ABSTRACT

SANCHEZ RAMIREZ, PATRICIA. Examining the Influence of Nested Contexts of Reception on Undocumented Graduate Students. (Under the direction of Dr. Kim Ebert).

Although existing research examines the relationship between receiving contexts and college experiences for undocumented undergraduate student populations, few have investigated the experiences of undocumented graduate students. Given their precarious in-between status as neither adult worker nor "unconstrained" undergraduate student, and their increased number of years interacting with educational institutions, graduate students have more experiences with the different dimensions of higher education, but face more limiting sources of support and guidance. Using in-depth interviews with five current undocumented graduate students in different regions of the United States, as well as a content analysis of blog *testimonios* from an additional nine undocumented graduate students, I examine how contexts of reception shape their graduate school journeys and affect their accessibility to needed resources and support. My preliminary findings suggest that varying combinations of the three dimensions associated with *nested contexts of reception* create differential experiences for undocumented graduate students at the state and local levels. Undocumented students across the United States contend with similar uncertainties and limitations associated with their formal legal status. However, state- and institutional-level policies create divergent opportunities to access financial aid support and meet admissions requirements for in-state tuition rates; which can affect their sense of belonging and security throughout their graduate careers. This ultimately exacerbates existing educational inequities not just between non-citizen and citizen graduate students, but also among undocumented graduate students themselves, a population that is already significantly underrepresented and isolated within graduate and professional degree programs.

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Examining the Influence of Nested Contexts of Reception on Undocumented Graduate Students

by
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DEDICATION

Para mi familia y mi comunidad, muchas gracias por todo su apoyo y cariño. ¡Seguiré haciéndolos muy orgullosos de mí siempre!

BIOGRAPHY

Patricia Sanchez Ramirez was born in Mexico City, Mexico and raised in Conover, North Carolina. After graduating from high school in 2016, she attended Lenoir-Rhyne University as first-generation, Latina immigrant student. In 2020, she graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology with honors, along with a minor in Theoretical Computer Science. She is currently a graduate student in the Department of Sociology at North Carolina State University, specializing in Race, Racism, and Anti-Racism. Her research interests broadly include Latina/o/x experiences, immigration, citizenship, and education.

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INTRODUCTION

Some scholars argue that an undocumented status is a "master status," or a primary identity that shapes an individual's social position. For example, it has an inordinate effect on an individual's ability to obtain "educational incorporation" and achieve social mobility (Valdez and Golash-Boza 2020:3). Gonzales (2016) specifically maintains that an undocumented status may serve as a "master status" during certain life stages. This is the case for many undocumented youth, particularly as it relates to their ability to pursue their educational aspirations and create meaningful social networks. As they transition from childhoods marked by experiences of inclusion with their fellow peers to adolescent and adult lives, experiences of legal exclusion, ostracization, and uncertainty about their future integration into U.S. society can be shocking, particularly as they attempt to pursue higher educational aspirations that they have been carrying since an early age (Ellis, Gonzáles, & Rendón García 2019:165).

Even when undocumented students are able to enter higher education institutions, their experiences and needs are often rendered invisible, and they find it difficult to achieve a full sense of inclusion and support. At its most general level, citizenship does not just refer to a formal legal status; it also speaks to a matter of belonging, which requires recognition by other members within the community one wishes to be a part of (Glenn 2011:3). The "context of reception" in the sphere of higher education influences their feelings of belonging, including their adjustment and acceptance into these institutionalized spaces. The dimensions of these receiving contexts include things like: 1) governmental policies that pertain to a specific group; 2) the societal reception of this group at their arrival, including the size of the group's community and their relationship to the dominant group; 3) and the institutions in which they participate, such as higher education (Portes and Rumbaut 2006).

While some existing research has begun to look at how different contexts of reception create differential college experiences and access to necessary resources for undocumented undergraduate student populations (Enriquez et al. 2019; Golash-Boza and Valdez 2018; Patler 2018), there remains a generally underexplored focus on the experiences of undocumented graduate-level students. My pilot study aims to contribute to this burgeoning literature by examining how contexts of reception affect how undocumented students navigate their graduate school journeys and mitigate their ability to access needed support and aid. I draw on various lines of research from multiple disciplines, including sociology, education, and immigration studies, to examine the following research question: how do contexts of receptions across different regions shape the higher education experiences of undocumented graduate and professional degree students in the United States?

To address this question, I conducted in-depth interviews with five current undocumented graduate students in different regions of the United States in 2022 and 2023, and I analyzed blog *testimonios* from an additional eight undocumented graduate students from 2018 to 2021. Applying a grounded theory approach to analyze interview transcripts and digital *testimonios*, my preliminary findings suggest that varying combinations of the three dimensions associated with nested contexts of reception create differential experiences for undocumented graduate students at the state and local levels. By nested contexts of reception, I am referring to the distinct contexts at the federal, state, and local levels that shape the educational incorporation of undocumented students; including federal policies like the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, state policies on in-state tuition eligibility, and local, institutional reception of undocumented students. (Golash-Boza and Valdez 2018). Undocumented students across the United States contend with similar uncertainties and limitations associated with their

formal legal status. However, state- and institutional-level policies create divergent opportunities to access certain forms of financial aid support, in-state tuition rates, and student support services. Such policies can determine whether they can apply to specific institutions and programs, and whether they feel welcomed and supported by the campus community. This ultimately exacerbates existing educational inequities not just between undocumented and documented graduate students, but also among undocumented graduate students themselves.

In this paper, I begin with a literature review on the integration of undocumented students into higher education institutions and their different experiences within the college admission process compared to their citizen peers. These differential experiences include things such as how they select universities to apply to and their ability to access financial aid. I also examine contexts of reception as a theoretical framework, and how this framework has been used to examine the experiences of undocumented undergraduate students in California. This includes a discussion of "undocu-friendly" spaces on university campuses, which can significantly influence the students' experiences at the local/institutional level. I proceed with a description of my data collection methods and analytic strategy, followed by a discussion of my findings. I conclude with a discussion of future research directions to move beyond this pilot study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Undocumented Students in Higher Education

In 1982, the United States Supreme Court ruled in *Plyler v. Doe* that all children, regardless of their or their parents' citizenship status, were afforded 14th amendment protections, which included a right to educational access. As a result, young undocumented children were formally given access to K-12 education in the United States, and their early integration into American cultural systems has allowed them to "establish identities alongside their U.S.-born

and citizen peers" (Gonzáles et al. 2018:4). Over time, many undocumented youths develop feelings of belonging within the United States, as well as formulating personal aspirations and life goals rooted in "American ideals" (Gonzáles et al. 2018). Many of these goals and aspirations include pursuing higher education and pursuing careers that require certain degrees or certifications.

