“Living in the Shadows”- The Socioemotional Impact of Legal Status on Unauthorized Youths Educational Aspirations

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Abstract:

This article examines the socioemotional impact of an unauthorized legal status on the post-secondary aspirations of undocumented youth, which can set them on a path of anxiety, fear, and uncertainty despite having gained unprecedented prominence around the country. Empirically, this study draws on a series of in-depth interviews conducted with Latino youth immigrants in the San Francisco - Bay Area. Findings reveal that undocumented youth still seek higher education despite facing minimal academic support and nearly non-existent financial support. Having their families as the main source of motivation throughout their educational career, most interviewees did not mind the uncertainty of their academic paths in terms of their liminal status, social stigma, and insufficient support networks. This paper will explore how in spite of age or gender they all shared a deep belief in the notion that higher education serves as a guaranteed path towards upward mobility and social change despite the stigmatized view of an “undocumented” status in the U.S. Lastly, this paper considers how research on undocumented youth can be expanded to have a better understanding of the educational inequality experienced by these students as they attempt to navigate the social, academic, and political waters of the U.S.
Introduction

“Cause at first I didn’t know what “illegal” meant or being here…at the age of nine or ten, I didn’t know what that was. It wasn’t until like we weren’t able to buy a house or even to get a cell phone ‘cause they ask for a social security number... It prevented us from having a better life, something that we were seeking. That’s one of the reasons we came here.”

-Pedro, 23- CSU transfer student.

Recent worldwide movements of capital and global interactions have translated into changes in migratory waves and hence immigrants in the United States are constantly received in a hostile manner, particularly those who are unauthorized. Said population directly impact the U.S. since according to a new preliminary Pew Research Center estimate, as of March 2010, 11.7 million unauthorized immigrants were living in the country (2013). This migratory trend sparked public concern when it comes to unauthorized immigration due to the immediate structural, financial, and social “threat” tied to America’s newer arrivals. Such is the case that through the media itself, those in favor of restricting immigration have represented undocumented immigrants as “undeserving” criminals and possible terrorists (Chavez, 2008). This perception has led to an increased stigmatized view of the approximately 3.2 million unauthorized children and young adults under the age of 24, out of which three quarters (71%) of the population came from from Latin America (Passel, 2006). This being a definite growth from past data, which has resulted from the impact of structural changes in the U.S. economy and other transnational events. These changes in international and national relationships have led to the creation of terms such as “The Latino Threat Narrative” or the “illegal alien,” which only further serve to hinder the development of these young student’s identity (Chavez, 2008).

Taking into consideration that about half of the nation’s undocumented immigrants live in just four states (California, Florida, New York, and Texas with pop. ranging from 630,000 to 2.6 million), there is still no proof of an actual displacement of U.S. born students or added financial burdens on the states’ educational systems. Allowing these undocumented students to obtain higher education by no means signifies fewer “spots” open for U.S. citizens or any other threat for that matter, as it’s usually portrayed through the media. (Gonzalez, 2011). Instead, as will be later explored, many of these students manage to be successful within academia without disrupting the experience of U.S. citizens or permanent residents (Martinez-Calderon, 2009). Consequently, there is a substantial need to understand immigrant youth in order to appropriately design policies and laws that would benefit them. Not only because under the current legal system all their hard work and future goals are ignored, but because their actions also impact our future (Passel & Cohn, 2011).

The truth of the matter is that as these students attempt to make an entrance into the “real world,” the current political decisions made on their behalf will soon impact the U.S. as a whole. After all, these children - without particularly making the personal decision to migrate- are many times educated all of their lives under the American Education System (k-12). In fact, a projected 50,000- 65,000 undocumented students graduate yearly from U.S. high schools and many do so with high honors and leadership roles (Oliverez, Chavez, Soriano, & Tierney, 2006). These achievements are reflected even in the relatively small sample of students interviewed for my study, as all the participants seemed genuinely
interested in obtaining leadership roles and striving for social change. Therefore, it is hard to understand the way that current political debate over undocumented immigrants in the U.S. has largely ignored the presence and value of this youth. Undocumented students ultimately live in two parallel worlds, one which requires them to keep quiet about their families’ background and another which asks them to believe in the power of an education as the key towards upward mobility in life. Whether it is legally correct or not to provide permission to these young adults depends on one’s judicious stance, but it is just as fitting to say that they cannot be solely blamed for their parents’ decision as to come without authorization into the country. Furthermore, previous research studies show the initial investment in their primary and secondary education will have no results as long as there are so many limitations that prevent this talented youth from advancing in life (Gonzalez, 2007).

Limited development takes place because without a settled path to legalize their status, this youth’s postsecondary paths become even more confined and they are left with fewer choices in regards to their future possibilities within American society. The case of undocumented students and their limitations is arguably even more crucial to understand than that of an adult undocumented immigrant because of the role they play as part of our future as a multi-ethnic/multi-racial society. In part, the lack of available resources to achieve their academic goals, caused incertitude and under-developed understanding of postsecondary education resources available to these students. Education has been a viable route towards upward mobility, but denied of many other legal resources, such as jobs and social services, undocumented immigrants often “live in the shadows” of society (Chavez, 2008).

As described by Arriola and Murphy, “Undocumented students fit the profile of the first-generation student as well as the low-income student” and the stressors they face only tend to increase with age. Like the majority of immigrants who arrived to the United States, these students face numerous hardships, obstacles, and unmet needs. Whether the issues are social, emotional, financial, etc. most of these students must learn how to cope with “adult problems” from a very early age. They are confronted with issues such as poverty, family separation, fear of deportation, and even lower educational support. All of this only heightens their pressure to drop out of school and possibly stunt their higher education. However, despite the obstacles, many college-eligible Latino undocumented students exhibit high levels of academic achievement, civic engagements, and leadership positions. Even if they may have long remained “invisible” member of society, they still willingly participate in the college admission process like most young adults their age (Gonzalez, 2007). If it were not for the studied characteristics of resilience and hope that these students have towards obtaining a legalized status, then there would not have been an overall public school enrollment increase among the Latino population or positive results on the way they go about education in the U.S. (Pew Hispanic Center, 2008).

I explore this topic through an independent research study that is based on the way undocumented students’ aspirations are influenced through the socioemotional impact of lacking a legal status. As explored throughout my study, upon realization of their legal status, there are certain experiences that become key influential factors on the Latino undocumented student’s decision process (Perez, P. 2010). First and foremost, I start this study through the use of the following research question: How are postsecondary aspirations influenced by the socioemotional experiences of unauthorized youth who have been raised and socialized in the United States? As well as two other sub-questions that further elaborate on specific themes: What are the reasons that explain postsecondary decisions made by some of undocumented students?, as well as what supportive factors provide a positive influence in these students and their perseverance to thrive? Secondly, I examine these questions with a description of the methodology and data utilized by this study to document the socioemotional influence of an “unauthorized” status on this immigrant youth. Thirdly, I present excerpts of students’ experiences, along with a detailed
comparative analysis to previously held research. Fourthly, I discuss the themes and sub-themes that resulted from one-on-one interviews held with my student sample, as well as any major connections found with previous held research held on undocumented youth. Finally, I conclude with an overview of my experience carrying out this independent research, along with its limitations and recommendations for possible future research.

Undocumented Migration – Unauthorized Youth

Unlike the waves of European immigrants who arrived during the late 19th and early 20th century or the seasonal labor migrants who left their children and families back in their home countries until the 1980’s, contemporary immigrants from a different set of backgrounds usually face different, often stricter policies and a highly negative reception by the American society (Rumbaut, 1997). Changes made in settlement patterns due to pressing immigration policy attempts to curb undocumented migration, have transformed the numbers and composition of the undocumented population (Gonzales, 2009). Due to this change is why the population of the United States is no longer largely White and of European descent, but it instead is rapidly becoming reality that those perceived as “minorities” are actually the largest growing populations (Suarez-Orozco, Paez, 2002). As a result of these changes the undocumented populations shifted from predominantly single male migrants working seasonally to larger proportions of women and children coming from Latin American countries. These immigrant children are considered undocumented when they have no proof that they are U.S citizens, no proof that they are legal permanent residents, or lack any other type of temporary visa (McWhirter, Ramos, and Medina, 2013). This “unauthorized” status leads them to live through a path of allegations and fears from individuals who believe that these newcomers are only planning a Reconquista or reconquest of lands that use to belong to their countries. The “Latino Threat Narrative” detailed in Leo Chavez’s book, describes in that manner how it is that Latinos - unlike any previous immigrant group - are unwilling or incapable of integrating or becoming a part of the American society (2008). This reasoning has not been proven factual, but has still influenced the perception of undocumented populations in the U.S. and their role in society.

