Dreamers: Stories of DACA Recipients in Higher Education During the 2018-2021 Political Climate

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DREAMERS: STORIES OF DACA RECIPIENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION DURING THE
2018-2021 POLITICAL CLIMATE

by

Alicia Billini

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Educational Leadership, Research, and Technology
Western Michigan University
December 2021

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Immigration has been a longstanding conversation, or debate, in American politics and society throughout history. Whether, or how much, to embrace immigrant populations into U.S. society has been a source of polarization over time, specifically as related to the handling or treatment of undocumented immigrants. A particularly acute dimension of this issue in the United States is the question of undocumented immigrants who were brought into this country as children illegally by their parents (Council on Foreign Relations, 2021). Efforts to address the needs of this unique population of immigrants have been caught between the historically and widely divergent values held across U.S. citizens, and (not surprisingly) within U.S. politics (Council on Foreign Relations, 2021; U.S. Citizen and Immigration Services, 2021).

This study examines the experience of five undocumented young adults coming of age and making their way in U.S. higher education at time of unique social and political turmoil, against the backdrop of the evolving attempts of U.S. legislators to define and design solutions for undocumented immigrants who have grown up in the U.S. The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore how DACA recipients in higher education make meaning of their experience and how this meaning motivates them to continue to pursue a degree during the current political climate when their fates in the U. S. has yet to be determined. The
implications that these findings have for higher education institutions seeking to support or
increase the access and success of DACA recipients are discussed in the final chapter.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to wholeheartedly thank my brother, Francisco X. Billini, you have always been there for me with unconditional love and support, keeping me grounded in my purpose, and to Dr. Nancy Mansberger, dissertation chair and confidante, you have always believed in me and helped me push through hard times with your friendship and kindness. You both have inspired me to be better and taught me lessons that will carry through with me.

I would also like to thank my parents, family, classmates, professors, co-workers, friends, my dissertation committee, and the participants of my study. Your support throughout my academic journey has made it possible for me to succeed.

To my participant’s, I am truly honored that you took interest in my study and trusted me with your story, my dissertation is dedicated to you all and fellow DACA recipients.

“The beautiful thing about learning is nobody can take it away from you” - B.B. King

Alicia Billini
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Immigration has been a longstanding conversation, or debate, in American politics and society throughout history. Whether, or how much, to embrace immigrant populations into U.S. society has been a source of polarization over time, specifically as related to the handling or treatment of undocumented immigrants. A particularly acute dimension of this issue in the United States is the question of undocumented immigrants who were brought into this country as children illegally by their parents (Council on Foreign Relations, 2021). Efforts to address the needs of this unique population of immigrants have been caught between the historically and widely divergent values held across U.S. citizens, and (not surprisingly) within U.S. politics (Council on Foreign Relations, 2021; U.S. Citizen and Immigration Services, 2021). This study examines the experience of five undocumented young adults coming of age and making their way in U.S. higher education at time of unique social and political turmoil, against the backdrop of the evolving attempts of U.S. legislators to define and design solutions for undocumented immigrants who have grown up in the U.S.

Current Background

Passel (2006) estimated that approximately 65,000 undocumented immigrants graduate from high school each year. As a response to this growing population of undocumented immigrants growing up in the U.S. and attending American schools President Obama, in 2011, proposed the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act of 2011 or DREAM Act of 2011. This act was designed to provide a path to citizenship for immigrants brought to the country illegally as children (Robertson, 2018). The Act would authorize
the Secretary of Homeland Security (DHS) to cancel the removal of, and adjust to the status of an alien lawfully admitted for permanent residence on a conditional basis, an alien who: (1) entered the United States on or before his or her 15th birthday and has been present in the United States for five years preceding this Act’s enactment; (2) is a person of good moral character; (3) is not inadmissible under specific grounds of the Immigration and Nationality Act; (4) has not participated in the persecution of any person on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion; (5) has not been convicted of certain offenses under federal or state law; (6) has been admitted to an institution of higher education (IHE) in the United States or has earned a high school diploma or general education certificate in the United States; and (7) was age 35 or younger on the date of this Act’s enactment. (DREAM Act of 2011, 2011-2012)

However, the U.S. congress failed to pass the legislation (Robertson, 2018). Instead, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) instituted the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), an executive order signed by President Obama, on June 15, 2012, in order to defer deportation proceedings for two years to qualified individuals who were brought to the United States illegally when they were children (Robertson, 2018).

The DACA agreement was intended to be a temporary compromise to the DREAM ACT until Congress could determine a permanent solution for undocumented immigrants. Originally DACA was designed to provide deferred action on deportation for two years, subject to renewal, for undocumented minors who entered the country before their 15th birthday. However, DACA has opened the door for more than merely “deferring action on deportation for childhood arrivals”. Recipients are able to apply for a Social Security card, allowing them to lawfully work
in the US and obtain a driver’s license (United States Department of Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2018). In the larger sense, DACA status enables recipients to engage lawfully in society, improving the quality of life for many recipients by allowing them, for example, to lawfully work and attend higher education institutions without paying out-of-state tuition, (Warman Hirschfield, 2018).

There is a misconception that DACA is only for undocumented Hispanic immigrants. Although Hispanics do make up the largest DACA population, this Act is intended to cover any undocumented immigrant from any foreign country who meet the application requirements. Of the approximately 800,000 DACA recipients (Lopez and Krostad, 2017), most were born in Mexico or Central or South America (648,430 or 94%). Another 18,940 (3%) were born in Asia, followed by the Caribbean (8,350), Europe (5,190) and Africa (4,240). Some of the requirements to be granted DACA status include being under 31 as of June 14, 2012 and not having been convicted of certain offenses under federal or state law (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2018). (See Appendix C for the full list of requirements.)

The relative security enjoyed by recipients of DACA status changed on September 5, 2017, when President Trump signed an Executive Order halting acceptance of applications for DACA status (Robertson, 2018). At that time, President Trump gave Congress a six-month window between signing the Executive Order ending DACA and it taking effect on March 5, 2018 to come to consensus on a permanent solution on how to proceed with undocumented immigrants (Edelman, 2017) but this timeline was not met. In June 2020, the Supreme Court ordered the reinstatement of the DACA program, stating the Trump administration unlawfully ended the program. In addition, the Supreme Court also ordered the Trump administration to reinstate the program as it was before it was rescinded. In July 2020, the Trump administration
refused to reinstate the program, going against the Supreme Court’s order, even though applications had been submitted and processing fees had been paid for by undocumented immigrants applying for DACA to the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). Following this action, DHS issued a memo on July 28, 2020 stating that it would not process any applications and would return paid processing fees to applicants. DHS also made some drastic changes to the DACA visa; one of the major changes is the duration of the visa from a two-year renewal to one-year length of time of deferred deportation (Alvarez and Sands, 2020; United States Department of Homeland Security, 2020).

During the Trump administration, many states were against the Executive Order to end DACA, particularly in California (with the largest DACA population), New York and District of Columbia where there were other large populations of DACA recipients (Mathema, 2018; Governing, 2019). Before the Supreme Court ordered the Trump administration to reinstate the DACA program, the state courts in the three states previously mentioned, were able to slow down DACA’s unraveling by allowing recipients to apply for two-year renewals of their DACA visas at that time. As a result of these three U.S. district courts’ orders to continue DACA visa renewals, recipients were able to continue to lawfully engage in society, in the hope that Congress would have enough time during the renewals to come to a permanent solution for the DACA program and its recipients.

In November 2020, President Trump, Republican, lost the presidential elections to President Biden, Democrat. By December 7, 2020, a new order by the U.S. District Court directing the Department of Homeland Security to act in compliance to the November 14, 2020 order came into effect, reinstating the DACA program as it was before President Trump halted the program in 2017. At the time of writing this, DACA applications are now being accepted,
except in the state of Texas, and deferred action from deportation has reverted to two-years. (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2021).

Both DACA recipients as well as any other undocumented immigrants who are qualified to receive DACA are commonly referred to as DREAMers (in reference to the DREAM Act). For the purposes of this research, I will only be using the term DACA recipient to identify the participants in this study, all of whom were registered under the Act to reduce confusion. Although DACA recipients are still able to lawfully engage in society at the current time, they continue to have no pathway to residency or citizenship and therefore are still considered to be undocumented by United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) (Adams & Boyne, 2015).

As part of his campaign, President Biden is committed to immigration reform, undoing many of President Trump’s immigration policies. President Biden has a vision to rebuild and expand legal immigration (Shear & Kanno-Youngs, 2021). In response to President Biden’s immigration initiative, in March 2021, the House passed the American Dream and Promise Act of 2021, which if passed by the Senate, would provide DACA recipients a pathway to citizenship (Foran, 2021). At the time of writing this, the Senate has yet to make a motion regarding this bill (American Dream and Promise Act, 2021).

Problem Statement

Researchable Problem

On March 5, 2018, the U. S. stopped accepting applications for DACA visas (Lind, 2018). On June 18, 2020, the Supreme Court ordered Trump’s administration to reinstate the DACA program and begin accepting new applications. The Trump administration refused to reinstate the DACA program and on July 28, 2020 the United States Department of Homeland
Security issued a memo stating that they would not process new first time DACA applications. The memo also included a major change in the duration of the DACA visa; from two-year renewals to one-year renewals (Alvarez, 2020; Alvarez and Sands, 2020; Informed Immigrant, 2020; United States Department of Homeland Security, 2020). Though in March 2021 the American Dream and Promise Act of 2021 was passed by the House, no action has been taken by the Senate at the time of writing.

In summary, Congress has the power to finalize a decision for the DACA program and its recipients yet has taken no action for nor against this unique program and its recipients. Currently, DACA recipients are neither illegal or legal and must live with the uncertainty of what their futures hold, not knowing if they will stay in the United States or be deported to their country of birth. Despite all this, many DACA recipients continue to strive to work and pursue an advanced education. The purpose of this study is to explore how DACA recipients understand and make sense of their lived experiences as students enrolled in higher education during the current political climate. Thereby, understanding these experiences will help higher education officials better infer how they may support and provide services to this unique population of undocumented immigrants with legal presence in the U.S.

**Review of Related Studies**

Suárez-Orozco, et al.’s (2015) study focused on student and campus level assets and challenges within the context of ambiguous national and state-level policies about undocumented undergraduates and how these students are overlooked, underserved, and underrepresented on college campus. Participants of their study were undocumented which included DACA recipients. Findings of Suárez-Orozco et al.’s (2015) study indicate that campuses attended by participants are “undocufriendly” (campuses do not understand the needs of undocumented
students therefore there is a lack of knowledge to assist this unique group of students). The participants in the study suggested that the first step for higher education institutions is to understand them as the unique group they are and to learn about who they are and how they believe institutions can help them. For example, Suárez-Orozco, et al.’s (2015) study recommended that higher education institutions ought to learn about specific state-laws pertaining to this unique population to better understand the legal rights (parameters and limitations of the DACA program) to better assist DACA recipients. Moreover, faculty and staff need to become more aware of this population, be informed, and receive training on how to best assist these students across a broad range of services (for ex., student services, student organizations, immigration support services) offered by higher education institutions to help them better succeed (Suárez-Orozco et al.’s, 2015).

Some researchers describe DACA students as being socially oppressed. Cadenas et al.,’s (2018) study addressed how DACA students experience social oppression through their individual and/or collective activism and advocacy, and how collective activism is related to their persistence to graduate. Findings of this study indicate that Hispanic DACA students face more discrimination than U.S. Hispanic citizens due to their immigration status yet often persist in higher numbers to graduation despite negative psychological experiences they encounter (Cadenas et al., 2018).

Another set of studies touch on how undocumented students in higher education demonstrate resiliency in the face of the ambiguous policies and social oppression. Gámez, Lopez, & Overton’s (2017) study touched on how undocumented students’ entry into postsecondary education has not been inclusive due to disparity of state laws across the country. Legal barriers in some states bar admission of undocumented students to colleges and
universities, whereas other states do permit undocumented students to attend but classify them as international students or out-of-state residents and are then charged higher tuition rates making it harder to attend. However, “undocumented students suggest factors such as mentors, individual resiliency, and the ganas (will/determination) to succeed affect students’ navigation strategies in higher education” (Gámez et al., 2017, p. 144). Perez, Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado, and Cortes (2009) examined academic resilience of undocumented immigrant Latino students. Their findings indicated that undocumented students were academically successful despite specific risk factors (e.g., elevated feelings of societal rejection, low parental education, and high employment hours during school). In this study, undocumented students who have high levels of personal and environmental protective factors (e.g., supportive parents, friends, and participation in school activities) reported higher levels of academic success than students with similar risk factors and lower levels of personal and environmental resources (Gámez et al., 2017; Perez et al., 2009)

**Deficiency Statement**

There are many studies that reflect on DACA recipients, their stories of how they immigrated to the United States, their experiences in higher education as DACA recipients and the impact they have in the work force. When the DACA program came to a halt on March 5, 2018, there were barely any studies that examined how the experience and motivation of DACA recipients to succeed in higher education was impacted by the dramatic political changes that occurred under the Trump administration (Andrade, 2019). Upon assuming office in 2020, President Biden has initiated many acts to support legal immigration, including the reinstatement of the DACA program, as well as initiation of the American Dream and Promise Act of 2021, which would provide a pathway to citizenship for DACA recipients. However, Congress has yet to approve this latest legislation. Though little is known about DACA recipients’ experience
during the Trump administration, even less information is available now that President Biden is in office. At the current time, DACA recipients are neither legal nor illegal, thrusting them into a legal limbo of uncertainty and a limited legal status, nor do they know what the future holds for them in U.S. It is important to investigate how the college-going experience of this unique group has been impacted by the current political uncertainty and what factors motivate them to continue to pursue a degree in higher education. Using a phenomenological lens in this study, I will explore, from their perspectives, the challenges they have faced and the reasons why they are pursing higher education despite the legal turmoil surrounding their present status and future prospects.

**Significance**

The findings of this study will be important to higher education institutions, government leaders and policy makers who want to understand who DACA recipients are and how they view their position in American society, specifically how their experiences as students in higher education appear to be affected by current political climate in their everyday lives. Understanding these experiences will help higher education officials better infer how they may support and provide services to this unique population of undocumented immigrants with legal presence in the U.S. (Lee, 2021). Bonilla-Santiago (2017) state that DREAMers see themselves as Americans, they contribute to U.S. society, they go to school, work, pay taxes, pay social security, and shop in stores, which in return enhances the U.S. economy. It is important to understand how DACA recipients who are students in higher education institutions are impacted by a political climate that refuses to legally recognize them as the law-abiding citizens in American society that they believe they are.
Suárez-Orozco et al., (2015) identified that many undocumented students in higher education are often overlooked, underserved, and underrepresented on college campuses in their study. Finally, the findings of this study will also be especially important to those educators and educational administrators who want to learn about DACA in order to better assist recipients and create an inclusive campus environment that is supportive for the educational needs of this unique group of students.

**Purpose Statement and Research Questions**

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore how DACA recipients in higher education make meaning of their experience and how this meaning motivates them to continue to pursue a degree during the current political climate when their fates in the U. S. has yet to be determined. For the purpose of this study, DACA recipients will be defined as students, in an undergraduate or graduate program in a mid-west university who currently hold DACA status in the United States. Please note that due to the current political climate of the DACA program it does not matter to me, for the purpose of my study, if the participant’s visa is current or not as long as they have been accepted to the DACA program and are currently enrolled in a higher education institution.

**Research Questions**

1. Why are DACA recipients motivated to pursue a degree in higher education when their future in the U.S. is uncertain?
2. What challenges have they faced in higher education unique to their status?
3. What factors have supported them in their quest to continue in higher education?
The purpose of this study is to understand how DACA recipients in higher education make sense of their experience in order to identify what motivates DACA recipients to pursue a degree in higher education during the current political climate. This phenomenological study will be guided by the theoretical framework of hermeneutics. Hermeneutics is an interpretive, existential, branch of phenomenology that uses individuals’ reflection when interpreting data to achieve meaningful understanding of a phenomenon (Merriam et al., 2016; Patton, 2015). It solely focuses on verbal language/context for interpretation. This approach provides a theoretical framework of interpretation grounded on original intent through language context. Using hermeneutics theoretical approach, I will be able to make meaning of the individual’s stories through their voice to interpret the phenomenon in question. Hermeneutics will also help in removing myself from the research and focusing on the participants stories through their own voice and not mine.

Chapter I Summary

The purpose of this study is to gain understanding as to why DACA recipients are motivated to pursue a degree in higher education when their future in the U.S. is unclear during the current political climate. This first chapter consists of the introduction of the topic, the problem statement, that entails the researchable problem, review of related studies, deficiency statement, and the significance, followed by the purpose statement and research questions, finishing with the methodology and theoretical framework to use. The second chapter reviews the current events on DACA and relevant literature pertaining to the DACA program and its recipients in higher education institutions. The third chapter explains the methodology I use, the recruitment process of my participants, the various sources of data to gather and the use of first
and second cycle coding to analyze the data. The fourth chapter depicts the emergent themes of the study. The fifth and final chapter is a discussion on the findings and my study.
CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

Background on the History of Immigration in the United States

The history of the United States originated with the first settlement of English immigrants in 1607 in Virginia. Then in 1620 a group of approximately 100 English immigrants landed in Plymouth, Massachusetts; this group of settlers are known as the Pilgrims. The Pilgrims were a group of lower-class British citizens, who left their homeland to be free to practice their religion and to be free from violence and economic oppression. Later on, the United States immigration influx would exponentially grow by different groups of Europeans looking for the same freedoms as the Pilgrims. Many Europeans arrived as slaves (indentured servants) upon their own will as a means to leave their homeland or forced into servitude by upper class Europeans. During this migration period upper class Europeans also imported enslaved Africans (Stockman, 2019).

First Wave of Immigrants

In 1815, after the war of 1812 between the United States and Britain, there was a large wave of immigrants from Northern and Western Europe. Most of these immigrants came from Ireland, fleeing both famine and religious prosecution for being Catholic. After the Irish came the Germans; seeking farmlands to work and settle in the late nineteenth century (roughly between 1881-1890). These two waves of both Irish and German immigrants precipitated the formation of the country’s first anti-immigration political party, the Know-Nothing Party (Stockman, 2019). The Know-Nothing Party, later known as the American Party, came together to harass and spread false information about this new wave of immigrants, especially the Irish. They were opposed to the new influx of immigrants because they were from different countries than the
settlers, practiced a different religion and were seen as competition for work. As a result of these differences the Know-Nothing Party, and followers, made the lives of immigrants difficult through acts of hostility, harassment, and the spread of false news/information about them (Stockman, 2019).

During the 1850’s there was a considerable influx of Chinese immigrants in the United States who were escaping economic disaster in their country of origin. With this new wave of immigrants new Anti-Immigration Acts were established by the U.S. federal government. For example, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 barred the borders to Chinese immigrants, being the first Act in U.S. history to deny a specific ethnic group from entering the country. The Chinese mostly worked industrial jobs and were perceived negatively by other U.S. citizens for taking jobs away from White workers as they accepted lower wages (Stockman, 2019, Pew Research Center Hispanic Trends, 2015).