According to Loya and colleagues (2017:201), approximately three million students graduate from high school per year in the United States, with approximately 65,000 of these graduates being undocumented immigrants. A fraction of these undocumented graduates are able to extend their educational careers beyond high school and pursue postsecondary education. For significant proportion of undocumented youth, the introduction of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program by the Obama Administration on June 15, 2012 (Benuto et al. 2018) allowed for the pursuit of postsecondary education to become a reality. The DACA program allows eligible undocumented individuals to receive a renewable two-year administrative relief from deportation, as well as eligibility for work authorization in the United States, the ability to apply for a Social Security card, and obtain a driver's license (Aranda et al. 2022:1322). Research has shown that the DACA program has increased optimism and motivation to achieve goals among DACA recipients and their families, as well as expanding access to educational and employment opportunities with higher incomes and improved working conditions (Ábrego 2018; Aranda et al. 2022; Wong et al. 2016).

However, as an executive order signed by President Obama rather than approved legislation, the DACA program remains vulnerable to political shifts and challenges. For example, on September 5, 2017, the Trump administration rescinded the DACA program through an executive order. In response to legal challenges from multiple parties, the Supreme

Court ruled to uphold the program and allow new applications in 2020 (Aranda et al. 2022:1323). However, current litigations within District Courts and Courts of Appeal have placed partial stays on the program, allowing for USCIS to accept and process renewal requests from current DACA recipients, but no longer allowing for initial applications (USCIS 2023).

These legal challenges have created an environment of uncertainty among DACA recipients and their families, with their legal status dependent upon announcements and court rulings that can surreptitiously change overnight. Additionally, DACA recipients are still subject to exclusionary policies at the state and local levels that deny them access to certain social institutions and aid resources, like certain university systems and financial aid. Nevertheless, researchers argue that DACA has undoubtedly diversified the opportunities available to many undocumented individuals, allowing recipients to develop more trusting relationships with institutions through their increased integration into these spaces as a result of sanctioned educational and work opportunities (Ábrego 2018).

Recent estimates from the 2019 American Community Survey (ACS) by The Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration and New American Economy (2021) indicate that undocumented students account for more than 427,000, or approximately two percent, of all students in higher education institutions in the United States (2021:1). Additionally, students who are beneficiaries of the DACA program or who are DACA-eligible represent less than half of the undocumented student population, which is approximately 181,000 students or 0.8 percent of all students in higher education (2021:1). When disaggregating between levels of higher education, about 89.7 percent of undocumented students, or approximately 383,000, are enrolled in an undergraduate program, while 87.2 percent (about 158,000) of those who are DACA-eligible are undergraduate students (2021:4). Accordingly, about 10.3 percent of undocumented

students, approximately 44,000, are enrolled in a graduate program, while 12.8 percent (about 23,000) of those who are DACA-eligible are graduate students (2021:4).

As more undocumented students apply to colleges and universities to pursue higher education, several university admission offices have elected to accommodate the specific circumstances of undocumented students. In her interviews with admission officers and staff across six college campus, Nichols (2020:475) found that dependent upon the resources and level of discretion they could exercise, some admission officers and directors have developed "social desire paths" for individual undocumented applicants to follow. Social desire paths refer to actions rooted in desires, interests, or goals that directly address inadequacies in existing structures and institutions. They collectively, but independently, leave an imprint on social structures over time, providing a blueprint for others to navigate bureaucratic institutions that limit their engagement, but without significantly changing the existing structure (Nichols 2014:14). These practices have been identified and studied in existing social scientific research, such as when parents seek exceptions for their child to attend a school not in one's district (Nichols 2014:6). For college admissions staff, following social desire paths allow them to make discretionary decisions on behalf of undocumented applicants that do not break any federal laws or state policies they are required to comply with (Nichols 2020:475). This can include waiving certain application requirements, such submitting proof of English-language proficiency or a Federal Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) application. However, a lack of a formalized process also means that colleges and universities are less likely to be able to provide undocumented students with a concrete plan for how to successfully apply and be accepted into their school (Nichols 2020:476). This differs from their documented counterparts who are able to follow a fairly standard admissions process supported by college and high school staff, and even

from international students, who are typically able to request support and guidance from an institutionally established international officer on campus or an admissions officer specifically trained to work with international students. This can pose a significant barrier for undocumented students who do not have the social and/or cultural capital to navigate the college application process themselves, including those that do not have external advocates who can answer their questions or guide them through the process (Nichols 2020:477).

Researchers and higher education advocates recognize that for many college students in the United States, a key obstacle to accessing and completing postsecondary education is the financial cost. However, for undocumented students, this financial barrier is further exacerbated by their legal citizenship status as they are barred from receiving many forms of financial aid (Thangasamy and Horan 2016:113). Seif and colleagues (2014:181) argue that Section 505 of the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 deters several states from passing provisions that allow undocumented students to pay in-state tuition rates at their public institutions. This is due to the fact that Section 505 is often interpreted as requiring any state that provides in-state tuition to undocumented immigrants who attend its public higher education institutions to also offer the same tuition rate to out-of-state residents who are U.S. citizens (Seif et al. 2014:181). Since public universities substantially benefit from the increased tuition payments from their out-of-state students, state legislatures hesitate to formally challenge this provision and risk diminishing their financial profits.

As shown in Table 1, many states require students with an undocumented status to pay out-of-state tuition at state-supported universities/colleges, if they are allowed to enroll at all. Additionally, many undocumented students are also ineligible for state financial aid in several states as well as being ineligible for any type of federal financial aid. These restrictions are

implemented and reinforced by state legislatures despite evidence from educational researchers demonstrating that in states that allow undocumented students to pay in-state tuition rates, there have been considerable differences found in regards to enrollment rates. For example, Evelyn Nakano Glenn (2011:11) contends that non-citizen Latinos enroll in college in states that allow them to pay in-state tuition at a rate "one and a half times" more than similar students in states without these provisions.

Table 1. Tuition & Financial Aid Policies for Undocumented Students by State/Territory.

Policy Provisions	States
Access to in-state tuition and some state financial aid for resident DACA **and** undocumented students	California, Colorado, Connecticut, District of Columbia, Hawaii, Illinois, Maryland, Minnesota, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Oregon, Rhode Island, Texas, Utah, Virginia, Washington State
Access to in-state tuition for the resident DACA **and** undocumented students	Arizona, Florida, Kansas, Kentucky, Nebraska, Oklahoma
Access to in-state or reduced tuition in at least some public institutions for resident DACA **and** undocumented students	Delaware, Iowa, Michigan, Pennsylvania
Access to in-state tuition in at least some public institutions for resident DACA students **only**	Arkansas, Idaho, Indiana, Maine, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Ohio
Actively bar access to in-state tuition or state financial aid for resident DACA **and** undocumented students	Missouri, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Tennessee, Wisconsin
Actively bar enrollment in all or certain public institutions for resident undocumented students, **but may** still allow DACA students to enroll	Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina

Table 1. (continued).

No known policies on access to in-state tuition or state financial aid for resident DACA **and** undocumented students	Alaska, Louisiana, Montana, North Dakota, Puerto Rico, South Dakota, Vermont, West Virginia, Wyoming

(Higher Ed Immigration Portal: Tuition & Financial Aid Equity for Undocumented Students)

Living with a non-citizenship status further places a burden on undocumented students in obtaining "legal" work opportunities that can allow them to offset the economic constraints they face in obtaining financial aid, placing an additional barrier in their lives to successfully afford a college education. As a result, some undocumented students may elect to work "illegally" in order to generate income that they can then put towards paying their educational expenses. However, this places them in a precarious situation where they can be potentially exploited by their employers or they risk getting reported to or caught by immigration officials and being placed in deportation proceedings (Gonzáles et al. 2018:3).