This anti-immigrant climate faced by undocumented immigrants resulted in most part from the failed immigration law and policies established thus far. Laws and policies that have not only generalized the diverse backgrounds of these immigrants, but have also ignored their actual contributions to society. Although these types of restrictive laws may have seemed undoubtedly necessary for better control of undocumented immigration, these laws only resulted in a higher criminalization of these individuals. In a country where most laws are established in order to protect and defend the rights of people, these “laws” depicted undocumented immigrants as “criminals, fugitives, and illicit” (Coutin, 2000). While the laws may not expressly prohibit their participation in post-secondary institutions, undocumented students cannot compete for financial aid, legally work, or even drive in most states. For this reason, there is an increased need for more studies focused on the individual students themselves and not on the statistics as these tend to dehumanize the undocumented youth and not see their true significance.

As a result of these migratory changes, it almost seems irrational to continue the use of labels such as "illegal" or "alien," to describe individuals that in the majority of cases are wrongly portrayed or overly generalized in the most inaccurate ways. More significantly, in regards to identity, these individuals have spent almost their entire lives in this country and have barely, if any, memories of their birthplace. How then are they thought to simply be planning to return to their home country and completely disregard contributing to the U.S.? It is even possible to say that in the particular case of undocumented students, there is an even smaller difference between them and their peers if it were not for what Sarah described as those “magical numbers”[Social Security number]. Numbers that have allowed them access to
education, jobs, and overall legal protections that are denied to them post-high school graduation. After all, these students share the same geographic locations, schools, interests, and their overall socialization processes as other native-born or naturalized students (Abrego, 2006).

In such cases, these students are simultaneously included and excluded from U.S. society and their access to basic social rights are sharply been reduced (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001). It is important then to examine the way in which these immigrants, but most importantly the unprotected Latino undocumented youth deal with the education and immigration policies that limit their upward mobility as they transition to adolescence and adulthood (Gonzalez, 2007). Today, undocumented students across the country confront a series of exclusionary state policies that solely limit their socioeconomic opportunities and ultimately affect the future of our society. Contrary to what is constantly portrayed these students are not simply taking spots in our classrooms, but they are actually striving to become leaders, professionals, and active citizens in the U.S. Most importantly, being aware of the significant influence of the Latino population among both education and work environments, it almost seems counterintuitive to keep ignoring the needs of these students, particularly in the case of California. A state that has seen the growth in the pool of young adults who shape 15% to 20% of the total undocumented population (Gonzales, 2009) and lack the adequate means towards educational access and a stable right to work.

The truth of the matter is that most individuals with a migratory background themselves would say that migration, as a whole, is one of the most radical transitions and life-changing decisions that any individual or family can endure (Perez, 2012). Transitioning into a completely new and “unknown” environment is a task that not many are able to accomplish with ease, most significantly if they have to do so while growing up in poverty along with all the associated stressors and dangers of migration (Gonzales, 2009). Due to the language barrier, family separations, social marginalization, and other obstacles; most immigrants are already put in a difficult position upon arrival. However, if to the usual stressors we add the categorizations of “undocumented” or “illegal,” many of these immigrants face an increased fear of deportation and even bigger social complications to further advance in American Society (De Genova, 2004). Even if they do enjoy some protection while growing up, the diversity of experiences felt by having an undocumented migratory status restrict their efforts and are added stressors for further development and fulfillment of their goals once they move into adulthood.

Although recently there has been more research devoted to examining unauthorized immigrants’ processes of integration as well as their socioeconomic impact on the United States’ economy, significantly less research has been done regarding the undocumented student population on its own. The segmented assimilation framework introduced by Alejandro Portes and Min Zhou helped to examine the achievements and incorporation patterns of immigrant children (1993). However, many of these studies combine undocumented with documented immigrant youth and native-born U.S. citizens, which leads to a less precise analysis of the effects of an undocumented status on the aspirations of this youth [which youth group?] (Portes, 1996). By underestimating the effects of an unauthorized status on the incorporation process, these studies tend to leave behind the importance of this status on the life opportunities and the possible motivation of undocumented youth to pursue a higher education. There have been certainly scholarly studies on the educational attainments of the most recent Latino Immigrants, but it remains unclear as to how this status affects the students’ postsecondary aspirations.

According to Portes & Zhou, the segmented assimilation theory studies the system of stratification by which the children of immigrants become incorporated into the new host society. Either it being through acculturation, assimilation, or preservation patterns of incorporation practiced by the immigrant community; there are many possible outcomes for these immigrants as they grow up in their new home country (1993). What is constantly overlooked is how once these undocumented youth obtains a higher education, they
many times find themselves in jeopardy by not being able to use their degree post-graduation. This finding implies that this theory is mostly applicable to only legal residents and citizens in the U.S since it overlooks the weight of each independent state’s decisions in terms of law and policies (Gonzalez, 2007). While most studies use this theory as basis for their analysis and interpretation, this population requires a more in-depth understanding by actually listening to the student’s educational experiences while dealing with their legal paradox (Gonzalez, 2007).

It is widely known that educational attainment is of pivotal importance for the further development of the youth. But if upward mobility depends mainly on limited political policies established thus far, then these undocumented youth may as well end up reproducing the same living conditions experienced by their parents or past generations upon arrival (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001). Something that goes against all the sacrifices made beyond the border in order to pursue the “American Dream.” Having allowed this youth to have legal access to public education throughout high school, it seems almost irrational to simply stop such rights through their college education. As this will also be depriving the country of many productive, educated, and talented professionals. These young adults are certainly becoming “adults” at a much younger age than their peers and without the proper efforts to integrate them into society, the unauthorized youth is left with very few means to achieve productive lives in academia. Without the ability to pursue their education under the current immigration policies, the 7000-13000 undocumented students who have a chance at attending colleges and universities across the United States each year are simply left as in a state of concern and limbo (Gonzalez, 2007; Passel, 2003).

California AB 540, AB 130-1 and Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals

Although it is difficult to determine the exact number of undocumented students in the U.S. public school system due to their forced invisibility, the National Immigration Law Center reported that 40% of the total number of undocumented high school graduates reside in California (NCLR, 2009). This number caused no surprise whatsoever, particularly having gone through at least half of my education under the California Public Education System and seeing the demographics amongst the schools attended. Yet, the most significant reason behind my decision to focus on the state of California is that undocumented students continue to make up only about 1 to 2% of the student population at community colleges, California State Universities, and University of California institutions (Mendoza, 2009). Without the proper support, what exactly are this and the rest of undocumented high school graduates doing after completion of their “free” K-12 education?

In that matter, seeing the large population of undocumented students that reside in the state of California it is not shocking to see the way that there are constant changes being made to state laws and policies that can also be applied to them. A great example of this took place when then Governor Gray Davis’ made the decision to sign Assembly Bill 540 (AB540) which made higher education a reality for both documented and undocumented students that came from relatively low-income families (Abrego, 2008). This ruling nonetheless still lacked federal and state financial aid along with its minimal financial support, nor was it in any way related to providing a fixed solution for the student’s permanent immigration status (NPF, 2010). Similarly, Assembly bills 130 and 131 increased accessibility of undocumented students to continue with their higher education by exempting them from paying non-resident tuition under AB 540 and allowing them to apply to privately funded scholarships offered among California public colleges and universities (State of California, 2012a). However, just like the previous policies and the much earlier Plyler v. Doe (1982) case decision, there was no clear path towards a possible window for the legitimization of their immigration status. Federal and state decision that ultimately caused higher
incertitude for the undocumented youth in terms of their higher education.

Lastly, on August 15, 2012, the Obama Administration announced what would become the “light at the end of the tunnel” that’s was hoped for by the millions of undocumented students in the U.S and it became known as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals. Otherwise known by its acronym, DACA, this program acts as a temporary grant of relief by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security for the millions of undocumented youth who are or are not in deportation proceedings and meet certain criteria (Nevins, 2012). However, as usual, this program does not come free of cost ($465) and still does not provide a path towards lawful permanent residency or citizenship at the end of the 2-year mark. Even more significantly, as described by most students interviewed during my research, this “help” may be revoked at any given point and in no way does it expand to the student’s parents. Reason why there is high concerns for this population of students, as they consider family their number one priority.

