b>	Attending a private university, took a semester off for financial reasons; major undecided (considering nursing or social work)	University grant, scholarships, private donations, self-funded	Yes	Working part time at a restaurant as a waiter 20-40 hours a week
<b>Jacqueline</b>	Currently attending a state university; attended two other universities before this one (one out-of-state and one private in-state); global affairs major	Soccer scholarship	Yes	Working part time giving soccer lessons or refereeing games
<b>Melanie</b>	Graduated from high school in 2010	N/A	N/A	Working as a waitress 40+ hours a week
<b>Michelle</b>	Graduated from a community college; currently attending a state university; civil engineering major	Self-funded	No; parents attended college in Honduras but did not graduate	Working as a waitress 30-50 hours a week depending on course load
<b>Rose</b>	Graduated from a private university; BA in psychology	University scholarship, parents	Yes	Working as a restaurant hostess 20-30 hours a week

Note: I use the terms *waiter* and *waitress*, but participants frequently described themselves as *servers* when referring to their jobs.

## **Alex**

Alex immigrated to Virginia from Guatemala when he was eight. Although his parents had come to the U.S. when he was one year old, he remained behind in Guatemala with his grandparents. He originally came to the U.S. on a visitor's visa that he eventually overstayed by convincing his parents not to send him back to Guatemala. Although he has memories of his first year in the United States being hard because he did not know any English and because he was bullied for being different, he never doubted that he wanted to remain in the United States with his parents. Alex is currently attending a community college about 45 minutes from his home and working approximately 20-40 hours a week as a waiter in a restaurant. Alex is planning to earn a degree in business administration. He also plans to apply for deferred action and a work visa and is optimistic about getting another job.

Alex described himself as an “*A, B, and C student*” who is very outgoing. He believes in the importance of a good education and feels that he has worked hard to get one. However, he also believes that his undocumented status has limited his educational choices. He would rather be attending a university than a two-year community college. During his junior and senior years of high school, he was unsure of next steps. He worried about whether, given his migratory status, he was going to be admitted into a college and uncertain about the steps to take. As a result, he spoke with his high school counselor about his situation, and the counselor told him about a couple of scholarships that he could apply for, helped him fill out applications, and suggested that he enroll in the nearest community college. He is the first one in his family to go to college.

Alex expressed greater frustration with his undocumented status than did my other participants. Not only does he feel that his status has limited his educational and career paths, he also feels that it regularly impinges on his day-to-day life. When asked about what it meant to be unauthorized, he explained, “It’s very hard. It’s very hard. Because I can’t do things, other people can. It’s really hard. It’s really hard and frustrating.”

**Anna**

When Anna was three years old, her parents moved from their home in El Salvador to the United States, and she was left behind with her grandmother. Nine years later, when she was twelve, she joined her parents in Virginia. Anna now lives with her mother and two younger half-brothers. She is attending a private university in the town where they live and was a junior in the fall semester of 2012. She is funding her education in business administration with a university grant and the support of some community members. In addition to being a full-time student, she also cares for her brothers in the afternoons and evenings when her mother is at work.

After arriving in the United States, Anna entered middle school. She has memories of spending much of the day in classes with other English Language Learners (ELLs). She remembers feeling separated from the other students (non-ELLs). Apart from learning English, Anna explained that one of her biggest high school challenges was her struggle to get an advanced diploma because her counselor told her that she did not have enough time to take all the classes that she needed. In spite of her counselor’s discouragement, Anna focused on her goal of being the first in her family to attend

college, attended summer school for two summers in a row to take the required courses, and graduated in 2009 with an advanced high school diploma. During our first interview, she described herself as being “a very dedicated student” who always does her homework.

When Anna entered high school, she also applied for temporary protected status, hoping this would assist her in her desire to go to college. However, her TPS application drew the attention of USCIS and, when she turned 18, during her senior year of high school, she received a letter saying that she was going to be deported unless she returned to El Salvador voluntarily, a process known as *voluntary deportation*. At that time, she retained a lawyer who did not provide much help.

What eventually improved Anna’s situation was Ms. Nan, one of her high school teachers. Ms. Nan voluntarily became heavily involved in Anna’s case and started a campaign to prevent her deportation. When Ms. Nan found out about the murder of Anna’s uncle in El Salvador, she began fearing for Anna’s safety if she were to be deported. Immediately Ms. Nan called her Virginia senators and representatives, made many contacts with local and state authorities, retained a good lawyer from D.C. and collected nearly 100 letters of support, including letters from her city mayor and state senators. Ultimately, because of Ms. Nan’s efforts, the U.S. government granted Anna deferred action and the permission to stay in the United States. She even received a one-year work permit. However, when the year was over, Anna’s work permit was not renewed.

At the time of our first interview Anna was uncertain about her status . However, at the end of May 2012, less than one month prior to the release of information about U.S. Homeland Security’s DACA initiative, she was once again granted deferred action status. She is currently again applying for a work permit.

### **Elena**

Elena, 27, was born in Mexico and came to the United States when she was six years old. Her father came first, under the guest workers program. Three years later, Elena, her mother, and her siblings joined him. Elena’s parents worked in the poultry industry for many years. Elena commented that her parents valued education and deeply wanted their children to succeed. Elena, from an early age, knew that she wanted to go to college, but when she graduated, she did not have the resources to pay for it. She began working as a full-time waitress, and after a year, had saved enough money to pay for one semester at a private university in her hometown. Later, with the financial support of a university grant, private donations, and her own resources, she graduated in three and a half years with a degree in social work. Now unable to use her social work degree, she continues to work as a waitress and pursues her activism. Her activist involvement includes leading a DREAMers group, doing outreach at local schools, and advocating in support of the passage of the DREAM Act.

Elena was a straight A student (4.0) in high school with perfect attendance. She has memories of pushing herself very hard to do well in school. She regrets that she was not encouraged to take AP and higher-level classes. She feels that the teachers did not challenge her sufficiently and that they had lowered expectations of her because she is

Latina. Perhaps because she was unable to take higher-level classes, she found her first semester at college particularly challenging, leaving her overwhelmed and stressed. Elena was the first in her family to attend college.

Of all my participants, Elena is definitely the most confident in speaking about her undocumented status. Although she did not become involved in activism until after she graduated from college, she said that she never felt afraid to share her undocumented status with others. In fact, in high school, guided by the advice of a history teacher, she and her stepfather, visited their state representative to talk about her situation. The state representative did nothing to help her. After college, Elena founded a DREAMers group in her hometown, and as a result of her passion and willingness to speak out, others have been motivated to join the group and participate in rallies, civil disobedience, awareness raising, and many other activities. Elena feels that the more open a person is about his or her undocumented status, the safer he or she is. She describes being undocumented as “living in limbo every day.”

Elena is in the process of applying for deferred action and a work permit. She hopes that if these are granted, she will be able to complete a course in interpreting (Spanish/English) and get a job working for the courts or a hospital. If she does not receive a work permit, Elena has also considered graduate school.

### **Enrique**

Enrique, 19, was born in Mexico. He never knew his father and when he was four years old, his mother left him with his grandparents to come to the United States. Enrique and his mother were reunited five years later by an aunt who brought him to Virginia.

Now, he is a college student, a waiter in a Mexican restaurant, and a proud older brother to two younger siblings. He lives at home with his mother, stepfather, and siblings. At the time of our second interview, Enrique had decided to take the following semester off college for financial reasons. He has been an active member of a DREAMers organization and he is used to sharing his story in various forums.

In describing his academic experiences, Enrique has memories of both challenges and successes. He remembers in his younger years having trouble understanding some classroom directions due to his limited English skills and struggling to pass the end of the year tests. His English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teachers offered him the greatest support. In high school, he transitioned out of ESOL and became active in several school clubs. He even assumed club leadership. He feels that his involvement in extra-curricular activities was instrumental in developing his social skills and public speaking skills. As he neared his high school graduation, he sought out the support of others. Through his activism, he learned of a grant offered by a private university in his hometown. He applied, was awarded the grant, and is now pursuing a nursing degree.

Enrique shared his undocumented status with only a very select group of people before his high school graduation, including a school counselor and a career advisor. Enrique describes his understanding of what it meant to be undocumented as growing incrementally over time until it peaked during his sophomore and junior years of high school. At an early age, he knew that he did not have the necessary identification to get him into the city swimming pool without his aunt's help, but he did not understand the full impact of his unauthorized status until during tenth grade he went to the local

Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) to get his driver's permit, and found out that he was ineligible due to his migratory status. At that moment he realized that he was different. The following year, his mother was deported to Mexico and he suddenly realized the even larger implications and risks of his status. His mother eventually returned to the United States, once again without legal papers, but this forced family separation had a lasting impact on them both.

### **Jacqueline**

Jacqueline came to the U.S. from Mexico when she was eight years old. An older brother had been living in Virginia since he was 14 years old, and when another brother was murdered in Mexico, her parents decided to bring the rest of the family to the United States. Jacqueline is the youngest in her family and the only one to have graduated from a U.S. high school and continued on to college. She began playing soccer as a young girl, and the sport has been an avenue to mentorship, support, and continued education. She is currently on a full-ride, all expenses paid soccer scholarship at a state university. Of all the participants I interviewed, Jacqueline has received, perhaps, the most help in getting where she is today. It is understandable that people close to her would want to help her and support her goals because of her enthusiasm and zest for life.

Jacqueline started school in the United States in third grade. Although, she was fearful her first day of school, she had a cousin in the same school who introduced her and supported her. She describes herself as being "rare" in that she loved school. She spent only one semester in ESOL, and by fourth grade, she was comfortable in school



and quickly became a straight-A student. She has fond memories of her ESOL teacher and her other classroom teachers.

When asked about her personal challenges, Jacqueline described the things she had to figure out for herself. As a child, because her parents lived elsewhere, she lived with an older brother and sister, both of whom worked a lot and had never been to a U.S. school. They were not able to help her with her homework and never attended school events or conferences. She described herself as living in two worlds that did not mix. In fact, her brother, who had stopped attending school when he was 14 to come to the United States, had a hard time understanding why Jacqueline was working so hard. He felt that her status would always limit her. Undeterred, Jacqueline told him that she was going to graduate from high school.

Jacqueline described being undocumented as something that held her back, yet at the same time, shaped who she has become. Although she says that she is not ashamed of being undocumented, she is still very selective about with whom she shares her status . She described it in this way,

It kind of made me stronger. A part of something. Maybe my life would have been different if I wasn't undocumented. It's just a little piece of paper, and we don't have that. But I feel like we're just the same as everyone else, but we can't really get there, yet.

In the spring of 2013 Jacqueline received deferred action status and almost immediately obtained a Virginia driver's license. She also had plans to begin an interpreting course so that she could get a job interpreting at hospitals in her hometown.

## **Melanie**

Melanie came to the United States when she was ten years old, two years after her father was murdered in Guatemala during a robbery. Her mother first came to the United States with Melanie's oldest and youngest brothers, leaving Melanie and her second brother behind with her grandparents and aunt. Less than a year later Melanie's mother returned to Guatemala to collect her two remaining children. Melanie explained that she was very excited to come to the United States because of all that she had heard about it from her cousins who lived in America. After arriving in the United States, she said she finally felt safe and no longer worried about the well-being of her family.

Melanie described herself as an average student. She said that she made a significant turnaround during her junior year of high school when she decided that she wanted to do better in school. She explained,

When I saw a lot of my friends going to college and stuff I wanted to do that too. I thought [by] doing better in school, one day I could show look I was a good student. I wanted to kind of say I have a right to go to school, to continue my school. [Also] It made me feel better. I didn't feel like such a bump.... I woke up and I was like "What am I doing?" My opportunities as an undocumented student are limited and by having bad grades or not doing my best, I was cutting those opportunities even less. That is when I thought I have to do something.

As a result, during her junior and senior years she spent a lot of time in the library doing homework and catching up on what she had missed in her previous years. Also, with the help of her high school counselor, she figured out how to complete all the coursework

that she needed to earn an advanced diploma, including taking an on-line science course. She proudly commented, “The moment I graduated from high school. It was the greatest moment. I felt like I actually accomplished something. I could tell my mom, here you go.”

Melanie always intended to go on to a university, but since at her high school she received no information about possible scholarships and thought community college was the only option available to her due to financial considerations. To date, financial and transportation issues have prevented her from starting.

She described being undocumented as being different from her peers because of “a single piece of paper.” She said that being undocumented makes you grow up faster and look at the world a little differently than others do. It also means carrying a weight on your shoulders and having to face the negative opinions of others that think you are doing something wrong.

Melanie is currently living with her second oldest brother and two cousins and working more than 40 hours a week as a waiter in a restaurant. She has plans to begin attending a local community college in 2013. At the time of our second interview, she had applied for deferred action and was waiting for the decision.

### **Michelle**

Michelle came to the United States from Honduras when she was ten years old along with her mother, father, and younger sister. Not long after settling in Virginia, her parents divorced. Michelle lives with her mother and younger sister who just graduated from high school. Michelle works at the same restaurant where her mother has worked

for the past ten years. She also attends a state university near her home. She started there after receiving an associate degree from a local community college three years after graduating from high school.

Michelle described herself as having always been oriented towards education. She explained that she was an *A/B* student who surrounded herself with education-focused friends. She said that her favorite teacher would describe her as studious, disciplined, and always attentive. She has particularly fond memories of her Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) class, a college preparatory program where students receive academic support and assistance in planning and preparing for college and where students help each other with their assignments. Michelle knew by tenth grade that she wanted to be a civil engineer and was aware of the science and math courses required for that degree. She took physics and geometry during summer school so that she could take AP calculus and AP chemistry during her senior year. She applied to three state universities, was accepted to one and waitlisted at two, and in the end, because of financial reasons, she decided to get her associate degree at a local community college. Michelle has such a strong belief in the value of education that in addition to entirely paying her own way through college, she has also offered to pay for her sister to attend college next year.

Michelle's view of being undocumented reflects the resigned approach she takes to funding her entire education while paying out-of-state tuition. She explained that, in being undocumented, "You're still like other people, but you're more limited for certain things. But other than that it's not bad. You can still make it through." When I asked if she ever felt angry about her situation, she calmly explained that she was not the type to

show anger and that being angry or showing anger was not going to help the situation and would just make it worse.

In the spring of 2013, Michelle received deferred action status. She immediately applied for a social security number and a Virginia identification card. During her university's spring break, she traveled to California and Nevada to visit family that she hadn't seen in twelve years. Additionally she has plans to get her drivers license and look for a job connected to engineering. She also hopes to return to Honduras to visit her maternal grandmother in the near future.

### **Rose**

Rose, 22 years old, came to the United States when she was eleven. She was born in Guatemala where her parents owned several restaurants. She grew up in an urban, middle-class family. However, when the Guatemalan economy worsened and her parents went into debt, they decided to come to the United States to work. Her parents came first and several months later, they returned to Guatemala for Rose and her younger brother. Rose graduated in May of 2012 from a small, private liberal arts college in Pennsylvania with a BA in psychology. She is currently working as a restaurant hostess, hoping that she will be granted deferred action status and a work permit so that she can return to Pennsylvania to find a job in her field, psychology and social work.

Unlike the other participants I interviewed, Rose received a lot of support both from her parents and from teachers at her Northern Virginia high school for continuing her education. She described herself as someone who always did well in school, always did her work, and took school seriously. In reflecting on her school experiences, she

explained that she was instilled with a belief in the importance of reaching higher, and at each point thinking about and preparing for what came next. She said, “I think that is one of the most important things I could remember. Always to look ahead. What’s next?”

In part, it is for this reason that she found times of transition to be incredibly stressful. Despite the support she received from her family and high school, the process of applying to college was an incredibly emotional and uncertain time. She applied to colleges based on the guidance of a school counselor and a minority outreach coordinator as well as her own research. While her parents were unable to assist her with the college application process, they always supported her goal of continued education and eventually went on to pay \$10,000 a year in tuition fees that were not covered by her university’s financial aid package.

Discussing her unauthorized status Rose described two sides to being undocumented. On one side are the limitations, challenges, and anxiety, and on the other, is the extent to which being undocumented taught her to be appreciative of what she has and what she has achieved. In describing the biggest challenge to being undocumented she explained, “There is always an obstacle to your dream, whatever your dream may be.”

### **Allies and Advocates: Advocate Participant Profiles**

To provide additional data for this research, I interviewed five advocates who demonstrated a strong commitment to supporting the pursuit of opportunities and rights for DREAMers living in Virginia. As mentioned above, one is an undocumented young adult interning at a non-profit organization that supports undocumented students. Three

of the advocates are connected to the field of education, and one is a state politician. Of these five advocates, four are Latino and the other is White. Three of the five have a connection to one or more of the immigrant participants. The chart and profiles below provide more specific information about each of them.

**Table 3: Advocate Participants**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Profession</b>	<b>Activist role</b>
Claire	Intern at a non-profit supporting undocumented students	Maintained a database of scholarships for undocumented students and lists of colleges that accept undocumented students; fundraised for undocumented student scholarships; maintained correspondence with students, donors, teachers and others
Michael	State politician	Advocated for a state version of DREAM Act in Virginia
Isabel	School board member; former ESOL teacher/director; founder of non-profit supporting undocumented students	School advocate for English Language Learners, Latino students, and undocumented students; began non-profit to provide information, scholarships, and mentoring to undocumented students.
Nan	High school reading teacher	Began a campaign to stop the deportation of a former student; activist; member of Virginia DREAMers
Susan	University law professor	Acted as faculty sponsor for a DREAMers group on campus; presented at a conference with two students about undocumented students' rights

**Claire**

Claire moved to the United States from Bolivia when she was two months old. She came with her parents who left Bolivia because of political unrest. They overstayed their visas and, because of her parents' fear of being undocumented, she was homeschooled until she entered third grade. She chose to tell her high school counselor



about her undocumented status even though she was afraid of disappointing her. She explained, “She called me her star student. I didn’t want to disappoint her. I knew that I couldn’t do all the things she wanted for me.” After sharing her story, her counselor had a lot of questions that Claire did not know how to answer. Together they tried to find a path for Claire to continue her education. Claire ended up attending a private university in another state that offered her the greatest amount of financial aid. She graduated in four years, earning a BA in history. She encouraged her high school counselor to pass along her information to other undocumented students at her school. Two other undocumented alumni of her high school applied to and were accepted at the same university she had attended.

Claire described being undocumented as always being faced with the question of what now or what is next. At the time of her college graduation she felt sad and depressed because she did not see herself doing anything after college. After graduation, she began interning at a non-profit organization that works to support undocumented high school graduates by providing resources and offering college scholarships. She did not receive a salary from this organization, but will receive a stipend towards continuing her education. As of March 2013, Claire had received deferred action and had two part-time jobs in her area of interest.

### **Michael**

Michael is a lawyer who has been involved in politics at both the state and federal level. Michael’s father immigrated to the United States from Latin America at the age of 19. Once in the United States his father worked as a busboy and a waiter, learned

English, and began taking community college classes. He eventually graduated from college around the same time Michael graduated from high school. Michael's mother, worked in the public schools as a teacher and guidance counselor and devoted her career to supporting culturally and linguistically diverse students.

Michael believes that a version of the DREAM Act that would provide in-state tuition benefits for undocumented students is critical for the welfare of these students and for Virginia. He believes that without such a bill, talented, hardworking students will chose to attend private universities outside the state that are willing to fund their education and ultimately find employment in other states. He sees this situation as a great loss of potential human resource for Virginia.

### **Isabel**

Isabel immigrated to the United States from Bolivia in the 1960s and completed both her undergraduate and graduate education in the United States. For over thirty years, she worked in the Virginia schools as an ESOL teacher and supervisor. Most recently, she founded a non-profit organization that raises funds to provide college scholarships to undocumented students, offers mentorship programs to undocumented student, and offers community education and teacher education. She believes that teachers and school personnel must be better prepared to meet the needs of the undocumented students that attend their schools.

### **Nan**

Nan is a high school reading teacher at a school in rural Virginia. Six years ago she developed a close relationship with Anna, a former student of hers, and at the time of

Anna's deportation proceedings became active in fighting against the deportation by consulting an immigration attorney and initiating a letter-writing campaign on her behalf. Ultimately, she and Anna succeeded in preventing the deportation.