When attending a public university may not be a feasible option, enrolling at a private university or college may offer more flexibility for undocumented students to obtain institutional tuition support. However, Nichols (2020:483) finds that the ability to provide financial support to undocumented students is usually not fully realized by private institutions. Minimized financial support by private institutions is often rooted in their reluctance to alienate donors, trustees, and alumni who may not support the use of donations and funding to provide financial support to undocumented students. More recently, federal and state threats to sue and/or suspend funding to "sanctuary schools" – educational campuses that implemented protections to ensure a safe environment for all students regardless of legal status – have dissuaded some private institutions from using institutional funds to offer financial aid as they also use/distribute federal financial funds (Enriquez et al. 2019: 683; Immigrants Rising n.d.).

Undocumented graduate school and professional degree program applicants face many of the same challenges in their application processes. However, the way in which the admissions procedures and financial aid offers are structured for graduate schools and programs can bring about additional constraints that are unique to the experiences of undocumented graduate-level applicants. Generally, at the undergraduate level, all institutional policies for admissions and financial aid apply to all undergraduate students; however, this is not the case at the graduate level, where individual departments have some flexibility with admissions and financial aid policies. Funding structures can become particularly difficult for undocumented graduate applicants as funding from private donors can have eligibility requirements related to legal citizenship status (Freeman and Valdivia 2021:82). Freeman and Valdivia (2021:82) find that it is not uncommon for undocumented students to be admitted into a graduate program to later find out they are ineligible to receive the financial aid they had been expecting. Additionally, as shown in Table 2, certain states restrict access for undocumented professionals to practice professions that require a license, such as law, medicine, dentistry, teaching, and cosmetology. Being knowledgeable of these licensure laws is vital for undocumented graduate students because they can significantly affect their pathway into their desired profession, and potentially influence graduate programs' decisions to admit these students (Freeman and Valdivia 2021:82). For example, Escudero and colleagues (2019) argue that graduate schools may be concerned with admitting undocumented students into their professional programs if the state they reside in has not passed a licensure law allowing for undocumented professionals to practice in that state, such as Alabama, Ohio, and North Carolina (see Table 2).

Table 2. Professional & Occupational Licensure Policies for Undocumented Individuals by State/Territory.

Policy Provisions	States
All individuals can obtain occupational licensure in all professions regardless of immigration status (provided that they meet all other requirements)	California, Colorado, Illinois, Nevada, New Jersey
Undocumented individuals can obtain occupational licensure in one or more professions (provided that they meet all other requirements)	New Mexico and Oregon
Individuals with work authorization (DACA recipients) can obtain occupational licensure in one or more professions that require licensure	Arkansas, Connecticut, Florida, Indiana, Mississippi, Nebraska, New York, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Utah, West Virginia
Actively prohibit individuals without legal status from accessing occupational licensure in most or all of the professions that require licensure	Alabama
No policies identified that actively expand access to occupational licensure for undocumented individuals	Alaska, Arizona, Delaware, District of Columbia, Georgia, Hawaii, Idaho, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Montana, New Hampshire, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Puerto Rico, Rhode Island, South Carolina, South Dakota, Texas, Vermont, Virginia, Washington, Wisconsin, Wyoming

(Higher Ed Immigration Portal: Professional & Occupational Licensure)

Some recent studies have found that undocumented graduate students are particularly concerned with issues regarding funding and finding support networks within and outside of their institutions (Freeman and Valdivia 2021). Through the Immigrant Student Research Project, Escudero and colleagues (2019) conducted a survey study of immigrant medical and law students (which included those who are undocumented or have DACA status. Their preliminary

findings revealed that they often draw on family savings to fund their studies and suffer from a lack of support from academic mentors. Undocumented students in particular, were much less likely to report an academic or personal mentor than documented immigrant students. Scholars in the medical field (see e.g., Anaya et al. 2014), highlight the barriers to medical school for undocumented/DACA students, which include receiving conflicting messages from the same institution about whether they are eligible to apply and being ineligible for assistance with application fees from associations like the Association of American Medical Colleges Fees Assistance Program. Conversely, Nakae and colleagues (2017) examine the positive impact of DACA on undocumented medical students' trajectories, including the ability to work while they are in school to secure funding. Within the field of law studies, Muñiz and colleagues (2018) find that among 33 DACA law students, many were uneasy about Trump's rescission of DACA in 2017, but were still determined to pursue careers in the legal field. They discuss the important role of their families in supporting their studies, and how they tried to give back to their families and communities by providing legal information and support based on what they had learned in school. These studies in the medical and legal fields provide insight into the experiences of a subset of undocumented students in graduate and professional degree schools. However, research that explores the experiences of undocumented graduate students in other fields and degree programs (i.e., masters and doctoral programs, humanities programs) is still limited, and generally focuses on DACA-eligible graduate students versus those who are fully undocumented.

Nested Contexts of Reception

As part of their theory of segmented assimilation, Portes and Rumbaut (2006) argue that the level to which immigrants are able to incorporate into the U.S. economy and society is based, in part, on the *context of reception* that receives them upon arrival and shapes their settlement

processes. They describe a *context of reception* being comprised of three dimensions: 1) government policies related to the immigrant group; 2) the societal reception they encounter upon their arrival and settlement into the area, including the presence of other immigrant community members and their relationship to the dominant group; and 3) the condition of the institutions in which immigrants engage with, such as the educational system or the labor market (Portes and Rumbaut 2006). In a positive context of reception, immigrants are welcomed and readily integrated into the community by developing supportive ties and successfully integrating into the labor market or educational system. In a negative context of reception, immigrants are isolated, have difficulty entering various social institutions and markets, and they experience discrimination and hostility from the dominant social group.

In their study assessing how local and state contexts mitigate the effects of the national context on the educational incorporation for undergraduate undocumented students in California, Golash-Boza and Valdez (2018) contend that there are three dimensions that constitute the context of reception that undocumented students face. This includes: 1) government policies that regulate their formal legal status; 2) the societal reception they encounter on campus and within the community; and 3) their engagement with and within their university or college. However, the context of reception is not uniform with respect to their favorability towards undocumented individuals within each of these three dimensions (governmental, societal, and institutional) or at the local, state, or federal level. Indeed, the authors find that the undocumented student experience is not monolithic across all dimensions. While the national context similarly affects most undocumented students by constraining their ability to live within the country without fear of deportation, state-level and local level contexts play a significant role in creating differential educational experiences. State-level context can determine whether or not undocumented

students can attend certain universities and whether they will have access to financial aid. A welcoming local or institutional context can also provide students with a sense of safety and inclusiveness, as well as dedicated resources and support services on campus that can help them navigate different aspects of the college experience. For these reasons, they argue that undocumented students experience *nested contexts of reception*.