The truth of the matter is that despite the establishments of U.S. Supreme Court decision in Plyler v. Doe (1982), Assembly Bill 540 (AB 540, 2001), California Dream Act of 2011, or the recent draft of DACA (2012), undocumented students continue to feel a sense of uncertainty about their futures and the possibility of accomplishing their aspirations towards higher education. Although, these laws and policies provided the opportunity for both undocumented and documented students alike to pay in-state tuition prices if certain criteria are met, they still leave the students with incertitude towards the so-called “opportunities” being given to them. In clarification, our current policy system is inherent with contradictions and limited frames of the “superstar student” who is denied of opportunities due to his/her undocumented status. In order to make the precise changes and for the benefit of future studies on this population, it is necessary to understand that it involves a more diverse set of students than what we see through statistics or the media. Just like there are those “superstar students,” there are also students who for a variety of unexpected reasons cannot excel academically and may feel as “not deserving” of the previously mentioned benefits. A significant example of the impact of socioemotional influence on its own, as it puts extra pressure on the further development of the student both as a scholar and worker.

Moreover, data collected with respect to the origin of these students seems to ignore the fact that despite there being high presence of Latino students as undocumented, there is still a significant number of African, Asian/Pacific Islander, and European descendants who for various reasons also lack a legal status (De Genova 2005). This population of students is composed by individuals of different class status, ages, and most significantly nationality and so the policies created should be just as inclusive of the student demographics. For this reason, many of these students advocate that the DREAM Act would for once and for all settle the situation of a significant number of undocumented students, not only the few who are constantly featured by the media. Without a proper discussion of rights, current debates and policies will eventually represent a return of polarizing conceptualization of students vs. criminals and potentially have a negative impact on the outlook of these students in their postsecondary journey. Beyond the immediate effects on educational opportunities of AB 540 and DACA amongst this youth, the law should also grant undocumented students a new sense of legitimacy (Abrego, 2008).

Methods and Data

This study took place in California, the state with the largest population of unauthorized immigrants at 2.6 million approx. For this study I conducted 15 informal and semi-structured interviews and participant observation during the months of May through July (2014) in the San Francisco Bay Area, Berkeley, and Los Angeles. These interviews allowed me to document how undocumented students live the uncertainty of their day-to-day lives and how they describe their own educational journey. This procedure was possible through a qualitative study that relied on the use of purposive and snowball
Purposive and remain family in snowball interviews of a in this from are upon the youth were semi-structured “deserving essential and respect just statistical sampling, were would my made students identification youth location Skype interview perspective in current in them to Latino future. have maintaining of in observation video participants data, and nonprobability perceived levels the friends involved of and was were Area with and who of the to with and allowed This of positively work negatively, different with All at have followed relation these allowed the of of the to be aware of the most recent news in terms of DACA renewals, current policy changes, and any other events that were applicable to my study.

Interviews were conducted at the location and time requested by the participants. The locations varied from interviewee’s homes, local cafes, to university resource centers all which provided them with a sense of comfort and which allowed them to talk in detail without perceiving judgment in their surroundings. The last was done with all but with the exception of two interviews which were done through Skype video calls since the participants were not in the Bay Area due to school or work responsibilities. Although there was a perceived change in terms of expressive behavior due to the lack of proximity to the participant, the interviews only differed in length and not on the actual content. The difference in length of interview mainly refers to having a more purposive interview, since having limited time available also meant fewer questions to ask them. All of the interviews were done in English, Spanish and “Spanglish,” in accordance to the particular interviewee and how they felt the most comfortable with. A pattern arose between age and use of language, with the older participants deciding to speak in Spanish more often, as this was the student’s “first language” in numerous occasions. All interviews were recorded and transcribed respectfully, with close attention taken to the tone of voice used and reference to any interruptions that may have taken place throughout its duration.

Having a semi-structured interview protocol allowed me to gain fundamental information about the participants’ educational experiences prior and post arrival to the United Stated and understand how influential these may have been on their postsecondary aspirations. This method also allowed me to gather information with respect to origin, family composition, family values and expectations, along with additional demographic information. This information was essential for proving possible transnational links which may factor into participants’ post-secondary decisions to return to home country or remain in their current communities. A pattern that is constantly used negatively, as to prove that these students are only taking the spots of other “deserving students” or that their contributions would not positively impact the American society, when in reality the complete opposite usually takes place.

Moreover, participant observation and short interviews with a few counselors allowed me to get a closer look at the students’ lives while in school, all while maintaining a safe distance for respect to their confidentiality. This permitted a meaningful collection of statistical information and data, taking the participant’s stories as a primary source and the rest as just comparative data. Through these methods I was able to experience the staff’s perspective at an academic environment and learn about the levels of engagement and participation of students in their schools and community. All while also becoming more aware of the level of training in part of the faculty and staff at community colleges and universities, as to be prepared to help the undocumented youth with any questions/concerns they may have in relation to their future. These provided a clearer identification of themes and patterns that were later described in detail.

Table 1: Latino Undocumented AB 540 College Choice Participants
Participants included 15 undocumented female and male undergraduate students and postgraduate students between the ages of 18-30. Most participants were residents in the San Francisco Bay Area. 7 of the 15 were undocumented community college students and currently still enrolled there or proximately transferring to a state university the coming academic year. 7 of these participants were Bay Area undocumented immigrant students who were in the process of completing or had completed a Bachelor’s Degree or higher [Master’s degree or Ph.D.] and one of them was a student who due to particular family situations was not able to continue her education post high school graduation, without necessarily meaning is not her dream to do so. I also interviewed one counselor who had worked with undocumented students for most of his career, as to understand the resources and support available to these students. All students, with the exception of one, arrived to the U.S. either as infants or as young children. Reason why in the majority of cases it was so hard for them to remember much about their lives before coming into the United States other than what their parents or older siblings had told them. The majority of them had no other place to call “home” than what they currently know or what they have known for most of their lives.

Although most participants were undocumented Mexican students due to the high levels of this population along the state of California, my focus remained open to all Latin American undocumented youth for a couple of reasons: First, in terms of participants, it provided me with a slightly bigger pool of individuals that could take part of my data sample due to their migrant backgrounds. Secondly, the distance travelled by migrants also tends to impact the way they assimilate to their “new” home because their transnational links may be a pressing influence on their growth. My original intention towards this criteria was to have as diverse a group of Latin Americans students as possible due to the geographical adjacency with their countries of origin and the way these transnational links may influence their decisions. But as it became more of a challenge in terms of demographics of the state itself, this criteria was no longer essential to the study. I chose to focus my study on this specific group of young adults in order to actually listen to the experiences faced by these students at a location that is so pivotal for the whole undocumented youth movement. This involved researching statistics and longitudinal studies based on this population, but counting on this methodology as supportive and not primary to my study.

Focusing on the social and emotional contexts that shape students’ postsecondary choice processes and practices, this study used semi-structured in-depth interviews with undocumented students as they reflect back to the experience of applying to college and how the lack of support may have heightened tensions over the students’ life-course. The goal was to provide a vocal outlet for these students in order to humanize the statistical data seen elsewhere and to seek a more detailed understanding behind the decisions of this undocumented youth. These contexts allowed a more ethnographic lens to search the data for social understandings of how positive influential interactions or the rather lack of, mattered in the student’s’ educational journey.

In order to provide these stories and examples while retaining the confidentiality of the participants,
one unique pseudonym was created based on the personal interest of the respective participants. All participants were: a) Latino, b) High School graduates/GED recipients; and c) undocumented AB540 students. Still, each participant brought their own experiences and challenges faced before, during, and after the transition into the American society. Prior to analyzing the data, transcriptions were reviewed in detail then coded and grouped by major themes and further analyzed across gender and institutional type. This multi-pronged analysis led to the identification of the following major influences on the Latino undocumented AB 540 college choice process: a) Liminal status b) Outreach opportunities despite social stigma and embarrassment and c) Choices through social support networks.