**Second Wave of Immigrants**

During the 1880-1929 American industrialization and urbanization period, there was a massive wave of immigrants from Southern, Eastern and Central Europe (over 20 million people migrated) seeking work opportunities and a better quality of life in America. This wave of immigrants also included the Jews who were escaping religious prosecution in Europe. In response to this new wave of immigrants entering the country, additional immigration Acts were established by the Federal government as a means to limit and control new entries. For example, the Immigration Act of 1891 excluded new immigrants who were considered of poor moral character from entering the U.S., such as polygamists, criminals, and those in poor health. This Act also established the first Federal Office of Immigration whose goal was to place immigration inspectors at the main ports of entry as a means to control who could and could not enter based
on the new and current immigration laws. Another example of the restriction of immigration was the Immigration Act of 1917, which required all potential immigrants who wished to enter the country to be literate in English. As a result of this Act immigration from Asian countries nearly stopped (Stockman, 2019).

The Immigration Act of 1924 established the first quota system in the country: only a certain number of people could enter the country on a yearly basis and then only from Europe. Favoritism was given to immigrants from Western Europe via limiting quotas for immigrants from Southern, Central and Eastern Europe. As immigrants before them, they left their country of origin to have better economic opportunities in an attempt to improve their quality of life. This Act specifically excluded immigrants from Asian countries, with the exception of the Philippines which was an American colony at the time. This new limitation on the number of immigrants permitted to enter the country resulted in the country’s first wave of undocumented immigrants; crossing either through the Mexican or Canadian borders in order to avoid immigration inspectors at the ports. The majority of the undocumented immigrants at this time were from China and other Asian countries that were either banned from previously entering and/or could not meet the literacy requirements of the Immigration Act of 1917 (Stockman, 2019).

Between the 1940’s and the 1950’s there was a relative increase in immigration from the Middle East and Eastern Europe. In 1948, the first refugee and resettlement law was passed to accommodate the rush of Europeans entering the country after World War II. In 1952, the McCarran-Walter Act ended the ban of Asian immigrants entering the country, causing a new influx of immigrants, though with an allotted and limited number of visas. During the 1950’s Cold War with Russia, the U.S. admitted Hungarian refugees for the first time in the country.
The U.S. also opened its door to Cuban children refugees as part of its anti-Communism program (Operation Peter Pan) in light of Fidel Castro’s rise in Cuba (Stockman, 2019).

Rise of Modern Immigration Patterns

The quota system ended in 1965 under the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA), and a new system was set in place: the seven-category preference system allowing for reunification (reuniting families) and skilled immigrants to enter the country. Later on, family reunification would greatly influence U.S. immigration patterns. A major result of the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) of 1965 was a decrease in European immigrants and an increase in Asian and Hispanic immigrants because the U.S. stopped giving preference to European immigration. Since the 1970’s until now most immigrants have arrived from Latin American and Asia (Radford, 2019).

In 1986, President Ronald Reagan granted amnesty to over 3 million undocumented immigrants, mostly from Latin America, in the U.S. via the Immigration Reform and Control Act. This Act represents the only time in modern American history where an exception to immigration laws was set in motion to address the legality of undocumented immigrants in the U.S. by granting them American citizenship (Stockman, 2019).

Research indicates that Hispanics have immigrated to America mainly for economic purposes (55%), family (24%), education (9%) and escaping persecution/conflict (5%). On the other hand, Asians have immigrated for family reasons (31%), education (28%), economic purposes (21%) and escaping persecution/conflict (9%). Furthermore, findings indicate that 49% of white Americans have a higher regard for Asian and European immigrants than they do for Hispanics, stating their impact on American society has been more positive than that of Hispanics (Pew Research Center Hispanic Trends, 2015a).
As we have shown earlier, before 1965, the majority of immigrants who settled in America were of European heritage, either escaping religious prosecution, famine, poor living conditions including violence, discrimination and lack of work opportunities. Based on this historical evidence, it is reasonable to conclude that European immigrants left their home countries in search of the freedom to live a better quality of life. Another observation of the historical record is that each wave of new European immigrants to America faced discrimination for being different than the original British settlers (Stockman, 2019). The U.S. has long been considered the land of opportunities and recent migratory patterns confirm that. Similarly to the immigrants who originally settled in America, current immigrants are arriving for the many of the same reasons: they want a better quality of life. Historically, “a better quality of life” meant freedom of religion and work, but now it means economic opportunity, reunification with family and improved access to education.

**Current Immigrant Patterns in the U.S.**

Radford (2019) states that the U.S. has both the most varied population of immigrants as well as the largest number of immigrants in the world. Recent immigration patterns, roughly, the past ten years, in the U.S. are as follows: 27% from South and East Asia, mainly from India and China, 25% from Mexico, 13% from Europe/Canada, 10% from the Caribbean (mostly from Cuba), 8% from Central America, 7% from South America, 4% from the Middle East and 4% from sub-Saharan Africa. Both Radford (2019) and the Pew Research Center (2015) confirm that most of these new immigrants arrived either as refugees or looking for a better quality of life, often settling in major industrialized/urbanized cities to have more work opportunities. Radford (2019) states that about 45% of immigrants live in these major cities: California (24%), Texas (11%), and New York (10%). The rest of the population is scattered across the country in cities
such as Boston, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., Detroit, Chicago, Seattle, Atlanta, Miami, Phoenix, and Las Vegas.

As mentioned above, Americans have a higher regard for European and Asian immigrants than they do for Hispanics. Currently, Americans view immigrants from Latin America and the Middle East as negative in regard to their perceived impacts on the economy and crime, while feeling more neutral regarding immigrants from Africa. A related study published by the Pew Research Center (2006) states that Americans believe that immigrants are taking jobs and housing away from them and causing issues to the health care system. The negative perceptions of non-Caucasian immigrants by some Americans was not helped by President Trump’s anti-immigrant political statements that have encouraged many Americans to openly express their dislike toward immigrants, especially those of color (Ishiwata & Muñoz, 2018).

To summarize, before 1965, each new wave of immigrants left their homeland seeking a better quality of life, whether it be to practice their religion freely and/or work. Moreover, each new wave of immigrants was met with discrimination and violence for being different than those before them. In modern times not much has changed in the reasons for which people immigrate nor subsequently how they are viewed and treated in the United States. It can seem as if American citizens forget their own history regarding the reasons their forebears migrated, and how and why this country was founded. Although DACA recipients were born in foreign countries, the vast majority of them, have grown up in the U.S., having immigrated as babies, toddlers and young children. Yet, because the majority of DACA recipients are minorities, they have been met with discrimination and social marginalization due to their ethnic background in addition to discrimination and marginalization for being undocumented.
In the following section, I discuss what has been found regarding how undocumented immigrants navigated higher education institutions before DACA.

**Undocumented Immigrants’ Access to Higher Education Before DACA**

Education for undocumented immigrants has been a hot topic of debate in the U.S. for many years. In 1982, in Plyler v. Doe, the Supreme Court ruled that all undocumented children have a right to a K-12 public school education. However, access to higher education was not addressed, leaving those wanting to further their studies unsure how to navigate state and federal laws in addition to university/college policies (Contreras, 2009). Before DACA, the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility (IIRIRA) Act of 1996, prohibited states from granting in-state tuition to undocumented immigrants unless the same rates were offered to citizens and out-of-state legal applicants (Biswas, 2005; Johnson and Janosik, 2008). The IIRIRA was designed to align with a clause in the Higher Education Act of 1965 which excluded undocumented immigrants from benefiting from federal financial aid (Biswas, 2005).

As a solution to the growing number of undocumented immigrant children graduating from high school in the early 2000’s seven states changed their policy on tuition by granting undocumented students in-state tuition. According to Johnson and Janosik (2008) the seven states were Texas, California, Utah, New York, Washington, Oklahoma, and Illinois. The authors reported that, as no federal funding was available to undocumented students at that time, granting in-state tuition allowed higher education to be more attainable in these seven states. The debate to offer in-state tuition to undocumented immigrants expanded to other states. By 2008 Virginia was debating on how to proceed on granting undocumented students in-state tuition along with Connecticut, New Jersey, and Missouri. However, Georgia, Nevada, Minnesota and Arizona had decided not to grant undocumented students in-state tuition rates. During the same
period Texas, Oklahoma and New Mexico passed legislation in 2001 that allowed undocumented students to be eligible for financial aid (Russell, 2007). In order for students to apply for financial aid in these states they first had to:

- Be state resident and attend school for at least two years
- Be a high school graduate or have a GED from the state in which they were applying to
- Fill out and sign an affidavit confirming intent of becoming a legal resident.

However, many undocumented students in these three states were not aware of these laws at the time. For example, by 2007, Russell (2007) noted that only one percent of undocumented immigrants benefited from any aid in the state of Oklahoma.

As a result of the continuation of unauthorized immigration in the U.S., the demand for unauthorized immigrant children to attend college grew. However, state and federal laws were not aligned to work with this non-traditional group of students. A disarray of laws and regulations across the country left many undocumented immigrants unsure on how to continue their studies or how to address the financial barriers, of being unable to afford to pay non-resident rates/out-of-state tuition (Macías, 2018). In 2012, as a response to the growing number of unauthorized immigrants and rising deportation rates in the U.S., President Obama signed the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). This Act prioritized non-threatening, unauthorized immigrants who were brought to the U.S. as minors by their parents by granting them legal presence in the country. At least one researcher contends that one of the main purposes of DACA was to qualify unauthorized immigrant students to receive federal financial aid and attend higher education institutions (Macías, 2018).

**Impact of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA)**

DACA was established in response to the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act which failed to pass in 2001. It was designed by President Obama as a
temporary solution for the issues faced by undocumented youth, giving Congress time to decide on how to proceed with its recipients. The DREAM Act, similar to DACA, was aimed at unauthorized immigrant students who met specific requirements, such as arriving in the country before the age of 16, residing in the U.S. for at least 5 years, being of good moral character, and passing a criminal background check. Unlike DACA, the DREAM Act would have given qualifying individuals temporary residency for 6 years during which determined individuals could have either served in a military branch for at least two years or met the minimal requirement of a two-year associate degree. If individuals met the requirements within the six-year window, they would be granted permanent residency making the DREAM Act a viable pathway to citizenship (Bjorklund, 2018).

DACA only provides its recipients with a work authorization social security number (which excludes them from receiving any social benefit, or welfare/unemployment assistance, in most states). DACA recipients are able to obtain a driver’s license and lawful employment, in-state tuition rates (in most states) and deferred deportation for two years. In 2020, DHS decreased the duration of deferred deportation to one year, with the option to renew their visa under the Trump administration with was reverted to two years in 2021 under the Biden administration. Because DACA is an executive order originally signed by President Obama, it can be rescinded or maintained in place by any following president. Congress is the only branch in the U.S. government that has to the power to decide the permanent fate of DACA recipients. Since DACA’s inception in 2012 they have yet to make a final decision. When President Trump ended the DACA program in 2017 he gave Congress six months to make a final decision. In June 2020 the Supreme Court ordered the Trump administration to reinstate the DACA program which they have refused to obey. Congress still has yet to come to any conclusions or solutions
for either the DACA program or its recipients (Bjorklund, 2018; Capps et al., 2017; Macías, 2018; United States Department of Homeland Security, 2020).

Background on DACA

As mentioned above, though President Obama proposed the DREAM Act as a pathway to citizenship for qualifying unauthorized immigrants, it failed to be passed by Congress in 2011. In 2012, DACA came into place as a temporary solution to help buffer unauthorized immigrants that were brought to the United States as minors from deportation while Congress came up with a permanent solution for its recipients (Graauw and Gleeson, 2016; Ingold, 2012).

During Obama’s presidency, the administration mainly focused on deporting convicted criminals and new arrived unauthorized immigrants. Undocumented immigrants having resided in the U.S. for a substantial period of time without having a negative impact on society, especially undocumented youth brought to the U.S. as children were not specifically targeted, as they were considered low-priority risks (Wong et al., 2013). Both Dinan (2012) and Ingold (2012) agree that, even though President Obama focused on deportation of a specific group of undocumented immigrants deemed to be high-risk/high threat to state and national security, in 2012 he set a record high rate of deportations. Approximately 409,849 undocumented immigrants (which also included an unknown number of low risk/low threat undocumented immigrants) were deported by President Obama in 2012.

Ingold (2012) posits that in response to President Obama’s deportation rate of 2012 and the failure of Congress to pass the DREAM Act, many undocumented youths felt it was time to come out of the shadows to protest for their rights. Ingold (2012) described how immigration activists protested outside an Obama campaign office in Denver, Colorado. Most of the activists were undocumented immigrants yet protested despite the possibility of deportation. Their goal
was to apply public pressure on President Obama to implement an alternative to the failed DREAM Act and to stop deportations of undocumented youth. The protesters chose the specific campaign office of Denver, Colorado as it had a significant Latino population. They also knew they would get both attention and needed support from the Obama administration and the media.

Malik (2015) published a report for The Center for American Progress stating that the Obama’s administration moved forward with DACA as an executive order in response to President Obama’s momentous 2012 re-election campaign and pressure from Republican’s release of their version of the Dream Act in addition to other immigration issues. DACA’s main purpose is and has always been to buffer its applicants from deportation, not to grant rights nor immigration status. Many DACA recipients consider themselves “legally illegal” as they only have legal presence and not legal status due to the aforementioned and the fact that they do not have any certainty of their future in this country (Benuto et al., 2018; Wong et al., 2013).

**DACA’s Impact on the Education of Undocumented Students**

In 2014, it was reported that approximately a third of DACA recipients were either enrolled in college or had been (Capps et al., 2017). In November 2017, The Migration Policy Institute (MPI) reported that out of the 690,000 DACA recipients only 18% were currently enrolled in higher education (Capps et al., 2017). The American Council on Education (2020) reported that out of the approximate 800,000 DACA recipients 45% are either in high school or college but does not specify the year in which the data was collected. Actual statistics on DACA recipients in higher education are a bit unclear and hard to find as they are still considered undocumented immigrants and are usually quantified in that category. To add to this, the number of active registered DACA recipients has varied since its initiation in 2012.
In January 2018, Congressman Steve King, representative of the 4th District of Iowa, wrote a letter to the United States Department of Homeland Security (DHS) requesting information on DACA recipients. The questions ranged from population demographics to level of education of active DACA recipients. DHS complied a report using data collected between August 15, 2012 and May 2, 2018. In 2018, there were 817,798 DACA recipients, out of which 33,769 had some college credit (less than a year), 620 had one or more years of college but no degree, 235 had an Associate’s degree, 246 had a Bachelor’s degree, 14 had Master’s degree, and one had a Doctorate degree (King, 2018).

DACA has facilitated access to higher education for its recipients by allowing them to qualify for in-state tuition. Since DACA is an administrative directive, granting lawful presence and not lawful status in the country, it does not guarantee recipients the ability to apply for federally funded financial aid or grants (Adams & Boyne, 2015; Macías, 2018). Not being able to apply for financial aid or most scholarships caused many DACA recipients to work either part-time or full-time, have financial help from their family and some receive funding through private scholarships which are extremely competitive to obtain (Benuto et al., 2018). Some may even be lucky enough to live in a state that allows for federal/state financial aid.

When it comes to funding attendance in higher education the national picture is very complicated for DACA recipients. Under the DACA executive order, states do not need to provide financial aid, but states do have the legislative power to amend/repeal laws to allow DACA recipients to receive such funding if they chose. For example, the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) confirmed that there are seven states that now offer state financial aid to DACA recipients: California, Colorado, Minnesota, New Mexico, Oregon, Texas and Washington (2019). Unfortunately, politically conservative states such as Arizona, Georgia and
Indiana do not allow in-state tuition for undocumented students. Georgia and Alabama go even further as to not allow undocumented students to enroll in higher education institutions. In 2008, as a response to the disparity across states granting enrollment or not to undocumented students, The U.S. Department of Homeland Security, The U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) issued a letter which indicated that states have the power to decide whether or not to allow undocumented students access to higher education institutions (Russell, 2011; The National Conference of State Legislatures, 2019).

**Other Benefits of DACA**

Apart from being deferred from deportation and receiving in-state tuition in some state’s recipients are able to obtain a Social Security number, which means that they are able to get a valid state ID or a valid Driver’s License. With the Social Security number comes work authorization, allowing that recipients to obtain lawful employment and accompanying benefits, such as medical insurance, and the chance of having a better quality of life through a higher income (Benuto et al., 2018). They are also able to open up bank accounts and apply for credit cards to establish credit with their Social Security number and valid I.D. card. Recipients are also able to improve their mobility trajectories and social integration, with a valid I.D. card and a social security number to obtain lawful employment, especially the younger population of DACA (Gonzales et al., 2014).

Gonzales et al., (2014) also agrees with Benuto et al., (2018) that DACA not only improves its recipient’s economic situation but goes beyond to express the importance of DACA’s benefits to this population to allow them to engage in the American society outside their communities. Gonzales et al. and Lee et al., emphasize that the recipients that benefit the most from DACA are those with higher levels of education, community engagement and
resources. Gonzales et al., (2014) also states that DACA recipients with “college-educated and higher income parents are likely to possess the networks to improve their employment options…and other types of access as well” (p. 1857).

**Limitations of DACA**

DACA does have its limitations. As stated earlier, it is an executive order that only recognizes lawful presence. In other words DACA recipients are still undocumented with no path to legal status, neither residency nor citizenship (Adams & Boyne, 2015), which is why recipients are not able to apply for Federal Pell grants nor receive any federal medical or social benefits such as unemployment or collect welfare (Schmid, 2013). Benuto et al. (2018) argues that because DACA recipients came forward and confirmed their unlawful presence in the U.S., and exposed their family in the application process, many feel terrified. The uncertainty of their current status and the uncertainty of what Congress will decide for them has many recipients feeling frightened, suffering from low self-esteem, depression, and feeling marginalized. Suárez-Orozco et al., (2015) adds to Benuto et al.’s (2018) argument by stating that the uncertainty of their status leaves DACA recipients vulnerable; not only taking a toll on their overall mental health but also limiting their engagement in society and ability to enjoy the benefits of DACA.

Taken together, Suárez-Orozco et al., (2015), Benuto et al. (2018) and Gonzales et al., (2014) state that while DACA has improved the quality of life of many undocumented youths many feel a sense of not belonging and being limited to what they can do due to the unclear future of DACA for all recipients. Though they may qualify for in-state tuition in many states, being disqualified for financial aid and/or scholarships in many states makes it difficult to overcome their financial constraints to attend higher education.
Apart from not receiving funding for higher education purposes DACA recipients are also excluded from receiving any form of state or local public benefits. Such benefits would include grants, profession/commercial licenses issued by a state/local government, unemployment benefits, retirement, welfare, or assisted living. In short, DACA recipients do not benefit from the many types of United States government assistance available to legal residents and citizens (Adams & Boyne, 2015).

Like many undocumented youths residing in the U.S., many DACA recipients do not become aware of their illegal status until it is either time to get a driver’s license or plan for college. In Benuto et al.’s (2018) study, she found that DACA participants who arrived in this country as young as seven months old described growing up feeling American, as this is the only country they know. When they became aware of their undocumented status and all the stereotypes attached to it, participants started feeling the repercussions of their status and how it limits them. DACA recipients are still met with many societal limitations due to their ambiguous status. Higher education institutions need to learn about state and federal laws regarding DACA as well as the benefits and limitations of the program to better assist this unique population of undocumented students. Especially when it comes to finances regarding tuition, as DACA recipients are limited to receiving private funding for their studies which is extremely competitive as is.

**DACA’s Liminal Legality Status**

As previously mentioned, DACA recipients have legal presence and not legal status in the country and are still considered undocumented. The term “legally-illegal” was coined to express the unique characteristics of DACA recipients in a society where they are allowed to be
present but have no pathway to citizenship or residency (Sahay et al., 2016). To further explain this quasi-legal status many authors describe it as liminal legality.