Since then, Nan has become a strong supporter of the undocumented students in her community by serving as a resource for teachers at the high school where she teaches, participating actively in protests and rallies, and seeking funding in the community to support students' continued education. Nan explained that when Anna first shared her story, she had no idea what it meant to be undocumented. Now, teachers at her school come to her asking her to speak to their students. She described the DREAMers greatest resources as themselves, their sense of humor, and their families. She explained, "some of the DREAMers, when they have friends who are born here [in the United States], and they see what they're doing with their opportunities, they really get angry because they know how hard it is for them."

### **Susan**

Susan is a law professor at a state university in Virginia. Through her connection with one student, she was asked to serve as the faculty advisor to a newly-formed DREAMers group on campus. She also presented at a conference with two unauthorized students about the proposed DREAM Act and its implications for DREAMers and U.S. society. She believes that the most important resources that the unauthorized students that she works with have are each other and the community that they have created. From her own experience as a Latina university professor, she described the importance of unauthorized students having mentors who understand and have also experienced what it

means to be unauthorized. She explained that it is hard to see yourself taking the next step if you cannot see someone who looks like you who has done or who is doing the same thing. She also explained the importance of students having safe places to talk about their experiences.

### **Chapter Summary**

I interviewed and profiled eight DREAMers and five advocates. I asked the DREAMers about their educational experiences, perceptions of being undocumented, activism, and goals. I asked the advocates about how they had gotten involved in their work, and their perceptions of undocumented students' needs, opportunities, challenges, and resources. The following section identifies the significant themes that emerged during data analysis.

## CHAPTER FIVE: FINDINGS

*“Let me be the future of this country because I can do many things.” Alex*

This chapter presents my research findings based on the analysis of the transcribed interviews and reflective memos. The guiding research question was: What is the participant’s understanding and experience of being an unauthorized Latino young adult in Virginia? The research sub-questions were: 1) How has being unauthorized shaped the participant’s educational and career path since high school? 2) How has the participant’s narrative been shaped by his/her experiences, achievements, challenges and interactions with others while living in Virginia? 3) What types of support benefited the participants in his/her postsecondary journey, and what additional supports could have benefited him/her more?

As described in chapter three, to identify, analyze, and extract the relevant data from the transcribed interviews and notes, I used thematic analysis. Through the analysis process, I identified six emic themes that get at the heart of what it means to participants to be unauthorized. These six themes include: 1) “I am different,” 2) “I am limited.” 3) “I am uncertain,” 4) “I need[ed] support,” 5) “It’s made me who I am,” and 6) “I am a DREAMer.” The themes along with a description of what each encompasses is listed in the table below. As an additional finding I have also included a brief discussion of the

role of the role of social media and technology in the DREAMer movement.

**Table 4: Theme Description**

<b>Emic Theme</b>	<b>Researcher Description</b>
“I am different.”	Perceptions of Self and Home and the Emotional Toll of Being Undocumented <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perceptions of self and home</li> <li>• Being different</li> <li>• Emotional and Psychological Toll (fear and stigma of status)</li> </ul>
“I am limited.”	Limitations Connected to Education, Career and Lack of Identification <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Postsecondary Limitations (choice, timeline, funding)</li> <li>• Career Limitations</li> <li>• Additional Limitations (connected to lack of identification)</li> </ul>
“I am uncertain.”	Limited Legality and the Implications of Personal and Political Uncertainty <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personal uncertainty</li> <li>• Political uncertainty (The Dream Act, Deferred Action, political positioning, and broken immigration system)</li> </ul>
“I need[ed] support.”	The Process and Outcome of Asking for and Receiving Support <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Depending on themselves</li> <li>• Not telling and the veil of secrecy</li> <li>• “Coming out” at school</li> <li>• Academic need</li> <li>• Financial need</li> <li>• Emotional need</li> </ul>
“It’s made me who I am.”	Participant Responses to Being Undocumented <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conformist resistance</li> <li>• Transformative resistance (Confronting negative stereotypes, Status as a motivator, Education as a tool for change and resistance, the role of hope)</li> </ul>
“I am a DREAMer.”	On being an Activist: the Process and Benefit <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Becoming an activist</li> <li>• Shifting the narrative</li> <li>• Connecting with other DREAMers</li> </ul>
	Social Media and Technology

## **“I Am Different.”**

### **Perceptions of Self and Home and the Emotional Toll of Being Undocumented**

The DREAMers in this study are a homogeneous group in many regards. They are fully bilingual. They belong to families of low socioeconomic status in which several members of the family are also unauthorized. They are ineligible to apply for government-sponsored financial aid, and they cannot work legally in the United States. They share these characteristics with many other DREAMers throughout the United States. They also have characteristics in common with some members of their documented Latino peer group, such as having families who immigrated to the United States for economic or security reasons, experiencing family separation at the time of immigration, and having parents with limited formal education. Because the DREAMers in this study came to the United States at a young age and have been raised in the United States like their documented or “legal” peers, these DREAMers consider themselves to be American; they view the United States as their home, and when they think about goals and aspirations, they see themselves living in the United States. However, the participants in this study also described themselves as being “different” from their documented or American-born peers in fundamental ways that shaped them into the people they have become. Unlike these peers, they have experienced the emotional toll of being undocumented, the limitations connected to their status, and the perpetual uncertainty about their lives and their futures. I will discuss the first of these in this section and the latter two conditions in following sections. Not surprisingly, what emerged from the data was the participants’ desire *not* to be different in these ways.

## Perceptions of Self and Home

Similarly to undocumented young adults in other studies of this nature, most of the DREAMers interviewed here explained that they identified more with being American than with their birth nationality (Abrego, 2006, Gonzales, 2007, Abrego & Gonzales, 2010). Although they still might have a preference for music or food from their birth country, they recognize the United States as home. Elena explained, “I want to go back to Mexico to visit, but I can’t see myself living there. This is home for me.”

Despite their attachment to the United States, participants’ undocumented status and feelings of being different lead to what Torres and Wicks-Asbun (2013), in their study of unauthorized youth living in North, refer to as *in-between identities*. Anna and Alex described their undocumented status as keeping them from being fully American. Anna explained “I don’t feel like I am from here, nor do I feel like I am from there [El Salvador]. It’s hard because I feel like I am from here, but because of my status...” In contrast, Alex said, “I’m American all the way. I grew up here. I went to school here. I still go to school here. I hang out with American people. I’m American all the way, just not on paper.”

Six of the eight immigrant participants mentioned the possibility of voluntarily returning to their birth countries, most without my explicitly asking. Because of the uncertainty in their futures, the possibility of pursuing a less-expensive higher education degree or legal employment outside of the United States has some appeal. However, like other unauthorized students who immigrated to the United States at a young age, the



participants in this study indicated that leaving the United States was not their preference (Torres & Wicks-Asbun, 2013). Michelle explained,

Even after I finished community college I was like, it's too much money to pay at [my current university]. I could just work and save money and get my entire college education down there [in El Salvador]... [But] from what my Dad says, it's really dangerous over there. You have to be home by a certain time or you can't go out at a certain time in the morning. Safety is one of the things.

Opportunities too.... If you go to a free public school [in El Salvador], you get less opportunities. . . . Teachers or professors rally [go on strike] because their pay is not enough, so you miss school days. [In] the end it's going to hurt you. You're the one who is trying to get those goals.

As Michelle makes very clear, there are many reasons for not returning to the birth countries. Some are the very same ones that brought their families to the United States many years ago: positive reasons, such as a belief that, despite their undocumented status, the United States offers greater economic and educational opportunities and negative reasons, such as the danger in their home countries. Other reasons for not leaving the United States include hope that the DREAM Act will be made into law or having family here.

Alex was the most adamant about not wanting to return to Guatemala. He said, "To tell you the truth, I really don't miss anything about my country other than my grandma and a couple of uncles that I have over there. I don't want to go back. I don't expect to go back."

It is striking that, despite the limited opportunities in the United States without the passage of a DREAM Act or similar bill, these youth still have a firmly rooted belief that the United States is a country that offers greater opportunities than their own countries.

Elena, for example, has been offered employment opportunities by relatives in Mexico—an aunt who works for an international company and an uncle who is a school superintendent. Both have told her that her English language proficiency would guarantee her a good job. However, she said that it is not what she wants. “I think about it, but I always think the DREAM Act will pass. I’ll just wait. I have better opportunities here in some ways.” Similarly, Enrique is also being encouraged to return to Mexico with his mother, after his college graduation. He said, however, “I don’t want to go back to Mexico. [Although] one day I do, [but] not to live though. There are greater opportunities here. It’s a good country. This is better. This is way better.”

Anna, Michelle, and Melanie mentioned family as key factors in their wanting to stay in the United States. Michelle, for example, said, “Here I have my family. There [in Honduras] I would be on my own.” Melanie described her family’s fear that something will happen and just one of them will be sent back to Guatemala.

My whole family is here, so we’re all scared if we do something wrong only one of us is going to go and the rest stays here. We know we don’t want to be back there [Guatemala]. We try to be on our toes. To keep our life straight as much as possible.

Melanie's quote exemplifies not only her desire to remain in the United States, but also the constant fear of deportation, one way she self-identifies as different from her documented peers.

### **On Being Different**

A recurring theme in many of the eight participant narratives was the way in which they were the same as or different from the other students in their classes. The undocumented young adults that I interviewed seldom thought about their status until high school where discussions of driver's licenses and college applications arise frequently. There was some mention of being different or separate at the start of their U.S. education, but, after they had mastered English, there was little mention of being different until they reached their teenage years. Elena, for example, explained, "I grew up like a regular kid."

This sense of being different increased or decreased depending on who they spent time with. Elena explained that unauthorized Latino youth who were not surrounded by other Latinos felt different in ways that were not true for her. She commented, "I grew up in a trailer park and played mostly with Latino friends." The desire to be "normal" or documented was greater in those participants who said they had few Latino friends, and was connected, in part, to a desire to avoid having to explain their situations or the factors limiting their opportunities. Jacqueline first described herself as different when talking about playing high school soccer and having to fly out of state to play in soccer tournaments. She explained, "Everybody was normal. . .and I was the only one. . . . They had their IDs [such as a driver's license]"

Similarly, Enrique described his experience of recognizing that he was different from others.

I told my mom, “Can we go get my driver’s license?” and we did. Then we kind of got shut down by the lady at the first station. She was like, “You know honey, you got to have a social security number. I’m sorry.” I looked at my mom kind of like, wow, I’m gonna be different. I’m different.

Three of the participants spoke about how, as they approached middle and high school, most of their friends were “Americans,” not other Latino students. The greater the participants’ involvement in higher-level classes and extra-curricular activities, the fewer Latino classmates and friends they had. This shift in friends also impacted to what extent participants felt different. Jacqueline explained,

In elementary school, I was with Hispanic kids. I was always hanging out with them. In middle school, I started getting into higher classes. I was hanging out with mostly American kids. Even in high school, I was mostly with American kids and the Hispanic kids were in the lower classes. The Hispanic kids would sometimes be like “Oh, do you think you’re American?” And I’d be like “No that’s not the case at all.” So throughout high school I’d say I was Americanized in a way. . . . It was weird, because the Mexicans would see me as American and the Americans would see me as a Mexican.

Clearly, many participants felt that they were straddling two worlds—the Latino world of home and the White-American world of their school.

In discussing his friendships with non-Latino, White students, Enrique said, “In my school, I never spoke to many Hispanic students, because I couldn’t relate to them as well as the White kids.” His active involvement in clubs brought him closer to the non-Latino students.

The desire not to be different prevented some of the participants from speaking openly about their undocumented status to friends as well as kept them from participating in certain types of social activities. Rose explained that she did not tell her college friends because she did not want her status to be an obstacle in forming friendships with others. “I never wanted to be seen as different, because I don’t feel like I am different.” Similarly, Claire, when explaining why she did not share her status with anyone at college, said that she thought that the DREAM Act would pass. “Also, I kind of wanted to be normal, leave it in the background.”

Michelle mentioned that when asked to go out to a bar or club with friends who are not aware of her status, she makes excuses to explain why she cannot join them; the real, unspoken, reason, is that her only form of identification is her passport. “People are like, ‘Let’s go to the club’ or, ‘Let’s go to the bar’, and I don’t want to take my big passport. Then questions start coming out. ‘Why do you have your passport?’” Michelle explained that rather than face those kinds of questions, she would rather just stay home. However, DREAMers do not just feel different from their documented peers.

The participants in this study also described themselves as being different from other unauthorized Latino young adults in their communities in terms of how much they were willing to speak out, how much support they received, and their goals for the future.

Anna explained that after she had told her story to the local newspaper, she thought that every year a few undocumented students should share their stories in the paper as a way of highlighting the number of unauthorized students graduating from high school. However she realized that “not everyone is willing to share. . . . Some students want to hide, especially high school students. They’re ashamed.”

Other participants felt that their unauthorized peers were unable to or decided not to pursue higher education because of a lack of money, a need to work, and/or a feeling that formal education was not worth the time and money. Speaking about her college education, Elena said that she feels privileged because she was able to attend college. She explained, “There are a lot of people [unauthorized youth] who have that desire [to continue their education], and they can’t afford it.” Both Enrique and Jacqueline spoke about friends who had given up. Enrique explained, “The ones that don’t care—they gave up. They didn’t get that chance to pursue anything. They’re going to work for the rest of their lives.” Similarly, Jacqueline described undocumented young adults she knew who had to work to support their family and others who felt that going to college was pointless.

Psychologically, you have to be really strong to be able to do it [go to college]. You see, your parents don’t have good jobs, and it’s something that you don’t want to do. You don’t want to be working in a poultry factory like your parents. Enrique’s and Jacqueline’s words speak to the emotional and psychological toll of being undocumented.

## **Emotional and Psychological Toll**

The mantra of DREAMers, “*Undocumented and Unafraid!*” is chanted at rallies around Virginia and throughout the country. This phrase has emerged as a slogan for the new immigrant youth movement. No longer living in the shadows, unauthorized students are coming out, organizing, and advocating for change in immigration policy. This phrase was also expressed by several of my eight participants. However, during our conversations discussions of fear and embarrassment or shame also came up repeatedly. There was a disconnect between the participants’ feelings that they had outgrown their fear and shame as they became increasingly involved with activism and more educated and the evidence that these emotions were still shaping their choices and experiences. There was also the sense that coming to terms with being undocumented was an emotional journey marked by different feelings, such as surprise, confusion, anger, sadness, and ultimately resolve.

Melanie spoke most openly about the anger she felt when, as a junior in high school, she recognized the significance of being undocumented clearly. She realized her status and her college ambition were at odds. She described herself at that time as mad at the world, questioning why her undocumented mother had brought her to the United States from Guatemala, and feeling embarrassed by her status. Melanie remembered what an older friend had told her about her own journey of accepting being undocumented.

She was like “get ready. This is going to be a roller coaster of emotions. One day you’re going to be happy. The other day you’re going to be mad about something.” She was like, “get ready because it’s not an easy way.” Now I see why she said that

because the same thing happened to her. She came here when she was nine or ten. She went through that whole phase of anger and accepting things a little bit before me. She told me it was going to be rough, but you're going to be okay. I think she was right.

All eight of the DREAMers in this study recounted feeling of fear and stigmatization connected to their status; how strongly they felt these emotions varied from participant to participant and changed over the course of their lives.

**Fear.** All eight of the Latino DREAMers described either feeling fear in the present or fear in the past, a fear of deportation for themselves or a family member and of the social stigma at the potential discovery of their status. Several described fear connected with their undocumented status as an on-going psychological stress that could limit opportunities, that kept them from sharing their stories, and dictated and controlled their behavior to some extent. In describing what it meant to be undocumented, Anna explained,

It's always to be afraid, always with pressure. And you don't know when you're out of your house if you're going to come back. One day you're here, and the next day you're not. We only rest when we sleep.

Several feared that any contact with the police might lead to deportation or some other negative future consequences. Enrique described how difficult it is to let this fear go, even when faced with other pressing issues. At the time of our second interview, he spoke of a call he had received from the police about a close friend who was missing . He explained,



We get afraid. This morning a police officer called me [from a neighboring town]. I was afraid for a moment to speak to him because he asked me for my last name. And I flashed back to a time. . .when there was a carbon monoxide leak [in my parent's house]. The officer asked for my information, and he asked for my first name, and my last name, and my social security number. And I'm afraid in this whole process [searching for my friend] that they are going to ask me for that [a social security number] and I don't have it. . . . I hope I don't get arrested because of this, because I am trying to find one of my dearest friends.

Enrique went on to explain that at the time of the carbon monoxide leak, his mother was very ill and did not want him to call for help because of her fear of discovery. This story illustrates the extreme impact the fear of deportation and being identified as undocumented can have.

Jacqueline provided a striking picture of how fear and stress about her status affected a choice she had made. After graduation, she was recruited to play soccer at a university near the U.S.- Mexico border. She described her first semester:

The border patrol is everywhere. I mean like everywhere you want to go. I went through checkpoints all the time [on the soccer bus]. . . . But one time, I was just like whatever. I was so tired of being in this little square. I was like I'm just going to go. My friends had invited me to go to this church retreat thing and I was like I'm just going to go. So I got in the truck. There were two people who knew about me but the one driving the truck did not know. I was like here it comes. The checkpoint's coming. "All American citizens?" I said, "Yes." He just let us

through. My heart was pounding. . . . I didn't tell my mom though. I didn't tell Rebecca, the lady that helps me out. I didn't tell her. Because I'm not going to make them worried because they were already very worried. And so I was very stressed during that time. I would think about it [being undocumented] every day. When I am here [in Virginia], I don't think about it every day. To be thinking about it every day, to think, "Oh, they might get me." To see border-patrol trucks every second around the campus. So then I called Rebecca and I was like "I'm coming back. I can't deal with this."

As a result of this on-going fear of discovery, Jacqueline returned to Virginia, leaving behind a full-ride scholarship and her soccer career and with no idea of what the future held for her.

Other participants also described fear getting in the way of possible opportunities. Anna explained, "I know friends of mine who are afraid of applying to this Obama Deferred Action, who are afraid because after that they think they're going to deport them. They're going to have all their information, their fingerprints and everything."

Enrique and Elena emphasized that undocumented parents teach their children be afraid and as a result unauthorized immigrant children are very wary and reluctant to trust. Elena, in discussing why more undocumented students do not become involved in activism, explained, "being undocumented, you've been raised not talking about it. Parents are like, 'Don't tell anybody. You can get deported.'" Similarly, Enrique spoke of his parents' message to him:

We learn to be warned. . . . We learn to worry. We learn to be aware. Then we become afraid. We start to become so worried or aware of what we have to say. We learn not to trust. We grow to be scared because our parents are scared. We have that mentality, if I share, I'm risking a lot of things. Part of the main thing is getting arrested. You see it all over the T.V. We don't know who is out to get us.

Jacqueline also shared the belief that her status could be used as a way for people to punish or hurt her. She recalled that both a family friend and one of her college soccer coaches gave her this message.

A lot of times I'm hesitant [to tell people]. . . . William [my soccer coach] would say "you can't really tell a lot of people," and Tony [a family friend] would say "you can't always trust people." I'm very well known in the community because of soccer. I coach and I take care of kids and stuff. I don't know if they would feel comfortable because of that or if they'd want to do some damage. They might go tell on me or something. People are not always going to like me. There are going to be some people that don't like me, and they might want to hurt me. That's what William would always say, and Tony.

In an effort to protect their children or others that they care about, the parents, family, and community members of these participants passed along messages that taught them to be fearful and untrusting of others.

Some participants in this study grew less fearful over time because of their activism and the sharing of their stories. Two participants, Rose and Melanie, however, mentioned growing more fearful after graduating from high school because they were no

longer under their parents' protection, and there was more opportunity for getting in trouble. Melanie said,

I am afraid but not to the point that I let it interfere with me. It's always there, no matter what. When I was younger I knew it, but I didn't really pay attention to it but now that I graduated school, I am out here. One thing I guess it has interfered with, I am afraid to do anything wrong. So it's kind of like I am always watching what I do, what I say, where I go, who I'm with so to not get myself in trouble. I guess in a way it is good because it gets me to stay away from things I shouldn't be doing anyway.

This quote highlights not only Melanie's on-going fear, but also how this fear has led her to a strong sense of responsibility for her actions.

In addition to fear, participants spoke of the stigma attached to their undocumented status, which in some cases led to feelings of shame. Enrique's and Jacqueline's quotes illustrate that through media and interactions with others, undocumented immigrants learn of the negative views in the United States of undocumented immigration; these negative views can take an emotional toll.