**UCLA – IDEAS Conference Experience**

On May 24th of 2014, I had the pleasure of attending a conference organized by the AB540 community service project of IDEAS which took place at the University of California, Los Angeles. This daylong event consisted of a variety of workshops, speeches, and a variety of social activities that served to educate the attendees about highly important information for their higher education opportunities as undocumented youth. All while also providing motivational support in order to take a step forward and become the must-needed change in their own communities. The conference titled “7th Annual Immigrant Youth Empowerment Conference,” suggested to me a much different take on the immigration debate from what we are currently being exposed to in the U.S. and much more relevant to my study, nonetheless. The underlying hypothesis of the conference was that the despite contemporary policy changes, the Public Education System in California is still not providing the necessary resources to increase the number of undocumented youth in higher education or providing them with basic rights in general. The location of the conference was also significant, seeing that in Southern California there is an even greater tension between the needs to protect this youth and the needs for overall migration control due to the closeness to the Mexican border. Both things that usually go hand in hand under the current state policies and which were constantly mentioned by both speakers and the attendees of the conference.

The day started off with the provision of a simple breakfast early in the morning, during which both attendees and organizers had the chance to meet and start talking about their goals for the rest of the day. Coming in as an “ally,” I expected to constantly be questioned about my decision to take part in this event. However, such was not the case as many of the students I met during that time were glad that “more people” wanted to learn about their project and the whole movement. As we moved on to the actual auditorium, I was taken aback by the large numbers of not only students, but also parents, teachers, counselors, and other allies also present in the event. There was a short introduction to each of the members of IDEAS at UCLA and to the background of its creation, all while different handouts were passed out along with the schedule of the day. This was followed by a short description of the different workshops taking place throughout the day, which involved scholarships, DACA tutorials, parental support, and many more. All of which could be chosen at the particular interest, age, and background of the attendee.

**IDEAS Background**

IDEAS (Improving Dreams, Equality, Access, and Success) is recognized as “the official voice of undocumented students at UCLA.” Established during the fall of 2003, this movement started as a support network for students and community outreach project and has now expanded its guidance to local middle school, high school, and community college students in transition to higher education institutions. Due to the diversity of the Immigrant Rights movement, this group is formed by individuals from various nationalities, cultural backgrounds, ethnicities, and genders regardless of citizenship status.
The main objective of the group is to provide undocumented students with the resources and support needed to ensure their retention in high education. This last is possible through the implementation of numerous community workshops and informational events that maintains them informed of new opportunities, legislation, and reform within both the state and federal systems. They advocate for fair immigration reform that goes beyond the statistics or media display, reason why it became so relevant to my study. Seeing that most of the students in my interview underscored the significance of having enough support or resources available to them during their educational path, much of what I learned during the conference seemed completely relevant to what I heard throughout my interviews.

Conference Experience

The most significant part about this conference was the liberty by which immigrant youth of all ages, ranging from middle school students to college graduates, were able to step out of the shadows and socialize with one another like at any other major school event. By taking part of this conference, the undocumented students and the allies themselves were able to learn about the different resources available to them such as Assembly Bill 540, the CA Dream Act, and Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, scholarships and many others. Forgetting for at least some hours about all the negative perceptions and stereotypical views by which they are looked at in a constant basis. Many times the only things we know about the growing undocumented youth is based on the portrayals made on TV or through other media and this can lead to destructive criticism that ultimately can affect their decisions or actions. In that sense, these kinds of conferences allow this students to not only learn from one another, but also as a very positive way of creating cross-cultural understanding for the rest of society As the many workshops and speeches came to a close, it seemed as if some sort of veil had been lifted and the participants became much more enthusiastic and confident than what I had observed during breakfast time. This increased confidence exhibited by the attendees could be due, among other things, to the wealth of information and opportunities shared with them through fellow successful students that graduated or an on their way to graduating from higher education institutions.

Data Analysis

Liminal Status

While outlining the major influences on the postsecondary choice process of Latino undocumented students after the conference and through my interviews, the idea of a liminal status came into play from the very start of my research. A kind of “in-between” or “double-ended” status that makes reference to the young immigrants’ uncertain legality as they experience a sense of “American” identity by being raised in this country for most of their lives, yet lack actual “citizenship” that proves so. Whereas undocumented status does not pose too many issues during childhood, the limits imposed by their status begin to emerge at the beginning of their adolescent years. Their entry into adulthood thereafter is further restricted as they face social barriers, stigma, and embarrassment (Gonzalez, 2008)

Undocumented youth, however, experience these transitions in a variety of ways. This status allows them to live their day-to-day lives without being profiled as undocumented or being questioned. While it can tentatively can also cause the students to feel alone in their fight by not being able to share their status with anybody else. Furthermore, in times of stricter immigration controls and laws, this status becomes a significant topic of study as it leads students to feel highly marginalized from the national community despite their own sense of identity (Menjivar, 2006). This is because as it was mentioned
earlier, many of these undocumented students arrive to the United States as young children if not infants, most if not all of them learn the language early on, share customs and interests, and ultimately make of this country their one and only home (Abrego, 2006). This in comparison to older immigrants who arrive to the United States and are unable to fully integrate and assimilate to a country that will forever remain as “foreign” in their minds (Portes and Zhou, 1999). Thus, the idea of not belonging and having a “liminal status” in this country can be considered a central factor of the undocumented youth paths of incorporation in the host society.

Especially taking into account that while growing up the lone idea of attending school is already seen as a privilege by the majority of these students. Despite the limited options they have due to financial needs, transportation, or other responsibilities, “free education” by its central meaning is still perceived as a privilege. An opportunity that allows them to keep a sense of invisibility despite having other obstacles as they cannot legally work, vote, receive financial aid, or drive in most states in the U.S. Otherwise, undocumented students can avoid being questioned about their legal status and maintain a sense of “invisibility” among their peers by remaining in the shadows and away from the very institutions that benefits the rest of their U.S. citizen or naturalized peers. (Gonzalez, 2006). For example, Peruano, a 24-year-old male college graduate speaks about coming to love this country as his own and simply wanting a shot at a better future:

“The promise and ethic theory of like you work, work, work hard and then you gain all these American values. But, these kids, myself included we learned English, we left everything behind, we kinda came to love this [country] and for some they call this their home nation because they only know this and that’s it. They should be recognized as Americans. They should get a chance!”

- Peruano, 24, Graduate student.

For undocumented immigrant children – who truly are facing three challenges as: children, migrants, and undocumented migrants – the alienation from doing what other young adults their age are doing can be a traumatizing experience. More concretely, students take into consideration that they all shouldn’t be paying the price of the decision made for their parents in terms of migrating into the United States without proper documents. For example, Mar explained, “I mean I came here when I was six months old, I had no say in the decision…I blame my parents [jokingly].” In her particular situation her parents decided to come to the U.S. since her dad had already worked here before and was aware of the opportunities available to them. She really did not have an option, and thus the only identity she’s known her entire life is that of being “American.” Something that allowed her to blend in with the rest of her classmates and not really differentiate herself from them in any way, at least that was the case until her junior year of high school came along. A similar situation to Sarah’s experience as she prepared to apply to colleges during her senior year of high school and noticed a pivotal difference between herself and her peers:

“But once you notice that you have to put that especial number on your application and it – it really hits you, you’re like, “Okay, so I’ve worked so hard for this – for this moment so they can just tell me NO, you can’t because you don’t have this.”

– Sarah, 21, Community College student.

This excerpt highlights the painful consequences of an unauthorized status even post passage of AB 540 and DACA for academically oriented students. Sarah as well as other undocumented students shared feeling immensely overwhelmed by the number of obstacles they had to face as an attempt to pursue a higher education, especially considering the fact that they shared a similar academic background
to her legally residing peers and had enjoyed the legal right to a k-12 education until then (Abrego, 2008). In fact, in comparative most of these students tend to excel academically and to be part of a significant number of extracurricular activities, since this may be the only way in which they can increase their chances at a highly competitive institution due to their status. Despite these achievements, college or most specifically the “college of their dreams” as Sarah explained, was still so unaffordable that the only choice left was to attend a community college. This in no way meant experiencing a lower level of motivation towards obtaining higher education and possibly obtaining a BA in the near future. However, this did mean a shift in their self-perception since community college provided support, but still was not what they had hoped or dreamed for. Given that obtaining a college diploma is just not part of the students’ dream goals, but also those of their families.