Menjivar (2006) describes liminal legality as the condition of ambiguity where one is neither legal nor illegal and yet fall under attributes of both. In her study, which occurred before DACA was passed, she described how undocumented youth felt to be undocumented and its effects for them. For example, being unable to get a driver’s license when their peers were getting theirs or being unable to participate in the college/university application process (including application for financial aid); brought new realization that they were limited in what they could do. In other words, they simply were not able to participate in life’s rites of passage as were their citizen/resident peers (Menjivar, 2006).

To add to Menjivar’s (2006) argument of what liminal legality means to DACA recipients, Suarez-Orozco et al., (2015) describes the state of being liminal in regard to belonging. Many DACA recipients, including undocumented youths, arrived in the U.S. at a very young age and feel that they neither belong in the country they were born in nor in the country they reside due to their liminal status in the U.S. Many undocumented youths arrived so young that they do not know their homeland and due to their status cannot fully engage in American society, affecting their sense of belonging. The study also describes how undocumented youths’ mental health is negatively affected by the challenges they face in society due to their liminal status such as not being able to fully engage in society (Suarez-Orozco et al., 2015).

Roth (2018) argues that DACA’s liminal legality status is a form of violence to its recipients as they can engage in society but at the same time have limited access to society benefits and services. He further argues that due to their ambiguous status many DACA recipients live in fear of being deported and are often excluded, especially by those that do not
understand what their status means. DACA recipients are in a state of limbo where they are neither legal, denied the same right as citizens/residents, nor illegal, having lawful presence and are deferral from deportation. The ambiguity of their status leaves them vulnerable to uncertainty about their futures, as they are still a relatively new and unique group among undocumented immigrants.

Due to the liminal legality of DACA recipients many higher educational institutions cannot offer them the right resources, including proper financial attributions to special support department, proper resources and financial awards for tuition. As you may recall from earlier, only seven states offer undocumented/DACA recipients financial aid (California, Colorado, Minnesota, New Mexico, Oregon, Texas, and Washington) (Lee, 2021; National Conference of State Legislatures, 2021). There are some universities across the country that offer scholarships, which vary state to state on legislature, to DACA recipients, one must ask where the money comes from, does it come from the institution itself or through private donations. Either way funding is limited, especially now with COVID-19. Other questions may rise such as how and if those programs are marketed to the DACA population, which can also vary on the state legislature. One is left to deduce that in order to protect the DACA student body, higher education institution’s do not really advertise special programs, especially financial awards to DACA recipients, as to safeguard their anonymity. Leaving many DACA recipients searching endlessly for information online to properly allocate resources for their studies.

**Current DACA Population**

In 2017, Lopez and Krosgtad reported that nearly 800,000 undocumented immigrants have been approved DACA status-visa since it began, yet only 690,000 were currently enrolled in the program. Around 70,000 did not renew or were rejected [please recall that in 2017
Trump’s administration ended DACA] and 40,000 had obtained a green card, either by marrying a lawful permanent resident or American citizen, or even receiving asylum (Lopez and Krosugtad, 2017). In 2017, Capps et al., wrote an article for The Migration Policy Institute, stating that by March 27, 2017 a total of 887,000 undocumented immigrants applied for DACA, 788,000 were approved and 799,000 renewed their DACA visas successfully (Capps et al., 2017). Krogstad and Gonzales-Barrera (2019) report that by September 5, 2017 there were approximately 700,000 DACA recipients. Unfortunately, due to how the U.S. Citizen and Immigration Services (USCIS) reports its data, it is difficult to identify current DACA holders hence the discrepancy between authors describing the total DACA population, yet one can still get a rough estimate of the DACA population.

In 2017, most DACA recipients were from: Mexico (548,000), El Salvador (25,900), Guatemala (17,700), Honduras (16,100), Peru (7,420), South Korea (7,310), Brazil (5,780), Ecuador (5,460), Colombia (5,020), Argentina (3,970), the Philippines (3,880), India (2,640), Jamaica (2,640), Venezuela (2,480) and the Dominican Republic (2,430). DACA is for any undocumented immigrant from any foreign country yet the majority of its recipients are from Latin America (648,430). Therefore, to report the rest of the population it is best to do so by region: 18,940 from Asia, 8,350 from the Caribbean, 5,190 from Europe and 4,240 from Africa (Lopez & Krogstad, 2017; U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2017). As of September 2019, both the Department of Homeland Security and The Migration Policy institute report that there are 652,880 active DACA recipients (United States Citizen and Immigration Services, 2017; The Migration Policy Institute, 2020).

In 2017, the mean age of a DACA recipient was 24. In 2012, when DACA began, one of the requirements was for applicants to have entered the country before their 16th birthday and be
As of 2017, no DACA recipient was over the age of 36, while 37% of the DACA recipients were between the age of 21-25, 29% were between 16-20, 24% were between 26-30, and those between 31-36 made up 11% of the DACA population. In regard to sex, women make up 53% of DACA recipients, males 47% (Lopez & Krogstad, 2017; U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2017).

Lopez & Krogstad (2017) reported that California (29%) and Texas (16%) are the two top states where DACA recipients reside. The rest of the population reside in metropolitan cities in Illinois, New York, Texas and Florida, following similar trends as undocumented, unauthorized, immigrants.

**Current Events on DACA**

DACA is an administrative directive, signed by President Obama, not a congressional law, as previously mentioned. It only had the power to grant lawful presence to its recipients. Adams and Boyne (2015) explain that because DACA was a presidential initiative that must be kept alive by succeeding Presidents. As referred to previously, the Trump administration rescinded DACA via a memorandum issued by the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) on September 5, 2017. Since February 14, 2018, federal courts, while not being able to re-activate the DACA program, were able to process visa renewals for current DACA recipients so they would not lose their benefits (DACA visas are only valid for two years) (Benuto et al., 2018). In 2021, under newly elected President Biden, the program was reinstated as it was before the Trump administration had halted it (United States Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2021).

After the DACA program ended in 2017, lawsuits were filed against Trump’s administration for “terminating DACA unlawfully”. On June 28, 2019, the United States
Supreme Court committed to review the legality of the termination of DACA agreed to hear arguments on November 12, 2019 and finalize a decision by June 2020 (Immigrants Rising, 2019; National Immigration Law Center, 2019). They found that DACA was illegally terminated and ordered the Trump administration along with DHS to reinstate the program which they stalled until President Biden won the November 2020 elections (Gonzales & Brant, 2019; United States Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2021).

In June 2020, the Supreme Court ruled that the Trump administration unlawfully rescinded the DACA program and ordered the Trump administration to reinstate it as it was before it was rescinded in 2017. However, the Trump administration had stalled the Supreme Court’s ruling and refused to comply. The Trump administration along with DHS stated that changes needed to be made to DACA before reinstating the DACA program. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security announced that they would not accept new DACA applications and reduced the deferred deportation period from two-years to one-year (Alvarez, 2020). In an article by Alvarez and Sands (2020), the authors concluded that the administration was stalling the Supreme Court’s decision as a means to buy time to (a) downgrade the benefits of DACA and (b) have time to collect evidence to appeal the Supreme Court’s ruling. President Trump, who was infamously known for being against DACA through his anti-immigration campaign, was running for reelection in 2020. He made his best efforts to discourage immigration to the U.S. as well as deporting as many undocumented immigrants to appeal to his followers and gain more support from those who agree with his anti-immigration policies. In November, 2020 President Biden won the presidential elections and by the start of 2021 the DACA program had been reinstated as it was originally written by President Obama (United States Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2021).
Most Republicans have been against DACA from the start as they believe it rewards undocumented immigrants with lawful presence therefore incentivizing more undocumented immigrants to arrive to the U.S. (Schmid, 2013). The Trump administration’s main stance on ending DACA is that it was unconstitutional to begin with and an abuse of power by President Obama. In the beginning of President Trump’s service, he expressed a positive opinion toward DACA recipients but later on referred to them as “tough, hardened criminals” (Barnes, 2020). One can counter this argument with the facts that the list of requirements (see Appendix C) clearly states that in order to obtain and maintain DACA undocumented immigrants have to be able to prove good moral character and have no criminal record. Therefore, Trump’s argument that DACA recipients are “tough, hardened criminals’ was seen by many to be invalid. In order to receive/renew DACA recipients must meet an education requirement, have no criminal record nor jeopardize public safety nor national security (Barnes, 2020; United States Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2018).

In summary, receiving DACA status has been a life changing event to its recipients, giving them an opportunity to come out of the shadows to lawfully work and study. Although it is challenging for many to continuously live in a liminal state, not knowing what their future entails, recipients continue to work hard to achieve their dreams. One can infer from the literature that many DACA recipients dream of attending a higher education institution and with DACA that dream can come true for them. DACA has provided a lot of benefits to its recipients yet due to its liminal status recipients are still met with limitations. Since DACA is an executive order and not a federal law, states have the power to appeal it and set their own rules. There are those DACA recipients who are lucky enough to reside in a state that allows for both in-state tuition and financial aid, are able to receive private scholarships/grants, or can get help from their
families or communities. Unfortunately, some DACA recipients may live in a conservative state that limits access to in-state tuition for DACA recipients and/or may have no support at all. Some recipients may engage in higher education institutions and feel included whereas others may feel excluded.

**How DACA Recipients Navigate Higher Education in Current Literature**

Most undocumented youth are the first-generation college students and have little support charting college/university territory (applications, funding and/or how to connect with staff/faculty). Some live in a mixed-status household, for example, as when younger siblings may have been born in the U.S. or they may be the sole family member with DACA. In either case the status of other family members might impose a heavy burden on them. For example, DACA provides work authorization, so in some cases a recipient might have to work to cover their tuition and, in some cases, also help their family financially. Due to the distress of living undocumented, many DACA recipients report complications with their mental health such as depression and anxiety (Muñoz et al., 2018; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015).

In Suárez-Orozco et al.,’s (2015) study, the authors identified how discrimination, due to national policy and society’s perception of undocumented youth, and funding are challenges for this unique group of students in higher educational institutions. The combination of these two challenges guided the authors’ study on how undocumented youth navigate their experience in higher education institutions. The findings of their study indicate that DACA recipients show resiliency as they overcome financial and social barriers to achieve their dreams. Those who are the most successful and most involved have support from their families and communities that enable them to continuously thrive. Similarly, Muñoz et al. (2018) also confirms Suárez-Orozco et al.,’s (2015) findings on how DACA/undocumented students are challenged with the financial
burden to cover tuition. This study also found that due to the lack of resources and the resultant stress they experience many participants felt out of place attending a higher education institution and did not engage on campus. Another challenge is that the majority of DACA/undocumented students are Hispanic and are considered people of color by many native-born citizens; this and their ambiguous status leaves this population of students vulnerable and sensitive to microaggressions.

Studies by Bjorklund (2018) and Suárez-Orozco et al.,’s (2015) find that DACA recipients report having high levels of anxiety due to constant worrying about their financial situation and the constant fear of getting deported, having a family member deported/detained or worrying about a deported and/or detained family member. Suárez-Orozco et al.,’s (2015) reported that 76% of their participants worried about getting deported and 85% worried about a family member getting deported. Most DACA students reported that having to both work and study, including the constant commute back and forth to campus, added factors of anxiety for them.

As mentioned above, being able to fund their higher education is, for the majority of this population, a constant worry. The participants in Suárez-Orozco et al.,’s (2015) study attended either a community college, or a private or public four year institutions. Students who attended four year institutions were less worried about covering their tuition as most received scholarships and/or grants. Students who attended community college were the most worried about paying tuition as 54% pay at least half of their tuition out of pocket. 67% of total participants reported being discriminated against due to their status by their peer students or faculty and staff (specifically mentioned was financial aid staff).
Suárez-Orozco et al.,’s (2015) study also emphasized that campus culture is very important factor supporting the ability of DACA/undocumented students to engage and succeed on campus, by having the resources in place to cater to undocumented students’ unique needs, such as “safe spaces” found in centers and student organizations. While the authors did not define what they meant by safe spaces, centers, and student organizations, one can deduce that those services/programs ought be designed to provide DACA/undocumented students support and resources needed for them to thrive in higher education. This includes support from peers, faculty and staff. For example, in the authors study, DACA students in private higher education institutions reported the highest level of peer support in the classroom and on campus and the lowest level of support when it came to their immigration status as many employees are not familiar with DACA.

Macías’ (2018) study focused around a group of DACA recipients’ strategies to maneuver a system that does not cater to their needs. Whether it be to overcome racism and/or cover their tuition, many DACA recipients reported their need to “grind and hustle” to overcome the challenges they faced in regard to their unique status. Macías (2018) describes grinding as a “high-stakes balancing act between work, school, and personal health that participants engage in as a result of their disqualification from federal subsides” (p. 617). Participants in this study used the term “grind” to relate the amount of hours they had to work to cover their tuition and the things they had to give up to do so. In the case of one participant who worked nights and weekends, if they had a test on a Monday they would need to study on Sunday before heading into work. Another participant reported having her scholarship to attend a university revoked (DACA recipients are not privy to public scholarships in her state) due to her DACA status. At the time the study took place, she was working to pay for community college
while saving money to later finish her degree at a university. As students are excluded from federal funding, in most states, grinding is not a choice but a necessary means to achieve their dreams of completing higher education (Lee, 2021; Macías, 2018).

The term “hustlin’” in this study is used to express the financial gains via unorthodox methods and not in the criminal sense of the term. Apart from grinding, many DACA recipients report they have to hustle as well for income. In Macías (2018) study, participants reported hustling in their community and with family members, and extended family. Two participants reported doing translations for members of their community at lower prices and with better quality than formal institutions as a means to attract customers since they worked off word-of-mouth referrals. Another example of how students hustle is of one participant who reported reselling football tickets acquired at student prices at the day of a game for greater profit. This form of informal work aided all of Macías (2018) participants to earn an informal source of income.

In response to DACA’s lack of federal funding for higher education, many recipients wanting to obtain a degree need to get creative, and in some cases to take advantage of opportunities. At times, some DACA recipients also have to “scheme.” Macías (2018) describes “scheme” as “the series of calculated approaches participants take to capitalize on misunderstandings or their last-resort attempts to side-step policies that hinder their educational pursuits” (p. 620). One of his participants, Sofia, reported on benefiting from not being a stereotype associated with DACA/undocumented students; no accent, no unique ethnic traits or Latino name. While completing her college application form, the DACA visa/status was not an option, so she checked off resident. Though Sofia’s state does not provide FAFSA to DACA recipients, the college’s financial aid office reached out to her to explain the importance of
providing them with her FAFSA paperwork. When Sofia said she did not qualify due to her DACA status, the financial aid employee stated they did not know what that was and that she should complete the application quickly to receive financial aid. Due to the employees lack of knowledge on DACA and Sofia not meeting the stereotypes associated with DACA/undocumented immigrants, she was encouraged to complete the FAFSA application and ended up “scheming” the system to her benefit. Because DACA provided a valid Social Security Number and because Sofia is described as having “White-passing characteristics” (p. 620) she was overlooked by the system.

Scholarships to fund higher education are hard to obtain for American students and even harder for undocumented/DACA recipients as they are more rare and, therefore, more competitive. This unique group of students struggle with overcoming the financial challenges of covering their tuition, living with anxiety about getting deported and/or family member(s) getting deported and being discriminated against due to their status, and in many cases, discriminated against for being a person of color. Due to the psychological and social limitations of the labels that come with being undocumented in society and on campus, many undocumented students (including DACA recipients) limit disclosing their status due to the fear of being stigmatized by a stereotype of which they feel ashamed.

In spite of these overwhelming challenges undocumented/DACA recipients continue to work hard to overcome financial, mental and social obstacles to achieve their dream of completing higher education. Both Bjorklund (2018) and Suárez-Orozco et al.,’s (2015) state that undocumented/DACA students are resilient and high performing students. This unique group of students not only bring diversity to campus but also talents that are added assets to their higher education institution (Bjorklund, 2018, Lee, 2021).
Resiliency

In an article by Hurtes and Allen (2001), the authors seek to define resiliency as one’s ability to have insight (understanding who they are and their environment including the characters within), independence (also associated with optimism and ability of negotiating to overcome challenges), creativity (ability to make decisions), initiative (determination to overcome challenges and flexibility), relationships (receiving and giving support), and values (associated with morals). These characteristics are key when demonstrating resiliency to successfully overcome challenges in a positive manner under stressful circumstances. In discussing the demonstration of resiliency by DACA recipients, Katsiaficas et al. (2016) defines resiliency among DACA recipients as a collective contribution where DACA recipients are both involved in their communities (civic engagement) and modeling social responsibility to not only be true to who they are but also inspire other undocumented youth. Gámez et al., (2019) defines resiliency among the DACA participants in his study as having the “personal strength, bravery, courage or perseverance” to pursue a degree in higher education. The author continues by stating how these characteristics are seen when DACA recipients overcome social and legal barriers, working harder than most of their peers, to graduate in higher education.

DACA recipients are faced with many challenges to obtaining a higher education degree, such as legal instability due to their liminal status, limited finances, mental health, stereotypes, discrimination, microaggressions, marginalization, and oppression, to name a few. And yet DACA recipients demonstrated a huge of amount of resiliency when they stepped out of the shadows to apply for DACA, outing themselves and their family members with the hopes for a better future through better access to higher education and lawful work with no guarantees. This unique group has overcome many legal and social barriers to live in a society that hasn’t fully
embraced them as individuals and thrive (Casas et al., 2019; Gámez et al., 2017; Muñoz et al., 2018).

**Chapter II Summary**

Chapter two covers a varied range of literature on undocumented immigrants and what DACA means to the recipient population. I decided to start off with a brief recap of U.S. immigration history to get an overall understanding of why Europeans made the choice to leave their homes and settle in a new land. From this piece, it is understood that this country was founded on the beliefs of having the freedom of religion, escape violence and prosecution, and improve ones’ economic status to obtain a better quality of life. This is why the United States is known as the land of opportunity and one of the main reasons behind modern day immigration, particularly by Hispanics and Asians. It is unfortunate that due to the evolution and restrictions of U.S. immigration laws, modern day individuals and families wanting to migrate to the U.S. have had to resort to unlawful immigration. Many undocumented immigrants entered the country with children who have been growing up in American schools and have been influenced by American culture and way of life. Before DACA came into effect, many undocumented minors did not have much accessibility to higher education institutions due to the financial and legal limitations of being undocumented. Upon receiving DACA many recipients could lawfully engage in American society through attaining this legal presence. Many recipients chose to make their dreams of obtaining a college/university degree a reality. Although their paths are challenging in a society where many stigmatize them for being an undocumented immigrant, and their future in the country is unclear, DACA recipients continue to work hard and strive to achieve their dreams. Finally, the literature gives us an understanding of the demographic characteristics of this population, how their experience may vary based on the type of college (community college to public and private institutions), and whether or not an institution has the resources to accommodate this unique group of non-traditional and/or unconventional students who are the first in their class to be a DACA recipient.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative phenomenological study aimed to explore how DACA recipients in higher education make meaning of their experience and how this meaning motivates them to continue to pursue a degree during the current political climate in the U.S. As of yet they do not know when Congress will finalize a resolution to their status nor the future of the DACA program. In addition to their ambiguous status DACA recipients do not know if they will be deported or granted a pathway to citizenship by Congress. It is also unclear for how long they will be able to renew their DACA visas. This unique group of undocumented students have legal presence and not legal status yet continue working toward their degree in higher education. The findings of this study will be especially important to educators and educational administrators who want to learn about DACA recipients and what challenges they face to better assist them in their journey through higher education. In order to help me understand how DACA recipients make meaning of their experience and how it motivates them to persist in their journey of higher education I chose a qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological approach as my research method.