**Stigma of status.** Nearly all eight participants described the stigma of being undocumented, a feeling that changed over time and with peer groups. Some described being ashamed in the past, but no longer. Others talked about stories that they told to conceal their status.

Enrique and Melanie spoke openly about the impact this stigma had on them. Enrique explained his feelings in high school,

What people think about you is one of your biggest concerns. I could never tell anyone in my school [about being undocumented] because the words that went through my head were wetback, *beaner*, brown-skinned, Mexican. Negative connotations. I never wanted to tell anyone because I was scared, and I was afraid of what they would think about me.

Melanie still feels the impact of this stigma today in thinking about her access to better jobs and higher education. She explains, “It’s kind of confusing. I feel like I do have the right. But at the same time because I am undocumented, I feel that I don’t have the right legally. But as a human I do have the right.”

Rose most felt this stigma when she left northern Virginia to attend a small, liberal arts college in rural Pennsylvania. In high school she had been open about her status both with both her peers and school faculty. However once she began attending a conservative, primarily White university the situation somehow changed. She did not feel comfortable sharing her immigration status with her new classmates and friends because she did not want to have to explain what it meant to be undocumented until it was part of her past. “I didn’t want to be looked at as different. . . . There were really not a lot of minorities where I was. In a way I would have to educate people. That wasn’t the time. I wasn’t ready for it.” Rose explained that one day she might tell them. “I feel like down the line, when I get myself figured out, I will tell them.

Similarly, Enrique described how negative stereotypes about undocumented immigrants kept him from sharing his status with high school friends and how he had decided not to reveal his status until he can prove the stereotypes to be wrong.

They [my high school friends] have a perception of what illegals are, and even the Hispanics are too ashamed and too embarrassed to defend it. Defend their own people and their pride in what they are. Where they came from? I want to be something so that they can say well he's illegal too and this is who you're talking about. Someone that's successful. . . . One of my closest friend's mom, she loves me to death. There was this thing on the local news stations, and it was all about the DREAM Act in 2010 when it was really a hot debate. . . . I remember how it hurt me a little bit [her comment]. She [my friend's mom] was like, 'there's no way this should pass. This is stupid. It's just going to encourage more people to come in. There's got to be a better way.' My friends are Republican. They think like Republicans because their parents are Republicans. So that encouraged me not to say anything.

Enrique says that now because of his activism he is no longer ashamed of his undocumented status. Yet, despite the fact that he has served on panels where he recounted his story and protested in Washington D.C., he has not talked about being undocumented with his high school friends. For this, he is waiting until he feels that he is more successful. For Rose and Enrique, achieving a certain level of success will set them apart from the stereotypes of "illegal immigrants."

In addition to the effects of fear and the stigma of undocumented immigration, the participants in this study have also suffered from the on-going and long-term limitations of being undocumented.

## **“I Am Limited.”**

### **Limitations Connected to Education, Career, and Lack of Identification**

Frequently, national discussions of DREAMers focus on limitations to continued education, including the inability to apply for financial aid and scholarships and the unlikelihood of obtaining a green card and legal employment. As expected, these were very real limitations for the DREAMers in this study as well. However, during the interviews, it became clear that the participants are troubled by a host of other daily reminders and limitations. The limitations are connected not only to the status of being undocumented but frequently to the inability to get a state-issued identification card or access to state services.

### **Postsecondary Educational Limitations**

My participants' unauthorized status has shaped their postsecondary educational paths in three fundamental ways: 1) limitations in school choice, 2) the length of time it is taking to get a degree, and 3) the burden of balancing a work and school load. The latter two are a direct result of their inability to apply for student loans as well as most scholarships.

**Educational choice.** Several of the participants said that they would have made different decisions about their postsecondary education had they had documents. Frequently their choices were based on financial considerations and limited knowledge of what was available to them because of the insufficient guidance that they received. As Table 5 details, information about available options usually came from high school personnel and other undocumented students that they knew. It is significant that all eight

of the participants in this study considered a very limited number of higher education options, and frequently others were directing them toward a particular option. For example, Claire explained,

When I went to college, I knew that there were still a lot of people at [my high school] who were undocumented. I told my counselor to send them to me. That was how I was helping people [during] college.

She went on to say that two other undocumented students from her high school applied and were accepted to her university the following year and one more the year after that.

**Table 5: Participant Higher Education Options**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Information Source</b>	<b>Options Considered</b>
Alex	High school counselor	One community college
Anna	Another undocumented student	Local community college One private university in hometown
Elena	Independent research	One private university in hometown
Enrique	Another undocumented student	One private university in hometown
Jacqueline	Independent research; college soccer recruiters/coaches	Recruited by several universities; sought a full-ride, college athletic scholarship
Melanie	High school counselor	Considering one community college
Michelle	Independent research	Applied to three state universities; One community college
Rose	High school counselor, minority achievement coordinator; independent research	Applied to three universities (two applied to by an older undocumented student and one university with a nursing



		program)
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School counselors steered Alex and Melinda towards community colleges because of their grades and finances. Enrique and Anna followed in the footsteps of another undocumented student that they knew and are now attending a small, private university in their hometown that is supportive of undocumented students and provides a grant for half of their tuition. Michelle applied to three state universities, was accepted by one, waitlisted at two others, and ultimately, due to financial reasons, enrolled at a community college. Rose’s college counselor pointed her in the direction of two private universities that had accepted other undocumented students and offered financial aid. Ultimately, without visiting any of the universities, she chose the one that offered the greatest amount of financial aid. In the end, Rose was very happy with her college experience, however she commented, “I always wanted to go to the big schools like VCU [Virginia Commonwealth University],” which she was unable to attend.

Rose was not the only one with ambitions to attend a different type of institution. Alex’s first choice, for example, was a private university located in his hometown. However, that university does not accept undocumented students, and, ultimately, without student loans, Alex felt he could only afford tuition at the local community college.

I wanted to live an American life, which I couldn’t. Well I am living one, but not the same way other people are living it like going to college, living in the dorms. That’s something that I would have loved. I told my parents once “Do you know if

I were a citizen I would have gone somewhere else to college?’

Two other participants also mentioned the dream of living away from home. Anna said that had she been a legal resident, she would have gone to the University of Virginia because it is bigger than the university she is currently attending and is away from home. “I told my mom that I have always wanted to live three parts of my life: living with her, living alone, and then getting married. It’s like the American way, I guess.” Of the other seven DREAMers in this study who went on to college, all but two lived with their families while attending college.

**Educational timeline.** Two of the DREAMers in this study were forced to delay enrolling in college because of a need to earn money for tuition and other expenses; two others indicated that their undocumented status and the price of tuition would lengthen the time it took them to get through school. Because they cannot get student loans, they must be able to pay all the tuition at the start of the semester. This means taking fewer classes at a time or taking time off from school to work and save money. Michelle, in particular, commented that because she is funding her education entirely on her own, it would take her extra time to get through school. When asked about how many more classes she needed to graduate, she answered,

I’m not sure. I always look at it. I’m barely half way through the sheet, so I know it’s a long ways. I try not to look at it that much because I might get discouraged or be like, oh, it’s going to take me so long at the pace I’m going. I just try to go slowly.

Similarly, at the time of our first interview, Enrique was deciding whether he would

be taking a semester off the following fall due to financial reasons. He explained,

If I don't [attend school in Fall 2012], I'll be behind when I go back. If I do, I won't have a grant for my final semester and that'll be like \$30,000 that I don't have. And I couldn't get any support for that."

By August 2012, he had made the decision to take a semester off from school.

**Educational funding.** All eight of the participants spoke about the challenge and burden associated with funding postsecondary education, and two in particular spoke about the challenge of balancing an academic workload and a job. Michelle explained that she gave up looking for scholarships because she could not find any for which she qualified. All the scholarships that she found either required a social security number or were specific to DREAMers in other parts of the country, such as California. She went on to explain the balance of work and school was very hard. Rather than being able to take a full academic load each semester, she decides how many classes to take based on how much money she has saved. She fluctuates between taking no classes to taking four or five classes at a time because of the pressure she feels about getting behind. She explains that, as a result, "I'm not as involved in school. I'm not keeping up with all the classmates that I had."

Enrique explained the impact of work on his grades and future degree and, ultimately, his own happiness.

I kind of stopped finding happiness in things as easily as I used to. Like I used to be so happy to eat a hot dog, and now I don't even care to watch a movie or go out.

Because going to school, you have to pay the semester before you get started, and I

never can. So, it is really hard on my grades because I work, and it drives my grades down, and you can see it. Especially this last semester, I got a 3.8 [grade point average] and that's because I didn't work. I did work at my internship but I didn't have to work for a living. When I used to work, I used to get, first it was a 3.1 and then it started dropping 2.9, 2.7 and it was just dropping gradually. Then my nursing professors were like we don't think you can make it through the nursing program if you keep going like that. It's just so much pressure.

In addition to affecting participants' educational opportunities, being undocumented also has had a significant impact on their employment opportunities.

### **Career Limitations**

Being undocumented affected how the participants sought employment, the type of jobs that they held, their outlook for future employment, and, ultimately, their ability to contribute to society in a meaningful way. Unauthorized immigrants are not able to obtain legitimate social security numbers, and this means that they are limited to jobs that will hire them without this. All six of the participants who were working regular hours at the time of the interviews, were working in entry-level restaurant jobs. All, except for Rose, had gotten the job through connections with others, and she explained that this was the first job that she had gotten without her parents' help. Jacqueline, who was not working at the time of these interviews, but had worked in the past explained, "Every job that I've gotten is because I know the owner of the business or because there is a connection."

Six of the participants spoke about the extent to which their status limits their career

options. A common theme concerning careers was the desire to have different employment from what they currently had; they also wanted to avoid doing the types of jobs their parents or other family members were doing. Elena, Rose, and Claire all currently have university degrees that they would like to be using. Elena has a degree in social work, Rose was a psychology major, and Claire graduated with degrees in history and sociology. Now, Elena and Rose are working in restaurants, and Claire is interning at two different non-profits and earning very little.

Rose felt that applying for deferred action was a risk because it meant alerting ICE of her unauthorized status. However, she also explained that it was a risk she was willing to take.

I feel like it is a risk, but at this point it's there, and it's a small light of hope. It's temporary. But two years, I would rather take these two years and have these two years be something great. Start my career. I don't want to be doing whatever, minimum wage jobs for a long time. If I can do something great by having this opportunity then I am going to take it.

Similarly, Alex explained about his own long term career ambitions.

I don't want to stay working in the same place my whole life. I want to be somebody. I want to be the boss of somebody. I want to own my own business. I want to make my own money. I don't want to work the same job for years and years.

In addition to restricting their access to potential jobs, their undocumented status also limited the types of professional experiences available to them. For example,

Michelle has been unable to find an internship because internships require a social security number. She feels that her lack of social security number puts her at a disadvantage for future employment. She explained that if she had a social security number or a work permit she would have applied for more internships. “Because you need the experience in civil engineering to be hands on. You want to learn that before you go to the work place, and people prefer that.”

Anna, who is currently unemployed, explained that during the year that she had a work permit, she worked as a secretary for the Hispanic leader of a community church. She loved the job and they were very happy with her, but when her work permit expired, she had to stop working.

Participants’ career limitations affected their larger goal of contributing to society. Almost all of the participants expressed a strong desire to put their postsecondary education to use and to contribute to society in a meaningful way. Nan, Anna’s teacher and advocate, explained:

When kids can apply for deferred action, when they start to be able to work and drive, communities are going to be able to see the potential. These are American-educated kids who can’t use their education. I think they’re going to be a real boon to our communities. These kids want to give back. They love their communities. They love their schools.

Alex gave his perspective:

I feel frustrated that I can’t become American yet, because I feel that I can do so many things for the community. . . . My goal after high school, if I had a chance

to become a resident, I was going to have a contracting company that was going to hire a lot of people. My dad was a painter and at one point, he had thirty employees working for him. I was going to do the same thing, to give jobs to people that needed jobs. But I can't and it's really frustrating. That's why I got interested in the DREAM Act stuff. I was at the Senate when they were doing the Senate Dream Act voting [in 2010]. . . . These guys had our future in their hands and they're saying no to my future. I can't do the things I want to do. That's really frustrating. That I can't do what citizens can do. We're all human.

Similarly Anna explained that she also would like to work in the interest of others. "My dream is working in a non-profit organization. My degree is business. Like advertising, helping with raising money, helping with getting funds. . . . There will always be a cause to fight for."

During a discussion about what she would like to say to the president and to members of Congress about passing the DREAM Act, Michelle explained,

I would say, "Hi. My name is Michelle. I'm a civil engineering student. There are many other students like me trying to get a degree. A STEM degree [i.e., in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics] or maybe social work or psychology, and we try to help our community by studying this. We don't want to study and [then] not be able to help out. . . . If we're getting our education and we're not able to use it, the United States is basically losing brilliant students to help out people in need."

Michelle's words represent a common frustration felt by the eight participants in this study. They feel they have worked hard for their education and now they want to use this education to get better jobs than those available to them.

### **Additional Limitations**

In describing what it means to be undocumented, my eight participants also spoke about routine limitations in their lives. In particular, several participants mentioned limitations imposed by not being able to get a driver's license or other valid identification. Elena, 27, the oldest of the immigrant participants, was able to get a license before the policy changed in Virginia. Anna, was also able to get a license when she was granted her initial work permit. Others, however, explained what not having state identification meant in terms of travel, going to clubs or bars with their friends, and even doing everyday activities such as returning an item at a store, purchasing a cell phone, or going to the city pool. Rose explained how small things, which might seem insignificant to those not in her situation, actually matter a lot,

Silly things, not being able to travel, not being able to go eat and have a drink.

Let's say when I go out with other people I don't know, I feel uncomfortable being like okay, here is my passport. I feel like those things that other people take for granted. They overlook them and think they're not important. It's just the fact that there is a constant reminder for us.

Alex also shared his frustration at these limitations.

I'm actually going on a trip to Florida tomorrow, and we can't go by plane because I'm scared to go on the plane because I'm undocumented. I'm going with



my friends. They're all American, citizens; they were born here. They all know I'm undocumented. Something really little, an ID can't get me into a plane because I don't have an ID. I can't get an ID, and I can't get on a plane to go to Florida to have fun with friends and spend money over there. Yeah, it's really frustrating. Even when I go to the movies, they ask me for ID. How dumb is that? I mean I'm 19 years old. I can't get into an R rated movie. . . . It's really frustrating. Down in Florida I'm going to try doing the same thing to get into a club [showing his high school ID, which includes his age]. I have my ID from 2001, and I'm probably going to show that too so that I can go and have fun. It's really frustrating.

Another common theme was self-imposed limits, which some participants used because of the need to be cautious. Michelle explained, "I feel like if I weren't undocumented, my Mom would let me do more stuff. Like maybe go to trips outside of the state. Because of that, I'm conscious that I have to limit myself with certain stuff."

Similarly, Enrique said he chose not to join the football team because he did not have health insurance.

I didn't play any sports as much as I wanted to and my PE teachers wanted me to. They [my teachers] asked me how come you don't play a sport. . . . I could never tell them why. Really, it was because I don't have insurance. What if I get hurt? Who was going to pay for it? It's a lot of money to go to the ER. That's something I wish I could have, because if you were in sports in our school, you were automatically popular.

Enrique’s narrative about deciding not to play sports certainly illustrates this additional consequence of being undocumented, but also his sense of responsibility to his family, a feeling common to the participants in this study.

In summary, being undocumented has significantly limited where the participants could go for postsecondary education, how much time they needed to complete this education, and the level of stress they felt having to balance work and school. In addition, lack of documentation has severely limited the types of jobs they have pursued. Not being in possession of a state-issued identification card bars them from many activities either because the activity is impossible without this type of identification or because they fear others will notice they do not have one and wonder why. These limitations have also contributed to the participants’ general sense of uncertainty about the future.

### **“I Am Uncertain.”**

#### **Limited Legality and the Implications of Personal and Political Uncertainty**

The very nature of being undocumented—residing in the United States without proper immigration documentation—is characterized by uncertainty: uncertainty over the future, uncertainty over jobs, and uncertainty over the political climate and its impact on federal, state, and local laws. The uncertainty of these unauthorized Latino young Virginia adults manifests itself in two areas: the personal and the political.

#### **Personal Uncertainty**

Elena aptly described personal uncertainty as “living in limbo.” She explained that being undocumented meant “always living in uncertainty and not knowing what’s

going to happen.” All of the participants in this study described times in their lives when they felt uncertain about what they would do next and their future.

The times of their greatest personal uncertainty, understandably came during transitions, such as high school or college graduation. The lack of clarity over next steps proved to be a source of stress, confusion, and emotional turmoil. Alex described his biggest challenge in school as his uncertainty over his future.

When I was in eleventh grade, and I wasn't sure what I was going to do. I wasn't sure if I was going to go to college. I wasn't sure if I was going to make it to college. I wasn't sure how I was going to get into college because of me being undocumented. My first semester of my senior year, that's when I really started worrying how I was going to get into college and what I was going to do and what I needed to do to get into college.”

Rose described both the end of her high school years and then her college years as being very stressful.

Things are very temporary. High school is four years and then there was the big college problem. When everyone was getting into all these schools, and I didn't know what I was going to do, it was awful. I was depressed. I was so upset. . . . I finally got my stuff together, went off to college, graduated, and then what do we do now? Junior year [of college] it was like panic time. What am I going to do? Time is going by so fast. . . . It's so stressful. It's draining.

As would be expected, participants speak about their potential careers with great uncertainty. Anna explained, “the question comes all the time, after I graduate, what am I

going to do?” Participants described how they felt during these transitions as “blurry,” “hazy,” and “a little lost.” Some of the participants brought up the topic on their own, as it is clearly a very important issue for them. Others think about it less frequently. When asked about their plans for the future, participants mentioned: 1) the possibility of a change in status through deferred action or passage of the DREAM Act; 2) continuing to pursue their postsecondary education in the United States; 3) returning to their home country to find work; and 4) continuing to work at their present jobs.

During my first interview with Alex, he mused about his future:

Somehow, hopefully, I can change my status. But if it doesn't change, then I am still going to keep going to school and trying to get my MBA or something. And still working. I don't know. I haven't made up my mind that far yet.

Enrique and Michelle also mentioned continuing at their present jobs if they were unable to get a change in status. When asked what she planned to do after graduation if the DREAM Act didn't pass, Michelle responded “just continue working where I am. I've been working there for four years. It doesn't seem like they want me out or anything.”

Anna has been thinking about studying or working overseas since her deportation scare.

I think a lot of things. When I was going to be deported, I went to the Embassy of El Salvador. I asked for a scholarship to another country. But I had to go back to El Salvador [to get it]. So I'm thinking of that again. I'll go back to El Salvador and then go to another country. Or work in another country.

Elena, who has been out of college for a few years, thinks regularly about her uncertain future, and when she spoke of this, her eyes grew teary.

Even today I was at work, and I was like what do I want to do with my life. It's definitely hard. You don't have a stable job, and other people are already talking about their retirement plan. You don't have anything.

Added to this personal uncertainty is concern over the broader, political uncertainty.

### **Political Uncertainty**

One common theme in the interviews was the sense that political leaders, both in Virginia and nationally, are not taking the needs of Latino DREAMers seriously; instead they are using immigration issues as political leverage. The negative fallout of this realization showed up in four primary areas: 1) a lack of optimism about passage of the proposed DREAM Act in the near future; 2) skepticism about the long-term impact of the DACA initiative; 3) a sense that decisions were made based on appearances rather than policy; and 4) a feeling that applying for residency was a futile act.

**The prospect of the DREAM Act. Prior to the 2010 failed Senate vote** several of the participants had been actively campaigning Virginia senators as well as senators from other states for the most recent version of the DREAM Act. Alex described sitting in the gallery at the time of the vote. "We were right there. I was sitting down watching the senators deny our future. It was really hard."

When asked about the future of the DREAM Act, Anna's explanation captured what many of the others also expressed:

It's awful. Right now it's further than ever. I think it will pass, but it's going to take us, the community, the people to speak up. But it's far, far away. Senators who were in favor are not in the Senate anymore. And Congress as a whole, people are not there anymore. So we have to re-educate, re-inform. Get them to vote. That's going to take more time, and it's going to take more people. We have more things to do.

Elena, was also present in the gallery for the 2010 vote. She described the frustration she felt at the loss of momentum for the DREAM Act.