Community College as an “academic bridge”

In response to this inability to attend their “top choice schools,” a pattern took shape as the majority of these students decided to attend a 2-year school instead of directly going to a 4-year institution. For example, several students in my study gained admission into a California State university or the University of California straight out of high school, but only one was able to immediately attend this kind of institution after graduation. In the case of Jose, this became possible through the help of private scholarships and the passing of DACA around the same time he was researching his tertiary education opportunities. For all other admitted students, the application process to schools outside of community colleges was more of a formality than an actual plan due to lack of knowledge of public policies, college preparatory programs, or private scholarships that would otherwise help them continue on their academic path. Because of these factors the majority if not all of them were forced to settle for the more affordable community college as an academic bridge towards obtaining a Bachelor’s degree. The journey towards college can very well be described as a competition among millions of students, all in hope to succeed in the capitalistic system of the nation. This same competitive factor is what leads these unauthorized students to attempt the application process towards a 4-year college/university and not feel “left behind” by their peers as they all decide to this kind of institution.

Due to the rapid growth of undocumented students, it is believed that they are highly concentrated in urban centers such as Los Angeles, Houston, and New York, but recent data suggests they can be found in any and most communities across the country. For that reason, current changes to state policies made in relation to this population, suggest that undocumented students are highly likely to begin their journey at community colleges rather than at four-year institutions (Gibson, 2003). Conway (2009) attributes this preference to several factors which include the affordability, location, and the absence of affirmative action program/support organizations that would have encouraged these students to apply to four-year universities. The lack of federal and state financial aid encourages undocumented students to keep choosing community colleges as their most preferred post secondary institution (Gonzalez, 2007). Like the case of Sarah, one of the students who saw her college dreams crushed although she was admitted into a UC and several private institutions, the cost of their tuitions was still way out of her reach as a low-income student. This is something that eventually lead her to move on to her second plan, a less expensive community college closer to home:

“It was until high school that it really hit me, like my situation, my legal status because I couldn’t apply to a lot of universities or mostly I couldn’t get the help. Whether if I got in the university [Like it happened with Holy Names], I couldn’t get the financial assistance no- in no way, not even federal aid, state aid, and not even loans because I just simply couldn’t qualify. All what I had as options was to either work illegally or to ask for scholarships, probably for low-income
where they don’t ask you for your social security or just hmm scholar merit.”

-Sarah, 21, Community College student.

This explains the way that despite their liminal status and practically sharing the same background as their native peers, undocumented students still lack of the educational benefits that would assure them access to postsecondary education. Sarah took all the honors and AP classes her high school offered, she participated in extracurricular activities, and held internship and mentoring positions that even her peers were not aware of. But none of these mattered when it came time to make the final decision as graduation approached her. Although there is no actual federal or state legislation that prohibits undocumented students from attending a public or private higher educational institution, there also isn’t much support that says so otherwise. These undocumented students may enjoy of all the privileges of native students throughout their high school journey, yet once they attempt to go to college, the limitations of their legal status become more acute (Gonzales, 2007). Without “the magical number” [social security] as many of my interviewees called it, there just isn’t any secure path towards college. Given the diverse barriers to continuing with their education, many undocumented students see themselves running through a maze looking for all the possible paths towards achieving their goals.

The Social Stigma/ Embarrassment

“Probably this one time- because when I was living in Washington there was mostly – no offense­ but White people, there was a lot of White people and if they saw a Mexican or Latino walking by the store or tryna buy in the store where they are, they look at you differently, they look at you as if you are nothing... Just because you’re from a different color, they just see that you’re not from here, that you don’t have the same class they do. I mean they would treat you differently obviously.”

-Lola, 20, High School graduate.

Another sub-theme related to liminal status was the idea that there is a social stigma or embarrassment surrounding undocumented students’ experiences. Although the majority of students denied ever feeling particularly discriminated against due to their legal status, participants repeatedly recognized that it was critical to stop creating generalizations about them and their backgrounds. As explained by a graduate advisor for San Francisco based organization E4FC, “Undocumented immigrants are usually thought to be the ones who cross the Mexico-US border consciously of their decision, however, the reality is that many of these students enter the country legally and just feel out of immigration status for various reasons” (Chan, 2010). According to DreamActivist.org, an online resource network for undocumented students, they come from places such as Argentina, Bangladesh, Brazil, Croatia, Iran, Mongolia, Peru, Philippines, among many others. Therefore, students from many other ethnic groups lack documentation as well, but “Latinos” constantly become the most targeted group as constantly claimed by my interviewees. Like Lola explains in the excerpt above, having lived in a few different places around Washington and then California in particular, allowed her to see the change in perception experienced by being a) an immigrant and b) an immigrant of color. By just having a certain physical appearance many of these students are already targeted as “outsiders” and this stigma becomes key in terms of social incorporation.

Along the same same lines of appearances and the social stigma tied to having a certain legal status, peruano explained how his experience as a South American immigrant was much different than that of his Central or North American peers. This was in great part due to not only his migratory experience as a whole, but also due to his “American or gringo looks,” as many of his friends would
describe him by. Despite lacking a legal status himself, he did not necessarily know the meaning of being “undocumented” while growing up and it was not until he started his college search that he found out about his limitations as a student. Nonetheless, he expressed acknowledgment towards the stigma and assumptions being made in regards to what an undocumented student “looks like.” There is no universal description of these students, as they all come from different cultural backgrounds and hold different mechanisms to fully incorporate into mainstream America. For this reason, it is critical for current immigration policy to understand how the current undocumented youth includes different groups of immigrants and they all assimilate into the U.S. in very contrasting ways. The segmented assimilation theory as it stands today does not account for the ways that these students’ decisions get influenced depending upon their legal status and this is by far one of the main needs as a society (Portes, 1996).

Throughout their lives under the American Education System these students learn expectations, both external and internal that equate academic success to economic rewards and stability (Abrego, 2006). However, the lack of any clear federal and state action that would permanently resolve their status, only ends up limiting their postsecondary aspirations in terms of security in the future. They may have the desire to pursue higher education or obtain higher ranking work positions in addition to being incredibly successful scholars, but their legal status constantly impedes these goals because of the stigmatization that take place in these institutions (Perez, Patricia A. 2010). Such as the case of Yuridia, who constantly found herself in shame and asking herself the following question, “What would they say if they found out?” Even after settling in a work position with the opportunities given through DACA, there is always the challenge of not feeling completely secure with this status:

“Like having to face my boss, supervisors, or coworkers while knowing that I was there with a fake identification. Like, they may not have known it, but I definitely knew. And it was like, I just wanted to hide whenever I could to not make things any more obvious…”

-Yuridia, 21, Community College student.

Along the same lines, there is also the dilemma faced when undocumented students are compared with their peers and are therefore criticized by the their decisions. This last realization was explored by Lola, a high school graduate who revealed having suffered a significant amount of negative criticism from not only being a teen mom, but being a teen mom “without papers.” As if her situation was not difficult enough due to the lack of a legal status, she then felt that there was absolutely no moral support or financial resources available to her by that matter. The overwhelming feeling that barely any counselor or faculty member was available to provide some guidance was frustrating and it left her thinking that she was completely on her own. However, like most young adults her age, she was certainly thinking of academic opportunities that would benefit both her and her newborn daughter. For that reason, despite the adversities of most teenage mothers, the criticism, and the assumptions made in regards to what an education meant for her, she decided to “prove them wrong” and succeed under her own terms:

“It was hard because people then just think that you come here just to have kids and not achieve any goals, but I showed people they were wrong because I graduated…”

-Lola, 20, High School Graduate.