This chapter explains my research design and rational for choosing a qualitative hermeneutic phenomenology approach. I included a reflection on my identity where I set aside my biases as the researcher by discussing my background and liminal connection to participants. I go on by discussing my population, sample, site, recruitment, the data collection procedures, instrumentation, interview protocol, data analysis, trustworthiness, and the limitations and delimitations of my study.
Research Design and Rational

The purpose of this study is to understand how DACA recipients in higher education make meaning of their experience in order to identify what motivates DACA recipients to pursue and persist a degree in higher education during the current political climate. Understanding these experiences may provide important information for policy makers and higher education institutions to better address the unique challenges faced by their students who are DACA recipients. Therefore, I used a qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological approach to study this modern-day phenomenon.

According to Patton (2015), qualitative studies examine participants' experience to understand their perspectives and perceptions. A qualitative approach helped me understand what my participants experience means to them in order to interpret what their actions mean to them through their stories. Such analysis also indicated if there are any commonalities and/or differences among participants. “When researchers conduct qualitative research, they are embracing the idea of multiple realities” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 20).

Historically, phenomenology has deep roots in the social sciences, specifically in philosophy and psychology. Phenomenology is centered around observing individuals from an empirical stance as it centers on how individuals process their own, and unique, lived experiences. It seeks to understand peoples’ realities; how they experience it and what the experience means to them; which is how I organized my study and research questions. The realities of participants are considered the phenomenon to uncover; phenomenology seeks to understand the “why” of a phenomenon, the lived experience, and to interpret its meaning (Groenewald, 2004; Patton, 2015). Phenomenological research seeks to understand how participants make meaning of their experience (the phenomenon of the study). Creswell et al.,
(2018) maintains that phenomenology is a study that describes the meaning of a lived experience known as a phenomenon of several individuals. Patton (2015) adds to the definition of phenomenology by stating that it is a retrospective reflection; researchers seek to make meaning of a lived experience, “the essence of human experience” through retrospective reflection of participants stories (p. 116). Merriam et al., (2016) adds to the meaning of phenomenology by stating that it is the study of individuals conscious lived experiences in accordance with their own personal environments which Patton (2015) describes as the essence of a lived experience.

Hermeneutics is an interpretive, existential, branch of phenomenology that uses reflection, whether it is from studying other peoples’ perspectives or from a specific standpoint, when interpreting data to achieve meaningful understanding of a phenomenon (Merriam et al., 2016; Patton, 2015). It solely focuses on verbal language/context for interpretation. This approach to qualitative analysis provides a theoretical framework of interpretation grounded on original intent of participants through language context. Being mindful of the purpose of my research will keep me focused when analyzing transcripts for interpretation of findings (Patton et al.,). I will be able to make meaning of the individual’s stories to identify and interpret the phenomenon in question putting aside my biases and focusing on the participant’s voice.

The purpose of my research seeks to understand why DACA recipients are pursing higher education during the current political climate in which their fate in the U.S. is unclear. My research questions are:

1. Why are DACA recipients motivated to pursue a degree in higher education when their future in the U.S. is uncertain?
2. What challenges have they faced in higher education unique to their status?
3. What factors have supported them in their quest to continue in higher education?
Reflection On My Identity

As previously mentioned, my research uses a phenomenological methodology. Phenomenology, in essence, attempts to interpret the meaning of a lived experience by an individual. However, when analyzing the data, the researcher must separate themselves, and their lived experiences, in order to properly analyze and interpret the lived experiences of participants in their study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This is known as bracketing, or epoche. In this section, I will state my biases to separate myself from my participant’s stories in order to solely focus on their lived experiences.

I am a first-generation Hispanic female student who has completed graduate school at a predominantly white institution (PWI). I completed my undergraduate program in the Dominican Republic. I completed elementary, middle school and high school in the United States (in Queens, New York). My current legal status in the United States is that of an international student with a J-1 visa. This type of visa gives me legal authorization by the United States government to study here along with work authorization upon the approval of the United States Department of Homeland Security for an allotted period of time.

I was born in the Dominican Republic and at the age of five I entered the U.S. with a tourist visa and overstayed as an undocumented immigrant until the age of 19 and four months. For about 14 years I lived as an undocumented immigrant in Queens, New York. Statistically speaking, due to my travel history in the U.S and being a minority female, I should not be in the U.S. working toward a Ph.D. Many would argue that due to my previous undocumented status I should not have been allowed back in the country and some would further argue that because I am a Hispanic female, a Ph.D. is not fitting for people like me.
Growing up undocumented I never really understood what that meant till my last two years of high school. I did not live with any of the stereotypical hardships commonly associated with being undocumented such as being uneducated or living in poverty. The only exception was not having my parents around because they were working all the time. Other than that, we lived in a safe neighborhood, I went to school, and lived in a nice and comfortable home. I had everything I needed from school supplies to clothes to food to toys. In that aspect I fit in with fellow peers and American-born cousins. Since my parents were barely home, they were extremely overprotective and sheltered me due to our unauthorized status. I was not allowed to participate in after-school activities, attend summer camp or engage in the community we used to live in. My parents raised me to not talk about our status due to fear of deportation and discrimination. Even to this day it is hard for me to be open about my previous undocumented status because of all the associated labels I risk being identified with that I do not feel pertain to me.

New York is one of the largest metropolitan cities in the world; it has a large number of immigrants, living in various ethnic neighborhoods across the state. With so many different ethnic groups living in one state, and before such concepts as cultural appropriation and inclusion were part of society’s conversations, I both experienced and observed a lot of discrimination, stereotyping and labeling. With that said, growing up, I never felt I fit in with the stereotypes associated with a Dominican living in New York, nonetheless an undocumented one. I am not sure if it was because I was so sheltered from engaging in the Hispanic neighborhood I lived in or because I grew up in America immersed in American society and pop culture; watching TGIF sitcoms on ABC, listening to the Back Street Boys, or enjoying my Eggo waffles before heading off to the school in the morning, but at that time in my life I felt American.
I attended middle school in a Hispanic neighborhood and was constantly bullied by my peers for being different from them. It also did not help that I was shy and kept mostly to myself. Classmates used to call me a “fake” Dominican because I did not speak enough Spanish to hold a conversation with them, had little knowledge of Hispanic/Dominican culture except for food, have light skin and an Italian last name. It was hard growing up, being bullied for not fitting into society’s designations of what and how I should look like and behave based on my race and undocumented status, and at the same time not actually belonging to the only country I knew (at that time in my life). It really tampered with my sense of belonging as I was not Dominican “enough” to fit in with my Hispanic peers nor American “enough” to lawfully engage in society.

In my junior and senior year of high school I finally understood what it meant to be undocumented. My parents would not let me get a job or teach me how to drive because I could not get a driver’s license nor a state I.D.; although there were ways around the system, they did not want me to expose myself. I could not apply to the colleges and universities I wanted to attend since I was not eligible for financial aid nor could cover the expenses. I did not have the support or the means of getting support to apply for private funding since I was raised to keep my status a secret. At that time of my life I was simply afraid of being open about my status to seek help and felt hopeless about being able to move on with my life the way I wanted. That was especially disappointing for me since I had the desire to continue my studies, I had the grades to get into a good college or university and met the requirements for financial aid and other public state assistance awarded to minorities with a good grade point average.

I remember feeling extremely marginalized by a system I had felt part of because, at the time, it was all I knew. I did not know or remember my country of birth, and I barely understood or spoke Spanish. All I knew was that I wanted to continue my studies and had to look into other
alternatives different from my peers. Therefore, I started out small at Borough of Manhattan Community College, for which I paid out of pocket at an international student rate in 2001. After the tragedy of 9/11 in New York, life got much harder, work was scarcer and inflation went up, especially impacting tuition for international students, making it harder for me to cover my tuition and books. At that time, I had been consulting with an immigration lawyer who gave me no hope of obtaining any form of legal status after 9/11 any time soon. After a year of community college, I decided I could not continue living undocumented in the states if I wanted to pursue my dreams of higher education and to have a sense of belonging and the right to live freely and openly in a society.

In August 2002, at 19 years old I arrived in a country I had no prior recollection of, a new culture and a new language. I spoke and understood a little Spanish yet not enough to express myself or understand idioms and cultural slang used by my peers. I recall it took me about six months to understand the culture of the language and give or take nine months to be able to express myself. I learned how to read and write Spanish in my first semester of college which I found difficult. Until this day my writing in Spanish is not the best. Looking back, returning back to the Dominican Republic was one of the hardest decisions I have had to make in my life. But I now know that if I had not returned to the Dominican Republic when I did, I would not be where I am today, working toward my Ph.D. Getting my bachelors and master’s degree was always something I wanted; never did I ever dream I would be working on completing my doctoral studies.

DACA began in 2012, by which time I had my bachelor’s degree and excellent employment in the field of education in the Dominican Republic. I had worked for a bilingual school that was both American and Canadian accredited. After years of working in education I
knew I wanted to continue my studies with a master’s degree. At the time I was eligible to apply for a scholarship to study abroad due to my grades and work experience. It took me a couple of years to apply for a scholarship to study abroad because I was afraid of getting denied the visa to enter the U.S., due to having lived undocumented. In 2009, I went through the application process for the scholarship with the Dominican government, the University application and the visa application with the American embassy. While having been accepted to the university and approved for the scholarship I was denied the visa and informed that, due to my overstaying my visa when I was a child, I was banned from entering the U.S. for ten years. Needless to say, it was devastating for me. I had entered the U.S. as a minor but because I left at age 19 and four months, I was considered an adult that had overstayed on my own accord. If I had returned to the Dominican Republic before age 18 and six months, I would not have been charged as an adult.

In 2013, after completing my ten-year “sentence”, I decided to go through the process again to do my master’s abroad, applying to the university abroad, applying for the scholarship with my government and applying for the student visa with the American Embassy in the Dominican Republic. I recalled how difficult it was the first time around, but I was determined to give myself the opportunity of knowing if I could get my visa approved to study abroad or not. Years later here I am, a former undocumented, ex-New Yorker, first generation Hispanic female from the Dominican Republic currently working toward her Ph.D. going against the odds and most stereotypes. I hope that by coming out with my story I inspire others to pursue their goals and dreams.

**Population, Sample, and Site**

In social science research, population refers to a well-defined collection of individuals or objects known to have similar characteristics. Undocumented students in higher education was
the population I targeted for this study. A sample is a subset of a population (Creswell et al., 2018). My sample needed to meet two criteria from the DACA population. First, they must be a DACA recipient, due to the current political climate it does not matter if their DACA visa is active or expired. Second, they must have been actively enrolled in either an undergraduate or graduate program in higher education or graduated from a higher education institution. This study was participant focused on DACA recipients in higher education and not site based.

**Recruitment of Participants**

For this phenomenological study, I was able to recruit 5 participants and although a small number of participants still met saturation. Please note that recruitment was done during COVID-19 social distancing protocols and I was never able to meet neither in person with gatekeepers nor participants. I used two sampling strategies to approach my target subset population. First, I used purposeful sampling, which was targeting pre-selected participants that meet the requirements of my research question (Creswell et al., 2018). Creswell et al.’s (2018) describes purposeful sampling as being intentional. By purposefully targeting the gatekeeper in charge of DACA recipients at a higher educational institution I was able to connect and recruit a DACA recipient. Through this initial contact with my first recruit, I snowballed them and obtained three participants. My fifth and final participant was obtained via one of my committee members, Dr. Candy McCorkle, purposefully targeting her contact list by sharing my recruitment flyer.

I used the strategy known as gatekeeping to identify my participants for my study. Creswell et al.’s (2018) describes a gatekeeper as a person who has insider status with a cultural group, who is the initial contact person for the researcher. To recruit participants, I contacted gatekeepers and known associates who work directly with DACA recipients at a Midwestern university and employees from a Midwestern college. Only one gatekeeper, from a midwestern
university, responded to my email, after my dissertation chair, Dr. Mansberger, intervened and contacted them directly. After her communication, the gatekeeper connected us with a recently graduated DACA recipient. The goal was to build rapport with them, to recruit them for my study and to connect with other DACA students in higher education through them. With this new contact I proceeded with snowballing. Snowball sampling is when participants help the researcher recruit more participants by word of mouth (Creswell et al., 2018). Through them I was able to recruit three participants. Dr. Candy McCorkle, one of my committee members, shared my recruitment flyer with her contacts and I was able to recruit my fifth and final participant from another midwestern university.

Due to the delicate nature of DACA recipients, they are very well protected and guarded from being identified as such especially having their stories exposed, any willingness to share information is mostly considered through word-of-mouth references. I was very fortunate to have built rapport with my first participant, as I snowballed them, and through their goodwill and references was able to recruit three more participants. My fifth and final participant was recommended to partake in my study from their counselor. After contacting me and getting more information on the purpose of my study and who I am, they agreed to participate.

For this study, due to the social distancing restrictions of COVID-19, recruiting took longer than expected and relied heavily on building rapport and personal recommendations. I shared the purpose of my study, what it would contribute to the higher education community, what participants would expect from me and the interview process (Informed Consent Form) and my personal story of having grown up undocumented in New York. By sharing that I was formerly undocumented, I believe, ultimately won them over as I was not viewed as an outsider
within their social constructs of community but as a welcomed member as I could relate to their lived experiences.

I followed up with all recruited participants via email to set a date and time for the interview. I attached a copy of the informed consent form (see Appendix B) and asked them to read it and then sign it, I reminded them that it states their rights as a participant and it guarantees their privacy by me, the researcher. The Human Subject Institution Review Board (HSIRB) Informed Consent Form included the following as suggested by Creswell et al.’s (2018):

- The right of participants to voluntarily withdraw from the study at any time
- The central purpose of the study and the procedures to be used in data collection
- The protection of the confidentially of the respondents
- The known risks associated with the participation in the study
- The signature of the participant as well as the researcher.

At that moment, potential identifiable risks that might have been an issue for the participant was being identified as a DACA recipient which is also indicative to the potential undocumented status of family members, for example, their parents. Another might have been from a psychological lens, assessing how touching on memories of emotional times could have caused some emotional distress to the participant. The cost of participation was free, although all participants were gifted with a $20 visa e-card gift as a thank you for their time. Participants did not necessarily benefit from this study, but a few expressed how reflecting on my interview questions made them look differently on their journey and felt proud of what they have accomplished as a DACA recipient in higher education.
Data Collection Procedures

Before collecting data, I received the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) approval from Western Michigan University. I contacted the Office of Research and Innovation at Western Michigan University, to initiate the process of obtaining HSIRB approval. Once I received my letter of approval, I commenced my study. I proceeded with contacting the gatekeepers for recruitment purposes, I shared my story and my study to recruit and start conducting interviews.

I designed my interview protocol to use as a guide during the interviews, (see Appendix F). My interview protocol is semi-structured with open-ended questions that I designed to align with my research questions. I also included follow up questions in case participants needed cues/probes to further elaborate on their story for thick descriptions. Merriam et al., describes thick descriptions as more detailed explanations, which also contribute to the validity of the data. Using a semi-structured open-ended interview protocol also allowed for flexibility in editing questions as needed during and/or after interviews. This allowed me to adapt to the interview and/or interviewee (Merriam et al.,). I left long spaces in-between questions to make such edits as needed. All interviews were audio recorded on my personal laptop and cell phone.

Due to the complexity of my recruitment, and not being site based, the method of conducting the interviews was based on the participants’ location and/or preference. Adding to the complexity is that the data collection was conducted during the international COVID-19 pandemic. Although I would have preferred conducting face-to-face interviews, these were not possible under the pandemic condition. All the interviews were over the phone. All interviews were audio recorded on my personal mobile using the iPhone Voice Memo App. As back up
interviews were also audio recorded on laptop using eXtra Voice Recorder Lite app. All my devices are password protected.

All interviews were transcribed using the Otter App. Then I proofread every transcript while listening to the interview audio to double check language. Making sure the Otter App transcribed what was said verbatim as at times if a participant, or myself, spoke too fast, or too slow the app would confuse the words/phrases. I paid for the student version of the Otter app and made minimal corrections to transcripts. I stored the data collected, the transcripts, on my password protected personal laptop to which only I have access to and my OneDrive account where I can easily access the data either through my phone or through my laptop for at least three years following HSIRB recommendations. I deleted all audio recordings from my personal devices after transcripts were finalized.

After receiving HSIRB approval, I initiated the recruitment process. I shared my background and the purpose of my research with gatekeepers and participants in the recruitment email (see Appendix D). The email included key information about the interview, for example, the estimated time of duration for the interview and that upon completion of the interview each participation would receive a thank you gift of a $20 visa e-gift card. I followed up with an email regarding the interview with the following key items (see Appendix G) with all recruited participants who met my criteria and agreed to being audio recorded:

- An Informed Consent Form, for them to understand their confidentiality and their rights, asked them to read it, sign it and return to me via email before the date of the interview.
• Inform them that I assigned them a pseudo name that I used to keep their personal information anonymous and refer to them in my study. (All of their transcripts were saved under their pseudo name.)

• Informed them the interview can last between 45-60 minutes but asked them to block out 90 minutes of their time for the interview.

• Asked for an interview date and time and preference of a video/phone call interview. In lieu of COVID-19 all interviews were over the phone. All participants received an email the day before the interview as a reminder with the date, time and medium (see Appendix G).

The day of the interview, I went over the consent form briefly with participants, reminded them of their rights and confidentiality, emphasizing that all shared information is anonymous. All Consent Forms were signed and returned to me before the day of the interview. I also informed them that they have the right to stop the interview at any time, that they can ask questions as needed, and I let them know that upon completing the interview they would receive a $20 visa e-gift card as a thank you. I asked them if they are ready to start, I informed them when I started audio recording the interview and began with reading the introduction of my interview protocol, which I designed, and continued from there.

During the interview I had blank paper available to me in case I wanted to make notes and it did not fit on my interview protocol print out. At the end of the interview, I informed them that I ended recording, thanked them for sharing their story with me. All participants completed the interview and all participants were gifted for their time with a $20 visa e-gift card. I asked each participant for the email address they wanted to receive their gift through, confirmed it, and proceeded to send it. All participants confirmed reception of gift. Finally, I asked them to be vigilant of their emails as I was going to be emailing them their pertaining transcript, asking
them for their feedback. Please note that this was part of my methods of trustworthiness, member checking.

All transcriptions were saved in a secure folder on my personal laptop to which only I have access to and on my OneDrive account. To better organize transcriptions, they were saved with line numbers and page numbers, double spaced. All transcriptions were saved under the participants’ pseudonym name. I also created a master list with participants’ pseudonym names logging interview date, time, location. On this list I also logged when and how they received their thank you gift. I created a participant demographic list with the following information: (Pseudonym) name, age, gender, race, major, minor and status (undergraduate or graduate). This list was derived from the transcript as the questions were embedded in the interview protocol.

**Instrumentation**

I, as the researcher, was the instrument. I conducted the interviews, took notes during the interviews as needed, used the Otter App to transcribe the interviews and personally proofread each interview. I personally coded and analyzed the transcriptions for interpretation. Creswell et al., (2018) defines interviews as ranging from one-on-one, in person interactions to group, web-based interactions. In this study, I conducted phone interviews. The type of data I collected were the participant’s personal stories in the form of transcripts about their higher education experience, including their reasons for pursing higher education. Interviews were designed to last between 45-60 minutes.