They're using our lives as a political game. Real human lives. You know the DREAM Act has to be passed by Congress. It's not even ICE [U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement]. And if our senators don't support us, it's frustrating, and it doesn't make sense. They know that this is common sense legislation. We've grown up here [in the United States]. They're playing politics and it's unfortunate. It's not just an immigration issue; it's an education and a human rights issue.

In lieu of the DREAM Act, many immigrants and advocates have heralded the DACA program as a step in the right direction. However, these eight participants all articulated varying degrees of skepticism about their opportunities over the long term with deferred action and expressed the feeling they needed to be on guard.

**Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA).** I had the good fortune to interview almost all of my participants both before and after the Secretary of Homeland Security announced the U.S. government's DACA initiative on June 15, 2012.

Interestingly, while in some ways this policy offers greater personal opportunities and decreased personal uncertainty, it also increased the numbers experiencing political uncertainty, or what Menjívar (2006) defines as liminal legality.

As described in chapter three, liminal legality is the ambiguous state of having characteristics of both documented and undocumented status (Menjívar, 2006). Although the concept of liminal legality was developed to describe Salvadorans and Guatemalans immigrants who had Temporary Protected Status (TPS) permits, it now can be used more broadly to address the thousands of applicants seeking deferred action. If granted, these individuals will have legal authorization to remain in the United States and could receive temporary permission to work in the United States. However, there is still substantial uncertainty over the possibility—or not—of renewal, age requirements, and how the policy will fare during varying political climates.

My participants' responses to this new policy highlight how much they want to be optimistic about possibilities and take advantage of every opportunity offered them, while at the same time they remain cautious about the long-term impact this policy change will have. Elena explained,

I'm cautiously optimistic [about DACA]. Because it's something very similar to what they have done before in terms of what's called *prosecutorial discretion*.

This is not an executive order. This is not a law. It's on a case-by-case basis. It's discretionary. From other memorandums such as this one we've seen that they haven't been effective. . . . What if they won't grant all the DREAMers a work

permit? Even now, we've seen DREAMers in detention, and they shouldn't be there. . . .

And so it's kind of like sweet and sour. Yeah, maybe I can get a work permit and get a better job. Interpreters get paid \$25 an hour at the hospitals and courts. . . . But, who knows if I will get it [deferred action], especially since I've done civil disobedience and been arrested. . . . It's very temporary. It's only up to 30 [years of age]. I'm 27. I'd probably only get it for two years. I probably can't renew it after that. Who knows if Obama will stay as president? Romney could totally get rid of that [DACA].

Elena's lengthy list of possibilities attest to the lack of clarity that DREAMers feel about their undocumented status and the potential for having a legitimate right to live and work in the United States. Although Governor Mitt Romney ended up losing the 2012 Presidential Election, and concerns about a reversal of the DACA initiative were decreased, participants mentioned other potential concerns. Anna, Rose and Michelle all had plans for what DACA could mean for the futures, but they also held on to a good deal of skepticism. In thinking about the future, Michelle explained:

I still feel that it [the future] is uncertain even with Obama's Deferred Action. Because even though I will be able to work if I get it, I will be able to work legally, it's not open to all jobs. . . . And the fact that I would need to reapply every two years. There's that uncertainty. If they don't continue the Deferred Action, if they stop it, I have to live with that.



Anna expressed the fear and risk shared by other participants as well. “This could be a strategy to have all the contact information of all these young people who could be deported. Or go knock on doors and take their families.” As a result of this uncertainty, Melanie and her brother were originally undecided over whether to apply immediately for deferred action or to wait and see what happened to others who applied. She explained that she has not given too much thought to what she might do if granted deferred action and a work permit:

I don’t want to be disappointed. I have that fear that what if something happens, and I don’t get it; I don’t want my dreams to be crushed again. I’m kind of holding back until I actually see that I am approved, and then I can start planning.

At the time of our second interview both Melanie and her brother had applied for deferred action.

Alex, the participant who spoke most openly about his frustration with being undocumented, was also most optimistic about what DACA meant for his future. He was optimistic that it could have a positive effect on his career goals and that it could lead to a permanent change in his legal status. He explained:

It’s going to help me out a lot. I can’t wait. . . . I am actually really anxious about it because I am going to be able to work legally. And I’m going to have an ID. [In addition to continuing part-time as a waiter], I’m also planning on working in *Rosetta Stone* here in downtown. Sales or customer service in Spanish and English. . . . That’s what I am planning. That will help me out a lot. Maybe the

deferred action and the work permit will help me get my license for the subcontractor. Those are the plans.

When asked whether he was optimistic about the continuation of the DACA program he explained,

I think I am. . . . It's every two years. Even if the president changes [President Obama leaves office and Governor Romney becomes president], I don't think he [Romney] will take it [DACA] out of the system because it will look really bad on him. And of course every president wants the Latino vote. It wouldn't be smart for him to take that out because the Latinos would be like, "oh, they said they were going to help us. And they really don't so we're not going to vote for that guy."

Despite Alex's optimism, the above quotation highlights what many of the participants reported—a sense that matters as crucial to them as their goals, hopes, and future, become merely a source of political positioning for those involved in politics.

**Political positioning.** In addition to discussions about the political nature of the proposed DREAM Act and the DACA initiative, participants also described other instances where politics came into play. Elena described when she was arrested in 2011 in North Carolina with nine other DREAM activists at an immigrants' rights rally. The city where they were protesting followed 287(g) U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) program guidelines, essentially an agreement between local police and the ICE. The agreement states that when an individual is arrested, the police will check for his or her legal migratory status, and if the person in question is undocumented,

immigration will come and take him or her away. At the time of her arrest, Elena was interviewed by a 287(g) officer who explained that he was beginning deportation proceedings, and that she would have to appear before an immigration judge. A few hours later, another officer told her, “We’ll pretend this never happened. We just spoke to Immigration, and in all the years that I have been working here, this has never happened. We got a call from the higher-ups to let you go.” When I asked her who she thought had intervened, Elena answered “probably Immigration. There have been several acts of civil disobedience with undocumented youth and they don’t want the bad PR.”

Elena went on to explain that while in jail she had met an undocumented man who was pulled over for driving without a taillight. He had two children who were citizens and his wife was eight months pregnant. However, he was not released when Elena and her friends were, so they started a campaign for him, and eventually he was released. Discussing this issue she feels fairly certain that if they had not publicized his case, he would have been deported. She feels that it is critical for people to be active and open about their status as a form of self-protection. “If we know who you are and we know what your situation is, if something were to happen to you, we can have your back.”

Anna, too, spoke about the role that both state and federal politics plays in immigration decisions. At the time of her deportation proceedings, she requested a letter of support from Senator Mark Warner (D-VA). He initially refused, saying that her situation was a legal matter and beyond his jurisdiction. However, following the publication of a *New York Times* article about Anna, that included a quote from Senator

Warner's refusal letter, he changed his mind and provided a letter of support. Anna also explained that this kind of positioning was happening at the federal level. At the time of our first interview, prior to the DACA initiative, she was waiting for the renewal of her deferred action status and work permit. She explained:

They are saying they don't want to give it [deferred action status and a work permit] to me because I benefit from the DREAM Act, if the DREAM Act were to be passed. They don't want DREAMers to think you can do this [campaign against deportation], and then get a work permit. [But] they don't want to deny it because I have a lot of support, and they don't want those people to be upset.

By the time of our follow-up interview, Anna's deferred action status had been reapproved. She explained that she thought she finally got a renewal of this status because the DACA initiative had already been planned, and that the approval of this status would no longer set her apart for receiving special treatment.

**Broken immigration system.** In addition to the perception that the current administration and politicians want to avoid negative press, several of the participants spoke about how backed up the immigration system is due to the numerous applications for residency. Jacqueline explained,

My brothers are not legal. My sisters are not legal. But they have [U.S.-born] kids. Maybe they'll have a chance to sponsor them. A lot of my uncles are legal. I think that my uncle could sponsor my mom, and my mom could sponsor me but that'd be like 30 or 40 years. . . . The system is not working.

Similarly, Elena applied for residency in 2004 through her stepfather, but does not hold out hope for a result any time soon. She explained,

It will be like 20 years before they get to my application. It's not a straight line.

It's all how you came and went and what country you're from. Right now they're dealing with cases from Mexico from 1993 or '94, and my stepfather applied for me in 2004. Even if I married an American citizen next week, next month, I would have to leave the country and apply from an embassy outside the United States, and I would get a ten-year block. I couldn't come back for ten years.

In summary, the participants in this study expressed significant personal and political uncertainty. This uncertainty affected life decisions and their ability to make plans and set goals for the future. Another significant theme that emerged from the data was that as they thought about and made plans for their future, they realized they could not face the future alone; they needed support.

### **“I Need[ed] Help.”**

#### **The Process and Outcome of Asking for and Receiving Support**

According to Passel and Cohn (2011), only 49% of undocumented high school graduates are in college or have attended college. Seven of the eight DREAMers I interviewed have are part of this group. As mentioned previously, the participants in this study are high-achievers in terms of their motivation to attend college, their participation in college-preparatory and advanced-placement courses, and their strong academic records. Their academic achievement sets them apart from some of their unauthorized Latino peers who are tracked into general education classes and are uninterested in or

unable to pursue postsecondary education. However, the participants' success in pursuing higher education was a result not only of their own strength and motivation, but also the emotional, academic, and financial support of others. Nan, an educator who is a strong advocate for DREAMers in her community, explained,

If you're the first in your family to go to college, you know how hard that is.

That's one thing. But when you're the first in your family to go to college and you don't have documents, it really does seem almost impossible. Anna is one of the most resilient, hardest-working, wonderful kids, but she could not have done this alone. Elena could not have done this alone.

Getting this support required taking a leap of faith in revealing their status, despite the general sense of secrecy that surrounds being undocumented. My analysis of the participants' stories revealed the factors that motivated them to share their status with others; the types of responses they got; and the extent to which they received the crucial academic, emotional, and financial support necessary to pursue higher education.

As already discussed, the participants in this study did not become aware of how much their undocumented status limited their access to higher education until their junior and senior years of high school when the talk of applying to college began. Like other DREAMers throughout the country, most felt that their working-class families could not provide the academic guidance that they needed due to their unfamiliarity with the U.S. educational system. Instead of giving up, these eight DREAMers took it upon themselves to seek additional help from counselors, teachers, and community members.

## **Depending on Themselves**

In general, the participants in this study felt they received very little academic support from their families. Many of the families believed in the value of education and supported their children's endeavors, but language barriers, limited formal education, lack of information about the U.S. educational system, and busy work schedules kept families from providing academic support for these students. Realistically, families were unable to provide much, if any, guidance about the types of courses necessary to prepare for college and the college application process. Rose, who received significant encouragement toward pursuing a college degree as well as financial support from her family described her parents as "clueless" when it came to knowing how to manage the application process.

As a result, all of the participants felt at some point that they had to figure things out on their own, and took great initiative when faced with limited support. They sought out additional help, worked to fund their own education, and became strong advocates for themselves. They explained that doing so resulted in them growing up quicker and taking on more responsibility than many of their peers.

Michelle explained,

My mom hasn't been that involved with my education. Mostly me. I would say, starting in middle school, it was me trying to decide, "Do I need this summer class?" Or if I don't need it, it was me deciding what classes I wanted to take. She just signed at the bottom.

And when asked how this necessity of making decisions on her own had affected her, she responded,

More responsibility. So I felt that I had to grow up a little bit faster. It wasn't my parents telling me. "Hey you have to take this. You have to get a C in this class if you want to finish high school." It was me.

Jacqueline had a similar experience. "I had to do everything by myself. If I didn't figure it out, I would have to work really hard to figure it out."

She also explained that she wished at times her family had been able to help her more.

My mom didn't live with us. I lived with my brother and my sister and both of them were working all the time. Sometimes I wished that they could help me. I wished they could help me out or know how I'm doing. They didn't pay much attention to my grades or anything like that. I was doing awesome, but to them, it really didn't matter. Sometimes my brother would be like, "I don't understand why you want to be at school working so hard when you know you're not going to be able to go to school [postsecondary]" because of my situation. That was upsetting at times.

When asked if she had ever spoken with her parents about the affect being undocumented had on her college ambitions, Elena responded,

Well my parents divorced before I was even a senior. I think I was twelve or thirteen. So that had to do with these issues. My dad had a green card. It's just really complicated. I guess they didn't realize that I needed to put attention to that. My dad moved to another state. They didn't hardly say anything.



As a result of their strong motivations to pursue a higher education and their limited information about how to go about doing so, all eight participants put aside any fears they had about revealing their status and sought assistance from high school counselors and teachers. However, none took this step without serious thought about possible repercussions.

### **Not Telling and the Veil of Secrecy**

Participants in this study had to make difficult decisions about when, how and with whom to share their undocumented status. No negative consequences ensued from the sharing, but many felt there was definite risk involved. Apart from the two most visible DREAMers that I interviewed, Elena and Anna, the participants were not always open about sharing their status. In fact, Elena and Anna only became more so as a result of their increased activism. Most of the participants felt similarly to Michelle who said, “You don’t know how people might react. Unless you really know them, I couldn’t share with them.” Reasons for not being open about status included fear of telling, not knowing whom to trust, feeling like people would not understand, and a fear of outing family members.

Enrique and Rose both spoke about not telling close friends because of the friends’ conservative views or upbringing. Rose, in particular, also did not share because she wanted to avoid being seen as an object of pity.

None of my college friends know. . . . My friends come from very different backgrounds, and I have a feeling that one of my friends would not be accepting because of her upbringing. Her parents are very conservative, hard-core

Republicans. Christians. She might be accepting, but it would just be a little weird, and I never wanted that to be an obstacle in forming relationships. I think that I don't want to be seen as the victim. I would never want people to feel bad for me because it just happened that way. There was no way around it [my unauthorized status].

Rose and Enrique also both talked about eventually telling their friends and/or former teachers after they have reached certain goals such as graduating from college or establishing a professional career. The revelation, in other words, will occur when their "being different" has ended, at least in terms of the barriers to their goals. At that point, it will be easier to share the challenges that they have overcome. Enrique explained, "I haven't told other teachers because I'm waiting for that moment that I can graduate and say, 'Look what I am now.'"

Michelle voiced the concern that in sharing her undocumented status with others, she might also put her family at risk. "It's still kind of hard. . . because you don't want to get other people in danger. Just because you share, can mean that your sister and mom are undocumented. And, what if they [your family members] don't like that idea [of being open about our status]." Enrique also spoke about feeling this larger risk to his family when he told a school counselor about his mother's deportation.

I told her [my counselor] I didn't trust her. . . . Then I told her [about my mother's deportation]. I cried even more. . . . I can't believe I told her. And she asked, "Does your stepdad have his papers?" I knew what the truth was, but I didn't think she deserved to know. Maybe because I [was] too scared that she [would]

do something to my dad too. And he [was] the only thing that we [had] now. He [was] raising me and my sister and brother. I couldn't risk him. I was like "I think he does, because he works." Because she was, no offense, not smart enough to know why he can work. They're not even educated about that.

The participants frequently described feeling nervous or worried when they first began talking about their unauthorized status. Alex explained,

When I first started telling people about it [my undocumented status], I'd freak out a little and get a little quiet, but other than that I'm always telling people that I'm undocumented if they ask me. If they don't ask me, then I don't have a reason to tell them.

Even among advocates, a deep sense of secrecy pervades discussions about undocumented student advocacy. I believe there is greater openness than in the past, but this research study revealed that a feeling of a need for secrecy still prevails today. I had the opportunity to attend a scholarship award ceremony for recent high school graduate DREAMers preparing to go to college. The scholarships were to be awarded by a non-profit dedicated to supporting higher education for undocumented students. Teachers, school board members, administrators, and community leaders attended the ceremony. The award recipients shared their stories to varying degrees, and everyone seemed to know that all of the recipients were undocumented. However, no mention of being undocumented was made in the brochure or information about the organization, and there was no explicit discussion about the challenges associated with being undocumented and

why such scholarships were necessary. Such silence is indicative of the political nature of this issue.

In a similar vein, a university staff member described to me how she encourages the undocumented students that she works with to use coded language when applying for university scholarships. She said that certain language lets allies on the scholarship committees know who is undocumented, while at the same time concealing this information from opponents of the idea of higher education for undocumented youth.

### **“Coming Out” at School**

The process of *coming out* as undocumented is an intensely personal decision for unauthorized students and one which involves coming to terms with a part of one’s own identity and then sharing that identity with others. It also involves coping with societal perceptions of undocumented immigrants and risking how others might respond to this disclosure.

All eight participants in this study, despite the risk involved, told at least one high school teacher or counselor about their undocumented status. They took this step out of necessity, with the hope they would receive the essential information and support they needed to help them pursue their goals. Frequently, the counselors or teachers with whom they shared their undocumented status was someone that they did not fully trust or with whom they did not have a strong personal relationship. Six of the eight participants first shared their status with a high school counselor; the other two first told a teacher at their school with whom they felt particularly close.

When they chose to share their migratory status with school authorities, participants commented that they received varying types of responses. In general, the participants' experiences suggest that counselors and teachers needed to be better informed and better trained to be able to support undocumented students. Several participants suggested that the staff member they chose to tell had little or no experience helping undocumented students. Furthermore, they added that several of the teachers and counselors did not know that there were undocumented students in their classes or at their school. In fact, there was a resounding sense that, in general, Virginia schools offer insufficient support and information to undocumented students.

Rose and Alex were the most positive about the assistance they received in pursuing postsecondary education. Alex's counselor helped him find two scholarships that he was eligible for, then helped him fill out the forms, and guided him towards his local community college. Alex ended up receiving both scholarships, and these have been crucial to his ability to pay his tuition.

Both a counselor and a minority achievement coordinator at Rose's school helped her. She told her counselor—the same woman who had helped Claire a few years earlier—about her status in eleventh grade. Claire had been the first undocumented student to ask for this counselor's help so they had worked together to figure out possible options. By the time Rose was looking into colleges, the counselor had more experience with undocumented students and was better able to provide guidance. Rose explained,

Luckily she [the counselor] had experience working with students with [my] same situation who had gone to college. . . . Then there was [also] the minority

achievement coordinator. He was just helpful, calling schools, helping me with applications, narrowing down the schools that I could apply to.

In contrast, Elena, who had a 4.0 GPA and who turned to both her counselor and two teachers for advice about how to continue her education, received little support. Elena explained to me her experience of trying to figure out where and how to go to college.

I knew I wanted to go to college. My parents worked in the poultry industry for many years, so they would always tell my siblings and I to value education and become someone in life. And so I went to my guidance counselor, and I told him that I wanted to go to college, but I don't think that he had every worked with an undocumented student. He didn't really help me. And I remember going to the counselor's office and looking at binders with scholarships, and most of them required a social security number. It was really frustrating.

Then Elena asked her history teacher for help and he pointed her in the direction of her State Representative Robert Goodlatte (R-Roanoke, Lynchburg). Representative Goodlatte told her that there was nothing he could do. Much later, after Elena became an activist, she realized that Representative Goodlatte had made a floor speech against the DREAM Act and voted against in-state tuition, educational benefits, welfare, and health care services for undocumented immigrants.

Melanie had a similar experience of sharing her story with a counselor who had never knowingly worked with undocumented students. She explained,

They [the high school staff] asked me if I wanted to look into schools and everything, but considering my situation, I was scared. So I kind of just glimpsed at what they [the colleges] needed and I was like, first of all, my grades aren't all that up there. I wouldn't have the money to go. I don't think I could get scholarships or anything. I kind of looked into it but not really. Then I kind of let it drop.

One of my closest friends [an undocumented student at a different high school] said at least I should go to community college. She was like, "Just talk to your counselor and see what he says. . . ." She said her counselor helped her a lot. . . . When I told my counselor, he was surprised, because apparently I was the first person ever that came up to him and told him, "You know what, this is my situation." He wasn't rude about it. I understand the fact that he had never dealt with anyone like that. In a way, he kind of told me to go back to my country and try to do something with my education there, because it would be easier. So, I cried there with him. I got home crying. I felt like I had no hope. My future was done.

Then after that he called me back and he was like, "I shouldn't have reacted like that. You were the first person to ever come and tell me. I don't know what to do. I don't know where to start." He said he felt like his hands were tied. Then he told me that he looked into [a local community college] and they said that they would take students like me, but I would have to pay extra for the credits. He said, "You can do it. Don't feel like you can't do it."