Lola knew that her path would not be easy post finding out that she was pregnant at the young age of 16. However, she did not expect feeling as alienated from the rest of her peers as she struggled with her own identity in society. Although she knew about her undocumented status from the moment she came to the U.S., it was not until she faced this added pressure and “become an adult at age 18” that she realized all the negativity that comes along with this status. As explored by other participants in my study
as well, most media outlets tend to represent the Latino undocumented youth as either this high-achieving “spectacular” population or to the extreme opposite, as this highly criminalized and not motivated youth. A clear lack of understanding by media sources as they are simply making assumptions about this group of students based on what seems to the most convenient way or what would seek more viewers, readers, etc (Rincon, 2010). Contrary to the media image that undocumented students take part of either of these two groups, Pedro suggests that we look beyond the dichotomy and understand that there is “more in between.” Only in that way, would we finally be able to start eliminating these misconceptions from our communities, campuses, etc:

“Definitely that we are not all like, like the pictures they show on TV, where like –… a “dreamer” as they call us, you know they’re always like 4.0, valedictorians, or like at the top of the class and they always show those like big dreamers you know? And like to a dreamer like me, I don’t feel like I’m on that position you know? And it’s not like I’m looking down on myself, but it’s like they really put the expectations high...Like they portray this image of dreamers as a “perfect Latino” and that doesn’t always happen that way. Like I know many people that get all stressed out about having to stand out and do this or do that …”

-Pedro, 23, CSU transfer student.

In examining the influential factors behind this social stigma and the impact of labels, it is fundamentally important to understand how this adds an extra weight or becomes an added obstacle to the student’s academic trajectories. Because of this stigma many of these students feel like they should not seek out help or even worse, that they don’t deserve an actual place along the “dreamers movement.” An idea that seems completely irrational, but that is actually taking place as students are finding it hard to believe that they are worthy enough of participating in this movement if they “don’t have what it takes” in terms of grades, college prep courses, extracurriculars, etc. According to graduate advisor Beleza Chan, “Undocumented students, are on the outside, just your average student and there is no way to define their identities just by looking at them.” So, with that in mind in addition to Pedro’s excerpt, this heightened social stigma across the media is not just influencing the relationship of the student with his/her peers and quite possibly with their academic counselors due to the fear of being wrongly “classified,” it is also influencing their postsecondary decisions (Chan, 2010). The lack of a better stated representation of the undocumented youth is ultimately affecting entire communities and their perceptions on immigrant rights and the overall opportunities that should or should not be given to these students.

Forgetting Stereotypes
As it was mentioned earlier, being undocumented bears a cultural and social stigma amongst the immigrant community; not necessarily only the Latino community but it is certainly one of the most affected (Chan, 2010). Described all throughout her article “Out of the Shadows, Undocumented Latino Youth,” Carmen Martinez- Calderon explains the way that there is a heavy-weight myth perpetrated through the media with respect to Mexican American undocumented students and the way they do not value education. A definite indication of the lack of deep knowledge of these students, since as demonstrated through my interviews, these students tend to exhibit the same type of optimism, ambition, and perseverance that fuels the rest of their native peers. As described by Daliah, instead of portraying undocumented students as this criminally-oriented or trouble-causing bunch, it should be understood that in the majority of cases they just want a chance at a better future:
“They really just dehumanize or not care about all these people and that they have a dream. They are not here to create chaos or do anything bad, but just to pursue an education, something that it’s not offered in their country. Like you know we can create a positive change, positive outcomes if we were just given the opportunity...”

-Daliah, 23, CSU transfer student.

An undocumented status is already considered shameful and kept secret or “invisible” in fear of rejection and the legal actions that may take place against these students if forced to reveal their identity. However, with increased pressure from the media, it is only reasonable that this youth experiences poor academic performance because there is nothing better expected out of them or what they could possibly contribute back to society (Valencia & Black, 2002). It is because of this same stigma, that many students do not allow themselves the opportunity to explore their postsecondary options beyond possibly working or attending a community college. However just like Lola, Jake also provided me with an idea in regards to how this population its challenging these myths or stereotypes with small but secure steps:

“M: So your undocumented status never stopped your motivation towards school?

J: Hmm not at all – not at all, you know I tried. Like I said earlier, I kept going to community college and I got stuck there, but now hopefully next - well in the fall, I’m actually starting state school. So, I don’t think I really let that affect me that much.”

– Jake, 25, CSU transfer student.

For Lola, Jake, and other students interviewed in this study, their dream of a better life included financial stability and a professional career in their area of interest. Either it being cars like Jake or simply helping and guiding people through the various stages of life, they all just want a chance at fulfilling their own and their parents’ dreams of higher education (Martinez-Calderon, 2009). They speak about how they aspire to continue with higher education despite the challenges faced because it would give back to their parent’s dreams and what they had hoped for their kids upon arrival. “Like I said [before] my dad – he is the one that talks the most to me, like I was just - like he told me that going to college was the way to go...he didn’t want me to end up with a job where I was gonna you know, break my back every day.” Despite the social stigma in regards to their legal status, the majority continue to pursue their dreams of “doing something better” or “being something better” than their own parents or other older relatives ever achieved. These “invisible” students are losing this veil under the current media and politician eye, but without the proper context or description this current exposure may only cause further damage to their academic path.

In the case of Lola in particular, she took these external assumptions as a motivation to continue her studies and “prove them wrong.” The social stigma experienced by these students may be negatively influential, but somehow the majority manage to turn this around and actually make this exposure work in their favor. Despite the negativity of feeling less important or as in the case of Myrel, feeling embarrassed of all the extra chores she had in comparison to most of her peers, most students turned those feelings into motivation to further advance in life. There is no denial that with the palpable risk of being deported most students feel, the law and social stigma play a definite role in their decisions and aspirations. However, as its been described this influence could vary in many different ways. For example, when asked about the effects or influences of having fear, Yuridia responded:
“Honestly it has, because I don’t really aim too high. Cause everything is just like so expensive, how am I gonna do it, I can’t- I don’t see how I would pay it all off or what about if I don’t stay here, what if I end up getting deported. All of that kinda stops me in a way”

- Yuridia, 21, Community College student.

By having to constantly live with the criticism and negativity of society, certain students like Yuridia tend to lose interest or motivation to continue their studies. The support of their families and peers that will be later explored, is many times the only thing that keeps them going, but living under such pressure does take a toll on them eventually. However, this does not completely stop them from pursuing their “American Dream.” Despite the legal ambiguity by which undocumented students live due to the uncertainty of their futures, their postsecondary goals remain fixated on pursuing an educational path. With more studies truly focusing on these students and attempting to understand them as individuals and not just as statistics, we would see that they indeed are not much different than any other teenager in the United States. Despite being born outside of the U.S., not having English as their first language, and/or maybe following certain cultural traditions foreign to the American culture; all of them are undergoing a process of socialization in this country and this ultimately establishes their identification as “American” (Gonzalez, 2011). This identity is what continues to give these student the means of agency against social media’s stigmatization and what also reinforces their confidence and activism to confront such negativity.

Influence of Socio-environmental factors

Like the case of many other first-generation college students who are US-born but possess a significant Latino ethnic background, undocumented students can also be included in the research that focuses on the role of social and environmental factors on their academic success (Perez, Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado, and Cortes (2009). Meaning that undocumented Latino students tend to also benefit from supportive relationships with friends and parents as well as other school engagement, which usually means one particularly supportive counselor or faculty member. However, through the process of college research even such support differs from their legal counterparts. Mostly because these sources become the encouragement that is lacking from the rest of the society and because many times these sources of support do not necessarily have all the resources to assist undocumented students. Most if not all participants agreed on identifying their families as the central support network in the selection of a postsecondary path, yet they also agreed that there was much need for training in part of the school staff and faculty(Perez, 2007).

Family

Among the three types of social networks (familial, peer, and school networks; Pérez, 2007) developed by these students, that of a familial one definitely served as the most significant among my participant sample. In-depth interviews revealed that the single most important factor involved in the postsecondary decisions made by the students was family and how the student’s postsecondary decisions will eventually impact their family’s upward mobility. More specifically participants explained the way that despite the pressures or fears that surrounded their day-to-day lives, being able to provide a better future for their families was more than enough of a source of motivation to pursue higher education. However, most children from undocumented households tend to have parents who did not go to college and therefore are unaware of the U.S. educational system which disables their ability to assist their children throughout the process of transition into college (Pérez, 2012). Such is the case that sometimes the students themselves have to instruct their parents on the steps they needed to take. This last was further described
by Sarah, as she mentioned the way that her parents never really knew the “full background picture” behind her application process or the way that is impossible to speculate how hard the process is for these students, as they many times live in this “little bubble”:

“I think they had an idea, but hmm I don’t believe they had the full hmm knowledge of it because like for example, my dad would ask me “Oh, how is it going with this? How is it going with this application for school.” And basically I would just reply with short answers like, “Oh, it’s going good” or “No, it’s not really working” And basically that was it, but he didn’t know the full background picture of it...And I - I guess no one can really relate to us, this type of students only if you’re in those same person’s shoes because is a whole different type of vision It’s a – it’s like your own little bubble in this society...”