**Interview Protocol**

The interview protocol was my interview script. I designed it as such to align with my research questions. I laid out the title of my study, the research questions, the purpose of my study, and a short summary about the interview and the interview questions for the participant to
have in mind of what to expect. As for the interview questions, I made sure they aligned with both the purpose of my study and the research questions as well as writing follow up questions in case the participant needed to be cued/probed for thick descriptions. My interview protocol is semi-structured which allowed me to make edits as needed during and/or after the interview. I made sure to leave enough spaces along the protocol to make proper edits and notes. I had extra blank paper and two pens as back up.

**Data Analysis**

The verbatim transcripts from the interviews were the data I analyzed. Creswell et al., (2018) states that analyzing data involves organizing the data by conducting a preliminary read-through of the database. After creating the transcripts, I printed out two copies of each. One copy was for reading, I read each transcript up to four times, and making notes on the margins and highlighting key words and/or quotes I understood to be both repetitive and meaningful related to the research questions. This process also aided me in creating a list of potential codes before making my notes and before the actual coding process. I did the coding by hand ergo I used the second copy to cut out quotes pertaining to codes. The coding process was done by aggregating the codes from the transcripts into small categories of information, then reducing, condensing, those categories of codes into themes (Saldaña, 2016). First, I coded each transcript. Then, after I had coded all my transcripts, I then proceeded to reduce the data, by condensing the collective codes into categories. Lastly, I further reduced/condensed those categories, this last reduction/condensation produced the themes. Creswell et al., suggests having between 25-30 categories and reduce them down to five to six themes. Organizing the codes into themes, which are broad units of information that consist of several codes (categories) aggregated to form a
common idea, helped me to represent the data that will be in the form of a discussion in chapter four.

“All qualitative research is inductive and comparative” (Merriam et al., p. 236). I coded using the purpose of my study and my research questions as a guide to keep me focused on the experiences and the context of those experiences of my participants. As this is hermeneutical phenomenological study, this approach also kept me grounded on the focus of my study and maintain objectivity when interpreting. I needed to understand the parts (of the stories) in order to understand the whole (of the stories) and understand the whole in order to understand the parts (Patton et al.,). This was my first-time handling so much data therefore I used Saldaña’s (2016) first coding cycle and second coding cycle framework to better make sense of my data by breaking it down and putting it back to together; reducing and condensing.

First cycle coding is the initial coding of the data, I used in vivo coding and narrative coding, to code the individual transcripts. In vivo coding prioritizes the participant's voice. This coding method aided me in identifying the meaning of participants lived experiences. Narrative coding is interpretative and consists of storytelling. It is also helpful in interpreting participants sense of self which I believe was useful to seek how participants make meaning of their lived experience (Saldaña et al.,).

Second cycle coding is more complex due to all the data being manipulated to reduce. It involves “classifying, prioritizing, integrating, synthesizing, abstracting, conceptualizing and theory building” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 69). For this cycle I used pattern coding and axial coding to further reduce the codes from the first coding cycle into themes. Pattern coding is a method of coding that seeks and gathers similarities, they are explanatory to help identify themes. Axial coding is a complex form of coding used to identify the most important, pertinent, codes from
the data to reflect the purpose of the study (Saldaña et al.). Axial coding is also a great method to implement to reduce codes from first cycle coding and greatly aided me in reducing data.

**Trustworthiness**

In order for my research to be valid and reliable, and that it had been conducted in an ethical and integral manner, I needed to ensure trustworthiness of my results. I assessed the findings by establishing if there was a connection to the purpose of the research to ensure validity. The use of triangulation confirms internal validity and how credible my findings were. Triangulation compromises of comparing and cross-checking multiple methods, multiple sources of data, multiple investigators, or multiple theories to confirm emerging findings (Creswell et al.; Merriam et al.; Patton et al.). Furthermore, Merriam et al., states that internal validity deals with the question of how research findings match reality. It is hard to measure reality, but triangulation is the best-known strategy to shore up the internal validity of a study. It is hard to match reality but having consistent results through triangulation can establish internal validity.

Internal validity – the extent to which research findings are credible – is addressed by using triangulation, checking interpretations with individuals interviewed or observed, staying on site over a period of time, asking peers to comment emerging findings, and clarifying researcher biases and assumptions. Merriam et al., 2016, p. 265

I used three means of triangulation to validate my data to question if my findings match the reality of what the data shows through reflexivity, member checking and debriefing.

Reflexivity is the internal piece of the researcher where they state their biases and connection to the study. This part of validation is an internal reflection and is embedded throughout my study. It is also seen in my Reflection On My Identity section earlier in this chapter, also known as the epoche, or bracketing, where I reflected on my identity, stated my
biases and connection to my study. As a former undocumented student who navigated higher education back in the early 2000’s I do have a lot of biases on undocumented students’ rights to attaining a degree in higher education. I am fully aware that these biases were reflected in how I interpreted the findings based on my own past experiences. In order to acknowledge my own feelings and thoughts I kept a journal where I wrote entries post interviews (same day) where I reflected on the interview, included thoughts and feelings, similarities and contrasts between the participants experiences to my own. Reflexivity was also seen in the notes I took during interviews and my notes and comments on the preliminary readings of transcripts.

The second method of validation is member checking with participants to seek their feedback. This approach “involves taking data, analyses, interpretations, and conclusions back to the participants so that they can judge the accuracy and credibility of account” (Creswell et al., 2018, p. 261). This is a great way to establish trustworthiness as participants can confirm that the transcripts were true to the interview, the participant’s voice was captured so that their story is interpreted as they told it (Creswell et al.; Merriam et al.). After transcribing an interview, I emailed it to the participant and asked them for their feedback (see Appendix H) with an emphasis on accuracy of their voice. If I had not heard from them after a week, I followed up with another email giving them another week to get back to me with their feedback. I also stated that if I had not heard from them within the time frame given, I would use the transcript as is (see Appendix I). Apart from one participant, Taylor, all remaining four participants confirmed accuracy of transcript.

The third and final method of data validation I used is debriefing with a peer, also known as peer review among different qualitative writers. It is when a researcher shares their study with another researcher to discuss findings and interpretations (Merriam et al.). I debriefed my
findings and though process with my dissertation chair, Dr. Nancy Mansberger. Dr. Mansberger is familiar with my research, she was honest and asked me hard questions on how I came about my findings. The methods I used and how I came about the meanings I assigned to the coding process. Since I coded manually, I also shared with her the process in the form of pictures. I had color coordinated my codes, each participant was assigned a different color. Using my living room space, I laid out all the codes per participant, reflected, reflexivity, on what the codes were telling me, formed categories, kept looking for similarities and differences, rearranging codes, rearranging categories, then breaking down those categories, reducing, through various cycles of reflexivity and reduction I was able to form my themes. This debriefing process was also reflexive for me as the researcher, I was explaining my thought process on the why of how I came about my findings. After having discussed my thought process on the analysis of my themes I felt even more confident on their validity.

To summarize, I confirmed trustworthiness of my findings using triangulation via reflexivity, member checking and debriefing. The purpose of using triangulation was to confirm that I got the same results using different methods to ensure the validity of my findings. Not only did this ensure validity of my findings but also my credibility as a researcher. In the following section I discuss the limitations and delimitations of my study.

**Limitations and Delimitations**

Limitations of my study could be Congress finalizing a decision on DACA recipients to either deport them or give them citizenship. In either case, I would have to start a new research study by changing the purpose of my study and begin from zero. Another limitation could be participants not being truthful, fearing exposure, with their answers during the interview thereby making my findings unreliable. In contrast, to participants potentially not being truthful I may
inadvertently misrepresent their lived experiences. I was extremely reflexive throughout my coding process but as this was my first-time coding so much data there is potential for human error on my end. I did my best to interpret the data, continuously reflecting (reflexive) on what it was saying by putting my biases aside and just concentrating on the data before me.

Delimitations of my study could be conducting the study at the institution where I am enrolled as a student. Four out of the five DACA participants from my study attend the same higher education institution as I. While I did my best to follow my interview protocol, I did have to adapt it to each participant. Many times, through their story telling they either answered some of my questions from another section of my interview protocol or spoke about a lived experience related to my study that intrigued me to ask questions on that were not part of my interview protocol. Finally, other delimitations of my study could be the research questions, recruiting during COVID-19 social distancing protocols, quarantine, recruiting during COVID-19 was difficult and I was only able to obtain a sample size of five participants (although I did meet saturation), the use of Hermeneutics as the theoretical framework to interpret the data and not a traditional conceptual framework, the design of my study and analysis of the data.

Chapter III Summary

In this chapter I discussed my research design and my rational behind it. I followed with my Reflection On My Identity for readers to understand my connection to my study. I went on and explained my population, sample, and the fact that this study was not site based. I followed with how I recruited my participants. I explained in detail my data collection procedures, that I was the instrument and used an interview protocol, how I analyzed the data and established trustworthiness. I concluded with the limitations and delimitations of my study and chapter
summary. Throughout the different sections of this chapter I also included how COVID-19 social distancing protocols influenced the design of my study.
CHAPTER IV
RESULTS

This study focuses on capturing the experiences and motivation of five DACA recipients in higher education during the current political climate. At the time of writing my study, Congress has yet to finalize a decision on DACA recipients’ fates in the United States. President Obama initiated the program via executive memo in 2012 which was halted in 2017 by President Trump which was then reinstated by President Biden in 2021. In the past four years, the DACA program has undergone political scrutiny and structural changes yet its recipients still continue to push through legal and social dilemmas to strive for their dreams in higher education.

This is a qualitative study with a phenomenological design. The data used for this study was collected via in-depth phone interviews, ranging between 50-70 minutes long, with each participant. Each interview was transcribed and analyzed by me, the researcher. Data collection took place with participants from four-year predominantly White institution’s (PWI’s) in the Midwest. I wanted to capture the participants voice therefore I opted for the theoretical framework of Hermeneutics to aid me in interpreting the participants stories. Hermeneutics is an interpretive, existential, branch of phenomenology that uses individuals’ reflection when interpreting data to achieve meaningful understanding of a phenomenon (Merriam et al., 2016; Patton, 2015). All participants drew from their personal experiences and perspectives to answer the interview questions on why they are pursuing, or in the case of one participant, pursued, degrees in higher education when their fate in the U.S. is unclear.

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to document how DACA recipients understand and make sense of their lived experiences as students enrolled in higher education.
during the current political climate. The overarching question for this study was to understand: How DACA recipients in higher education make sense of their experience in order to identify what motivates DACA recipients to pursue a degree in higher education during the current political climate? The research questions were as follows:

1. Why are DACA recipients motivated to pursue a degree in higher education when their future in the U.S. is uncertain?
2. What challenges have they faced in higher education unique to their status?
3. What factors have supported them in their quest to continue in higher education?

Participant Profiles

Due to the global COVID-19 pandemic during the height of this study, recruiting was challenging. I was not able to connect with gatekeepers nor potential participants face to face and had to rely on email exchanges and word of mouth references to recruit. I was able to recruit five participants for my study, all obtained through word-of-mouth references, and snowballing. All interviews took place over the phone at a time of the participant’s choosing. One participant was a recent graduate and had just obtained her degree a month before our interview. Four participants were actively enrolled in higher education during the time of the interview, three were undergraduate students and one was a graduate student. Four participants were native to the Midwest and one participant was from the Southeastern region of the country. All students attend/ed a predominantly white 4-year institution in the Midwest. Please see Table 1 for a summary of participant demographics.
Table 1

*Participant Demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Minor</th>
<th>Student Status</th>
<th>Attend Higher Ed</th>
<th>Age when arrived in U.S.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Taylor</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Family Studies</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>Graduated with Bachelors</td>
<td>In state</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blake</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>Biology</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>In state</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skyler</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Art Organizational Change</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>In state</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artem</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Leadership Business Administration and Engineering</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>In state</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Logan</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>Out of state</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Taylor

My first participant was Taylor, a 22-year-old female who had graduated three weeks prior to our interview from a PWI (predominantly White 4-year institution) in the Midwest. She attended a university that provided scholarships for DACA recipients who met certain requirements. A gatekeeper at a Midwestern university connected us. Through snowballing, she helped me recruit three other participants. Out of the five participants Taylor was the only one who has a parent, her father, with a bachelor’s degree from home country. She was a year old when she arrived in the states. She was not aware that she was undocumented until reaching high school. As most immigrants, her parents left their home country seeking better opportunities; education had always been a major push from her parents and she was always motivated to do her best, get involved and be open to new opportunities. Taylor has a strong personality and sees
herself as a role model for other undocumented immigrants to help inspire them to be vulnerable; be open about their status and to pursue their dreams.

**Blake**

My second participant was Blake, a 21-year-old female currently attending a 4-year PWI in the Midwest. She attends a university that provides scholarships for DACA recipients who meet certain requirements. She arrived in the U.S. when she was about a year and a half old. She is a first-generation college student. Her parents always pushed her to do her best regarding education. She is a senior, majoring in psychology and minoring in biology as she wants to pursue becoming a veterinarian. She feels that as a DACA recipient she needs to be better and always prove herself, and that she is not allowed to make mistakes due to her status.

**Skyler**

My third participant, Skyler, is a 22-year-old female who arrived in the states at six years old. She is a first-generation college student attending a 4-year PWI in the Midwest. She has a private scholarship that covers 100% of her tuition and expenses. Similar to the first two participants, the importance of education was engraved upon her by her parents early on. During the interview she stated that she does suffer from mental health issues and at times the pressures of being undocumented, even with DACA, is “too much”, as she feels she always has to be at her best, both in and outside the classroom. She believes in the importance of having an education, and, similar to the other participants, education is a top priority in her family. However, she also believes that higher education is not for everyone. She believes the importance of being “best” adds more pressure to young DACA recipients who aren’t top students or might be better off in a trades position.
Artem

Artem, my fourth participant, is a 30-year-old male who first arrived in the states at age eight. He is a first-generation college student attending a 4-year PWI in the Midwest. Artem is the oldest participant in my study and has been pursuing higher education since 2009, bringing a unique perspective to my study as he is the only participant to has been navigating the higher education system pre and post DACA. His higher education journey began in 2009. At that time undocumented immigrants in higher ed were considered international students. Through his own research he found a loophole in the law (in the state he resides in) that allowed him to obtain a moped license, state ID, to prove state residency which allowed him to pay in-state tuition. He is also the only participant who transitioned from a community college to a university, where he obtained his bachelors. Currently he is working on his master’s degree. He has always been a full-time employee, has paid for majority of his education out of pocket. After obtaining DACA he was able to obtain some private funding and grants to finish his degree, yet still pays for a majority of his tuition expenses out of pocket. Through his hard work and discipline, he will graduate debt free.

Artem is also an advocate for undocumented immigrants. During the Trump administration he frequently traveled to Washington to advocate for DACA recipients on Capitol Hill. He recalls that his family did not support him being open about his status nor advocating in Washington but he felt he had to be the voice he wanted to hear. He feels the Latino community needs to unite in order to see the change that is much needed for DACA recipients regarding legislation.
Logan

Logan, my fifth and final participant, is a 20-year-old male who first arrived in the states at age five. He is a first-generation college student attending a 4-year PWI in the Midwest. He is double majoring in Business Administration and Engineering. He is the only participant not native to the Midwest. He is from the Southeastern region of the United States and is used to living in a more ethnically diverse state. He is only attending a midwestern university because it has the program of study he is interested in. He attended a military high school and exceled due to his intelligence and leadership skills. He has been awarded grants and scholarships yet still has to pay for the majority of his tuition and living expenses out of pocket. During summer he works two jobs to be able to save up for the following academic year.

He stated during his interview that while he is proud to be a DACA recipient he is not open about his status as he wants to be recognized for his accomplishments and not be labeled by stereotypes. He recognizes that his path is not easy but feels honored that he is able to get his bachelors and sees the challenge as a privilege.

Data Collection and Analysis Overview

Data collection took place during COVID-19 global pandemic, I initiated recruiting in the Fall 2020 semester but was unable to get any feedback from contacted gatekeepers. In the Spring 2021 semester, with the assistance of Dr. Nancy Mansberger and Dr. Candy McCorkle, I was able to recruit five participants for my study. Although a low number of participants I was able to meet saturation. All five interviews were over the phone and ranged between 45-60 minutes. Interviews were recorded on my personal laptop and mobile phone. I uploaded the recordings onto Otter.com for transcriptions. I reviewed each transcription while listening to the audio recording to confirm validity of transcribed data, making minimal changes where necessary.
After I reviewed each transcript, I sent it to the participant for member checking. Participants had up to two weeks to confirm accuracy of transcription, four out of the five participants confirmed accuracy. Analysis of the data began once transcription was confirmed by participant or the requested time for feedback had elapsed.

I coded manually. I began the coding process by printing out two copies of each transcript. I read each individual transcript four times. I made notes and highlighted key phrases/sentences. Using the second copy, I identified significant statements in the form of meaningful phrases/words (codes), that aligned with my research questions and the participants voice related to their lived experience, Hermeneutics, and cut them. After identifying and cutting the codes, I wrote each code on a piece of paper, using a different colored paper for each participant, and placed them inside an empty envelope and attached the supporting phrases/words cut from the transcripts. Each envelop was labeled with participant pseudonym name. After coding each transcript individually, I proceeded to lay out all the individuals codes on my living room floor. After reflecting on the codes, how they aligned with my research questions and the participant’s voice of their lived experience, I identified significant, repetitive context, and started to cluster significant statements, making categories. After further reflection, I continued by condensing those categories, again, reflecting on repetitive and significant context related to my research questions and the data before me until I had reduced the categories into six emergent themes. This last step was done in two cycles on two individual occasions. To set aside my biases, I concentrated on the data and what it was telling me to set my mindset on the participants voice to recreate their stories into themes. I practiced continuous and intentional reflexivity to recognize the impact of my biases throughout the entire process.
Presentation of Themes

The analysis of the data produced six themes which told the stories of the participants lived experiences:

I. “My Parents Sacrificed…”

II. Pressure to Always be “Outstanding”

III. First-Generation College Student and DACA Recipient

IV. The Path is Lonely in Higher Ed

V. Navigating a System Designed for Others

VI. Sense of Belonging

Three of the emergent themes produced sub-themes. Table 2 depicts the alignment between research question, theme produced and sub-theme.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Sub-themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Why are DACA recipients motivated to pursue a degree in higher education when their future in the U.S. is uncertain?</td>
<td>“My parents sacrificed…”</td>
<td>a. DACA requires education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Pressure to always be “outstanding”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. What challenges have they faced in higher education unique to their status?</td>
<td>First-generation college student-DACA recipient</td>
<td>The path is lonely in higher ed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Navigating a system designed for others</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

70
Table 2 - Continued

3. What factors have supported them in their quest to continue in higher education?

| Sense of belonging | a. I am a leader |

Theme #1: “My Parents Sacrificed…”

As part of my interview protocol, all participants were asked about their thoughts on education. Incredibly, all participants expressed that their parents always prioritized education in the home onto them. Simultaneously, all participants expressed that the main reason for their parents immigrating to the U.S. was for them to have a better quality of life. They indicated that their parents sacrificed so much for them to have more opportunities and education would be the driving force behind it.

Taylor, who is the only one with a parent that has a degree and was a working professional in their home country, talks about how her family was well off yet her father sought better opportunities for his family aboard and decided to immigrate unlawfully. She feels that due to the sacrifices her family made for her, and her siblings, to have better opportunities she has to do her best and make them proud.