Elena's and Melinda's stories illustrate the lack of available information about resources for undocumented students. A recurring theme from the interviews was the extent to which well-meaning faculty and staff, particularly counselors, need adequate training so that they can better support undocumented students. The interviews also suggest that, for all parties involved, learning how to support undocumented students is a process requiring understanding of the experiences, ambitions and obstacles of unauthorized youth, empathy for their situation, and knowledge of key resources. As noted above, Claire was the first undocumented student the high school counselor had worked with and, at the time, she was uncertain how to best support her. A couple of years later, the same counselor had put together a list of resources available for undocumented students, and, as a result, Rose felt well supported.

Nan's experiences provide another example of the process of learning how to support these students. Nan, who is now a passionate advocate for undocumented students in her city, said, that when Anna first told her she was being deported, she was "pretty clueless" about undocumented immigration and the DREAM Act. Nan and Anna had developed a relationship outside of class that started when Nan had invited her entire class to her house. However, it was only when Anna received her deportation letter, that she shared her status with Nan. Nan described the transformation she has undergone as she has become better informed about undocumented students.

My life has been totally enriched and totally changed, and I do hope that I am much more sensitive culturally in a lot of ways than I was before. I hope I had always taught students and not just my subject, But now I want to know kids. I



want to know their stories, so that I understand where they're coming from. It's made me a better teacher.

Nan's words convey one of the ways in which better training and education of all school personnel who work with undocumented students—school counselors, teachers, and support staff—can open them to the needs of the unauthorized youth in their schools.

### **Academic Need**

As explained in chapter two, undocumented students require access to very specific types of information in addition to the academic social capital all students need.

Unauthorized students need to know which colleges and universities accept undocumented students, which may provide some financial aid, and which scholarships are available to undocumented students. Frequently, as was the case for the eight DREAMers in this study, unauthorized students find it very difficult to achieve academic success and continue on to college without institutional support that includes advocacy; role modeling; emotional and moral support; and regular feedback, advice and, guidance.

Of the eight, Michelle's and Rose's descriptions attest to the greatest level of academic support. Michelle took an *Advancement Via Individual Determination* (AVID) class that was designed to support students who were the first in their families to attend college. She took the class for three consecutive years and described it as one of her favorite parts of school because of the support she received both from the teacher and other students in the class.

It's like a college preparation course, and our teacher, Ms. Mario, was very friendly. . . In that class, what you basically do is try to help each other. We

worked in little groups. So let's say four people in our class took AP chemistry; all of us worked together. We did three questions every day. We tried to go over all those questions and everybody helped each other explain them. We did homework. It was a very helpful class. Every morning everybody came in the morning just to hang out, and try to finish up some homework that we had questions on, Maybe other people knew the answers. So I really liked that class.

Although AVID is not targeted at undocumented students, the type of supportive environment Michelle describes in this class would be conducive to the sharing of information about undocumented status. In addition, the class provided the academic mentorship, support, and feedback many undocumented students need. Michelle eventually ended up telling her AVID teacher about her undocumented status, and, while the teacher encouraged her to apply to college, she did not provide her with any information about which colleges would accept undocumented students, nor did she offer any suggestions for scholarships or schools that might grant financial aid. Although this particular class benefited Michelle both socially and academically, it failed to provide the very specific information she, as an undocumented student, needed.

Rose also felt well supported academically. She explained that she was encouraged by teachers and programs in her schools to plan for her future. She also had the support of a minority achievement coordinator and belonged to two different clubs, designed to provide mentorship and guidance for female, minority high school students, *Latinas Leading Tomorrow* and *United Minority Girls*.

In contrast, three of the eight participants sensed that some teachers had low expectations of Latino students in general, regardless of their migratory status. Elena felt that, despite her solid academic record, she was never encouraged to take higher-level classes. Anna had to fight to be able to take advanced classes, including summer school classes, which she took for two summers in order to graduate with an advanced diploma. She said,

They [counselors and teachers] don't look at those students [having different backgrounds] the same. . . . High school students should have counselors [who are] Hispanic or from other backgrounds, who support them, who aren't like my counselor who told me, "No, you can't." Some students want to take higher courses, but some counselors believe they can't do it.

This quote exemplifies the deficit theorizing described in chapter three in which all that is seen in culturally and linguistically diverse students is what is lacking, rather than the very important skills and qualities these students do bring to the classroom. Anna, for example, had come to the United States during middle school and was still mastering English. Rather than recognizing the motivation, determination, and resiliency that she brought to school (as well as her bilingualism), her high school counselor assumed that she would be unable to complete the necessary coursework for an advanced diploma.

When I asked the eight participants to discuss how schools could better support undocumented students, they all had a lot to say. Some participants spoke to the need for Latino students (both authorized and unauthorized) to be better served in general. Again, Anna said that in her experience, counselors, teachers, and administrators interact

differently with White students and “other” students. She believed there was a need for Hispanic counselors or counselors from other backgrounds who could support all students.

Some students want to take higher [level] courses, but some counselors believe that they can't do it. . . . It takes teachers to speak [out for the students] when the counselors [who] are there to help the students and they're not. And I think most immigrants do not know [the types of courses needed for college] . . . like me, I did not know. Well, I did know because I read the requirements. That's why I got an advanced diploma. But most immigrants don't know and their parents don't know. . . . The counselors should talk to them. . . . Like my mom didn't know, doesn't know. I am the one helping my little brother.

Anna's thoughts are very illustrative of her frustration over having to advocate for herself to gain access to the classes required for an advanced diploma and of the strong need for the educational system to fill in the gap in knowledge left by these students' parents, who are generally not in a position to provide any advice about college.

All my participants felt that there was a need for counselors in particular, as well as teachers and staff to have information about undocumented students. Claire explained, You [counselors, teachers, and school staff] need to support all your students. Just knowing you can go to college without a social security number, or you can get merit aid. All those things. I think that is important to know for all the people in the school system. You never know who the student is going to reach out to. It

might be the English teacher and if she doesn't know. . . . There is that lack. Just knowing what the possibilities are in each state.

As Claire explained, schools and staff should be familiar with all of the possibilities available to students, including which private and public schools accept undocumented students, which offer financial aid, which public schools might go against state policy and offer in-state tuition, and so forth. Because the education of undocumented students has been an unspoken issue for so long, this type of information, which is so critical to students hoping to continue their education, has not been sufficiently collected and shared.

In discussions of how to create a safe environment in Virginia schools where unauthorized Latino students would feel comfortable reaching out to teachers and staff, participants had several suggestions. These included: 1) starting the discussions early (before high school), 2) including information for undocumented students in general college information meetings, 3) getting to know students in a more informal way, 4) bringing in undocumented students to talk about their experiences., and 5) including parents in these types of discussions to increase their understanding of the college process. Rose explained,

I just wish they [schools] started giving out information earlier on. Even as early as middle school. Eighth grade, seventh grade start talking about that. I've heard about a lot of people [who say], "I didn't know I was undocumented until my senior year." What can you do then? I feel like also parents need to get involved to a certain extent. . . . There are a lot of Hispanic parents that are not aware, and

they're the reason why kids are not going anywhere because they are like, "Okay, you can't go. That's it." [They assume] there's no help. It [school outreach] needs to be more family-oriented because a lot of minority groups, we are really family-oriented. So I feel like getting the family involved, starting to educate the kids earlier on.

In addition to academic support, participants emphasized the need for financial support.

### **Financial Need**

Working-class college students throughout the United States are struggling to pay college tuition and living costs. They do so through a combination of savings, parental support, scholarships, institutional support, and federal and state loans. Latino DREAMers living in Virginia often do not have access to any of these resources. In addition, because Virginia DREAMers live in one of the 36 states that does not offer in-state tuition benefits or state loans for unauthorized students, they have to either pay out-of-state tuition at a state school or find a private school that will accept them and offer a financial aid package. Without the benefit of student loans, tuition fees can put college out of reach financially. Additionally, most unauthorized students, like the DREAMers in this study, come from low-income families who are unable to help their children pay the high tuition costs.

All of the participants in this study indicated that finances played a central role in determining where or if they would attend college. Of the participants in this study, six were unable or unwilling to ask their parents or families for support in funding their

education. All of the participants mentioned the stress over the cost of college and how to pay for it. The participants who were most open about their status received the greatest amount of financial support from organizations and community members.

All eight of the participants' college choices were affected in one way or another by money. Of course the same can be said for the majority of prospective college students, regardless of whether they are undocumented or not; however, DREAMers' choices are further limited by their inability to get student loans. For Alex and Michelle, their limited finances meant having to attend a community college rather than heading straight to a four-year institution after graduation from high school as both had hoped. Community colleges offered them a less expensive way to earn college credit, but meant that they continued to live at home and were less integrated into the college community than they wished. Elena and Melanie postponed college to earn money for tuition. Enrique, Anna, and Rose all made their choices based on the university's financial aid packages or grants rather than any particular preference for the university itself. Jacqueline had to explain to all the soccer coaches who were recruiting her to play at the college level that she would need a full-ride scholarship to be able to come and play for them.

Of the seven DREAMers who had attended or are currently attending college, only Rose received money from her parents to help pay for college. Her parents and brother made significant sacrifices to save the money necessary to pay the tuition not covered by her university's financial aid package. Alex, Enrique, Maria, and Michelle lived at home while attending school and received free room and board, but not money for tuition. Alex and Enrique both explained that they did not want to ask their parents for money because

they wanted to be independent. Enrique said,

I didn't want to be dependent on my parents the whole time because I was sick of seeing them struggle. . . . Learning to be undocumented you have to survive on such a low income. It made me so upset [seeing] my parents lose their jobs, and it is harder to get a job as an undocumented immigrant. My parents struggled so much just so they could raise me, my sister, and my brother. . . . Now, I pay for everything by myself, which I don't mind, but I had to take on the responsibility of going to school, paying for school, pushing myself through school, and paying for the rest. . . . I feel like I shouldn't have to work and go to school at the same time.

Susan, an advocate of unauthorized students and state university professor, considers the financial burden to be one of the greatest challenges for the undocumented college students she knows because they have to pay out-of-state tuition fees. She highlighted the balancing act that many undocumented students, like the ones in this study, must manage of trying to manage a full class load with family responsibilities and often a full-time job.

Enrique clearly described the stress generated by having to balance work and school and how he wishes he had greater financial and emotional support from his family.

I just don't have the money. The school wants it. I don't have it. They [the university] want me to work. They want me to get good grades. I don't have enough support. My parents don't understand what I'm going through. They've



never gone to college. It's a mess. At this time in my life, being undocumented, that's what it means. It's very stressful.

Anna explained that the search for financial sources has been an on-going source of stress, but that the publicity she received from the newspaper article was written about her at the time of her deportation proceedings benefited her financially.

It's been a lot of stress, but people who knew my situation because I was in the newspaper, and people who knew the teacher [Nan] and people who I have approached have supported my education with money. But every year I am stressed out for next year.

Anna's words illustrate both how much being open about her status benefited her, but also the stressfulness of having to rely on the generosity of others, because she never knew if she would have enough money to pay for her tuition the following year.

Of the eight young adults interviewed, four of them received financial aid from university grants or scholarships, community groups, or private donations. Procuring these types of support required participants to be open about their status and need for assistance. Elena explained,

In college there were a few professors that helped me tremendously and financially because it is so hard to finance your college without grants or loans. . . . There was one professor, and I told her. I had money saved up and I was able to pay for one semester, but as the money ran out, I told her "I can't pay this. This is really expensive. . . ." She got in touch with her faith community, and her friends, and the people that she knew and they donated money for me.

Enrique and Anna received similar types of private donations from members of the community to fund their college tuition. Jacqueline gained financial support starting from when she was quite young when the families of other members of her soccer team would pay for her soccer tournaments, uniforms, and shoes. She became especially close to the mother of a friend that she played soccer with and eventually told her about her status. This woman was the one who took her to college in the southwest and the one that supported her when she decided to come back to Virginia. She, along with another community member, helped pay for Jacqueline to attend one semester of private university in her hometown after returning from the southwest. However, this amount of outside support was definitely not the norm for the other participants.

In contrast, Michelle, who has never asked for help and has received no guidance concerning scholarships or colleges or universities offering grants, is paying out-of-state tuition fees entirely on her own. She searched to find scholarships for undocumented students, but gave up in the end. She explained,

I looked for some [scholarships] on-line, but most of the time they are either very specific to certain regions, like most of them are for California or the Bay Area or Mexicans or Salvadorans. Some of them are for Hispanics but they ask for a social security number. By the time I started working I was like, I prefer to work and study because I am tired of looking for scholarships and not finding one that I can actually apply for.

In addition to academic and financial support, participants also spoke about the need for emotional support.

## **Emotional Need**

Emotional support is much harder to characterize and address than academic and financial support. For the purposes of this research, *emotional support* is any non-tangible assistance that helped the DREAMers in this study to feel loved and cared for. It includes encouragement and positive feedback, advice and guidance, and assistance with problem-solving. When discussing support that they needed and received in preparation for college, the participants in this study tended to focus almost entirely on academic support and financial support. However, participants also told stories of much needed emotional support coming from families, mentors, and advocates, support which was critical to their journey of “becoming undocumented.” Some expressed a desire for even greater emotional support.

Elena, Melanie, Rose, Eduardo, and Jacqueline each went through periods of depression, anxiety, and/or stress associated with being undocumented. Elena, Melanie, and Rose specifically mentioned the role that their parents played in helping them respond to this stress. Elena said,

I remember my first year of college or when I was trying to go to college, I was pretty depressed. I even had had suicidal thoughts, and I told my best friend and she told my mom. My mother lived further away. . . . Knowing that [about my depression], she decided to buy a mobile home close to the university. She said, “You should move in with me. You really need to move in with me.” She supported me in that way.

Melanie had a similar experience:

I was kind of down for a bit. They [my family] all helped me, pushed me through, [saying], “You have a whole life ahead of you. Don’t let yourself get down.”

They were always there to back me up on anything. Or any doubts or anything, they were always there.

Rose also described her family as being an essential emotional support, but she felt she would have liked even greater support during times of transition.

I feel like the greatest support system that I have is my family. My parents have been really good about it most of the time. A lot of the times, like right after I graduated from college, there was a lot of frustration. A lot of like, I don’t want to say negativity. . . . My dad goes through these phases where he gets angry. He’s like, “You have a college degree and you can’t use it.”

She added that it would have been beneficial to be able to talk more about what it is like to be a DREAMer with others who could understand, especially at those difficult transition times.

In those transitional areas, change from high school to college and college to real life, I feel like a lot of people don’t realize. We are aware, being in this situation, that it’s going to be hard, but it’s just the little things. People are just like, “You’re just being dramatic over it”, but those are the things that matter and make a big impact.

Rose’s experience speaks to the need, once again, for connections with other unauthorized immigrants. It also addresses the need for professional staff to be adequately trained in the emotional aspects of being undocumented. Anna described.

Nan, her high school teacher, as being her greatest support in school, and she explained that she was able to open up to her because she was very friendly and had invited her (along with several other students) over to her house.

### **“It’s Made Me Who I Am.”**

#### **Participant Responses to Being Undocumented**

As described in chapter two, how students respond to the oppressive conditions and social structures that bar the way to further education for them can be understood through the lens of resistance theory. What sets resistance theory apart from social and cultural reproduction theories is the role of *human agency*, the ability to act on one’s own behalf (Solórzano & Delgado-Bernal, 2001) As described in a previous section, the DREAMers in this study all demonstrated a significant level of agency in terms of seeking support, information, and/or resources in their pursuit of higher education. Solórzano and Delgado-Bernal (2001) and Yosso (2006) use a resistance framework to identify four types of students’ oppositional behavior: self-defeating resistance, reactionary behavior, conformist resistance, and transformative resistance. However, these models of resistance are complex and can be understood to include a range of behaviors. The eight participants in this research modeled both conformist and transformative resistance.

#### **Conformist Resistance**

Solórzano and Delgado-Bernal (2001) describe conformist resistance as “the behavior of students who are motivated by a need for social justice yet hold no critique of the systems of oppression” (p. 318). Students in this category seek better opportunities for themselves and others, but only from within the existing social structure. They tend to

blame themselves, their families, or their culture for their situation. The participants in this study who were least involved in activism most modeled conformist resistance.

Melanie explained that despite the hard work she had done during her junior and senior years of high school in preparation for college, she decided to postpone continuing her education. At the time she did not think that she would be able to find scholarships for college, and without any financial support, she was not able to pay for college on her own. She regrets that decision now. She blames herself rather than her counselor, school, or social barriers for her situation. She explained,

Two years. I would have been two years ahead now. If I would have had that option [of student loans or other financial support], I could have started then [immediately after graduation]. If I would have looked harder, I could have found it, or found at least a little bit of help. I kind of regret not looking like I should have [for scholarships.] I was kind of like, “I know I won’t get it, so why even try.”

These remarks exemplify how DREAMers who are unable to critique the systems that oppress them, and are faced with extreme obstacles, a lack of information and little to no support, can easily become discouraged or resigned to accepting limitations on their ambitions.

The participants in this study who were resigned to the negative stereotyping of undocumented immigration also demonstrated conformist resistance. Rose explained that she was able to ignore the negative views of undocumented immigration, and that she did not try to change anyone’s view. She explained,

I feel like there is a lot of ignorance. It makes me upset, but not to the point where it ruins my day. . . . I kind of just brush it off as, “You don’t know any better. You’re not educated on it.” I don’t want to engage in discussions or altercations over it. Just like whatever, “This is your opinion and this is mine, and we’re just going to leave it at that.”

When an individual chooses not to speak out, keeping this “secret” can contribute to feelings of fear, shame, and illegitimacy and is indicative of the extent to which DREAMers feel they are somehow responsible for their situation. Melanie described how she felt when she remained silent when others made negative comments about undocumented immigrants.

I usually don’t say anything, just stay quiet. But it makes me feel bad. I think I’m not doing anything wrong personally, but then when then I see things or read things that people say sometimes it kind of gets to you and makes you think, “Am I really the criminal or how they paint [me]?” Sometimes it makes you feel that you are that person. But I never usually say anything because if I answer back, I feel like I am just going to be attacked worse. Probably, it will just be a mess.

For some participants conformist resistance meant avoiding situations where they might have to explain their status or creating stories to explain a specific situation. For example, Michelle prefers staying home to going to a bar with friends and then needing to explain why she has a passport rather than a driver’s license. Similarly, Rose said she was tired of all the questions about not having a driver’s license or carrying around her passport. She

began to tell friends in Pennsylvania that Virginia did not issue any identification cards other than a driver's license.

These behaviors illustrate conformist resistance, where individuals who are aware of problems with the system continue, nonetheless, to follow the system rules, rather than trying to change the system. In this study most of the participants, however, modeled transformative resistance.

### **Transformative Resistance**

Students who are aware of and work against the oppressive conditions that limit their educational attainment and are motivated by a desire for social justice are engaging in transformational resistance (Solórzano & Delgado-Bernal, 2001). Yosso (2006) used this model to look at the educational experiences of Chicana and Chicano students. She explained that the students in her study wanted to prove that the negative stereotypes that others held about Chicanas/os were wrong, and they did this by openly confronting the negative stereotypes, being motivated by these images, and seeing education as a means of disproving them. The DREAMers that I interviewed had all of these characteristics: they confronted negative stereotypes, worked to disprove these stereotypes, and saw education as tool for change. I would also add that all of my participants were optimistic that their hard work, their persistence, and their activism would ultimately bring about change both for themselves and for other unauthorized youth.

**Confronting negative stereotypes.** Elena and Anna, the most vocal about their status, are models of transformational resistance in their responses to society's negative perceptions. They both describe the role that their activism has had in helping them



challenge the negative stereotypes about illegal immigration and embrace their status.

Elena explained,

Activism has definitely changed my view of being undocumented. I'm not scared anymore. And I think that has helped me to realize this is part of who I am, and I'm going to embrace it, and I don't mind if the whole world knows about it. It's an important issue, and I'm glad that I got involved. I'm no longer a scared undocumented immigrant. I'm an empowered undocumented immigrant.

Additionally, Elena described immigration reform as a human rights issue, and she identified language as well as misconceptions about undocumented immigrants that serve to keep this group oppressed. She explained, "They call us illegal, and I really dislike that term because no human being is illegal. . . . They think that we are taking taxpayers money and abusing the system, [but] we don't even qualify for any services." Similarly, Anna explained that activism helped her remain calm in the face of negative comments.