-Sarah, 21, Community College student.

Although families like Sarah’s are many times unable to provide assistance in terms of college attendance or application, the emotional support still plays a critical role in the lives of these students (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). These students expressed that their parents had always emphasized the value of obtaining a good education and most particularly getting a college degree. Such is the case, that many interviewees said that their parents themselves had agreed to say that education was a pivotal cause of their migration. As Mar herself explained, it may have been her parents’ decision to migrate when she was only six months old, but they had ultimately done everything in their power to be able to provide her with the opportunities they lacked back in their home country. For example, when asked to explain about the support role of her parents along with the implementation of DACA she said the following:

“That [DACA implementation] helped me out a lot ‘cause like before that, I – I – before that my dad always told me like. “You’re different from everyone else.” That’s why I had all these special rules, ‘cause like I had to stand out, I had to be different. And his encouragement is what kept me going in school you know, like that’s why I did good in school. I loved doing good and seeing that people liked that I did good...”

-Mar, 22, High School graduate.

There is no doubt in saying that parents and older relatives tend to be the most influential figures in the life of young adults. However, once this particular group of undocumented youth come of age, that support tends to become highly limited. As Nadia explained during our interview, the long-term uncertainty under which immigrants live through delimits their opportunities socially, academically, and professionally as they cannot find someone to whom they can go in search of answers or simple curiosities about “college life” and more. More specifically, as it was the case with Mar and the fear imparted through her father, Daliah touched upon the topic of negative parental influence among the students. Despite being the main source of motivation towards overcoming any academic challenge, there are also many parents of undocumented youth who increase the fear of the students by saying things like” Well no, you don’t have papers, you can’t go!” Due to the lack of understanding of the legal policies of this “foreign country,” many parents fear that there are going against the law by letting their children simply write their names down in any sort of document. Their status as undocumented immigrants creates further concern
and for that reason it causes even more fear in the students as they navigate their way through the “college process” (Gildersleeve, 2010).

Fear

Findings from my research reveal that since the passing of DACA in 2012 most of the students I interviewed felt that some sort of weight had been lifted off their shoulders. This new permit allowed them to feel a sense of security about their status and being able to feel relatively “normal” in terms of work, school, and even driving opportunities. However, with the current standing of California laws and policies, much of the issue of undocumented migration has not been resolved and the fear is still in the back of their and their parent’s minds. This fear is usually passed on from parent to child and which becomes even more apparent as these children reach their teenage years, resulting in a barrier to emotional support.

With age comes a sense of identity and personality development that is shaped by the way these students can or cannot fully integrate into society. The fear of the previously mentioned social stigma may not be constantly present with the newly gained confidence, but consequently the security of their families becomes a major source of concern for this youth. The fear of being judged, reported to ICE, or having someone close to them deported, is a pressing fear for them. So much that the Pew Hispanic Center addressed that just over half of all Hispanic adults worry that they, a family member, or a close friend could be deported (2007). How can this ever be considered as living a “normal” life? This is explained by Jose, a rising sophomore at a University of California who felt that the fear of losing his family due to deportation was a fear that never truly left his mind. The strong support network he found in his university may have given him confidence in terms of his positive worth in society, but nobody could explain the “What is going to happen to our parents?” question. Which ultimately left him in a state of limbo:

“Hmm, a lot of people know about my status like I’m not afraid to say, “Oh I’m undocumented.” ‘Cause I mean, like, I’m not afraid for me, but I am afraid for my family. Like people know, but they just don’t say anything cause some of their parents are undocumented as well. And or they know how it is like some of my friends are undocumented as well so they know how hard it is like.”

-Jose, 19, UC student.

Obligations

Families may truly empower undocumented students to obtain higher education, but it eventually becomes their only source of inspiration through the numerous challenges that were faced before and beyond the border (Gildersleeve, 2010). As previously mentioned, they also become a permanent responsibility for the student and many times leads them to “give up” on their studies and solely focus on sustaining their families through work earnings. This was not a particular case to my participants with the exception of Myrel and Eddie, but many of them did mention at one point feeling that working may be their only choice post high school graduation. More so, knowing that about 10-11 participants worked part-time or even full-time to cover their tuition and help support home at the same time. This places an additional burden on these students, as they have to add the pressure of balancing multiple roles: students, workers, and sons or daughters (Martinez-Calderon, 2009).

All participants in this study recognized the importance of obtaining higher college education and the benefits that this will likely bring to them and their family’s success. However, the path towards achieving that goal is filled with obstacles that influence their motivation and overall emotional well-being.
My study intended to illustrate how the impact of legal status extends far beyond lacking a social security number or not having access to certain services, and as demonstrated the topic of socioemotional influence is definitely one to take close attention to. As Myrel explained:

“Like at one point I was really motivated, when I was okay when I was in College- I was really motivated like I wanted to do everything and succeed, but it was having the whole, having too much in me like being the oldest sister, you know like la hija mayor, like I put that burden on me. Like I wanted to take care of others, so that’s what- like I felt that I couldn’t do it, so I gave up. [tearing up] Cause you know I was like, I would rather work and you know take care of my family… “

– Myrel, 27, CSU transfer student.

Although she may have “outgrown” most of her insecurities and fears through psychological support, the incertitude felt throughout her high school years it’s still present as she attempts to make major life decisions. Undocumented students reported being motivated to do well in school to be able to take care of their families, but this same sense of care ultimately leads them to think that they are being selfish by investing time or money in themselves and not in their families. In part this is due to the fact that despite there being more organizations or political assertions that support their integration in public life, many of these individual youths continue to lack interactions with one another. And if they constantly feel misunderstood or that their voices are not truly being heard, as in the case of many recent statistical studies, then that causes a sense of disappointment in their work and themselves (Nichollis, 2013). A factor that leads this youth to have the same constraints or feelings of frustration throughout the years and something that can only be fixed until if a final statement of possible legalization is provided by the government. Otherwise, all the forms of exclusion only serve as constant reminders of this youth’s “illegality” as presented through the media, and as the main cause of resurgent feelings of shame, awkwardness, and fear (Gonzalez and Chavez, 2012).

Faculty, Staff, and Administrators as social support.

Going beyond the role of families’ socioemotional influence in the postsecondary decisions of the undocumented youth, their rejection to continue “living in the shadows” often comes due to the frustration felt at not finding support in their own secondary institutions. Participants in my study often mentioned that despite the lack of understanding by their parents and peers, their motivation and support often remained positive and constant. However, the lack of professionalism and proper training of their counselors or “mentors” often meant a switch in the student’s postsecondary ideals as these students feel despair when they feel that all their hard work will not pay off or that their dreams will not come true. College counselors often have better understanding of college opportunities available for undocumented students, but in the case of high school counselors or even financial aid advisors the complete opposite tends to happen. The students interviewed often mentioned feeling ashamed or “undeserving” of educational opportunities because of the assumptions made by those same counselors. Undocumented students are regularly reminded about their limitations as they see their classmates joining various academic programs or obtaining financial support, despite less impressive academic records. Like Daliah explains in the following excerpt of her interview, there is an overall lack of responsibility and knowledge in part of these counselors or advisors to learn more about the social contexts of undocumented student:
“ They didn’t even know, you know like she’s AB 540 and they were like “ahhh, what’s that?” And these are the people that we have like, at financial aid, so it was like yeah… and I think that like a lot of the teachers don’t know how to handle that [undocumented student’s limitations], so they would automatically try to push them to – like usually they would send them to a Spanish-speaking professor.”

– Daliah, 23, CSU Student.

Provided that there has been a significant number of undocumented youth that have taken a stand and joined organizational groups all across the Bay Area and California in general, the main source of help students seek is still very limited. The assumptions that only people of their “race” or who speak “their language” can help these students, the damage in the student’s socioemotional well-being. As Lola explained, other than constantly feeling “physically trapped” due to the lack of a driver’s license or work permits and such, these students also tend to feel emotionally insecure of their abilities. Especially, when confronted with these counselor’s negative reactions or often prejudiced commentary. Since in addition to the discouragement felt by these students, their self- worth is negatively influenced as well. In the long run nothing less than more students going back to the low-paying labor market, which is something they and their parent’s wanted to escape from the very start.