…they [my parents] gave up everything, they literally had it all, and they gave it all up just for us. And I don't know, that's just like, kind of always had it set in my mind that like, you know, I have, I have to do everything, like I have to do it. All right. And I have to pursue this because of my parents, because I don't want to let them down. And I think that's what made me like, I feel like really succeed and really, like, push through with everything. Taylor

Blake also talks about her parents sacrifice of immigrating unlawfully to the U.S. She also included the pressures of what is expected from a DACA recipient.

what really motivated was this idea that I had to prove myself. I feel like with a lot of DACA recipients, we're told that our parents came here for a better life. And like, that motivates us in a way that's like, Okay, I have to go to college, because they came here for a reason. So I need to, like, do this. And so that kind of like, motivated me... Blake
Skyler shares that her parents did not have the opportunity to attend higher ed, specifically her mother never went to college yet always wanted to. Skyler feels that is a way to honor her mother as well as pressures of being an undocumented immigrant as a way to prove herself to society.

I feel like it's always been like a, like top priority for my family, I think that was kind of just passed down to me. However, I like guys who believe that, um, because like our parents didn't have that opportunity. There's a lot of pressure on, like, like younger immigrants to complete like a higher education. Skyler

Artem expresses how education is something that cannot define nor be taken away from someone. His parents sacrificed a lot by immigrating unlawfully to the U.S. and are still making sacrifices to this day, as they remain undocumented. He believes in the collective idea that his success is his family’s success.

…growing up a lot of us recognize that our parents sacrificed a lot, and the one thing they asked from a lot of us was to get to have an education, to the them education is something we see as something that that cannot be taken away from you. So, you know, in a way. Our success will always be tied to their sacrifices. So, this is our way as well as honoring the sacrifices that our parents made for us, and we can share our set success with them. So when we graduated, I really just, you know, me myself personally graduating, but I just see that it's my family members graduating with as well. So there's a collective idea, and collective success. So, the idea of wanting to higher education is not just an individual investment but it's a collective investment of yourself and with your family. Also, with the fact that, you know, we, as I mentioned you have someone fighting against you. We're doing this for family. Artem

Logan also acknowledges his family’s sacrifice and because he believes he is in a system that punishes undocumented youth he believes higher ed is the only way he will be able to succeed and honor his parents sacrifice.

…your [my] parents sacrifice their, you know, their lives, their money, their time to get you to a better place, and yet it's not rewarded but it's punished. So, getting a higher education go into college, is where you [I] should go…Logan
Sub-Theme 1a.: DACA Requires Education

One of the driving forces behind DACA was for undocumented youth, who met certain criteria (please see Appendix C), to have access to higher education. This really opened the door for many DACA recipients who wanted to attend higher ed as a way to distinguish themselves due to the fact that obtaining a degree is not for everyone. Some participants believe in education and appreciate the opportunity they have yet feel that it is the only way to be accepted in society.

...as a DACA recipient individually, I think it is almost our only pathway, because it's just one little tally that we can have one extra point one extra bonus point that we can have to kind of say this is who we are, versus anybody else that maybe is a US citizen that doesn't do college. It makes it a little bit easier on them. Logan

Theme #2: Pressure to Always be “Outstanding”

Participants expressed that because they are DACA recipients they feel they must always be performing at their best in order to be accepted in society and be viewed as non-threatening. It is public knowledge that President Trump had repeatedly referred to undocumented immigrants as a threat to American society during his term. Taylor expresses how as an undocumented immigrant she feels pressured to always be performing at her best to prove that she “is not a statistic.”

I think that whole stigma of like, Hispanics not doing well in school, like, it just kind of when you come here as an undocumented, like, you try your best to not fit those statistics. And you do your best to, you know, to be the better generation and like, kind of like the phrase that a lot of like undocumented people say, like, I'm not a statistic, you know, and I think, like, aside from like, the whole, like, oh, they're rapists and all that stuff. It's more of also like, oh, but I can also be good in education, too. I think that's where I feel like why a lot of people, undocumented people that I know, do really well in school, because they just, it just sucks because within education, specifically, like undocumented people have to prove themselves even more. Taylor

Skyler also expresses how discrimination toward undocumented immigrants has always been present but during the Trump administration that discrimination somehow was more accepted and those with similar views were more open about it. She said that as an
undocumented/DACA recipient she felt pressure to do more, to be outstanding, which eventually caused her to burn out. She is the only participant to express that she suffers from anxiety and depression.

I feel like I feel like the, so the pressure from the government was already there, but it just became more when Trump came into office because even since, when they first like started drafting up like the Dream Act. It was always like, Oh, they're like, good, like their students, they are trying their best, like so you always had to be like, like the excellent student and the excellent worker who could provide to like society and I feel that like regardless of the education. We're like, we're still providing to society and participating in it. So, when Trump came into office because of those because of everything, he said I feel like the pressure added was added even more to like prove him wrong. And then, I don't know it's just difficult thing when they talk about like creating legislation for immigration for that exact same reason because, um, I mean I've struggled a lot with mental health and I feel like I've had a lot of pressure on my own for like not being able to meet those expectations that if I'm undocumented I should be like a top student, like, yeah, I don't know if that makes sense. I've pushed myself to be full time and then I ended up going like dropping classes and that puts me in like probation with financial aid and so I guess I've just been like, like, trying to meet the goal but then falling short, because of the pressures I put on myself. Skyler

Here, Logan, talks about society’s double edge sword, and his belief that as a DACA recipient he is not allowed to make a mistake, he always has to be perfect; and, if not, he will not be accepted. This really adds pressure to him because he feels like he always has to be proving himself and he cannot be like his peers simply because he was born in another country.

I thought it was very interesting because we they did have different political views, and you know they think, you know people that weren't born here, they shouldn't be here, or people that you know aren't from this country shouldn't be here, and I was like okay you know let's sit down, let's have a grown-up discussion where we're able to give our inputs but we don't we're not going to you know sit there and bash anybody. And, I mean one of the things that I brought up was, you know, isn't it strange that somebody, a student that came from you know a different country is here studying and working. And, you know, made straight A's in high school and is pursuing a degree, but yet they make a dumb mistake. Maybe they ran a red light, or they got a speeding ticket now their entire future is in jeopardy. But somebody else who maybe has been through, you know, the legal system and has been in and out of jail, they still have all of their rights, and is continued to be a member of society. And nobody really questions that. But somebody will question somebody else who just made a small mistake. And now their entire future is at Jeopardy just because of one little thing. I've only been as different is the place they were born. So
that, that kind of also, like you said, it's just a this reflects that people that are asking them
to repeal certain questions or make certain remarks. Logan

Theme #3: First Generation College Student-DACA Recipient

Like many first-generation college students, DACA recipients’ parents are not familiar
with the higher education system and therefore can only provide emotional support instead of
guidance through the different higher education functions/processes.

Blake shares that when she was almost done with her Psychology degree she decided to
switch majors, and her family supported her decision but was not able to provide any support
navigating the higher education system to help make this change happen for her.

I feel like it's a little harder to ask for help from my family just because I am a first-
generation college student. So a lot of the times they don't really know what is going on.
They don't know too much about college, at least not not like college in the US, but it's a
little hard sometimes. But I feel like a perfect example when they provided support for
me was this past semester, so fall 2020, I actually decided to change my career path
completely. Like I mentioned earlier, I'm majoring in psychology. But I kind of thought
about it and realized that that's not the career path that I want to take. I'm actually
interested in veterinary medicine. And so when I mentioned this to all my family
members, they, they were really supportive. And I think that made me feel really good
considering that I was feeling really nervous about that change, because I graduate this
semester. And so it was a really last minute change for me. And I also don't have any
experience in the veterinary field. And so I was feeling kind of overwhelmed and
stressed, but especially my mom, she was really, really supportive. And she said,
something along the lines of I know, it's like a last minute decision for you. But I know
you're going to be able to accomplish what you want. So just having those like supportive
words from her from my brother, from my dad, and just like other family members, it's
been really great. Blake

Skyler’s parents did not finish their secondary education therefore could not help her with
the college application process. Although DACA does allow its recipients access to higher
education, many higher education institutions do not have the proper resources/departments to
assist first generation college students who are DACA recipients.

when applying to colleges came around in graduation I felt really excluded because I saw
like my peers getting all these scholarships, and, you know like seeing that they really
had like the support to get into college. And although my parents tried my best, like they
didn't have the experience of graduating high school, or even the opportunity of going to college. So it was just like difficult for them as well. And then since my sisters were older, they kind of did their own thing. Skyler

She, Skyler, also expressed that while she values her education, she acknowledges that higher education is not for everyone. She feels a certain pressure to complete higher education as her parents did not have that opportunity and she is a DACA recipient.

I feel like it's [education] always been like a, like top priority for my family, I think that was kind of just passed down to me. However, because like our parents didn't have that opportunity. There's a lot of pressure on, like, like younger immigrants to complete like a higher education. So although I believe it's like really important and necessary I do believe that, you know, it's not for everyone. In general, some people are more like hands on people and could probably do better in like trades or something like that. Skyler

Artem, also expresses the difficulties of being a first-generation college student and DACA recipient. Adding to the conversation that the level of critical thinking needed to move through the higher education system in the classroom is beyond the reach of his parents. He does receive a lot of support from his parents but because they have another level of education different to his they are limited to providing him with emotional and financial support.

It became challenging because, I think, as a first-generation student, One thing that is not really taking into consideration is, while your parents do support you and your higher education. As mentioned, we're at a loss here because the highest education they received was just a GED, so they can no longer really understand how to really help you when it comes to navigating higher education or even the content that you're studying, because it's a whole new level, a whole another level of critical thinking that, is that really caters to the way that they learn, as you know a lot of a lot of things my parents, the way that my parents learned was really working with their hands, but you know the concept of just working with your mind kind of goes over their heads, which is not on them, it's just more of a generational thing and it's one of the challenges that we face as we continue to make sure the next generation is prepared to go into higher education. So, we did have their support but if their support really just came in, in a way of emotional support, or, you know, making sure I have food at the table, making sure I had a roof over my head, and you know if I really needed any money. Although I didn't like to ask but if I needed some money, you know so I can just continue focusing on my studies, you know they were there. …Artem
Logan reports the added stressors being a first-generation college student while simultaneously worrying about his family while away studying, as his parents are undocumented. Stating that if anything happens to them, for example, his father, he would have to drop his studies and take care of his family as he is the oldest son.

I would say, other than that, other than that a lot of it is kind of just like, emotional and like psychological and just kind of worrying about your family. Since I’m a first generation. I also have to, you know it's in the back of my head that if anything happens to my, you know, my father. I have to be the next one in line to support my family. So that means, like automatically. School is gonna have to be paused and you have to get a job and support your family and stuff like that so this is kind of in the back of your mind that you know, especially if your parents are also immigrants that you have to kind of worry about them and you know they're supposed to be worried, they're worried about you. You're worried about, and stuff like that so that can also kind of be a little bit stressful. And that's unwanted stress, especially when you're going into, like, finals week or something like that, you just try to, try to, you know, block out so you can focus on what you need to do. Logan

Theme #4: The Path is Lonely in Higher Ed

Taylor attended a PWI four-year institution and was very disappointed and isolated with her college experience. Due to the lack of diversity and cultural understanding she felt very alone in her program.

I remember specifically, my first two years in college, they were like in education. Like I did not like school. I just thought like, maybe I should drop out. Like, I just don't know, like, I just feel like so. I felt so alone within the program… I think you guys [the attended university] need to do a lot more better regarding the education of like learning, like diversity and learning about your students. Taylor

Blake felt very alone in the application process for higher ed. As a DACA recipient and first-generation college student neither her parents nor anyone in the school she went to could help her. To add to this stress she submitted her applications through her phone.

Yeah, honestly. It's kind of terrible. But yeah, I feel like I was on my own when I was applying to colleges, just because I know, I could have reached out to people. I just, I guess I just didn't know who and so I ended up navigating everything on my own…So I just remember applying to I think I applied to four different colleges. And it was just really, really stressful, because I didn't really know exactly what I was doing. And I didn't
have a laptop. So I had to do everything on my Android phone during that time. And it may be even more difficult. Yeah, so uploading files, that kind of stuff, and applications, it was just really, really difficult. And I just didn't really know what to do today. So I just, it was a really painful moment. Blake

Skyler says that while her journey in higher education is lonely (as a DACA recipient she reported she lacks support from her attending higher education institution and her parents do not understand the higher education system) she has found support from other undocumented students.

Yeah, I feel like, I mean most of it action from myself, but also like for my parents. So I think the support, whether it, whether it was given properly. Just I know that they're I know their intention, their intention drives me I guess, if that makes sense. Maybe it's not executed in like the right way but I guess, like it's mostly been like, from my family and my boyfriend, then just like some of my friends that understand what it's like. Like, they don't even fully understand what they know about being undocumented, because they either have like relatives or their parents are undocumented. And then, I feel like the biggest support really has been from other undocumented students mostly. I don't think I've been able to find, like, a mentor in them like, you know, in my university faculty yours, and the university staff that have, like, really guided me through it I think it's just been like a. We're all in this together. Like other undocumented students but we also have our own, like lonely path to follow. Skyler

Artem expresses the solicitude feeling of being a first-generation college student and DACA recipient, highlighting how he will never have a traditional higher ed experience because the system does not cater DACA recipients and his parents do not have any experience in higher ed to assist him in navigating the higher education system.

I recognize that as a graduate student, as a first-generation student and I'm still trying to do this all by myself. And I think at first, it was a little overwhelming with the amount of graduate school is so different than undergrad, graduate school was very independent learning, which is great. I think it was very difficult for me to understand that just never going to have a traditional college experience, because there are days where I'm down. And I'm like, Dad, how nice would it be to just focus on my studies and that's right, like how nice would it be to just get out of work, focus on your studies, call it good and not worry about paying for school or pocket, I have to worry about balancing extra hours if need be, that pay for that education out of pocket or unexpected bills come up and you have to find a way to, you know, in some funds to pay for school out of pocket. You know, I just, I, and I just even, even under my undergrad, getting my bachelor's at A University and finally being in the university, having to come into terms that I'm just not
going to have a traditional college experience that we always get told, you know by
everybody else, you know, and same thing with a masters like it's just coming to terms
that you're just not going to be a traditional student, which is fine because even the that
still has its perks but man it just would be nice sometimes. Artem

Theme #5: Navigating a System Designed for Others

Blakes shares her experience from about four years ago when she first started applying to
higher educational institutions and was treated as an international student even though she held
the DACA visa. Even with DACA in place since 2012, there are still some universities across the
country that do not know how to process a DACA recipient/student in their system.

But then the next thing was that they [university] were asking for my student visa, which
I didn't have because I don't know I, I've been in this country since I was one. So I didn't
have a student visa, I had DACA. And so I told him that I didn't have that. But then they
were asking for, like, my home address. And as the I gave it, I gave them the one here,
where I live. But then they were like, No, we mean, the one from [the country you were
born in]. Blake

Skyler expresses how her attending higher educational institution does not have a system
in place for DACA recipients which makes standard procedures more difficult for DACA
recipients.

…it's really hard to work with financial aid…so for example to do taxes you need your
like form from university right and they don't generate one for undocumented students
typically you like find yourself going to them and asking them to generate one…Like for
example, because of my mental health, I'm like, I didn't do so well in classes once
COVID started. So, I was going through an appeal process a few weeks ago, and to write
an appeal you need like your transcript history you need to explain every single W or
single E, you had. So, I was like I need my transcript, but I had a hold on my account,
because I hadn't paid off my tuition, but I can pay off my tuition, because my accounts
were was placed on hold because of that same situation of my like academic progress. So,
it was like a whole loop like I need to access this but I can't because of this…it's just
really difficult because you know we can't fill out FAFSA … So it's just difficult to
access those things, because I have never completed FASFA before. Skyler

Artem feels that even with DACA he will never have a traditional student experience
because he will always have that financial burden of figuring out how to pay off his tuition.
So, it is an ongoing fight but you know we're doing our part. We don't qualify for financial aid or anything along those lines. So how to get yourself set up for a payment plan, how are you going to afford this payment plan. Understanding that, you know it's not going to be easy. You're not going to be done with education like everybody else you're taking that nontraditional path. Artem

Logan understands that education is necessary but not having access to financial aid makes it almost impossible.

…getting a higher education go into college, is where you should go, but it's almost impossible, and it's hard to pay for college. Scholarships are extremely difficult because you're going up against a very motivated… it's almost a life or death but it's a life situation, and going to college is, is the first step is difficult to find a college, and kind of get used to it and understand that you're going to be spending the next several years. Scrapping for a couple pennies just to make your tuition. So it's kind of like my thoughts on education it's, you know, it's necessary, but it's almost impossible. It makes it very difficult. Logan

The higher education system in PWI’s is not set up to include DACA recipients leaving students like Logan feeling marginalized both in the classroom and the higher ed system as a whole. Not having access to financial aid resulted in added financial burden to Logan and frustration seeing as his peers are able to enjoy the benefits of financial aid, yet because he was born in a country he could not help be born in and his parents decided to unlawfully immigrate, he is excluded from the system.

Most of the classes that I'm in that were in person at a time like that were on the mind, but a lot of them were Caucasian and like that, that is not a problem, but it's just that I didn't know if I was you know if the Hispanic population or DACA recipient population was, you know, represented by any chance, kind of the things for me that kind of bother me or, or just how difficult it is to pay for college, especially since you can't apply for financial aid, and a lot of the times people think, will ask like, oh, you know, how do you pay for school if you don't have like a bad pocket, then they're like oh wow you must have money, no it's complete opposite. And therefore, if you don't have a FAFSA on file, you can't apply for some of the very like easy scholarships that are literally just handing people money. It's kind of aggravating. …Logan
Theme #6: Sense of Belonging

Finding a network of people with similar traits aided in Taylor’s success through college as she was able to find support from her like-minded peers.

In college, I feel like I gained a lot of support with friends that I made, and specifically my sorority, because like, we always put education first, regardless of anything. And I think, I don't know, I like the fact that like, for us specifically for like, Latinos, and specifically like, you know, for me undocumented, like, education has always been engraved in my mind. So like, the fact that I gained a lot of support from that from my sorority sisters, I really appreciate it. Taylor

Getting involved in her community and networking outside the classroom helped Skyler discover extra help and resources to aid her in journey through higher ed.

I feel like on that part. It's been a little difficult, I feel like if anything I've tried to like involve myself in community organizations I could have like more access to resources. I guess my, my sisters are a great help. I feel like they're also involved. I feel like I'm the one who's always like oh this is happening in the community with immigration and things like that. So I think I just looked for like my other undocumented peers. I guess. Um, I guess a lot of it has been something that I've learned was like in the professional world in a way, you have to make those connections. You know like those networks, which I feel like I've tried, I've been trying to do that but at the same time, I, I felt like in a way alone in my journey. So, whether it's like just being able to connect with professors or with faculty and staff in general. I feel like they're just, I don't know, I wish people were more understanding, if that makes sense. Skyler

Artem is paving the way for other DACA recipients, he believes that by successfully navigating a system designed not designed for DACA recipients he is proving that it can be done.

If we succeed in finding a way to navigate higher education as undocumented students. We are creating a path for others and can prepare the next generation to follow that path, it's not going to be an easy path. Artem

Communication with campus leaders provide Logan with support and resources through his higher ed journey.

some of the, the campus leaders on campus like one specifically that knows my status and does their best to try to reach out and like send scholarship, emails or you know any type of support, just like this one, I was able to get that's how I was able to receive this email
to participate in the study. So people there on campus kind of looking out for our best interest. Logan

**Sub-Theme #6a.: I am a Leader**

Taylor believes that she has to be the change that she wants to see in the Hispanic community. By modeling this behavior she hopes to inspire others to do the same.