“Undocu-friendly” Spaces on University Campuses

Similar to their documented peers, the constraints and uncertainty of navigating higher education spaces does not end for undocumented students, both at the undergraduate and graduate-level, once they arrive on campus. For some, these barriers and feelings of exclusion may even be exacerbated in their new environment, where the local context that receives them may not be as welcoming or accommodating of the unique experiences and circumstances faced by undocumented students. Scholars note interview reports from undocumented students that detail difficulties accessing resources and support on their campuses, being required to educate university staff about their immigration status, and being denied access to opportunities because of their ineligibility (Sarabia et al. 2021:6). Additionally, they suggest that campus inclusion plays an important role in fostering the use of academic and student support services through various forms of social and structural integration (Sarabia et al. 2021:18). Undocumented students, in particular, often experience heighted feelings of belonging and see increased retention on campuses that welcome them into a local context that is considered “undocu-friendly,” and have student support centers specifically dedicated to supporting undocumented students (Sarabia et al. 2021:6).

California’s public university system is often regarded by education and immigration researchers as a template for how university systems can support their undocumented

communities by creating inclusive and safe local contexts for undocumented students and students of mixed-status families to feel accepted and thrive on their respective campuses (Cisneros and Valdivia 2020:52). These spaces, known as Undocumented Student Resource Centers (USRCs), have emerged on college campuses across several states, namely in those with higher percentages of undocumented students enrolled in higher education institutions, like California and Texas (Tapia-Fuselier 2021:133). The development of USCRs is rooted in the larger history of cultural campus centers and student activist movements calling for institutions of higher education to "recognize and integrate their cultures into the academic, social, and administrative functions of institutions" (Cisneros and Valdivia 2020:52). In particular, Black cultural centers and student-activist movements led by Black students in the 1960's and 1970's have served as key models for the establishment of multicultural centers and other support centers responding to the concerns and needs of marginalized communities on campus (Cisneros and Valdivia 2020:52). While these centers were initially developed to provide "safe spaces" for marginalized students, they have expanded their supportive efforts to provide student communities with vital resources and services that help mitigate feelings of isolation and marginalization, which in turn, could potentially help to increase retention and graduation rates among the students they serve.

With 59 USRCs established in the United States at the time of their study, Cisneros and Valdivia refer to them as "physical structures on campus designated as centers that provide a space for undocumented students and students of mixed-status families to obtain institutionalized support" (2020:52). They contend that USRCs provide "visible support structures" that generate feelings within students of being welcomed and supported. Interacting with other students and staff that share similar backgrounds empowers undocumented students to feel comfortable in

asking for help and validates their own experiences, thus "enhancing their educational outcomes" (Cisneros and Valdivia 2020:52). As a result, USRCs can serve as an invaluable means for institutions who are intentionally committed to supporting undocumented students to create a welcoming and supportive local context for them. However, of the 59 USRCs that Cisneros and Valdivia identified, only 30 of them were established at four-year institutions, which of only one was situated within a private institution. The remaining 29 USRCs were located at two-year/community colleges. Thus, when considering how these spaces can contribute to the local contexts that receive undocumented graduate students, it is important to recognize their limited reach to this specific population as a result of their institutional location. Additionally, in order to create spaces that effectively meet the needs of undocumented students from all educational levels (undergraduate and graduate), it is vital to understand how these students are interacting with these spaces and the multitude of different experiences they carry with them into these spaces.

The Current Study

While some existing research has begun to look at how nested contexts of reception lead to differential experiences among undergraduate student populations, there still remains a generally underexplored focus on the experiences of undocumented graduate-level students within U.S. higher education institutions. In comparison to undocumented undergraduate students, there are far fewer undocumented students present within graduate and professional degree programs and have less opportunity to be connected to other undocumented graduate students for guidance and support. Additionally, formal policies and guidelines are much less likely to be institutionally established or available online for undocumented graduate applicants to review in order to determine their eligibility. Thus, I believe that it is vitally important to

understand how educational inequities present in the experiences of undocumented undergraduate students are mirrored in experiences of undocumented students at the graduate level, and how they are directly impacted by their specific contexts of reception. This pilot study will contribute to this field of literature by examining how nested contexts of reception shape and influence how undocumented students navigate their graduate school journeys and how their abilities to access needed support and aid are varied based on regional and institutional contexts. I argue that these differential experiences could ultimately lead to the reification of inequities in access to educational opportunities not only between documented and undocumented students, but also within the undocumented graduate community.

DATA AND METHODS

Recruitment and Data Collection

In order to investigate the experiences of undocumented graduate students in higher education, my study follows a qualitative mixed methods approach using multiple kinds of data. First, I conducted five in-depth interviews with current graduate students who identified as DACA recipients studying in higher education institutions across the United States (sample demographics in Table 3 below). Interviews were conducted from November 2022 to February 2023, and lasted on average between 60 and 90 minutes. All interviews followed a semi-structured format, with a life history approach used to inform the themes and subject matter that I covered within my interview guide, while still leaving an opportunity for me to ask additional questions in order to clarify or expand upon certain responses or salient experiences that my participants shared. This biographical approach offers a framework for developing a better understanding of the participants' lives and how their present circumstances and experiences, as well as their future, are shaped by their past (Cox and Hassard 2007:486, Vaquera et al.

2022:1612). My interview guide included questions regarding my participants' migration histories, experiences with their educational institutions and accessing needed resources, their social relationships with faculty, peers, and administrators, as well as general measures of social psychological well-being, including their sense of belonging at their graduate institutions and academic programs.

For the purposes of this pilot study, all of my participants were required to meet certain requirements in order to participate in an interview. This included being: 1) at least 18 years of age or older, 2) currently enrolled in a graduate or professional degree program based in the United States, and 3) a Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) or Temporary Protected Status (TPS) beneficiary. I opted to only interview DACA or TPS beneficiaries due to the temporary protections from deportation that these programs provide, thus allowing me to mitigate any potential legal risks for my participants as much as possible (IRB #25412). However, my recruitment efforts resulted in all of my participants being DACA recipients. Thus, my analysis and literature review only include a discussion of the DACA program and how it has shaped the educational experiences of my participants.

Table 3. Sample Demographics.

Pseudonym/ Public Name	Self-identified Race/Ethnicity	Age	State of Program	Graduate Program of Study	In-Person or Online
Interview Participants:					
Lola	Mexican/Latinx	25	California	Master of Science in Education	In-Person
Victoria	Mexican/Hispanic	34	West Virginia	Master of Arts in Education	Online
Emmanuel	Mexican	28	New York	Doctorate in Dental Surgery	In-Person

Table 3. (continued).