Some people don't agree with it [undocumented immigration], and it's okay. . . . You know how many comments there are. Like we're illegal; we take jobs; we're this. It's upsetting. . . . [My view of my status] has changed. We're not that type of people and our parents did what they had to do. . . . I used to get really, really upset. Really mad. But now, not much. . . . It's a surprising feeling.

Both Elena and Anna have shared their own stories numerous times out of a desire to improve the situation for other unauthorized immigrants. Elena has been interviewed several times, openly addressed state and federal political leaders, and purposefully gotten arrested, all with the hope of bringing about change. Similarly, when a reporter

from Anna's local paper asked her for an interview, she agreed despite the fear of exposure, hoping that discussing her situation openly might help improve the situation for others.

Michelle, who has presented information on undocumented immigration in one of her college classes and also as part of a panel at an academic conference, spoke about how knowledge about this topic is empowering. She explained that, through her research and her interactions with other DREAMers, she has learned more about immigration policy and the DREAM Act. This knowledge, in turn, has helped her speak out in favor of reform. She explained, "If I am more knowledgeable on the topic, I will talk more. Being more informed about it, makes you more confident to speak about it."

While not all the DREAMers in this study were able to respond openly to the negative stereotypes of unauthorized immigrants, many did speak of another positive effect of their status—that of a motivator.

**Unauthorized status as a motivator.** Nearly all of the DREAMers in this study described their status as being beneficial in some way. These benefits included appreciation for what they were able to achieve despite the barriers, motivation, and a belief that their experience of being undocumented affected their worldview and commitment to others. Claire, who has worked with many undocumented DREAMers in Virginia, described the positive aspects of being unauthorized:

I see it [being undocumented] as more of an opportunity that was given to us instead of a burden. I don't think a lot of the young ones would be as involved or as successful in what they've done if they hadn't been undocumented. . . . If it

were not for that big struggle, they wouldn't have come out and helped other people or gotten so involved in community service.

In describing their immigration status and what they have achieved despite (or because of) it, the participants in this study often mentioned American peers (particularly U.S.-born Latinos of their age) who have not had to face this challenge and have not gone on to college. Enrique explained,

I think that if I hadn't had these challenges, I would have been a snot. I think I would be careless. I think I wouldn't appreciate things as much. My friends, they chose the community college path. I've seen the reality of that. They go for two years and they really don't continue. It's sad to see that.

Melanie also viewed her status as a force that keeps her on a more positive path than others she knows. When asked how her life might have been different if she were an American citizen, she explained,

I think I would be a little bit careless. Right now I try not to get in trouble. I try to keep my life as simple as possible. I don't want to get in trouble with the police or anything. If I didn't have to worry about my status, I think I would be a little more reckless. I think I would have been more of a normal 21-year-old.

In addition, Rose explained,

Things happen for a reason. If I was a U.S. citizen, if I had every opportunity, I probably wouldn't have done as great as I have or worked as hard as I did. You get to appreciate things a lot more. In a way, it's made me who I am, and it's made me stronger.

What Rose described, and what was also expressed by many of the other participants in this study, was the belief that their status motivated them to work hard and pursue higher education because they saw it as a means of integrating more fully into U.S. society and overcoming the limitations of their “illegal” status. Connected to this belief was a conviction in the inherent value of education and the hope that if they pursued an education, they would be granted the same privileges and the rights of American citizens.

**Education as a tool for change and resistance.** When the DREAMers that I interviewed discussed what made them different from other unauthorized young adults in Virginia, several spoke of the value that they place on education and the extent to which they see education as a pathway to a better way of life.

Michelle, who has offered to pay her sister’s tuition in addition to her own, explained that some unauthorized high school graduates felt that it was not worth their time or money to continue their education. Alex voiced similar views: “There are lot of undocumented people that I know that don’t meet with us [the activist group]. They’re just working. They don’t want to further their education, and I do. I want to be someone in life.”

Elena explained that education was something that could never be taken away from her, and Claire described her hard work in school:

Even though I had those thoughts, like, “What’s the point?” and “Why am I doing this?” “It’s probably not going to end well.” I always went on for the sake of it. I [believed] in high school [that] I wasn’t going to get to college. [But] I had that

mindset of. . .I'm already here, I might as well get good grades. I will have this. Have the good grades. Be at the top. I guess my secret hope was that I would be so up there that someone would have to say yes eventually. . . . It's almost like being in the race, but you're just running alongside the contestants just for the fun of it.

Claire's quote reflects the DREAMers' belief that education is one of the best possible pathways to a better life, and the optimism that their hard work will eventually lead to the life that they dream of. Enrique voiced similar views, emphasizing how pursuing a postsecondary education allowed him to prove himself to others.

This is what it is all about for me—to be normal. People make you not normal. . . . Something nasty. Something unwanted. I want to show people. I want to show myself that I can do it. At first, it was, I want to be normal. Why can't I be normal? College? License? Job? How do I get this? Who do I talk to? So I pushed myself to find the resources.

These thoughts demonstrate the faith the DREAMers in this study put in the belief that their hard work and achievement could counter the negative perceptions aimed at and limitations placed on undocumented students in Virginia and throughout the United States.

**The role of hope.** The Suárez-Orozcos (1995), as noted in chapter two, define negative social mirroring as the negative social images about themselves that immigrant youth must face as part of the undocumented immigrant minority group. Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (1995) see hope as critical in allowing immigrants to ignore the

negative social mirroring to some extent, maintain a sense of self-esteem, and either focus their energies on daily life or even work for social change. Hope is especially important for unauthorized youth who face significant stigma due to their migratory status. One of the most surprising findings of this research was the extent to which, despite the numerous obstacles facing them, the participants that I interviewed all expressed some hope about the eventual passage of the DREAM Act and/or their ability to create a long-term life for themselves in the United States. In my interview with Susan, the advocate and college professor, she echoed this finding.

All of the students that I have had the opportunity to speak with are so optimistic, and their discussion of after graduation [from college] usually involve the contributions that they are [going to make] to their families and their community. I mentioned Carrie and her discussion of after graduation is [about] law school, and that is her singular goal and that is what she's going to be doing. With Michelle, her discussion is becoming an engineer and becoming the best engineer that she possibly can. So, the discussions after graduation are incredibly hopeful. There are certainly those moments of fear and dread and unfortunate realizations of some of the really negative possibilities of after graduation, but fortunately those tend to be limited, sad moments rather than the norm. I think the norm is an optimistic, "Here's how I am going to the make the world a better place," and "Here's how I am going to continue my own education, or continue my own career."

When asked about whether encouraging these students in their dreams was building a false sense of security or optimism about the future, she explained that, while she would never want to crush the optimism of such high performing and dedicated students or discourage them, she does sometimes feel scared that their views are not realistic. However, she also explained

We don't know if the DREAM Act is going to pass. We don't know if there is going to be some sort of immigration relief. We don't know what is going to happen, but you're in a better position if you are striving for your dreams when it passes or doesn't pass than if you decide to give up and be sad about it. You might as well as stoke the optimism, because the worse that happens is someone becomes better educated and a better advocate for themselves.

In short, Susan is supportive of the transformational resistance behaviors she observed in the DREAMers she knew and, which are apparent in others in this study: not only were these youth seeking a better way of life for themselves and other undocumented youth, but they were also able to identify the extent to which societal structures, language, and perceptions served to oppress them, and then, in the face of this oppression, hold on to hope that the future would be better.

**“I Am a DREAMer.”**

### **On Being an Activist: The Process and the Benefit**

Seven of the eight DREAMers I interviewed had been involved in some form of activism in support of the DREAM Act, advocating for undocumented immigrant rights and/or stopping the deportation of undocumented immigrants. They became politically

active for a variety of reasons: four of the participants explained they became active at a particular challenging moment, connected to their status; others spoke about becoming active after being inspired by other activists.

The participants' political activism and the extent to which they were open about their status shaped their views of what it meant to be undocumented. These activities served to empower them and legitimize their place in the United States. Through their activism, they developed powerful counternarratives that they shared with each other, with allies, and with the larger society. Their activism also served to connect these DREAMers in ways that allowed for information sharing, support of one another, and a sense of connectedness.

Social media has played a huge role in fostering activism. It connects DREAMers to each other, is a way to share information, and allows undocumented students to see the visible role that some are taking in fighting for greater rights. A visit to the Facebook pages of the Mason DREAMers (<http://gmu.collegiatelink.net/organization/masondreamers>) or DREAM Activist Virginia (<http://www.dreamactivist.org/regions/region-3/virginia/>), two organizations supporting undocumented students illustrates the types of information available to DREAMers, if they know to look there. These pages cover a range of topics, including details about information sessions on DACA requirements, requests for help to stop the deportation of low-priority cases, and fundraising in support of undocumented immigrants.



## **Becoming Activists**

Four of the participants said their activism dated to a personally critical moment. Elena, the most vocal of the seven, did not become an activist until after she graduated from college. Not knowing what to do next in her life, she started researching the DREAM Act and support organizations on-line. This research led her to a conference in Washington D.C. where she met other DREAMers and was motivated to begin a DREAMers group in her hometown. Since then she has organized rallies, attended sit-ins, been arrested, and led training sessions.

For Michelle, activism goes against her soft-spoken, reserved personality, but she feels that it is essential to keep pressure on the current administration to get the DREAM Act passed. She explained that she thinks about her status constantly,

For the DREAM Act the age is 30 and time flies. I might be 30 tomorrow and maybe the DREAM Act [won't have] passed. But if I want it to pass, I have to get involved. Getting involved is the only way.

Anna became an activist to fight back against deportation. She made the decision to share her status not just with a select group of people, but through an interview with a journalist from the local newspaper, her entire community. She explained, "I thought I didn't have anything to lose. Let the people know."

Alex became an activist because of a talk that Elena gave:

I got involved through Elena. . . . She was good friends with a counselor at our school, and she got up a gave a speech, and she asked if we wanted to take part in a little action that she was going to do. . . . I felt really embarrassed when I went.

Nobody knew that I was undocumented. We went there in front of many veterans. We were holding signs “It’s Our Dream to Serve in the U.S. Army.” It was my first time. Then we were on the news. That’s how I started. Then I do an action here and there, talking to senators, doing a lobby up in D.C.

As mentioned above, Alex has gone on to take part in widespread activism and education. He explained that like many others, his activism has given him increased courage to share his story.

### **Shifting the Narrative**

Six of the seven DREAMers who were involved in some sort of activism felt that their involvement had significantly changed their views about being undocumented. Participants reported that their political activism helped them feel less afraid, empowered them to speak out more, allowed them to stop blaming their parents for bringing them to the United States, and helped them to recognize that they were not alone in their situation.

Elena, Alex, Jacqueline, and Anna all reported feeling less fearful because of their activism. Anna, in describing what it was like to be involved in demonstrations and other activist activities, explained:

At first it was, not hard, but a little complicated. Then I got used to it. I guess, even though I was in the newspaper, I was still a little afraid. . . . But since we were a group of people, not just one person, it made a difference.

Alex describes his own transformation similarly:

I’m less afraid of going out and saying I’m undocumented. Before the DREAM Act

was put up for a vote, we were lobbying in senators' offices. There were five of us in Senator Hutchinson's office. Our plan wasn't to get arrested. In the group there were U.S. citizens. Two of us were not, but all of us said we were undocumented. We wanted to talk to someone. They called the police. I was afraid. I was anxiously waiting. More cops started coming in. They said we were going to get three warnings. Finally, they called the senator's immigration aid. We finally go up. . . . It [my activism] changed me so much. Now I am able to go to a freaking senator's office. I don't really care now. When I first started meeting, I was afraid. I didn't want to talk about my status. But now it's like whatever.

Others talked about the extent to which they felt empowered by their activism.

Enrique explained,

It [activism] helped me develop encouragement, I guess. By that, I mean making me feel that being undocumented is okay. And that it wasn't my fault, and I'm also not going to blame my parents for trying to give me a better life. Being an activist and involved in organizations such as the . . . [DREAMers group], it helps you empower yourself and others around you to show that it's okay to be undocumented and to not be ashamed of that. To be unapologetic. Growing up I used to be so ashamed of being undocumented because of the things people hear on the news. I heard it so much that it started becoming true to myself. . . . As I become more active, I become more American—that I am the American that I have been, but I couldn't feel like it because of media, people, and all these nasty comments that you always hear.

Elena has seen the transformation that activism has had not only on herself, but also on other DREAMers:

I met this young girl from Georgia when we went to Georgia and were organizing there. She was really scared. She didn't want to tell anyone. She was just starting to get involved with the Georgia DREAMers. And now, she's all out there. I see her Facebook page and she's at a conference or at a training. She's getting interviewed by reporters. It's just a totally different person. It empowers you to see other youth not be scared, and you have opportunities. People want to help you. There are nice people out there in the world and they want to help you because they hear about your story. Good things come out by being public.

Clearly activism is an empowering activity, which can decrease the fear and shame that undocumented individuals feel, but which also can connect DREAMers to other DREAMers as well as to people who want and are able to help them.

### **Connecting with Other DREAMers**

Meeting and speaking with other DREAMers led participants in this study to look at their situation in a new light. They began to see that they were not the only ones struggling; that they could have achievements, even with an undocumented status; and that they could gain access to essential information. The company of people with like problems helped participants think more positively about their situations and their futures.

Rose and Melanie explained how their contact with other undocumented students

helped them to see that they were not as limited as they thought. Rose said, “There are still a lot of things I can do. People get creative, find loopholes for a lot of things. I can find ways to do things that I still want to do.”

Melanie described how her contact with another undocumented student inspired her to think about her own future differently.

I kind of admire her. I know it [being undocumented] hurt her and stopped her from doing a lot of things too, but she overlooked it and still went and got where she is. She made me realize that it is possible even if you are undocumented it’s possible to do things and we shouldn’t get stuck where we are. Just because you are undocumented, you are not going to sit in a corner and cry, cry all the time. You have to stand up and go somewhere to see what you can actually do.

In fact, it was this woman who encouraged Melinda to talk to her high school counselor about her situation and helped motivate her to attend a community college.

For Elena, it was her contact with other DREAMers at a conference that inspired her to begin her own DREAMers organization.

I had never met them [other undocumented students], but it only took a few hours to feel like we really knew each other. That similarity that we have connected us. We’re not alone. My friend kept in touch with me. All the time calling me and pushing me, “When’s your first meeting? When’s your first meeting?” That kind of thing. I think if I just . . . [gone] and left the conference, I don’t know if I would have been involved, but it was the others who were in contact with me, guiding me. They were my inspiration. The other undocumented youth that I met, they were my

inspiration. We had a march and a rally, and I was inspired. . . . Knowing that there are others involved. It was inspiring. It was them.

Now others describe Elena as inspiring and motivating them to be active.

Michelle explained that there was a sense of security in being able to share her story and feelings with other undocumented students and allies.

It feels good [belonging to a DREAMers group] because you can share openly. You can be more, I don't know, not too nervous or speculate about what people might think. Because they're there [part of the group], so they probably support it [the DREAM Act], so you don't have to be scared or worry about what they might think.

Michelle also explained that the group that she belonged to sought to share their stories with the larger community in order to garner support. "Tell them [students and faculty] about how you feel about being undocumented and why it affects you. If you make it personal, it will get to their heart." These stories illustrate how several of the participants in this study began by sharing their experiences with other undocumented immigrants and then found themselves able to expand their audience to include the wider community, with a goal of working for systemic change. In becoming part of an activist community, DREAMers learn to go beyond thinking about the frustrations and challenges of their personal situation to recognizing the larger injustice that prevents a group of individuals from pursuing their dreams and integrating more fully into U.S. society. This transition can only occur through connecting with other DREAMers.

In summary, the participants' activism and their interactions with other DREAMers

had a significant impact on their narratives about being undocumented. These experiences allowed them to be less fearful and reduced the stigma associated with their status. In addition, other DREAMers' ability to realize a variety of achievements, despite the limitations, provided inspiration. Further, the network of DREAMers that has developed among people encountered during activities has proved invaluable for sharing essential information.

### **Additional Finding: Social Media and Technology**

Before I began this research, I had no idea of the significant role that the internet and technology would play in the process. However, I first began finding participants by posting information about my research on two advocacy list serves. I made contact with participants via e-mail and texts. I followed DREAMer-related events on DREAMer Groups Facebook pages. Social media and the internet have also been essential components in the momentum of the DREAMers movement. All seven of the participants who have been involved in political activism discussed the importance of social media in the process as did three of the advocates that I interviewed. They explained that social media has served to connect and inform people in essential ways. Claire explained,

All of the DREAMers are connected through Facebook and G-chat. Because a lot of the movements are connected across the country through that, it's made it easy for us to be connected even though we are low-income, and we can't travel wherever. The internet makes it easier for everyone to stay connected and on the same page and distribute information widely and quickly. Since our target audience is mainly students, they're always on line.

Elena expressed similar views:

I use it [social media/the internet] a lot. Basically that is what I use my Facebook page for. . . . Really to spread awareness. Look we're having this workshop on Deferred Action, come. Share it with everyone. We even have a secret group. It's private. It's just us [members of her local DREAMers group]. . . . I've had some undocumented youth who have requested me. They see pictures and posts that I write. . . . I've had private messages saying, "Wow, what you do is encouraging. What all you guys, the other DREAMers are doing, it's very inspiring and empowering. I want to be able to do that or I want to do that. How can I get involved?" . . . Or DREAMers from other parts of Virginia. I would have never heard of them if it wasn't for social media.

She also explained how she has used social media to connect and to share information with DREAMers from around the country.

### **Chapter Summary**

The participants in this study described in detail how being undocumented has set them apart from their documented peers in terms of the emotional toll of being undocumented, the limitations placed on them, and the uncertainty that they feel. They described the role that emotional, academic, and financial support played in helping them achieve their goals, but they emphasized that there is a need for greater support. This research also identified how most participants took action vis-à-vis their undocumented status, and how their activism has played a powerful role in helping them shift their narrative about being undocumented so that it is no longer largely negative.



## **CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

*To me [DACA] was like a watershed moment. The conversation has shifted. I don't think we'll ever go back. We've turned the corner, and it's because of the bravery of these kids that we won't go back. Nan*

Unauthorized students are entitled to basic human rights, rights that are not currently being protected by the U.S. government. Most of these students came to the United States through no fault or volition of their own, and they are part of families who have made their homes here. They have deeply rooted ties to their communities through their schools, their jobs, and their civic actions. These connections alone do not entitle them to legal status, but educational, political, and social structures and policies that deny them the right to pursue higher education and make long-term, meaningful contributions to society stand in the way of social justice. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), ratified by the United States in 1992, states that “all peoples have the right of self-determination,” which includes the right to pursue “economic, social, and cultural development.” Thus, to deny them such opportunities is a denial of their civil and political rights.

As Congress grapples with comprehensive immigration reform and the states examine their own policies with respect to higher education opportunities for

unauthorized youth, a movement is growing in the Commonwealth of Virginia in support of in-state tuition benefits for unauthorized students. As has been widely expressed by those supporting the movement, generally, unauthorized youth have no plans to return to their countries of birth, and so it is in the best interest of the United States to support them in their endeavors to obtain meaningful employment and become tax-paying members of society. Access to higher education is central to this endeavor.

As a result of *Plyler v. Doe* (1982), unauthorized youth throughout the United States now have the right to a free, public K-12<sup>th</sup> grade education. This education provides them with aspirations to become active and productive members of their communities and rise above the often low-paying jobs that their unauthorized parents and other family members have. While higher education is a widely recognized path to the middle class, for unauthorized youth, higher education can be out of reach due to academic and financial obstacles (Abrego & Gonzales, 2010; Gonzales, 2011; Huber & Malagon, 2007). These barriers are particularly daunting in states, such as Virginia, that do not offer in-state tuition benefits or student loans for unauthorized students (Torres & Wicks-Asbun, 2013). Because of the obstacles in their path, unauthorized youth need access to very specific forms of information and support (Gonzales, 2010) to pursue higher education. Without such support, their goals will likely fall to the wayside, and they will instead remain in the lowest strata of society, feeling resentment and frustration over their situation (Abrego, 2006 Gonzales, 2011, Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). This waste of talent and potential is beneficial neither to the immigrants nor to the larger community.