I've always told myself that, like, you know, like, a lot of the times like, Hispanic students are like, we want more people to be able to translate during like orientations. And we want more representation. And it's just like, sometimes they don't understand that like, that literally starts with you. And you have to, you know, be that representation, because as much as you want it yourself, like, the next year, they're gonna want the same thing. And when nothing's there, it's just kind of like, you know, who's there to represent. And so I always made sure to, like, be part of different, like, big organizations and like, put my face out there, because I just kind of wanted to, you know, let them know, like, hey, like, there's a Latina, you know, it's not just like, you know, white people are like, you know, like, if you need help, I can help you with certain things I can translate. And I know, like, outside of classes, I was very outgoing and very active…Taylor

Establishing a connection with DACA peers in higher ed helped Blake detach herself from feeling isolated and embracing her status. In return, she is inspired to give back to the DACA community by being open about her status, letting other DACA peers know that they are not alone.

But I feel like when they see other people being comfortable with that [being open about their DACA status], and accepting it, and like embracing it, I feel like it kind of, I don't know, inspire is the right word, but it kind of like, motivate or inspires people who are in your similar situation, to kind of embrace that part of their self, and also realize that they're not alone on this journey. And so with me being open about this, I just want to like, be able to let other people know that they're not alone, going through this DACA experience. And so I think, because when I came in my freshman year, there's a lot of people who were really open about their DACA experience, and being from other countries and being undocumented. And when I was seeing that from other people, it was like, oh, wow, I'm not alone. And so that made me feel more comfortable about sharing my experience. And so now as like a What's the word? Like a senior now in college, I kind of want to have that same, like role model effect to like the younger students. Blake

Artem understands that DACA recipients will find success through education therefore he wants to give back to the DACA community by obtaining his Master’s.
I might want to work at higher education because I had a lot of help that helped me, you know, get to where I am today and I hope to be the helping hand one as well, and helping underrepresented students in higher education, as well as creating programs for those underrepresented students because there's a system at play here it's very clear he called you, you need education to achieve a certain status in your career, you need that bachelor's or master's to achieve a certain status to get into specific career paths. That's just the way the system works, and there's no real way around it. And especially for our low-income community members or disenfranchised students. So, and I was one of those disenfranchised students so now that I have my masters, I do find myself with the mentality of one day being in higher education helping those students. And the best way to do that as well as to get my master's degree, to work in higher education…, I think that one of the things that I like the most, at least personally that I feel is that actually, again, there’s not a lot of undocumented immigrants that are getting a master's, and by proving that I can get a masters that can show others that it's possible sure it's not going to be easy, but it's possible and with the right support group and the right way to navigate it. You know they can do it too. Artem

Chapter IV Summary

This chapter reported the results of my study. The emergent themes express the experiences and motivation of DACA recipients in higher education during the current political climate. My first research question, Why are DACA recipient’s motivated to pursue a degree in higher when their future in the US in uncertain? yielded the theme “My Parents Sacrifice…” with a sub-theme “DACA Requires Education”. Participants expressed that their parents sacrificed a lot by immigrating unlawfully for them to have better opportunities in life and education being a top priority in their family. Within this theme participants also expressed that one of the reasons behind DACA creation was for undocumented youth to access to higher education. The participants feel that it is an expectation for them to attend higher education.

My second research question, What challenges have they faced in higher education unique to their status? resulted in four themes. The first theme is: “Pressure to Always be Outstanding”. Participants discussed how they constantly feel pressured to always be performing at their best in the classroom and how they feel they are not allowed to make mistakes in their everyday lives. The second theme is: “First-generation college student and DACA recipient”.

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Participants expressed the challenges they face being a first-generation college student and DACA recipient, such as having to navigate the higher ed system without any counsel from their parents and lack of resources by higher ed institutions for DACA recipients. The third theme connected to my second research question is: “The Path is Lonely in Higher Ed.” Participants expressed how the path in higher ed is lonely for them due to their quasi-legal status higher education institutions do not have proper systems set in place to help them. In some cases, they may not even have the proper faculty/staff educated in DACA. As all participants attended PWI’s in the Midwest, they expressed feeling isolated in the classroom due to their status and in some cases race. The fourth theme emerged from my second research question is: Navigating a system designed for others. Participants feel as though the higher education system is designed for them to fail as it does not cater to their unique status.

My third and final research question, What factors have supported them in their quest to continue in higher education?, yielded the emergent theme: Sense of Belonging with the sub-theme: I am a Leader. While participants expressed feeling isolated in the classroom and the difficulties of navigating higher ed as a DACA recipient all participants confirmed that having a community of varied people supporting them made them grounded their sense of belonging and inspired them to be leaders within their communities for other DACA recipients.
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION

This study adds to the literature by supporting the need for higher education systems to better educate themselves on the DACA program, what it entails and what it means to its recipients to have a DACA visa in order to better assist this population to navigate higher education. DACA grants its recipients in-state tuition, making higher education more accessible, yet there is still a lack of systems within higher education institutions to successfully recruit and provide assistance to the admission and ongoing support of DACA recipients made necessary by the challenges created by their limited/liminal legal status. Overall, this study calls for the need for higher education institutions, administrators, faculty, staff, and policy makers to educate themselves on DACA and learn what they can do to create systems that facilitate the inclusion of DACA recipients into their systems.

Five DACA recipients were interviewed for this study, all from 4-year PWI’s in the Midwest. Four of the participants were drawn from the same higher education institution and one from a neighboring higher education institution. In studying their experiences as DACA recipients, this study asked the participants why they were motivated to pursue higher education, and what challenges unique to their status as DACA recipients did they face. Six themes emerged from the data analysis: I) My Parents Sacrifice…, with a sub-theme DACA requires education, II) Pressure to Always be “Outstanding”, III) First-generation College Student-DACA Recipient, IV) The Path is Lonely in Higher Ed., V) Navigating a System Designed for Others, and VI) Sense of Belonging with a sub-theme I am a Leader.
Findings

“My Parents Sacrifice…” with a sub-theme “DACA Requires Education”.

Participants expressed that their parents made a huge sacrifice by immigrating unlawfully to the US. All participants stated that their parents left their home country so they could have a better quality of life, better life opportunities through education, whether it be for them to have better access to education or have better opportunities to attend a higher education institution.

Within this theme participants also expressed that one of the primary reasons behind the creation of DACA was for undocumented youth to have access to higher education. The participants felt that it is an expectation from them to attend higher education. Many participants also agreed that higher education is not for everyone; although they are content with their choice to attend, they agree that having DACA applies a lot of pressure to those who may be more inclined to do trades work.

“Pressure to Always be Outstanding”. Participants discussed how they constantly feel pressured, due to having DACA and being an immigrant, to always perform at their best in the classroom and to live their life without making mistakes. They feel they are not allowed to make the normal human mistakes that others may be forgiven in making. They expressed that as immigrants, they reported feeling social pressure to not be labeled and/or stereotyped, and therefore reported feeling they cannot allow themselves to make mistakes. Logan expressed how hard it is to be judged (labeled/stereotyped) due to being born in a different country through no fault of his own. They do sense that they are viewed by others as a threat to American society who ought to return to their country of birth, because they believe if they make any mistakes they are no longer welcomed. One participant shared a story of a debate he took part of, where he and class peers discussed how if an American got a DUI they were “sympathized with”, but if a
DACA recipient or undocumented immigrant got one then they had to be deported because they were considered to be a threat/liability. The participant went on to discuss this double standard and how isolating it is due to the pressure of not being allowed to be human.

“First-generation College Student and DACA Recipient”. Participants expressed the challenges they face being a first-generation college student and DACA recipient, such as having to navigate the higher ed system without any counsel from their parents and the lack of resources in higher ed institutions to support DACA recipients. Apart from one participant who has a parent with a bachelor’s degree from their home country, the remaining four are first-generation college students. Even with the one participant having a parent with a degree, due to the differences in the systems and a language barrier she had to navigate the system alone just as the other participants. All participants reported that their attended high school did not have the informational resources or staff knowledgeable of DACA to help them in university applications and in explaining how to navigate the process. As first-generation college students with DACA, all participants reported feeling an overwhelming amount of stress when going through the higher education institution application process as well as when searching and applying for private scholarships and grants.

“The Path is Lonely in Higher Ed”. Participants expressed how the path in higher ed in lonely for them: due to their quasi-legal status, higher education institutions do not have proper systems set in place to help them such as a distinction to their unique status to assist them in better requesting information/documentation, for example, from registrar and/or financial aid. In some cases, they may not even have any faculty/staff educated in DACA. Noting that all participants attend/attended PWI’s in the Midwest, they each expressed feeling isolated in the classroom due to their status and race. The lack of support, understanding and having knowledge
of their unique status, from both the higher education system and in the classroom makes participants feel marginalized, and in some cases participants who are naturally outgoing and engaging feel that in the classroom they are shy and quiet.

“Navigating a System Designed for Others”. Participants expressed how the higher education system appears almost to be designed for them to fail as it does not recognize or support their unique status. All participants expressed that due to their DACA status it is hard to feel that they belong in a system where they are neither legal residents nor citizens nor unlawfully present nor international students. It is hard not knowing how to navigate the system as the system does not know how to categorize them therefore, they constantly find themselves going back and forth in processes. Being a unique group of undocumented students with legal presence in the country, participants do not feel the higher education system can cater to them.

“Sense of Belonging with the Sub-theme: I am a Leader”. While participants expressed feeling isolated in the classroom and the difficulties, and loneliness, of navigating higher ed as a DACA recipient, all participants confirmed that having a community of varied mentors and peers supporting them grounded their sense of belonging and inspired them to be leaders within their communities for other DACA recipients. All participants feel they have to model the behavior they want to see in their communities through leadership and engagement. All participants volunteer in the community. One participant is an advocate for DACA recipients and undocumented youth, Artem works for a non-profit organization whose main focus is to provide resources for DACA/undocumented youth, in particular provide information/resources regarding higher education. Four out of five participants have a mentor at their attending higher education institution that has made them feel welcomed and has informed them about opportunities for DACA recipients. Specifically, opportunities for volunteering, participating on-
campus activities, student organizations and belonging to a Greek life organization enhanced their level of inclusion on campus. As the researcher I did deduce that while all these levels of engagement occurred with other minorities, none of the participants in my study took part in student organizations, events or activities primarily populated by White students.

**Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to seek to understand why DACA recipients are pursuing higher education during the current political climate in which their fate in the U.S. is unclear. Whether or not DACA recipients are eventually granted a pathway to citizenship, continue to maintain DACA status or are deported back to their country of birth DACA recipients who participated in my study are pursing higher education because their parents immigrated to the U.S. for them to have a better quality of life through education. They believe they are deserving of the opportunity to receive higher education and they have strong family values that heavily influenced them to pursue higher education. Many participants spoke about honoring their parents sacrifice through receiving higher education degree. One participant even went on to express the importance of his success to his family and how he views it as collective success among them.

**Limitations**

Limitations of my study include having all participants from the same country. This is the reason why I have not mentioned participants country of birth. Since four of the five participants are from the same higher education institution, it would have been nice to see how DACA recipients navigate other higher education institutions, especially in more urban/metropolitan cities, to compare and contrast resources available to DACA recipients. The one participant that is from a neighboring higher ed institution, Logan, said the institution he attends has a very low
DACA population and he only knows a small number of them. On his campus DACA culture is secretive, his attending university does not divulge any information related to DACA students nor is there a department and/or student organization to connect DACA students across the campus. Logan also admitted that he is not open about his status due to the lack of diversity, and the challenges of being a minority-DACA recipients at a PWI. He does not want to be labeled or judged based on being a DACA recipient but on his work ethic and accomplishments.

**Recommendations**

More studies are needed on DACA recipients from different ethnic groups and backgrounds. It would be interesting to see how those differences in ethnicity, race and culture affect the different DACA population, especially their decision making around their everyday lifestyle choices, to report how they make meaning of their place in American society. It would also be interesting to see how these differences influence their perceived connection in American society and how that connection influences their lifestyle. For example, do Afro-Caribbean’s connect more, identify with, Black American culture? It would be interesting to capture how these interpretations of “self” influence their level of engagement in American society as well. Another recommendation for a study would be to repeat my same study but introduce a social-psychological lens to interpret participant’s lived experience and gauge a deeper understanding of what it is like to be a DACA recipient in today’s American society.

While many people connect DACA with persons of Latinx heritage (specifically, Mexico) more studies are needed on European DACA recipients, and other ethnic groups. It would be interesting to study how European DACA recipients navigate higher education and if they face the same challenges as Latinx, African, and Asian DACA recipients and their involvement/levels of engagement in higher education institutions. The identification of these
differences and/or similarities and seeing if DACA recipients from other regions report whether, in their experience, race plays a role in these differences, would really add to the literature.

Higher education institutions ought to take the time to learn about DACA recipients and the DACA program, understand what the Executive order entails and what their local legislation allows in order to create safe spaces for DACA students. All participants voiced a need for more advocacy, especially from their own communities, undocumented and DACA recipients, including American society, politicians, lawmakers, and higher educational institutions (campus leaders for DACA recipients. Due to their liminal status, neither legal nor illegal, DACA recipients in higher educational institutions represent only a small part of an underrepresented student population on a given campus. Many participants expressed that there is a lot of information available if one knows where to look, but without any guidance as to where it is located the information is, for all intents and purposes, lost. This is a phenomenon that could be ameliorated by the adoption of more open advocacy and outreach efforts on the part of the educational institution. All participants expressed a need for information to be easily accessible as well as for more information provided online. Most participants expressed a need for higher educational institutions to have better systems specifically geared for their unique status, specifically when it comes to financial aid and having access to documents such as transcripts.

Higher educational intuitions can better promote more inclusive campus environments through their departments of Diversity and Inclusion and Institutional Equity. Cisneros and Valdivia (2020) study indicates that it is important to have institutionalized support, such as from campus leaders to advocate for educational equity to improve the experience of all undocumented students. One way that some higher educational institutions across the country are advocating for educational equity for undocumented students is through the development of
Undocumented Student Resource Centers (USRCs). USRCs, institutionally supported, designated physical spaces, on campuses, provide an extensive variation of support services. These support services for undocumented students are meant to enhance their inclusive campus experience through civic and community participation and strengthens mental health in order to overcome academic/personal challenges undocumented students may experience throughout their higher education journey (Andrade, 2019; Cisneros, & Rivarola, 2020; Cisneros, & Valdivia, 2020; Chin Goodby, 2021; Freeman & Valdivia, 2021; Tapia-Fuselier, 2021).

Conclusions

It is already a challenge to attend higher education as a first-generation college student, and even more so having the added stressors of doing so while being a DACA recipient. The addition of the financial and emotional stress of being a first-generation student appears to strongly impact an already vulnerable population with limited status and limited resources. The six themes emerged from the data analysis illustrate that DACA recipients in higher education are resilient and call for the need for advocacy for this population. One way to advocate for DACA recipients in higher education institutions is by enhancing educational equity through designated safe spaces that provide an array of support services to undocumented students, which include DACA recipients. These support services ought to promote inclusivity on campus, mental health services, academic support and engagement within campus and community and access to information resources specific to their needs/status, and financial aid situations.

The DACA population on campuses are small groups of students, and due to the stigma of being undocumented, and having arrived unlawfully in the U.S., there is still a culture of secrecy within the DACA community. Participants in my study are still divided about disclosing their status, even on campus. Some recipients feel that they do not want to disclose their status
on campus because they do not want to deal with the social and emotional setbacks such conversations could invite and choose to just focus on being a “normal” student. Whereas others participants stated they felt that DACA recipients need to be open about their status, specifically DACA recipients in higher education in order to show society that they are hardworking students and non-threatening to American society. By doing this, some participants expressed that they can indirectly teach more people about DACA recipients in the hope of changing old stereotypes.

Due to my study, I can conclude that this culture of secrecy has made it challenging for higher education institutions to address the needs of DACA recipients. The Vice President of Diversity and Inclusion at Western Michigan University, who is one of my committee members, stated in an email that most services and resources that schools offer are off the books (C. McCorkle, personal communication, September 10, 2021). Green (2019) and Vasquez et al., corroborates Dr. McCorkle’s statement, in her study stating that universities that implement policies and/or practices that benefit undocumented students are not made public for many reasons including avoiding attention from federal and state legislators. Four out of the five participants in my study stated being open about their DACA status; these were the first four from the same higher education institution that has a small but strong DACA community. My fifth and final participant stated that he would rather not disclose his DACA status as he wants to be recognized for his accomplishments and not be stereotyped. He is the only who attends a higher education institution different from the first four participants, and the institution he attends does not advertise for DACA nor connects DACA students on campus.

Campus leaders in higher educational institutions have a challenge on their hands and need to find a way to close the gap between respecting the privacy of DACA students and providing them with proper resources unique to their status and needs. Educational equity ought
to be for all students in higher education (Freeman & Valdivia, 2021; Freeman, Varelas & Castillo, 2021). More studies need to be conducted to assess the needs of DACA students and determine best practices to better cater to this unique population in higher education.
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Appendix A

Western Michigan University, Institutional Review Board Approval Letter
Date: October 6, 2021

To: Nancy Mansberger, Principal Investigator
    Alicia Billini, Student Investigator for dissertation

From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair

Re: WMU IRB Project Number 20-09-25

This letter will serve as confirmation that the changes to your research project titled “Dreamers: Stories of DACA Recipients in Higher Education During the 2018-2021 Political Climate” requested in your memo received October 5, 2021 (to change project title "DACA Recipients in Higher Education During the 2019-2021 Political Climate" to "Dreamers: Stories of DACA Recipients in Higher Education During the 2018-2021 Political Climate" and update materials to reflect this change) have been approved by the Western Michigan University Institutional Review Board (WMU IRB).

The conditions and the duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University.

Please note that you may only conduct this research exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project. You must also seek reapproval if the project extends beyond the termination date noted below. In addition, if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the WMU IRB for consultation.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Approval Termination: October 8, 2022
Appendix B

Informed Consent Form
Informed Consent Form

Western Michigan University
Department of Educational Leadership, Research, and Technology

Principal Investigator: Dr. Nancy Mansberger, Ed.D
Student Investigator: Alicia Billini, M.A.

Title of Study: DREAMers: Stories of DACA Recipients in Higher Education During the 2018-2021 Political Climate

STUDY SUMMARY: This consent form is part of an informed consent process for a research study and it will provide information that will help you decide whether you want to take part in this study. Participation in this study is completely voluntary. The purpose of the research is to: *Explore how DACA recipients in higher education make meaning of their experience and how this meaning motivates them to continue to pursue a degree during the current political climate when their fates in the U. S. has yet to be determined* and: “will serve as Alicia Billini’s Dissertation study.” If you take part in the research, you will be asked to partake in an online interview via WebEx. Your time in the study will take up to 60 minutes to complete. Possible risk and costs to you for taking part in the study may be emotional stressors as you will be talking about memories that may cause discomfort to some. After completing the interview, you will receive a $20 gift card as a thank you gift. Your alternative to taking part in the research study is not to take part in it.