Angel	Indigenous/ Mexican	28	California	Master in Social Work	In-Person
Beto	Latino	33	Texas	Doctorate in Education	Online
Digital *Testimonios*:					
Emelin	N/A	N/A	Texas	Master of Science in Mechanical Engineering	N/A
Ramon	N/A	N/A	Connecticut	Doctorate in Political Science	N/A
Pratishtha	N/A	N/A	N/A	Master of Science in Biomedical Science	N/A
Frida	N/A	N/A	N/A	Doctorate in Education	N/A
Martin	N/A	N/A	California	Master of Science in Nursing	N/A
Jose	N/A	N/A	California	Master of Arts in Sociology	N/A
Dani	N/A	N/A	N/A	Doctorate in Sociology	N/A
Katy	N/A	N/A	Connecticut	Doctorate in American Studies	N/A
Lucy	N/A	N/A	N/A	Doctorate in Ethnic Studies	N/A

Various recruitment strategies were utilized to find and select potential participants. I began by emailing student-led organizations and institutional student centers at several U.S.-based universities with known or presumed connections to racial/ethnic and/or undocumented students. As part of this strategy, I contacted Undocumented Student Resource Centers/Dreamer Support Centers at multiple universities as they would most likely be able to pass along my study's information to my intended demographic among the students they serve. Within these

emails, I provided recruitment materials for organization leaders to share with their networks, including a virtual flyer and an information form detailing my research study. I also shared virtual recruitment flyers on my personal social media and in various online spaces, including community Facebook groups catering to first-generation and/or minority graduate students, and gave permission for followers/members to share my recruitment flyer with their networks. Additionally, I reached out to multiple Instagram pages run by current graduate students and/or undocumented individuals who dedicate these spaces to cultivating community among other first-generation graduate students of color and/or undocumented individuals. After explaining my research study, these pages agreed to share my virtual call for participants with their followers on their Instagram Stories. This strategy proved to be the most successful, as four of my five participants responded to my call for participants after seeing my virtual flyer shared on these pages. I also had several colleagues share my research study with various academic listservs they were a part of, allowing me to also recruit among virtual academic spaces.

My second set of data includes blog posts from an online series developed by *My Undocumented Life* and *UndocuScholars*, in which they commissioned undocumented graduate students from across the United States to "share advice and reflections about navigating graduate school as an undocumented student" (2019). The series features posts from nine graduate students enrolled in various graduate-level programs within multiple disciplines. I refer to these posts as digital *testimonios*, drawing from a Latin American approach to knowledge production that involves the participant engaging in a critical reflection of their personal experiences within a particular socio-political reality (in the case of this study, an undocumented/DACAmented identity) (Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, and Flores Carmona 2012; Lilly 2022). *Testimonios* are intended to re-center stories of marginalization in order to raise consciousness of these lived

experiences and elicit social change (Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, and Flores Carmona 2012), which aligns with the original intent of these blog publications.

Data Analysis

For my first set of data, I conducted all interviews online through Zoom and I recorded using Zoom's recording feature. I manually transcribed the audio recordings, and all transcripts were de-identified by removing names of people and places shared by participants and replacing them with either pseudonyms or general descriptions that obscured identifiable details while leaving the essential meanings of their responses intact. For the second set of data, the blog *testimonios* were collected from the *My Undocumented Life* website. However, because they are public posts, I opted to use the names and identifying information provided in the posts rather than de-identifying them and using pseudonyms as was done with the interviews.

Data analysis followed a grounded theory approach, which allows for theory to inductively emerge through the continuous interpretation of collected data in consultation with existing literature (Charmaz 2008). Thus, my analysis was an ongoing process as I interacted with the data during the collection and coding phases, allowing for preliminary findings and emerging themes to inform the ways in which questions are adjusted for subsequent interviews and helping to identify early-stage patterns. Open coding was first used to review interview transcripts and to begin identifying broader themes and meanings that emerged from the participants' narratives. These initial codes were then categorized based on their similarities and their conceptualization of ideas and processes that may or may not be currently discussed in existing literature. Finally, these refined codes were condensed as I identified and focused my final discussion on the most salient themes pertaining to my research question. In all stages of

data collection and coding, memos were used to keep track of certain themes, patterns, and specific narrative points that emerge and hold saliency for me throughout the research process.

FINDINGS

National Context: Duality within a Liminal Status

Golash-Boza and Valdez (2018) argue that distinct nested contexts of reception at the national, state, and local level create heterogeneous educational experiences for undergraduate undocumented students in California. Using a similar theoretical approach, my findings suggest that a similar influence can be found among undocumented graduate students across the United States. All of my interview participants were DACA recipients at the time of their interviews, and as such, faced similar uncertainties and constraints associated with their formal legal status, including concerns over the precarity of their DACA status in relation to previous and current legal challenges to the program. Near the end of his interview, Beto shared,

> *"You know, the only time when I was terrified out of my mind was when Trump was in office, because he kept trying to get rid of it. And that he was appointing judges that were saying that they were gonna get rid of it…So yeah, under Trump I was really scared that he's just going to revoke it one day, or he's got all my info, and he's going to, you know, come after me. But definitely scary if he gets reelected, or somebody like him, you know. But so yeah, it's nice having DACA, but I tell people at the same time, it's still never secure. Because all it takes is one person to go in and say, you know, go after them and that'll be it."*

For some of the interview participants, the insecure nature of the DACA program had already manifested in detrimental experiences regarding the revocation or delay of certain benefits they were eligible for as DACA recipients. Victoria recalled how back in 2017, former president

Trump rescinded the DACA program right when she was expecting a decision on her Advanced Parole application to travel outside of the United States to visit a sick relative; her application was ultimately denied as a result of the rescindment. Additionally, Beto shared that during the Trump administration, he lost his job as a result of not receiving his work permit on time. These occurrences led to heightened feelings of stress and anxiety for the participants, and highlight how national policies, like DACA, generate a pervasive environment of uncertainty and insecurity in the lives of undocumented individuals.

On the other hand, several participants acknowledged a sense of privilege and "freedom" that comes from having a DACA status. They recognized the ways in which DACA opened up additional opportunities for them to pursue and afford higher education through access to certain financial aid programs and being able to obtain a work permit in order to be legally employed and pay for their educational expenses. Emmanuel recounted in his interview how after applying for DACA during his undergraduate years, he was able to get his driver's license and was issued a Social Security number and work permit. This allowed him to legally work as a research and lab assistant at his university and he was even able to travel in an airplane for the first time in his life. These developments instilled in him a burgeoning sense of hope and he felt that there was a more positive future in store for him than he had considered prior to DACA, albeit still with some challenges. Dani also reflected on the privilege he has experienced during his graduate career in his blog *testimonio*:

> *"Despite all the obstacles that I have faced in graduate school and the uncertainty of my future after I receive my PhD, I have to recognize the privileged position that I've been in. Few people in my community have the opportunity to attend college, much less*

graduate school. Pursuing a PhD has given me the opportunity to reflect on my experiences and pursue work I am passionate about."

Additionally, Lola's contemplation on the duality of her liminal status in her interview summarizes the nuances that come with being a DACA beneficiary:

> *"…While I know that my legal status has been, can be, limiting, I'm really thankful for it… And then I also know that while I am very grateful, I know this is like not a long-term solution, and I don't think it's sustainable. But it has provided me an opportunity to gain employment and gain an education and I'm grateful for that."*

Through this statement, she recognizes that the DACA program has had a positive impact on her life and expanded the social mobility opportunities accessible to her as a result. Nevertheless, she emphasizes the unsustainable nature of the executive action program and the urgent need for a more substantive, "long-term solution" that actively addresses the insecurities and exclusionary constraints felt by undocumented individuals in the United States.