As described in chapter one, the purpose of this research was to understand the lived experiences of eight unauthorized Latino high school graduates in Virginia as a means of identifying how educators and social justice allies can better support and advocate for unauthorized students and young adults throughout Virginia in their quest for higher education and a career. To focus primarily on low-income, young unauthorized adults growing up in Virginia, I selected participants based on these research criteria: 1) between the ages of 18-34; 2) immigrated to the U.S. as an unauthorized minor by the age of 12, 3) immigrated from Mexico or Central America; and 4) lived in Virginia for at least three years during high school and graduated from a Virginia high school.

Through this narrative inquiry research, I have sought to give voice to the lived experiences of these eight individuals as a means of working for social change. Examining how participants described their acculturation in the United States, their educational experiences, and their civic involvement, I sought to answer the following research questions:

- 1) What is the participant's understanding and experience of being an unauthorized Latino young adult in Virginia?
- 2) How has being unauthorized shaped the participant's educational and career path since high school?
- 3) How has the participant's narrative been shaped by his/her experiences, achievements, challenges and interactions with others while living in Virginia?
- 4) What types of support benefited the participants in his/her postsecondary journey, and what additional supports could have benefited him/her more?

In this final chapter, I summarize the major findings and implications of this research in response to these research questions and offer research conclusions and recommendations.

### **Discussion of Findings and Implications:**

#### **Being an Unauthorized Latino DREAMer in Virginia**

##### **Characteristic of Participants**

As I completed my research analysis, I came to understand that the eight DREAMers I interviewed are members of what can be seen as the most resilient group of unauthorized students living in Virginia, based on the fact that they graduated from high school, they pursued higher education, and they engaged in civic action. Rather than viewing their migratory status as a reason to give up on the possibility of postsecondary education, they described it as a motivating factor in their ambitions. The participants in this study demonstrated a strong commitment to education, a heightened sense of responsibility, strong allegiance to family, and great resiliency, despite numerous obstacles, in the pursuit of their dreams. All eight came to the United States with very limited social and cultural capital. For the most part they came from families having very little to no experience with postsecondary education and a low socioeconomic status. However, despite these challenges, they persevered in seeking out the support that they needed to pursue their goals.

Seven of the eight participants are currently pursuing post-secondary education or have already completed a four-year degree. The eighth, Melanie, had firm plans to start college part-time in 2013. This puts all but one of the DREAMers in this study among the

49% of unauthorized high school graduates who are or who have sought postsecondary education. Of the seven, six are working or have worked to fund a portion, or in the case of Michelle, all of their education. Despite their uncertainty about whether, once they have earned a degree, they will be able to work in their field, all eight are convinced of the value of a higher education in its own right.

Most of the participants in this study also described having to grow up faster, taking on greater responsibility, and showing more maturity than their documented peers. This reality is demonstrated by participants acting as interpreters for other family members, charting a path for furthering their education without the help of their parents, being overly cautious about breaking any rules, not asking their parents for financial support, and taking on responsibility for younger siblings. In addition, six of the eight were quite active in their community and larger society, engaging in such activities as leading education workshops for immigrants, speaking on panels, joining protests, and doing volunteer work. These various characteristics speak to the funds of knowledge that unauthorized students and young adults may possess.

The eight Latino DREAMers in this study had much to say about what it meant to them to be unauthorized, particularly with respect to how they differed from their documented immigrants or U.S.-born Latino peers. They spoke of the psychological and emotion toll that living with their “illegal” migratory status has had on them, the limitations that their status imposes, and the impact that their status has on their aspirations and achievements. However, participants also emphasized that they are the

same as their peers in terms of their upbringing, their view that the United States is their home, and their hopes for the future.

### **Emotional and Psychological Impact**

All of the participants in this study described feelings of fear and stigma associated with their status. Chavez (1992) explains that fear of discovery and deportation is constantly present in the lives of unauthorized immigrants. The DREAMers in this study described fear of deportation for family members, friends, others in their communities and themselves. Anna had a very close call as she herself faced the possibility of deportation. The participants also explained that the fear that they felt and the need for secrecy were passed along from their parents and families as well as other members of their communities. This type of fear, which can often freeze a person into inaction, was closely connected to negative perceptions of unauthorized immigrants in U.S. society.

Participants' fear and embarrassment impacted who they chose to tell about their unauthorized status, as well as decisions about where to pursue postsecondary education, how to travel, and when and with whom to socialize. Goffman (1963) in his work on stigma described how members of a stigmatized group will often attempt to pass as "normal," avoiding markers that will identify them as part of this group. My participants, in particular, described avoiding situations where they might have to show state-issued identification, such as going out to a bar or club with friends and having to use their "big" passport. Goffman further explained that this stigma could lead to isolation, depression, and anxiety, particularly in individuals who chose to hide their stigma. The stigma my

participants felt, along with fear and on-going limitations took a significant emotional toll on participants with over half of them describing intense feelings of depression and stress at certain points in their lives.

How much fear and embarrassment these DREAMers experienced changed over the course of their young adult lives, varying based on peer groups, surroundings, and level of activism. Participants were least likely to share with friends and peers whom they described as “conservative” or “Republican.” Clearly, they were aware of the political nature of the immigration debate. Furthermore, participants who described spending more time with “Americans” or non-Latinos were more likely to be hesitant about sharing their status and feel a greater risk or stigma associated with sharing. They indicated that they would be more likely to share when they had achieved a certain level of success in the future.

The above discussion demonstrates unauthorized youth’s need for strong systems of support both from adults in their schools and communities and from other unauthorized youth. As they go through the stages of what Gonzales (2011) calls “learning to be undocumented,” they need mentors who can provide guidance and empathy, as well as those who can share their own experiences of coming to terms with the limitations and feelings of exclusion connected to their identity. In addition to the psychological and emotional trauma connected to being unauthorized, participants in this study discussed the limitations imposed by their migratory status.

## **Impact on Educational and Career Path**

A dominant theme emerging from this study is how limited DREAMers felt their goals and daily activities were due to their status. The participants in this study are typical of other unauthorized Latino immigrants: they come from families with limited human capital who, upon arrival in the United States, begin working in menial, low-paying, service professions with little opportunity for professional advancement (Abrego, 2006). My participants' parents and other family members worked primarily in entry-level jobs in the poultry industry, food service, and construction; the participants themselves who had employment, all worked as waiters, waitresses, or hostesses. Having found these jobs through their personal connections, they were able to work despite their lack of a social security number and the appropriate work permits. All eight of the participants viewed education as a means of ultimately obtaining better jobs, and they all hoped to have different jobs in the future.

As has been described by other research on unauthorized youth (Abrego, 2006; Gonzales, 2007, 2010; Olivérez, 2006; Muñoz, 2008), educational and professional limitations affect the long-term goals of this population. These participants are no exception. Their status influenced their choice of college, the length of time needed to earn a college degree, and the decision to work and go to school at the same time. In addition, their status negatively affected their access to internships and careers in their fields of study. The two participants who had already graduated from college found that their unauthorized status impaired their ability to find employment in their areas of interest.



The implications of these educational and professional limitations are profound when considering the ability of the participants to break away from the economically difficult lives of their parents and to find meaningful work. Portes and Rumbaut (2001) explain that for children of immigrants to escape the low-paying jobs and the hardships faced by their parents, they must gain access to the middle class through higher education. However, as this study and others show, access to higher education is not guaranteed, and without a change in U.S. law, a college degree will not necessarily help unauthorized graduates set out in their dream careers.

The participants in this study described choosing colleges that were in some way a poor fit for them either because the school was far from their families, had few students of color, or was private rather than public. They also described the on-going stress of having to work and study, continually seeking funding for tuition, and taking extra time to finish their degrees because of the need to work. Any one of these factors might ultimately lead unauthorized youth to quit college before graduation.

Those fortunate individuals who were able to graduate, such as Elena and Rose, have been unable to use their degrees because of their migratory status; they now await a policy shift that might grant them a path to citizenship and hope that it occurs before they are too old to qualify. Meanwhile, they are forced to continue working at low-paying jobs despite their education and determination. The result is feelings of great uncertainty and frustration.

## **Other Limitations**

The literature on unauthorized students describes in great depth the educational and professional limitations of unauthorized students (Abrego, 2006; Gonzales, 2007, 2010; Olivérez, 2006; Muñoz, 2008). However, less study has been devoted to the extent to which other limitations affect an unauthorized young adult's ability to fully acculturate. The DREAMers in this study spoke a great deal about the limitations of being unauthorized, particularly those associated with not having either a social security card or a state-issued identification card. For example, in the realm of transportation, which is critical for getting to work and getting to school, all but one of the participants described having to choose to drive illegally (with the risk of being caught and then possibly facing deportation), to use public transportation, or to seek others' help. Not having state-issued identification also affected modes of transportation and possible destinations.

These limitations might seem trivial when compared with the larger obstacles facing unauthorized youth in terms of college and career. However, they illustrate how unauthorized youth can experience exclusion on a regular basis and are exposed to ongoing sources of stress. Recognition of the emotional and psychological toll that can come of being fearful, being stigmatized, and being limited is an important step in thinking about the unauthorized students who make up our classes and our communities. We might not know who they are, and perhaps their status affects them in ways that are not apparent to others. These limitations should not be minimized or ignored, no matter how much resiliency or resistance a DREAMer demonstrates.

## **The Narratives of the DREAMers**

The most challenging of my research questions was to look at the factors impacting participants' narratives about their experience of being undocumented. There is no one experience of being unauthorized, and people's responses to status can change as their circumstances change and as they internalize what it means to be unauthorized (Gonzales, 2011). I was fortunate to be able to interview most of my participants before and after the announcement of the DACA initiative. Through the narratives of these eight DREAMers, I came to see how their feelings about and reactions to being unauthorized changed in response to changes in their own personal situations, the political and social climate, and particularly, the degree of hope and optimism that they felt about the future. I also learned of how much their interactions with other DREAMers and their activism impacted their responses to being unauthorized.

The participants in this study described living "normal" lives until their late high school years when, suddenly, they realized the implications of their status. Attending school and college, participating in clubs and social groups, and working are all experiences which offered them inclusion and a legitimate place in U.S. society. However, the barriers to their educational and career goals and the limits placed on their behavior were reminders of the unauthorized nature of their identities. The extent to which unauthorized students experience inclusion and exclusion based on their migratory status can be understood through the lens of liminal legality (Gonzales, 2011).

**Liminal legality.** Throughout this study, participants described the impact of personal and political uncertainty on their aspirations and morale. They spoke about

times of transition (high school graduation and college graduation) as particularly challenging. This research also revealed the extent to which these DREAMers saw their future plans and goals inescapably linked to political decisions at the state and federal level. Four of the participants had been active in working for the passage of the DREAM Act in 2010, only to see it fail. Such on-going uncertainty about immigration policy and changes to individual migratory status creates a state of liminal legality, which as already explained, is the ambiguous situation of being neither legal or illegal, but sharing characteristics of both. This in-between state curtailed participants' ability to plan for and envision their future.

Participant responses to the 2012 DACA initiative is an excellent example of the impact of liminal legality on their narratives of being unauthorized. By November 2012, all eight participants in this study had applied for deferred action status. Most were hopeful about the result and anticipated applying for various jobs or internships and obtaining identification that would allow them to drive, fly, and perhaps even apply for in-state tuition. As of March 2013, three of the eight participants had received a change in status. The rest were still eagerly awaiting news. As a result of this policy change, participants began to envision their future in new ways and felt an additional sense of security. They expressed greater optimism about the future, and some felt greater willingness to speak out about their status. However, their reactions also demonstrate the way in which a policy seemingly designed to support DREAMers, actually resulted in greater uncertainty and additional questions.

If an unauthorized person is granted deferred action status, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) agrees not to place this individual in deportation proceedings. However, this decision is discretionary and could be terminated at any time either because of a change in policy or because of an individual's actions. The "legal" status could end if, after a two-year period, the deferred action status is not renewed. The status could end when the individual turns 31 or with a change in administration. Furthermore, individual states can choose whether to grant specific rights to individuals with this legal status; Arizona and Nebraska, for example, have refused to grant driver's licenses and other state benefits to DACA recipients. As a result of this ambiguity, the DACA initiative has brought up numerous new questions about participants' futures, and they expressed concern about the lasting impact of this policy shift.

This ambiguity is not benign. Abrego (2010) and Gonzales (2011) in their studies found that unauthorized youth who are able to earn a college degree, but unable to pursue a career, feel intense levels of frustration at the obstacles blocking their goals. If individuals are allowed to work in their field of choice temporarily, only to have this right taken away after a period of time, it is to be anticipated that their feelings of frustration will intensify. Although the DACA initiative was well intentioned, without further legislation or opportunities for a path to citizenship, its unintended consequences could be devastating for DREAMers.

Liminal liability, then, helps us to understand why and how participant narratives change over time as a result of their personal and political circumstances. Looking at how participants responded to their status through the lenses of resiliency and resistance also

helps clarify those factors that most influence what they had to say about being unauthorized.

**Responses to being unauthorized.** The emotional and psychological toll of being unauthorized, the limitations imposed by this status, socioeconomic hardship, and families with limited educational background are all risk factors for the DREAMers in this study, as they are for other Latino unauthorized youth throughout the U.S. (Abrego 2010; Gonzales, 2011; Muñoz, 2008; Olivérez, 2006; Perez et al., 2009). In fact, because the participants in this study all came of age in Virginia, which is conservative (apart from Northern Virginia) in its policies towards unauthorized immigrants, it is very likely that they have faced even more limitations and less accepting communities than unauthorized youth in more liberal states such as California, New York, or Washington. The underlying question, then, is what do their narratives say about their ability to achieve in the face of numerous obstacles and social stigma? A partial answer can be found by examining the protective factors that supported their resiliency.

**Resiliency.** Through their narratives, the DREAMers in this study described both personal and environmental protective factors that research has shown foster a sense of resiliency. Benard (1991) described resiliency capacities as including: social competence, problem-solving, autonomy (including distancing from negative social messages), and a sense of purpose and belief in a bright future. She described environmental protective factors as including caring relationships, messages of high expectations, and opportunities for meaningful participation. In examining resiliency in unauthorized youth, Perez et al. (2009) looked at the protective factors that contributed to their

academic achievement. They concluded that, in the face of significant risk factors, both personal and environmental factors contributed to academic success. Such factors included how much students' parents and friends valued school, the students' degree of involvement in extra-curricular activities, and the levels of distress related to their situation.

Based on the definitions described above, most of the participants in this study showed a significant level of personal resilience through their transformational resistance behavior: they value education, they possess problem-solving skills that enabled them to seek needed support, they are able to distance themselves from the stigma of their status, and they believe in a positive future for themselves. Additionally, to varying degrees, their civic involvement and the family, school, and community support they received are examples of environmental protective factors that supported their academic achievement.

***Transformational resistance.*** The participants in this study, like other unauthorized youth throughout the country, were very aware of the challenges and experiences of others like themselves. However, rather than this knowledge contributing to lowered aspirations, several of the participants in this study described their status as a motivating factor. As discussed earlier, this use of what others view as a negative status exemplifies what Solórzano and Delgado-Bernal (2001) and Yosso (2006) describe as transformational resistance behavior. Not only were the participants able to imagine an alternate and more socially just situation for themselves and others like them, they were also, to varying degrees, able to identify and critique forms of social oppression that limited them, and also motivated them to work towards social change. Their willingness

to be interviewed for this research project is one example of their commitment to working for social change.

Additional examples of transformational resistance include the participants' assertions that they do not blame their parents for bringing them here, they acknowledge how dependent the United States has been on unauthorized immigrant labor, and they speak with determination about wanting to prove what they can accomplish or how they can contribute to U.S. society. They demonstrated a deep commitment to education by seeking out resources and, in many cases, working hard to fund their education. They have been able to maintain hope about their futures despite the obstacles blocking their educational and career goals. Furthermore, they describe their unauthorized status as helping them become stronger, less careless, more successful, and more engaged in helping others.

The participants demonstrating the greatest amount of transformational resistance were also the most politically active. Clearly, civic engagement can play a positive role in shaping the narratives of unauthorized youth.

**Benefit of civic engagement and community involvement.** As explained by both Rincón (2008) and Gonzales (2008), being part of a DREAMers' activist group can have a profound impact on the lives of unauthorized immigrants. I found that this assertion held true the participants in this study. Their activism benefited them in several essential ways, such as mitigating feelings of isolation, fear, and shame and connecting them to key resources. Their activism and their engagement with others allowed them to



create a counternarrative about their status and fostered a sense of resistance to the limitations of their status.

Several participants in this study explained that their activism and their experiences of sharing their stories and speaking out in support of the DREAM Act empowered them in essential ways. The more vocal they became in resisting the limitations of their unauthorized status, the less fear and shame they felt. In addition, through their activism, they were able to connect with other unauthorized immigrants, thus putting an end to their feeling of being engaged in an isolated struggle. This ability to connect and share stories with others allowed them to escape the secrecy that had been prevalent in their lives.

Furthermore, the participants' activism offered them paths to new resources that they might not have learned of otherwise. For example, it was through their activism that three of the participants gained financial support from community members, advocates, and faith communities. Without openly sharing their status, the students would never have received this type of financial support. In addition, being part of activist communities provided participants with essential information about educational and professional opportunities. As previously mentioned, the extent to which access to resources and opportunities is unwittingly hidden means that, all too frequently, unauthorized students are unaware of the possibilities available to them. The more connected they are to other unauthorized students and allies, the more opportunities they will have.

Social engagement can take many forms, perhaps not enough to engage *every* unauthorized youth, but certainly a sufficient variety to attract youth with many different personality traits. For example, three of the participants in this study described themselves as being reserved and unlikely to attend a rally or reach out to their senators or representatives in favor of immigration reform. However, all three spoke about their participation in some form of community activity such as being members of clubs in high school and college and interning at non-profit organizations. Perez. et al. (2009) in their research have demonstrated that these types of extracurricular activities and volunteering can have a significant impact on unauthorized students' resiliency by fostering relationships with supportive adults and peers, which, in turn, can support their academic achievement

Thus, the DREAMers in this study possess the resiliency that unauthorized youth can demonstrate when provided with sufficient protective factors, such as opportunities for involvement in school and community activities and access to supportive adults and peers. It is possible that the personal resilience of these DREAMers would have been insufficient to face the difficulties of pursuing postsecondary education without the support of family, school, and community.

### **Support in the Pursuit of Higher Education and Future Goals**

As documented by previous research on unauthorized immigrants, participants in this study benefitted from very specific forms of support, as well as expressed need for greater support. Participants described essential support in three key areas: academic, financial, and emotional. As detailed above, when seeking support, participants shared

their status with counselors, teachers, and community members and received varying responses.

**Academic.** Numerous studies have highlighted the additional challenges that unauthorized students face in school with respect to those faced by other culturally and linguistically diverse students (Abrego, 2006, Dozier, 1993, Gonzales, 2007, 2010; González, Plata, García, Torres, & Urrieta, 2003). The participants in this study were no exception. While the degree of academic support varied among participants, all expressed a need for schools to provide greater support. While prior research of unauthorized students has also highlighted the extent to which students are likely to piece together information about pursuing postsecondary education from other undocumented peers rather than ask school faculty or other adults (Enriquez, 2011), that was not the case for the individuals in this study,.

All eight participants chose to share their status with at least one member of their high school staff. Half of the participants chose to share with a school counselor that they did not fully trust. They made this choice because their desire to pursue their education outweighed the risk involved. While some students with the same degree of determination as these might take a similar step, others may not be willing to expose themselves to the risk. These DREAMers found that reaching out to counselors and teachers did not necessarily pay off; guidance tended to be insufficient, discouraging, or narrow in perspective.

Only two of the eight participants reported that their high school counselors gave them information targeting unauthorized students, specifically, scholarships or financial

aid packages available to unauthorized students. Both of these participants also explained that their counselors had previous experience working with unauthorized immigrants. In contrast, three of the participants explicitly stated that their counselors had no prior experience supporting unauthorized students who were open about their status. This lack of experience meant that, while well intentioned, the counselors were ill equipped to advise these students on how to continue their education. Even the two who did have previous experience with unauthorized immigrants were only able to offer very limited choices to the students they were counseling.