You are invited to participate in this research project titled "DREAMERS: STORIES OF DACA RECIPIENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION DURING THE 2018-2021 POLITICAL CLIMATE" and the following information in this consent form will provide more detail about the research study. Please ask any questions if you need more clarification and to assist you in deciding if you wish to participate in the research study. You are not giving up any of your legal rights by agreeing to take part in this research or by signing this consent form. After all of your questions have been answered and the consent document reviewed, if you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to sign this consent form.

**What are we trying to find out in this study?**
The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore how DACA recipients in higher education make meaning of their experience and how this meaning motivates them to continue to pursue a degree during the current political climate when their fates in the U. S. has yet to be determined.

**Who can participate in this study?**
DACA recipients, anyone who has received a DACA visa, in the United States, does not matter whether or not their visa is current, currently enrolled in higher education or with a higher education degree.

**Where will this study take place?**
The study will take place online via WebEx or over the phone.
What is the time commitment for participating in this study?
You can plan to spend up to 60 minutes on a one-time interview.

What will you be asked to do if you choose to participate in this study?
You will be asked to participate in answering a set of questions regarding your early life, your decision to attend higher education and your experience in higher education. This process will take up to 60 minutes. The interview will be audio recorded in order to produce transcriptions to analyze the data, after the transcriptions are finalized the audio recordings will be deleted.

What information is being measured during the study?
The study is a semi-structured interview about your experience in higher education as a DACA recipient. In order to analyze and interpret your story I will need to record our interview, audio only. I will transcribe the audio recording and delete it once the transcript is finalized.

What are the risks of participating in this study and how will these risks be minimized?
You may experience some emotional stressors as you will be talking about memories that may cause discomfort to some. You also may have some doubts about confidentiality; in order to protect you and your information I will not record or store any of your personal information and your transcript will be saved under your pseudonym name.

What are the benefits of participating in this study?
Participants’ will not necessarily be benefited from this study, but I hope that my research will help them tell their story better, be proud of who they are, what they have accomplished, and inspire others. I hope to inspire other people, whether they are DACA or not, that if they have a dream, they can do it. Understanding this unique student population in higher education, graduated from higher education, and their experiences may provide important information for policy makers and for higher education institutions to better address the unique challenges faced by their students who are DACA recipients.

Are there any costs associated with participating in this study?
There are no costs associated with participating in this study.

Is there any compensation for participating in this study?
After completing the interview, you will receive a $20 gift card as a thank you gift.

Who will have access to the information collected during this study?
I (student investigator) will have access to all data collected, the transcripts, the primary investigator will guide and mentor me throughout this study. Transcripts will be stored on my OneDrive account and the PI will have a copy which they will store.

What will happen to my information collected for this research after the study is over?
The information collected about you for this research will not be used by or distributed to investigators for other research.

What if you want to stop participating in this study?
You can choose to stop participating in the study at any time for any reason. You will not suffer any prejudice or penalty by your decision to stop your participation. You will experience NO consequences either academically or personally if you choose to withdraw from this study.

The investigator can also decide to stop your participation in the study without your consent.

Should you have any questions prior to or during the study, you can contact the primary investigator, Dr. Nancy Mansberger at (269) 387-2821 or nancy.mansberger@wmich.edu. You may also contact the Chair, Institutional Review Board at 269-387-4307 or the Vice President for Research at 269-387-8298 if questions arise during the course of the study.

This consent document has been approved for use for one year by the Western Michigan University Institutional Review Board (WMU IRB) as indicated by the stamped date and signature of the board chair in the upper right corner. Do not participate in this study if the stamped date is older than one year.

I have read this informed consent document. The risks and benefits have been explained to me. I agree to take part in this study.

Please Print Your Name

Participant’s signature

Date
Appendix C

DACA Requirements
DACA Requirements

The guidelines to meet DACA requirements are as follows:

1. Were under the age of 31 as of June 15, 2012;
2. Came to the United States before reaching your 16th birthday;
3. Have continuously resided in the United States since June 15, 2007, up to the present time;
4. Were physically present in the United States on June 15, 2012, and at the time of making your request for consideration of deferred action with USCIS;
5. Had no lawful status on June 15, 2012;
6. Are currently in school, have graduated or obtained a certificate of completion from high school, have obtained a general education development (GED) certificate, or are an honorably discharged veteran of the Coast Guard or Armed Forces of the United States; and
7. Have not been convicted of a felony, significant misdemeanor, or three or more other misdemeanors, and do not otherwise pose a threat to national security or public safety. Consideration of deferred action for childhood arrivals (DACA), 2018)
Appendix D

Recruitment Email/Script
Recruitment Email/Script

Hello,

My name is Alicia Billini, I am a former undocumented immigrant. From age 5 to 19 I live in New York undocumented. I graduated high school in 2001 and attempted to get an associate degree in accounting from Borough of Manhattan Community College. It was difficult navigating higher education during that time as I was classified as an international student and had to pay tuition out of pocket. After the infamous 9/11 tragedy and a year of community college I made the bold decision to return to my country of birth to pursue my bachelor’s degree without of the legal and social barriers as well as the financial struggles I was enduring at the time.

Currently, I am a PhD student in Educational Leadership Organizational Analysis at Western Michigan University. I am working on my dissertation which is on DACA recipients in higher education. I invite you to take part in my research study titled DREAMERS: STORIES OF DACA RECIPIENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION DURING THE 2018-2021 POLITICAL CLIMATE.

The purpose of my study is to explore how DACA recipients in higher education make meaning of their experience and how this meaning motivates them to continue to pursue a degree during the current political climate when their fates in the U. S. has yet to be determined. The data is going to be collected through interviews, I will be asking questions about stories related to higher education. The interviews will be up to 60 minutes WebEx video call. This study is important because by sharing your experiences you will provide important information for policy makers and higher education institutions to better address the unique challenges faced by DACA recipients in higher education.

Each participant will receive a $20 gift card after completing the interview as a thank you for your time.

To qualify for this study, participants must meet the following requirements:

1. Be DACA recipient, does not matter if visa is expired or not.
2. Currently enrolled in undergraduate/graduate program in a higher education institution, does not matter if it is a 2- or 4-year college or a university.

If you would like to participate and/or have any questions, please email me.

Cordially,

Alicia
a.billinicastillo@wmich.edu
Appendix E

Flyer
Research Participants Needed for my Study on:
DACA Recipients Experience in Higher Education

Requirements:

1. Must be a DACA recipient actively enrolled in an undergraduate or graduate program or have an undergraduate and/or graduate degree.

2. Be interviewed for 45-60 minutes. (Phone or video call.)

Participation is CONFIDENTIAL and voluntary.

Qualifying participants will receive $20 gift card after completing the interview.

For more information contact Alicia at:
a.billinicastillo@wmich.edu
Appendix F

Interview Protocol
The Interview Protocol: DREAMERS: STORIES OF DACA RECIPIENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION DURING THE 2018-2021 POLITICAL CLIMATE

This is an interview protocol for the Research Questions:

1. Why are DACA recipients motivated to pursue a degree in higher education when their future in the U.S. is uncertain?
2. What challenges have they faced in higher education unique to their status?
3. What factors have supported them in their quest to continue in higher education?

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study about DREAMers experience in higher education during the current political climate. I am interviewing you, along with other DACA recipients in higher ed., to better understand your motivating factors in pursuing a degree as a DACA recipient, the challenges you have faced in regard to your unique status and supporting factors that have aided you in your higher education journey.

In the interview today, I am interested in your life experiences, what they mean to you, how you interpret them, and what has essentially motivated you to pursue your degree in higher education. I am specifically interested in:
(a) your early life, experiences as an undocumented student,
(b) how you came to make the decision to attend higher education,
(c) your experience in higher education, challenges and support, and
(d) what motivates you to continue pursuing a degree during current political climate when your future in this country has not be determined yet.

Again, thanks for letting me interview you about your experiences. After completing the interview, I would like to email you a $20 visa ecard as a thank you for your time, is the email I have on file for you a good one to send it to?

Do you have any questions before starting? Ok, I will begin the audio recording now.

The following are Demographic questions, they describe you as a participant in my study.
1. What is your age?
2. How do you identify? For example, male, female?
3. What is your race? For example, Asian, Hispanic, African?
4. What country were you born in?
5. How old were you when you arrived in the U.S.?
a. What grade were you in when you first started school in the U.S.? For example, did you start kindergarten, first grade?
6. Are you a graduate or undergraduate student?
7. What is your major?
   Do not read: For undergrads ask them:
   Read: Are you also doing a minor? If so, what is your minor?

The following questions focus around my first research question: Why are DACA recipients motivated to pursue a degree in higher education when their future in the U.S. is uncertain?

1. What are your thoughts on education?
   Prompts
   a. Do you believe education is important? Why?
   b. What are your thoughts on learning?
   c. Do you think learning is important? Why?
2. Does your family support your educational journey? If yes, how? Please share a story of a time they have supported you, for example, when you needed help the most.
   Prompts
   a. Does your family believe in education? What are their thoughts? Why or why not do they believe in education?
3. Do you have any other types of support systems? For example, your community, church, friend, teacher, professor?
   Prompts
   a. How do they support you? Please share a story of a time they have supported you, for example, when you needed help the most.
4. Does your attending higher education institution support you on your educational journey? If yes, how do they support you? How do they motivate you?
   Prompts
   a. Do they provide you with any support? If yes, what are they?
   b. Do they provide you with any resources? If yes, what are they?
   What do you think your higher education institution needs to be doing to better support you as a DACA recipient?
   Prompts
   c. What do you believe your attending higher education institution could do to better support you as a DACA recipient?
   d. What would you like your attending higher education institution to do better to best support you on your higher education journey?
5. What kind of student were you in high school?
   Prompts
   a. How would you describe the kind of student you were in high school?
6. Currently, how would you describe yourself as a student now?
7. Did you always know you wanted a degree in higher education? Why?
8. Why are you pursing a degree in higher education?
   Prompts
a. Can you recall the influencing factors that made you decide to pursue a degree? If so, what were they?
b. What was your inspiration?
   i. Who was your inspiration?
c. When did you know you wanted to attend higher ed?

9. Have you been keeping up with the news on the DACA program? **Do not read:** If no, summarize current events. **Read:** The Supreme Court ordered the Trump administration to reinstate the program which they refused. The Department of Homeland Security supports the Trump’s Administration decision and has not processed new applications, reduced time of visa from two years to one year.
   a. Has the current political climate affected your journey in higher ed? How? What happened? How has it affected you?
   b. Why are you currently pursuing a degree in higher education during the current political climate?
   c. Does the current political climate impact how you feel about your status in the U.S.?
   d. How does the current political climate make you feel about your status in the U.S. as a student?
   e. How does the current political climate make you feel about the future?
      i. How does this make you feel about your future as a student in higher education?

The following questions focus around my second research question: **What challenges have they faced in higher education unique to their status?**

1. As a DACA recipient in higher ed, what challenges have you faced while pursing your degree?
   a. Could you please share a story of a challenge you have faced?
      Prompts
         i. What happened?
         ii. How did you deal with it?
         iii. Did you learn anything from it? What did you learn?
         iv. Did this challenge change you in your higher ed journey? How?

2. Thinking back to your higher ed application process, what was the hardest thing about the application process? How did you handle it? Did you receive any help? Did you figure it out on your own? How?

3. As a DACA recipient, how was the application process for attending higher ed?
   Prompts
      a. Did anyone help you with applications? If so, who and how?
      b. Do you recall the application process for attending higher ed? How was it? Could you please tell me how your application process for higher ed was?

4. What did you learn from the application process experience?
   Prompts
      a. Was it stressful?
      b. What made it stressful?
      c. How did you deal with the stress?
      d. What did you learn from it?
5. How did you decide to attend your current higher education institution?
Prompts
   a. Why did you pick the higher ed institution you attend?
   b. Did anyone help you decide? If so, who and how?
6. Did you/do you get any support to fund your higher education expenses? If so, who?
How? What does it cover?
Prompts
   a. How do you fund your tuition/student expenses?
   b. Do you have any scholarships? Grants? Private funding? What does it cover?
   c. Do you pay out of pocket? How do you pay?
   d. Do you work to cover your tuition and student expenses? Such as books, materials needed for class? Commute?
   e. Do you receive financial support from your family? Community? What are other sources of funding provided to your to support your higher education journey? Is it enough to cover your tuition? Student expenses, such as books, materials? Commute?
7. As a DACA recipient, how would you describe your experience higher education now?
   a. How was it pre-COVID? When you were on campus? Interacting with staff? Faculty? Peers?
8. What are you enjoying most about being a student in higher ed?
9. What do you like least about being a student in higher ed?
10. Are you open about your DACA status in your college/university? Why or why not?
Prompt
   a. As a DACA recipient have you had any issues due to your status in you college/university?
11. In your experience, what have been the biggest challenges you have faced as a DACA recipient in higher education?
Prompts
   a. What challenges have you faced as a DACA recipient in higher ed?
   Prompts
      i. How have you dealt with these challenges?
      ii. What is your mindset for dealing with these challenges?
      iii. What have you learned from these challenges?
      iv. Do these challenges affect your everyday life?
         1. Do these challenges affect your life outside higher ed?
12. In your attending higher ed institution, are any resources provided to you as a DACA recipient? If yes, continue:
   a. What resources are offered to support you as a DACA recipient?
   b. Do you know of any resources for DACA recipients at your attending higher education institution? If so, what are they?
   Prompts
      i. How do you feel about these resources?
      ii. Do you believe they are useful to DACA recipients? To you? Why or why not.
   c. Do you participate/take advantage of/use/ any of these resources? If so, which ones and why? If not, why?
i. How do you feel about these resources?

13. Are you involved in any extra-curricular activities on campus? For example, community service, volunteering, student organization. How about pre-covid? What were they?

14. Do you belong to any student organization?
   Prompts
   a. Do you belong to a sorority? Do you have a role in this sorority? If so, what is it? What do you do?
   b. Do you belong to a fraternity? Do you have a role in this fraternity? If so, what is it? What do you do?
   c. Have your DACA status ever limited your participation in this organization? If so, how? Please explain.

15. In your personal opinion, what do you think your attending higher ed institution can do to better support DACA recipients?

The following questions focus around my third research question: **What factors have supported them in their quest to continue in higher education?**

Having support is extremely important to anyone who is venturing on their journey as it provides comfort, knowledge and, at times, inspiration to do better, inspiration for a better tomorrow.

1. Do you have a support system? who or what is your support system?
   Prompts
   a. How has this person supported you? Can you give me an example? Tell me a story of a time this person has supported you?
   b. How has your community supported you? Can you give me an example? Tell me a story of a time your community has supported you?
   c. How has your family supported you? Can you give me an example? Tell me a story of a time your family has supported you?
   d. How have your peers supported you? Can you give me an example? Tell me a story of a time your peers have supported you?
   e. How have your high school teachers/staff supported you? Can you give me an example? Tell me a story of a time this person has supported you?
   f. How have your current professors supported you?
   g. How have your current staff members supported you?
   h. How has your current higher education institution supported you?
   i. What influences you to continue pursuing a degree in higher ed?
   j. Who influences you to continue pursuing a degree in higher ed? How do they influence you?

2. Thinking about your journey in higher education, what are the factors, for example, support systems/self-motivation/determination, that have supported you to continue pursuing a degree in higher education?
   Prompt
   a. What are the factors that motivate you to continue pursuing a degree in higher education?

3. In your experience, what do you believe you need to be successful in completing your degree in higher education? Please explain.
Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience as a DACA student in Higher education?

I will end the audio recording now. Thank you so much for your time.

Notes:
- If participant completed interview, confirm the email they would like to receive their $20 gift card at. **AND**
- Inform them to keep an eye out for the transcribed interview, I will email it to them for feedback.
Appendix G

Interview Email
Hello (name of participant),

Thank you so much for participating in my study. As you may recall I am a former undocumented student who decided to return to my country of birth to finish my bachelors back in 2002. My study on DACA recipients’ experiences in higher education is very important to me as I seek to understand what motivates you to pursue higher education, how you interpret your experiences, and if and how you are affected by the political climate of Trump’s administration.

For our interview please note the following:

- *The attached Informed Consent Form details your confidentiality and other information, please read, sign and return it to me before the interview.*
- *As your participation is anonymous, I will assign you a pseudonym name for me use when referring to you.*
- *The interview will last between 45-60 minutes, but please block out at least 90 minutes for us to meet.*

Please provide me with the following information to schedule the interview around your preferences:

Date:
Time:
Medium: (phone call or video call):

After completing the interview, you will receive $20 gift card as a thank you for your time.

I can’t wait to hear back from you to finalize the scheduling details. Hope you are having a great day.

Kind regards,
Alicia
Appendix H

Interview Confirmation
Interview Confirmation

Hello (name of participant),

I look forward to conducting an interview with you for my dissertation study on DACA recipients in higher education. The purpose of this email is to confirm the date, time and medium of our interview:

Date:
Time:
Medium:

If you have not read, signed and returned the Informed Consent form, please do so before our interview.

As a reminder, block out at least 90 minutes for the interview. The interview should take between 45-60 minutes, but it is best to block out at least 90 minutes in case we need to stop and take short breaks.

After completing the interview, you will receive $20 gift card as a thank you for your time.

Thank you again for your interest and participation in my dissertation study. I am excited to learn about your experiences and listen to your story. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me.

Warm regards,
Alicia
Appendix I

Interview Reminder
Hello (name of participant),

I look forward to conducting an interview with you for my dissertation on DACA recipients in higher education. The purpose of this email is to remind you about the interview we have scheduled. Our interview will last from 45 to 60 minutes and is scheduled for:

Date:
Time:
Medium:

I would like to remind you that while our actual interview is expected to last between 45 to 60 minutes please block out at least 90 minutes in your schedule. This is just in case we need to take short breaks.

After completing the interview, you will receive $20 gift card as a thank you for your time.

Thank you again for your interest and participation in my dissertation study. I am excited to learn about your experiences and listen to your story. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me.

Warm regards,
Alicia
Appendix J

Member Check
Hello (name of participant),

Thank you for sharing your story and experiences as a DACA recipient in higher education with me. As you may recall from our interview, I recorded the interview to transcribe it. I have attached the transcription and would love your feedback, within two weeks’ time, on it as I want to make sure that I captured your responses correctly.

Please review the transcript with the following in mind and answer the following questions:

1. *Does the transcript reflect what you hoped to share? If not, what would you like to add?*
2. *Is there something that you would like to add or clarify regarding your experience?*

   Please bear in mind that I transcribed the interview word for word, to my best attempt, and it reflects spoken language rather than written language therefore perfect grammar is not expected, context is.

You are not required to read or comment on this transcript however I would appreciate your feedback any clarifications if needed.

Thank you for your continuous support and participation in my dissertation study. I look forward to hearing your thoughts and feedback.

Thank you,
Alicia
Appendix K

Member Check Reminder
Hello (name of participant),

Thank you for sharing your story and experiences as a DACA recipient in higher education with me. As you may recall from our interview, I recorded the interview to transcribe it. I have attached the transcription and would love your feedback as I want to make sure that I captured your responses correctly.

Please review the transcript with the following in mind and answer the following questions:

1. Does the transcript reflect what you hoped to share? If not, what would you like to add?
2. Is there something that you would like to add or clarify regarding your experience?

Please bear in mind that I transcribed the interview word for word, to my best attempt, and it reflects spoken language rather than written language therefore perfect grammar is not expected, context is.

You are not required to read or comment on this transcript however I would appreciate your feedback any clarifications if needed. If I do not hear from you in a week from today, I will use the transcript as is.

Thank you for your continuous support and participation in my dissertation study. I look forward to hearing your thoughts and feedback.

Thank you,
Alicia