State-level Context: Accessing Financial Aid Support

As previously discussed, state and institutional level policies largely dictate whether undocumented students pursuing higher education are able to benefit from financial aid support, in-state tuition rates, and whether they are able to apply to certain institutions. These differences, particularly based on state of residency, were significantly evident in the experiences of my interview participants and within the *testimonio* blog posts. Angel and Lola, both California residents studying at California-based public universities, were eligible to pay in-state tuition at their institutions, irrespective of their formal legal status. Both of them were also eligible to apply for California's State University Grant (SUG) program, which provides need-based grant funding through participating universities to eligible undergraduate, credential, and graduate

students who are California residents or AB 540-eligible students (CSU 2023). These grants typically cover tuition fees, and were a significant source of financial support for both Angel and Lola. Angel also disclosed that they received additional financial and resource aid from the Department of Rehabilitation, which included financial support for school-related and living expenses, as well as summer school funding, access to school supplies and funds to purchase clothing for professional development opportunities. Access to these various financial aid programs alleviated both of them from significant sources of stress in relation to their abilities to support their graduate studies, allowing them to focus on their academic performance.

On the other hand, several graduate students shared in their interviews and in the blog *testimonios* concerns with being able to afford tuition payments and related school fees. Emelin, a DACAmented graduate student from Texas, shared her difficulties with affording tuition payments in her blog *testimonio* from 2018:

> *"Since I'm not able to afford the tuition for the full-time track of my master's in Mechanical Engineering program, I only attend two classes on Wednesday and Thursday nights to obtain my degree. Outside of school, I spend my days working full time at a local call center. The workload might seem heavy, but it has become my way of life."*

While her DACA status afforded her the opportunity to have a work permit to work legally to support her educational endeavors and Texas does allow eligible undocumented students to pay in-state tuition and receive state financial aid, Emelin also served as a significant contributor to her families' needs and expenses due to her mother's own undocumented status, thus limiting the amount of discretionary income she had available to put towards her education.

Emmanuel also shared his frustrations with affording dental school tuition and specialty program fees. In order to afford his doctoral education in New York, he has had to take out

several private loans with significant interest rates, totaling to over $300,000 so far. While he has received a few small scholarships from his institution, he is not eligible for many other scholarships due to his legal status, so most of his graduate education has been paid out-of-pocket and with loans. When it came to applying to residencies and specialties, Emmanuel shared how difficult it is not only to be accepted into these programs, but to also afford their exorbitant tuition fees once accepted. Some of the most competitive specialties cost nearly $100,000 per year for tuition alone and do not provide their students with stipends to help offset their costs. Even when looking at paid programs, the stipends they offer can range from $1,000–30,000, which in many areas, is not nearly enough to meet basic needs and living expenses. While Emmanuel mentioned that he has applied to a few residency programs, the associated fees for each application, plus the uncertainty regarding how he would be able to afford the programs' tuition fees if accepted, have ultimately hindered his ability to pursue these opportunities for further training and specialization.

For all of my interview participants and in several blog *testimonios*, the affordability of specific institutions and access to respectable financial aid packages was cited as a significant factor for selecting what institutions and programs they would apply to and ultimately study at. Beto shared that during his search for doctoral programs, he knew that he would not receive any state financial aid through the Texas Application for Student Aid (TASFA) program and that there were few scholarships available to doctoral students that he would be eligible for, so he would need to pay for his school-related expenses out-of-pocket. Thus, it was imperative for him to find a Texas-based university that allowed him to pay an affordable in-state tuition rate. Fortunately, he was able to find a university and program that met his needs, though was still

required to take out private student loans to afford his tuition payments. But he emphasized that these struggles were ultimately worth it to achieve his academic and professional goals.

Ramon also discussed in his 2018 *testimonio* how financial aid ineligibility limited which graduate schools and programs he was willing to consider.

> *"Soon, I realized I was not eligible to receive any funding from public institutions since I was a resident of North Carolina, a state that still charges out-of-state tuition to undocumented students and does not offer financial aid to non-citizens. This fact ruled out ALL public universities, leaving me to contemplate exclusively private institutions."*

This realization compelled him to only consider programs at small, private institutions that offered uncertain financial aid prospects, and most importantly, were not aligned with his general research interests. He added that for many undocumented students, their reality is to settle for attending small, private colleges that are willing to accept undocumented students and willing to provide solid funding packages. Yet, he later argued, in graduate school, the reputation of the university/program and mentorship opportunities with prominent faculty matters more significantly and was not satisfied with his narrowed list. After conversations with his advisors, Ramon decided to not "settle with crumbs" and applied to four top private institutions in the United States. He was ultimately accepted into an Ivy League institution and program that provided supportive mentorship, a competitive funding package, and a comfortable environment for him to thrive. Nevertheless, Ramon's application experience highlights how state-level policies actively influence choice among undocumented students regarding where they can feasibly apply and afford in order to pursue their academic goals. Some states, like California, have policies and aid initiatives set in place that are "undocu-friendly" and make it less stressful for undocumented graduate students to pursue graduate degrees without incurring significant

debt. However, in states with less welcoming contexts of reception, choice is actively constrained for undocumented students in regards to which institutions and programs they can consider based on exclusionary financial aid and admissions policies, thus forcing them to "settle" for options that may not always provide mentorship and professional development opportunities that align with their personal goals.

Local-Level Context: Institutional Awareness and Support

At the local level, institutions can play a significant role when it comes to creating an inclusive and accommodating environment for undocumented graduate students. However, higher education institutions can often be oblivious (or even worse, intentionally antipathetic) on how best to support and assist undocumented students and applicants. During her interview, Victoria shared how during her application process, she spent a significant amount of time reaching out to admissions departments to inquire about their policies regarding DACA recipients. She found that all of the institutions she inquired with had different policies and requirements regarding in-state tuition eligibility and residency classification. For example, some institutions classified her as an international student and required that she pay out-of-state tuition, irrespective of her DACA status and the fact that she has resided in her particular state of residence for several years. When Victoria approached the institution that she currently attends, their admissions department was completely unaware of what DACA was, and she was required to educate them on her formal legal status and on the DACA program, even forwarding them links to informational websites and the Department of Homeland Security's page on the DACA program. They ultimately told her that West Virginia did not have any special accommodations or policies regarding DACA students, and she would still be classified as an international student at their institution. However, all of their students, regardless of residency classification, pay the

same tuition rate, so Victoria was relieved to know that she would not have to pay more simply because of her legal status classification. She admitted that she still occasionally receives requests from university departments to submit documentation that only applies to actual international students. As a result, she has to consistently remind them of her DACA status, though surmises that this probably occurs so frequently because, to her knowledge, she is the only DACA student at her university.