Procuring and providing up-to-date information about college admission policies, scholarships, and financial aid in the schools could be done with limited resources. However, the extent to which school administration and staff are afraid to speak openly about and support the unauthorized students in their halls highlights the how the school personnel themselves are helping to keep these students in the shadows. It is easy to blame the counselor who told Melissa to go back to her country of birth or the history teacher who directed Elena to speak with an unsupportive state representative. However, these examples can be more fruitfully examined as an illustration of how relegating the undocumented status to the realm of off-limit topics has become systemic. As a result, teachers are not getting the training they need, and students are not getting the support they deserve.

Given the limited information available to them, the participants in this study predictably only considered a very narrow range of postsecondary possibilities, and ultimately financial considerations played a major role in their decision-making.

**Financial.** Participants received financial support in the form of university grants, scholarships, and community and individual donations. Without these, most participants would have been unable to pursue the educational path they chose. Seven of the participants received no financial support from families towards college tuition. However, four of the eight lived with their parents rent-free.

The cost of higher education impacted participants' ability to pursue this education, their college choices, and the length of time spent in school. In addition, participants experienced on-going stress over finding ways to pay their tuition and trying to balance their school and work loads. Although these characteristics are not unique to unauthorized students, unlike others, undocumented students are unable to apply for student loans.

This dire economic situation points to a bleak picture: unauthorized students without access to financial assistance and/or the ability to handle a challenging school-work balance will be unable to pursue a higher education. In general, participants' families supported the pursuit of higher education to the extent possible, despite the expense. However, this is not the case for all unauthorized students. Many of the participants, when describing what set them apart from other unauthorized peers, described the pressure or desire that these peers felt to get a job and contribute to their families, rather than to continue their education.

**Emotional.** As described previously, all eight participants expressed feelings of depression and/or stress at certain points in their lives, particularly at transitions. These participants experienced what Gonzales (2011), as noted above, described as "learning to

be illegal”; in this process, the impact of an unauthorized youth’s status evolves from marginal importance to a major obstacle to future plans. Abrego (2006) explains that when high-achieving, unauthorized youth who have accepted the U.S. belief in upward mobility through hard work recognize that this belief may not apply to them, they may experience confusion, anxiety, and depression. These feelings, in turn, can result in negative assimilation patterns where unauthorized youth remain in the lowest strata of society.

The DREAMers in this study all were somewhat optimistic, particularly following the announcement of the DACA initiative that they would ultimately be able to work in their chosen fields. However, despite this optimism, they expressed a need for greater emotional support in coming to terms with the implications of their status. Most explained that they rarely, if ever, spoke to their families about being unauthorized and their feelings about their status. When they did, their parents frequently had difficulty understanding their frustration. In addition, the emotional aspect of being unauthorized was not addressed at school either. Clearly, teachers, allies, and advocates need to help with the emotional, as well as the logistical implications, of being unauthorized.

### **Conclusions**

Based on the findings detailed above, it is evident that the participants in this study were able to reach certain goals as a result of their personal resilience and determination and the emotional, financial, and academic support of their families, schools, and communities. However, despite their achievements, their unauthorized status has taken an emotional and psychological toll on their lives and caused them to make

both daily and long-term decisions based on this status. In fact, their status has marginalized them, and if their immigration status does not change, they will have to continue in the same types of minimum-wage jobs they currently have, despite their education, skills, and work ethic.

It must also be recognized that not all unauthorized students will have the same level of resiliency or the same level of support as the participants in this study. As mentioned previously, the participants in this study are among the minority in terms of percentage of unauthorized students who are able to graduate from high school and continue their education. Many instead drop out of high school, make a career of minimum-wage jobs and/or get involved with gangs or other trouble with the law. Therefore, to help other unauthorized youth achieve more in their lives, it is essential to learn from what helped this group of participants succeed and to identify the gaps in their support.

There is much room for improvement in the support of unauthorized students, both in the schools and in the community, in the pursuit of their dreams. The following section offers specific recommendations for pursuing a path for social justice for DREAMers.

### **Recommendations for Educators, Allies, and Advocates**

Based on the findings discussed above, input from the participants in this study, and research on unauthorized students, I offer recommendations to two key groups: public schools and social justice allies and advocates.

## **Public Schools**

As evidenced in the literature review and research data, there is much scope for improving the support that schools offer unauthorized students. I propose four recommendations aimed at improving support for unauthorized students at the middle school and high school level.

First, students must receive sufficient information about the variety of educational options available to them, including community college and public and private universities. They need to know which schools accept unauthorized students and which are likely to provide some type of financial aid. In addition, students need to a list of scholarships for which they are eligible. As was explained above, if students are only given a limited set of possibilities, they are forced to choose from this incomplete set. With more complete information, the students will be better able to make educational and professional decisions that are right for them.

Second, the information should be easily accessible; students should not have to reveal their unauthorized status to gain access to these resources. Making the information accessible and transparent will allow greater access and help to normalize the situation of being unauthorized. Accessibility can be improved in multiple ways: by presenting the information at college planning information sessions; by placing lists of resources in several locations throughout the school, such as the counseling office and classrooms; and by having bilingual parent information nights. In addition, it is important to begin discussions about postsecondary possibilities for unauthorized students prior to high school (in middle school, for example) and to include parents in these conversations. This



upstream approach will help students begin to think about their options and the challenges of their status when they still have ample time.

Third, it is important for schools to help unauthorized students connect with one another. Schools can do this by providing information about advocacy networks in their list of resources. Another way is to bring DREAMers who are in college or who have graduated from college into the schools to talk about their experiences. Schools can also lay the groundwork for establishing DREAMers' groups in the schools as these groups can provide both emotional and academic support. To start up such a group, school leaders or counselors should identify one or two students who would be willing to lead the group and then create a safe space where the group can meet.

Fourth, schools must insure that all counselors, teachers, and staff are educated about what it means to be unauthorized, including the potential emotional trauma associated with the status and the challenges to pursuing higher education and a professional career. Counselors and teachers will then be more aware of their students' experiences as well as better equipped to support and guide students if they ask for help. Teachers must be provided with a list of resources so that if a student chooses to speak with them, rather than a counselor, they will have appropriate, up-to-date information. In addition, counselors, teachers, and other staff must be made aware of the importance of keeping this information confidential and being sensitive to the possibility that students feel fear and shame about their status. ESOL teachers and counselors at middle schools and high schools can be trained and then share information both formally and informally

with other teachers and staff. The work must be on-going as staff, policies, scholarships, and other opportunities will all change over time.

### **Allies and Advocates**

The community and society as a whole can also assist these undocumented youth. As described previously, the veil of secrecy that surrounds unauthorized youth, serves to perpetuate their remaining in the shadows. It is essential to speak openly and regularly about the challenges these students face. I have four recommendations in this area.

First, the most pressing issue for unauthorized students is access to in-state tuition, federal and state educational loans, and ultimately a path to citizenship. State governments and community colleges and universities around the country are making positive choices in these areas and more must be encouraged to do so. Northern Virginia Community College and Montgomery College are two examples of local colleges supporting unauthorized students. Montgomery College, in particular, has refused to charge out-of-state tuition to unauthorized students living in Maryland. Allies and advocates can put pressure on a variety of individuals and entities: 1) state legislators to encourage the passage of a bill similar to the DREAM Act in their states; 2) local colleges to accept unauthorized students and give them scholarships, grants or in-state tuition benefits; and 3) the federal government to support immigration reform and passage of the federal DREAM Act. Such a strategy also means challenging limitations that perpetuate the ambiguity of DREAMers' status, such as requirements to renew deferred action every two years and to cut off eligibility for deferred action and DREAM Act benefits at age 31.

Second, allies and advocates can assist advocacy groups that support unauthorized students. Such groups are creating data banks of information for unauthorized students, providing scholarships, offering teacher education, and setting up mentorship programs for students. The support of these organizations through time, money, and publicity is essential. DREAMers' groups are also vocal about the deportation of non-priority cases, undocumented immigrants who have not committed any crimes. Allies and advocates can join these groups in speaking out against such deportations.

Third, unauthorized students have a critical need for funds. Allies and advocates can help unauthorized students raise money to fund their education. This research has shown that through the sharing of individual stories, members of faith groups and other organizations have learned of students' plights and donated money to support their education.

Fourth, there are loopholes in the laws governing legal employment, including internships, in the United States. For example, currently several law school graduates are fighting for the right to work as lawyers after having successfully passed the bar exam. Allies and advocates can educate themselves about these loopholes and share their learnings with unauthorized students, thus broadening their employment opportunities.

Further research on the experiences of unauthorized youth and young adults is also essential to strengthening our understanding of their experiences and needs.

### **Further Research**

The participants in this study were a highly motivated, resilient, and academically successful group of students who, for the most part, modeled strong levels of

transformational resistance. Nevertheless, they still needed significant levels of academic, financial, and emotional support to continue their education after graduating from high school. My participants described another set of students, their unauthorized peers who were not interested in or who were unable to continue their studies. Further research is needed to focus on the experiences of this population, unauthorized Virginian young adults who have decided not to pursue higher education. Additional research is also needed to determine the extent the DACA initiative supports the long-term goals of its recipients.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The nail-biter presidential election of 2012 provided a picture of how this country is changing and how current and future leaders need to take into account the needs of long underserved groups. During the same election, Maryland voters easily approved the Maryland DREAM Act that was passed by the state's General Assembly in 2011. This was the first of such bills to be supported by popular vote. These are positive indicators of the momentum for greater rights for unauthorized students and immigration reform.

However, the momentum is insufficient. The DACA initiative is not enough. As Michelle said, we need to "not stop the activism, but make it stronger." Virginia is the twelfth state in the nation in terms of numbers of DREAMers who could benefit from the passage of the DREAM Act (Immigration Policy, 2012). Yet, it is one of only six in the top twelve that does not currently offer in-state tuition for unauthorized immigrants. Currently, unauthorized Virginia students attending public universities full-time pay around \$30,000 a year in out-of-state tuition fees. Without the benefit of student loans,

few can afford such an investment. Without access to affordable higher education, thousands of motivated, resilient, and high-achieving individuals who are ready to make valuable contributions to the state they call home are being denied the right to fully integrate into U.S. society. Not only does this stance represent a violation of their civil rights, but it is also a grave failing on the part of the Commonwealth of Virginia. Schools must ensure that they are doing all they can to guarantee that DREAMers know their options for pursuing higher education. If these DREAMers drop out of school, move out of state to pursue an education at a private university that offers funding, or continue to work in minimum wage jobs despite a college degree, the state is losing valuable human resources. Furthermore, if they are unable to pursue their goals, these unauthorized individuals may find themselves on a path of downward assimilation that will affect not only them, but also their families and the larger community.

## **APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE - ADVOCATES**

1. Could you describe how you first became aware of the challenges undocumented immigrant students face?
2. What motivated you to begin to speak out?
3. What would you describe as some of the greatest challenges to being an ally to these students?
4. What does it mean to you to be an ally? What do you think as an ally are some of the most important aspects of the work that you do?
5. Could you describe a specific event or a specific person that you worked with that really stands out for?
6. What do you think is the role of social media (Facebook) in the DREAMers' movement?
7. What do you think motivates some undocumented students to become activists and others to remain in the shadows?
8. In thinking about the undocumented immigrants that you work with, what would you describe as their greatest challenge?
9. What would you describe as their most important resources?
10. As a high school teacher what do you think motivates students to share their status? How can schools create a safe space for this sharing?
11. What suggestions would you make to teachers who work with undocumented students?
12. What do schools need to do to better support undocumented students?

13. If you were able to speak to Congress or the president about immigration reform what would you say?

14. What's your opinion of Obama's Deferred Action policy? Do you think it will last? Will it change the way undocumented students think about their future?

15. Is there anything that I haven't asked about that you think I should know?

## **APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW GUIDE - UNAUTHORIZED IMMIGRANTS**

### **Opening Questions**

1. Can you begin by telling me a little bit about you and your family?
2. Where and when were you born?
3. How and with whom did you come to the U.S.? How old were you that time? What else was going on in your home country or in the U.S. at that time?
4. Did you come directly to Virginia? When you first arrived, did you have any relatives or close friends to stay with?
5. Can you describe how you learned that you were coming to the U.S.?
6. What do you remember about your first few years in the U.S.?
7. Can you describe your responsibilities to your family? Your parents and siblings.

### **Education questions**

1. How many schools have you attended? Where were they located?
2. When you think about your education in the U.S., what memories stand out for you?
3. What did you enjoy most about school in the U.S.?
4. What were some of the biggest challenges?
5. Did attending a U.S. school change you in any way? How?
6. Could you describe any activities that you were involved in outside of classes?
7. What kind of student were you?
8. Who gave you the greatest support in school? Who did you hang out with?



9. Did you form any close relationships with teachers or other school employees? How did the relationship develop? What about that person helped you open up to him or her?

### **Identity questions**

1. How many years have you lived in the United States?
2. In what ways do you consider yourself \_\_\_\_\_?  
(i.e., Mexican, Guatemalan, Salvadoran)
3. In what ways do you consider yourself American?
4. Do you feel you identify more with one or the other?
5. Do you have a memory of a favorite teacher from school? How do you think s/he or would describe you?

### **Work/ higher education experiences**

1. When did you graduate from high school?
2. Are you currently working? Part time? Full time?
3. Can you describe the process of getting this job?
4. Has your legal status impacted your job choice? What type of work would you see yourself doing if you were a citizen?
5. Are you currently studying or did you take any classes after high school? Where? When?
6. What type of tuition (in-state or out-of-state) did you have to pay?
7. Can you describe what you had to do to be accepted to \_\_\_\_\_?  
Did you receive help? What was the hardest part? When did you decide that you would go to \_\_\_\_\_? Why did you choose \_\_\_\_\_?
8. What does it mean to you to be a college student?

### **Status Questions**

1. Do you remember at what point you realized that you were in the U.S. without legal paperwork?

2. What specific memories do you have of this being talked about in your family?
3. What has been the most challenging of being undocumented?
4. Who if anyone did you feel comfortable talking with about your immigration status?
5. Does any member of your family currently have or has had in the past a Temporary Protected Status? How has that impacted their opportunities in the U.S.?
6. If you were a U.S. citizen, do you feel that you might have made different choices in your life? How?
7. How would you describe what it means to you to be undocumented?
8. How would you describe most U.S. citizens' views of undocumented immigration? How do you feel about this?

### **Empowerment Questions**

1. Could you talk a little bit about how you got involved in your activism work?
2. What types of activist activities have you been involved with?
3. At what point did you begin to feel comfortable speaking openly about being undocumented?
4. How has your activism changed how you view your undocumented status?
3. What is your opinion of Obama's Deferred Action policy? Do you feel that it will last? Does it change your future plans? Have you made any immediate changes because of this? Will you apply for Deferred Action? Has it changed the way that you think about your status? Why do you think that he decided to make this change?
4. What is the role of social media (Facebook, etc.) in the activist movement? How important is it?
5. You seem to have a lot of academic skill, dedication, and commitment to education. Would you describe yourself as typical of the undocumented young adults that you know? Or are there many who are not as committed to continuing their education? What stands in their way?
6. How do you feel that your future is uncertain? Has your view changed since the Obama policy?

7. Some people that I have interviewed have described their undocumented status as shaping their development in some way. Do you feel that this is true for you? How?

8. Have you ever had a bad experience when you shared your story of being undocumented?

Or

1. What do you know about current laws on immigration? What's your opinion of these laws?

2. Do you think the laws should be changed in any way? If yes, how?

3. How do you think laws like these get changed?

4. To what extent do you feel that you are able to be part of the process to change the laws?

5. How have you been involved in working to change these laws?

6. How has it felt to be part of this effort?

7. Can you remember a specific time when you realized that you could be part of working to change the laws? What happened? Who or what motivated you to join this group?

8. If you could say one thing to President Obama and Congress about what it is like to be an undocumented immigrant, what would you say?

9. What would you like U.S. society to know about what it means to be undocumented?

## APPENDIX C: FOLLOW-UP INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Check chart. What year were you born? Name choice?
2. How has your activism changed how you view your undocumented status?
3. What is your opinion of Obama's Deferred Action policy? Do you feel that it will last? Does it change your future plans? Have you made any immediate changes because of this? Will you apply for Deferred Action? Has it changed the way that you think about your status? Why do you think that he decided to make this change?
4. What is the role of social media (Facebook, etc.) in the activist movement? How important is it?
5. You seem to have a lot of academic skill, dedication and commitment to education. Would you describe yourself as typical of the undocumented young adults that you know? Or are there many who are not as committed to continuing their education? What stands in their way?
6. How do you feel that your future is uncertain? Has your view changed since the Obama policy?
7. Some people that I have interviewed have described their undocumented status as shaping their development in some way. Do you feel that this is true for you? How?
8. Have you ever had a bad experience when you shared your story of being undocumented?
9. Suggestions for teachers/school staff to get students to feel comfortable being open about their status?
10. You spoke about not being optimistic about the passage of the DREAM Act, do you feel optimistic about your own future?
11. Have any other members of your family been involved in activism? What do you think sets you apart?

12. How do you feel when you think about the future? How frequently do you think about it?

13. Do you think that there is a connection between your undocumented status and your service orientation (e.g. – community service or future profession)?

**Questions for specific individuals:**

1. (Alex) How long were you separated from your parents? Who were you staying with, grandparents? Are your parents still together? Other siblings? Did you apply to other colleges besides (name of current college)? Why did you finally decide to go there?

2. (Alex and Elena) You do various types of trainings and education. Do you feel that the majority of undocumented immigrants are feeling like they can be more open about their status? Does it depend on their age? Level of education? Other factors?

3. (Jacqueline) In your interview you talked about the other students being ‘normal’ and you not being normal in terms of applying for colleges and riding on the plane. Do you still feel a sense of not being ‘normal’?

4. (Michelle) You mentioned that all the internships require a social security number. Have you researched this extensively or that is what you assume? Have you spoken with any of your faculty advisors at your current university about this? Do you think Obama’s policy change will allow you to apply for internships? Will you pursue this?

5. (Michelle) Do you ever think of going back to your home country?  
Same/different?

6. (Enrique) You talked about the pursuit of happiness in your last interview. Can you describe what makes you happy? Could you be happy if you are always undocumented?

7. (Enrique) Have you applied for residency? What is that process like?

8. (Elena) A few of the people that I interviewed, described your role of getting them involved in activism. What does it mean to you that you have been instrumental in getting so many others involved in activism? Do you see that as a central goal of yours?

9. (Elena and Alex) You do various types of trainings and education. Do you feel that the majority of undocumented immigrants are feeling like they can be more open about their status? Does it depend on their age? Level of education? Other factors?

10. (Elena) You mentioned that you had opportunities for jobs in Mexico such as working for your aunt and uncle. Why do you feel that your opportunities (without the passage of the DREAM Act) are still greater? What keeps you here?

### **Follow-up Melanie and Rose:**

1. Have you applied for Deferred Action? Have your future plans changed at all since we last spoke?
2. What time of support do you think was most instrumental in helping you get where you are today? What greater support would you have liked or needed?
3. In our last interview, you spoke about the negative views that some people have about undocumented immigration. What are your feelings about those opinions or how do you respond to that? Do you think that your feelings about these negative opinions have changed in the past few years? What has led to the change?
4. Many of the people that I interviewed talked about feeling fear connected with being undocumented? Do you feel now or have you felt afraid in the past? What are you afraid of? What makes you feel more or less fearful?
5. What do you feel are the greatest limitations to being undocumented?
6. What experiences or relationships have most impacted your feelings about being undocumented?

Melanie:

1. Do you have any regrets about not starting college sooner, right after graduation?
2. What might have made a difference in getting you to apply right away? What were the biggest obstacles preventing you from attending?
3. You talk about the negative opinions of others about undocumented immigration. How do you feel about those negative opinions? Does it impact your behavior in any way?

Rose:

1. You mentioned that in the future you might tell your college friends about your status. Could you talk a little bit about what you feel would need to change in order for you to tell them?

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## **CURRICULUM VITAE**

Sydney C. Snyder graduated from Pacific Lutheran University (Tacoma, Washington) in 1995 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in English and Women's Studies. Since then she has spent her professional career teaching ESOL/EFL, both in the United States and internationally, and advocating in support of cultural and linguistic minorities. From 1995-97 she served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Guinea, West Africa. Following that, in 2000, she received her Master's in Teaching ESOL/EFL from the School for International Training in Brattleboro, Vermont. From 2000-2003 she served as an English Language Fellow at Gadjadara University in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. Since returning to the United States, she has taught high school to English language learners and English to adults in a family literacy program and worked as an educational consultant.