Beto also struggled with his chosen institution in order for his eligibility for in-state tuition to be recognized and accepted. He recounted how his Texas-based institution originally intended to charge him out-of-state tuition as a result of his DACA status. Over the course of five months, Beto had to demonstrate that he did indeed meet the eligibility requirements for in-state tuition as stipulated by Texan state policy. Not only had he graduated from a high school in Texas, but he had been residing in the state far longer than the required three years. His institution finally acceded that he did in fact qualify for in-state tuition, and they admitted that they had rarely dealt with undocumented students at the graduate level and were unexperienced with the process. While, the situation came to a favorable resolution for Beto, he still had to engage in extra work to educate others and advocate for himself, as well as burdening him with heightened level of stress in the process.

In his *testimonio*, Ramon shared more unfavorable experiences during his initial inquiries with admissions departments:

> *"One time I inquired about admissions with a university in the West Coast (whose name I am omitting) that told me they did not accept undocumented students. The thing is, they were so polite and concise in the tone of their email that I barely got mad at the message. A couple of days prior, I emailed the registrar of another program asking if they would*

accept me. Her reply? An unformatted response simply saying, 'We don't take in illegals.'"

He ended up forwarding that hostile, nativist response to the institution's Director of Affirmative Action, who found out that the program Ramon was interested in did, in fact, accept undocumented students and offered to waive his application fee. Ramon acknowledges that not all of the people he interacted with were so openly rude and problematic; on the contrary, most were quite polite and professional even when providing him with less-than-ideal responses and information regarding their admissions policies. He was most likely to encounter ignorance on what it meant to be an undocumented student or surprise that he was applying to a graduate program based on his legal status. However, he chose to use these reactions as a way to gauge how accommodating and receptive certain institutions were of undocumented students, and adjusted his list of potential programs accordingly.

Not all institutional interactions shared by interview participants and in the blog *testimonios* were negative. Both Lola and Angel have been able to tap into their respective universities' Dream Centers (USRC) and affiliated legal services to have their recent DACA renewals fully funded. These renewal applications cost $495 and must be processed every two years, so both of them were grateful for the financial support they received from their Dream Centers. Additionally, Angel has received support from the Dream Center and their legal services team to apply for Advanced Parole in order to attend an international conference. This was an ongoing process at the time of their interview, but they felt very fortunate to have this opportunity available to them.

Resource centers open to all graduate students regardless of legal status were also valuable sources of support and professional development. Lola is especially grateful for the

paper review and writing support services offered by her graduate student center. Coming into her graduate program, she knew she wanted to hone her writing skills further and has been able to see great improvement in her academic writing. Victoria, despite being an online student, has also found support through her university's graduate center and attends events hosted by the center whenever she has available time. Angel also shared appreciation for his university's basic needs center, which has supported him with funding for groceries and meals through their grocery assistance pilot program. Thus, although these services were not directed specifically for undocumented graduate student, they aided in creating a more welcome reception for these students through their provision of invaluable support and comradery, allowing them to feel accepted and worthy of care and support within their university community.

DISCUSSION

Sociological understandings of contexts of reception convey that the level to which immigrants are able to incorporate themselves into American society is based upon the context that receives them upon arrival (Zhou & Bankston 1994; Portes and Böröcz 1989). Golash-Boza and Valdez (2018) build on this theory to posit that the contexts of reception that undocumented students face in higher education are not uniform with respect to three dimensions: national, state-level, and local-level. Extending Golash-Boza and Valdez's theoretical framework of nested contexts of reception, this pilot study explores how they differentially influence and shape the educational experiences of undocumented graduate students throughout the United States across these different dimensions.

My preliminary findings indicate that varying combinations of the three dimensions associated with nested contexts of reception create differential experiences for undocumented graduate students, particularly at the state and local levels. DACA recipients across the United

States contend with the same uncertainties and limitations associated with their formal legal status, including concerns over the insecurity of their DACA status in relation to previous and current legal challenges to the program. Federal policies keep them in a liminal position, and are beholden to the decisions and (in)actions of political elites regarding federal immigration policy. Nonetheless, they are also able to take advantage of expanded opportunities available to them as a result of the DACA program's mandate allowing them to obtain social security numbers, work permits, and driver's licenses, albeit in a temporary manner, in order to pursue educational and professional programs in hopes of achieving some level of social mobility.

However, undocumented experiences are not monolithic, and this becomes evident as we begin to assess differing contexts of reception at the state and local level in regards to their favorability towards undocumented students. As Lola expresses in her interview:

> *"I'm really thankful for it [DACA status] specifically in California…I think that's something important to acknowledge, because I think being undocumented can look really different in different parts of the country."*

As the interview participants and blog *testimonios* demonstrate through the experiences and interactions that share, state-level and institutional-level policies create divergent opportunities for undocumented graduate students to have access to certain forms of financial aid support, in-state tuition rates in their given states of residence, and can determine whether they can apply to specific institutions and programs. In states with more welcoming contexts of reception, inclusive policies and state programs make higher education a more accessible option for DACA recipients by allowing for them to pay in-state tuition rates and apply for state financial aid, greatly reducing their concerns for affording their educational pursuits. States that were less receptive towards undocumented students created a more restrictive environment that limits their

social mobility opportunities through educational attainment. This is done by requiring non-citizen students to pay out-of-state tuition and denying them access to state financial aid resources. In certain cases, this may force undocumented graduate students, like Ramon, to look outside of their current states of residence to find educational options in other states and institutions that have more welcoming contexts of reception. However, not all students, particularly those who have families and/or children like Victoria, may have the option to look at programs elsewhere, thus forcing them to choose between their familial responsibilities and their desires to pursue a graduate-level degree.

Furthermore, institutions are also liable in creating an inclusionary or exclusionary environment for undocumented students and potential applicants. As demonstrated by Beto's, Ramon's, and Victoria's interactions with admissions and financial aid departments, having university staff and administrators who are knowledgeable about the needs and constraints of undocumented students is imperative to ensure equitable access throughout the admissions process. This is even more important at the graduate level, where far fewer undocumented students are present and connected to one another to help guide each other through the process, and where formal policies and guidelines are much less likely to be in place or available online for undocumented applicants to review and determine their eligibility for admissions and financial aid.

Additionally, support centers specifically dedicated to meeting the needs of undocumented students (like USRC's) can be invaluable spaces to provide community and support to a particularly marginalized community of students on college campuses. Ensuring that undocumented students have access to immigration legal services, funding options for immigration-related applications, and spaces to connect with other undocumented students can

provide a safe and welcoming environment for these students, potentially mitigating some of the insecurities and isolating feelings that come with an undocumented status, particularly for graduate students who may already feel isolated due to being one of the few, if not the only, undocumented students in their program or department. Ultimately, this study demonstrates how nested contexts of receptions lead to varying experiences for undocumented graduate students and the ways in which unfavorable policies contribute to the reification of inequities for educational attainment not just between non-citizen and citizen graduate students, but even among undocumented graduate students themselves. Just as Jones (2019) argues for the importance of studying local contexts in regard to new racial formation patterns and race relations, I also contend that a more in-depth focus on the influence of local, institutional contexts on the educational integration of undocumented students at the graduate-level is much needed. Specifically, future extensions of this research could further explore how the implementation of social desire paths by institutional actors and undocumented graduate students could potentially lead to increasingly "undocu-friendly" local and institutional reception contexts, in turn serving as powerful mitigators against the more harmful and liminal consequences of restrictive and exclusionary federal immigration policies.

Limitations and Future Directions

Due to the relatively small size of my interview sample, the experiences of my interview participants are not generalizable to the greater experiences of all undocumented graduate students in the United States. Furthermore, all of my interview participants identified with a Latine/Hispanic background. Based on existing research, the racialization of "illegality" creates differential experiences and perceptions of vulnerability for racialized communities and individuals, affecting how they may experience their undocumented identity and how they

approach social interactions with others. For example, Patler (2018) notes that among undocumented youth in California, Latina/o undocumented students were more likely to be open about their legal status unlike their undocumented Asian and Pacific Islander and Black counterparts, who were more likely to report feeling "isolated and too scared or embarrassed to seek support from their friends." Additionally, based on her comparative research on Korean and Mexican undocumented youth in Los Angeles, Cho (2017) argues that undocumented Koreans are significantly more likely to conceal their immigration status from others. As a result, their ability to create and engage in coalitional relationships are significantly reduced, particularly if they are not aware of other Asians who also hold an undocumented status. Thus, the experiences of my interview participants as graduate students with an undocumented status are also not generalizable to undocumented graduate students from racial/ethnic backgrounds distinct to those of my participants.

However, I argue that this limitation serves as significant motivator to further examine how the racialization of "illegality" affects the experiences of undocumented graduate students within higher education institutions in the United States. In order for universities and graduate/professional degree program to more effectively meet the needs of all their students, regardless of their legal status, it is important to understand how race/ethnicity and citizenship intersectionally impact the ways in which undocumented students experience and operate within higher education institutions. While some existing research has begun to look at these processes among undergraduate student populations (Enriquez et al. 2019; Golash-Boza and Valdez 2018; Patler 2018), there still remains a generally underexplored focus on the experiences of undocumented graduate-level students within U.S. higher education institutions. As such, I propose to expand this pilot study and advance this line of research by exploring how the

racialized construction of "illegality" creates differential experiences and meanings that influence the ways in which racial/ethnic undocumented graduate students seek out and engage in social interactions with fellow students, faculty, administrative staff, and potential mentors; as well as their ability and willingness to access and engage with institutional support and resource systems that are available to them.

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APPENDIX

Appendix A: Interview Guide

<u>Demographic Questions</u>

1. What racial and/or ethnic identity do you self-identify as?
2. What is your current age?
3. Are you a DACA or TPS beneficiary?

<u>Part 1: Immigration and Early Life in the U.S.</u>

4. Tell me about your experience immigrating to the United States.
   a. Where did you immigrate from?
   b. How old were you when you immigrated?
   c. Who immigrated with you?
   d. If it's okay for you to talk about this, what motivated you and/or your family to immigrate to the U.S.?
   e. Do you remember your initial arrival to the U.S.? What was that like? Where did you first arrive?
5. How did you become aware of your undocumented status?
   a. How old were you?
   b. Who told you or talked to you about being undocumented?
   c. What were your feelings when you first found out? Have those feelings changed or stayed the same over time?

<u>Part 2: Early Education Paths</u>

6. Tell me about your early educational experiences.
   a. Where did you go to school? What states?
   b. What kind of schools were they? (Public, private, magnet, charter, early college, etc.)
   c. What kind of student were you? Were you involved in anything?
7. Were you open about your undocumented status to anyone at school?
   a. IF YES → With who? What did you share with them?
   b. IF NO → Why not? How did you keep your status private or secret?
8. Were you encouraged to attend college from an early age?
   a. IF YES → By who? What motivated you to want to go to college?
   b. IF NO → How did you decide you wanted to go to college?
9. Do feel that your undocumented status affected your college aspirations?
   a. IF YES → In what ways?
10. Did you have other undocumented peers or mentors who you looked up to for inspiration or helped you during this time?
11. Tell me about your undergraduate experience.
    a. Where did you go to school?
    b. What was your degree/major?

c. When did you graduate?
d. How did you decide where to attend?

12. Do you remember the application/admissions process for undergrad?
    a. Any issues? Difficulties with meeting application requirements?
    b. Financial Aid? Any help from schools or outside programs?
13. Were you open about your undocumented status to anyone (i.e., friends, classmates, faculty, administration, etc.) during this time?
    a. IF YES → With who? Why? How much did you share?
    b. IF NO → Why not?

<u>Part 3: Experiences with Current Institution & Resource Access</u>

14. Describe your current student status.
    a. Where do you go to school?
    b. What is your program affiliation?
    c. How many years have you been studying in this program?
15. How did you decide you wanted to pursue a graduate/professional degree?
16. Why did you choose your specific school and program?
17. What was the application and admission process for your program like?
    a. Were there any issues you encountered during the application process?
    b. Did you have anyone who helped you with applying to grad school?
    c. Did you highlight or were you open about your undocumented status in your applications?
18. Do you receive any type of financial aid (scholarship, fellowships, grants, etc.)?
    a. What is the financial aid structure like for your school/program?
    b. How did you come across these aid resources?
    c. Do you have to renew them each year/semester?
    d. Do you work on campus as part of your financial aid package?
19. Do you actively use any resources or student support centers available to all students on campus?
    a. Which ones?
20. Does your school offer any resources specifically for undocumented students?
    a. Have you used or benefitted from any of them?
    b. Were they helpful?
    c. Can you share your experience with them?
    d. IF NO → Do you think there exists significant need on your school's campus for these kinds of resources?
21. Can you think of an experience or encounter with an administrative official or resource center on campus that stands out to you? Tell me more about it.
22. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, what has your school's/program's response been like for providing needed/necessary assistance and resources to you and your colleagues?

a. Do you feel like they've done enough?
b. As an undocumented grad student, are there additional resources and help that your school has provided or you think they should provide?

23. With the uncertainty of DACA, has your school shown any solidarity or support for undocumented/DACA students?

Part 4: Social Relationships and Connections

24. What are your interactions like with:
    a. Faculty?
    b. Your classmates/other graduate students?
    c. Administration staff?
25. Do you have mentors or advisors in your program/school that you interact with frequently?
    a. Are they assigned?
    b. What is your relationship like with them?
        i. Comfortable? Professional?
    c. Do they provide relevant advice/support for you?
26. Have you disclosed your undocumented status to anyone on campus?
    a. What is this experience like for you?
27. Generally, how easy is it for you to connect with other people on campus?
28. Have you had opportunities to connect with other undocumented graduate students on campus?
    a. Does your school have specific groups or organizations to help connect undocumented students with each other?
    b. How important is it for you to create these kinds of connections?
29. Are you involved in any social or support groups outside of your school?
    a. Support system outside of school?
30. Do you feel like you belong at your institution and/or your department? Why or why not?
    a. Is there a particular organization or program on campus that has helped you cultivate a sense of belonging?

Wrap-up

31. Is there anything that I we did not talk about today that you think is important for me to know?