It is true that in many cases counselors serve as advocates for undocumented students as well as mentors (Brilliant, 2000). But, if one counselor is not well carefully trained and does not succeed at advising these kids through their postsecondary choices, then just on that there’s already dozens of students who are left unaware of their possibilities for the future. As explained by William Perez, these support networks should be particularly trained to be sensitive to the need of the undocumented youth (2010). This can be done through workshops, one-on-one meetings, conferences, etc.; there are many options available to these counselors as a way to provide better support to undocumented students. The application process may be a significant part of their “job,” but it must be understood that a significant part of the support needed is both social and emotional. These students need someone with whom they can be comfortable sharing their concerns or what may be causing them anxiety or even depression, like Myrel herself experienced. Without careful attention from the academic staff, these students may truly find themselves alone and the possibilities that are still available to them post-graduation.

As exemplified through my study, nobody says that these student-educator interactions would be easy to accomplish or that the trust would be there from the start because that would be a complete misconception. At this juncture, these relationships are of predominant significance. This youth are at a developmental stage where they are solidifying their identities, but having a great deal of guidance is still required. In the end of most if not all interviews, all the participants agreed that they wish more people would be willing to actually listen to their stories and not simply base their judgments on what they see or hear on TV. They are more than thankful for the opportunity to still be able to attend school and have a better chance at success than they ever would have back at “home.” However, they all agreed that their experiences and transition to a postsecondary option would be extensively better if less people would simply label them as “outsiders” or “undeserving” and actually look at the contributions made by their work to both the economy and academic world. Postsecondary choices may be limited for these students, but this does not mean that they should not aware of all the choices available to them and/or especially getting the socioemotional support that is so needed to confront the stigma of today’s society.

Findings
Having a liminal status, feeling fearful or ashamed due to social stigma, and lacking the adequate resources may indeed push undocumented immigrant into the “shadows” and away from success. However, this does not mean that this is the route that they actually wish to take. Although undocumented students face a rather uncertain future, the most recurrent theme collected from my interviews was their persistent optimism. Instead of becoming isolated or alienated from the larger society, most participants agreed to frame their challenges as a source of motivation. Despite the minimal prospect of being able to use their degrees, most students took significant value in just becoming “educated” (Perez, 2012). These students want to feel proud, to make their parents proud, and to feel like productive members of society. Contrary to the popular belief that these students wish to earn status and financial stability to simply go back to their country and benefit such country’s economy, the majority agreed to wanting to see growth in this country and help it as much as they can. As Edgar explained:

“I would like for them to understand that - well we just want an education. To help this country, because it’s not to go back to like Mexico and help Mexico, but that we want to help this country and help its growth. We want to see it grow and only that, we want to help this country.”

-Edgar, 25, CSU transfer student.

Unless there is a pending need for them to stay and support home, they are not willing to put their academic careers on hold for something that has not been solved for over a decade. Instead, as expressed through the variety of my participants’ academic levels, they all have chosen to stay focused and step out of their shadows in order to actually make their postsecondary dreams come true. Although most students who anticipated pursuing postsecondary education were more likely to attend a 2-year rather than a 4-year institution due to time conflicts with other responsibilities, they all were confident enough to say that they planned to continue despite the barriers. Besides the humanitarian reasons for actually seeing this youth as students and not just criminals, numerous studies also suggested that they already are great contributors to the growth of U.S. society. Contrary to the myth that Latinos do not value education, these students see the benefits of obtaining a higher education for achieving upward mobility for themselves and their own families. Over time, with the proper legislation, young men and women who are currently undocumented will improve their education, get better jobs, and contribute back to country they now consider their home. This was further described through Jake’s aspirations towards the development of his own car business:

“...and like just look around and – and don’t try to figure out everyone in general. Take a little bit of time to get to know who you’re talking about, because there’s people out there that come here because they wanna succeed and in a sense like I came here, I wanna get my degree, I want to open up my own business – I wanna employ people, I wanna help other people as much as I’ve been helped.”

-Jake, 25, CSU transfer student.

Having lived in the United States for most if not all of their lives, having adopted many interests and cultural norms as their own and with barely enough knowledge of their birthplace, this country is what students like Edgar and Jake now consider home. As mentioned before, most participants had arrived before reaching the age of 10 years old and therefore have grown conscious of the rather positive impact this migratory move had in their lives in comparison to their lives in their birth place. Many undocumented youth take different pathways of incorporation into the society, according to their own age of arrival, ethnic background, and the amount of resources available to them (Portes and Zhou, 1993; Portes 1999;
Portes and Rumbaut, 2001). The relatively lower expectations expressed through academic staff or the media may lead them to lower motivation towards their academic well-being. But in spite of the many barriers, all of these students ultimately wish to be granted a secure path to legalization that would allow their full integration and fully live through their identity as “Americans”:

“Like we are part of this society, we contribute so much already, but we can do much more. We can do a lot for this country, we can do a lot for society. You know they just kinda have to give us, help us not just for us, but for everybody as a society...if you sent me back to Mexico, what the f*** am I gonna do there? I can’t even speak Spanish that well. I don’t know - I don’t feel completely Mexican, Mexican from Mexico? I don’t feel that way... like you know yeah I’m American.”

-Liz, 21, CSU transfer student.

Conclusion

Against what may be portrayed through non-Latino/a and even Latino/a media outlets, there is not a specific description that can be given to this particular group of students. They may be the highly praised honor student who got rejected by his/her dream school and will instead attend community college or they may well be the student who had to drop out in order to help with a family emergency at home; there is just no way to give them a specific description to this heterogeneous group. It is easy to forget about their legal status if we merely look at all they accomplish during their academic journey as active scholars, civilians, and mentor guides to other fellow students. Despite the socioemotional influence on their aspirations and all the other obstacles faced, these young Latino/a students all have a deep appreciation for the value of education in spite of “growing up in the shadows,” as described in detail by Suarez-Orozco (2011). They are many times fearful of the uncertainty of their futures or the constantly changing immigration laws and policies, but obtaining a higher education that could benefit their families’ upward mobility and overall life fulfillment serves as more than just motivation to continue to strive for their academic goals (Hernandez, et al., 2010; Perez, Cortes, et al., 2010).

The early twenty-first century has been a time of important advancement for the immigration rights movement in the United States (Kibria, Bowman, and O’Leary, 2014). Be it through organizations, immigrant rights advocates, or the remarkable “DREAMers” movement we see on TV, the role of the undocumented youth has definitely become a critical topic of study. In light of this growing presence, we as a nation would be better served by providing further investment in the student’s future and creating a less restrictive immigration policy. Undocumented students in the United States continue to live in ambiguity under the current immigration policy and this is in large part due to the lack of research that focus on the students individually and not just as numbers. Consequently, the present study expanded on the educational development of individual Latina/o undocumented students by testing associations between an unauthorized legal status and its socioemotional influence on their future aspirations. These students have the right to a primary and secondary education, and yet their chances of pursuing higher education become restricted as soon as they reach adulthood and finish their secondary education. If greater access to higher education is part of the national commitment for equality, then it is important to consider these findings as motive to step away from the stigmatization of immigrant students as taking up resources or undeserving of this opportunity.
This is one of the few studies that solely focuses on the role that socio-emotional factors play in Latina/o undocumented youth’s future aspirations and expectations, and thus, there may be limitations with respect to generalizability (William Perez, 2010). It is possible that my findings are based on a particular subset of Latina/o students who experience greater support from family and peers, are more aware of outside resources, or simply feel more optimistic about the future because they have grown accustomed to the ideal of the “Land of Opportunities.” Cases such as Liz’s, show how positive they still consider this country to be despite the barriers that have come their way. In addition, I here note that California has not passed highly restrictive, anti-immigrant legislation such as Arizona or Alabama and that its significantly Latino/a-populated environment is welcoming of immigrants (Perez, 2010). A particular stance by the California state government that could have resulted in Latina/o undocumented students in my study to have stronger positive outlooks for their future. Research with undocumented Latina/o students in other regions may result on different findings in terms of actual educational attainment of U.S. Latinos. Based on these limitations, it is necessary to further develop and implement more specific case studies that would fully analyze the experiences of these students.

By giving light to the barriers, motivations, and sources of support of undocumented students and the role they give to their higher education, this study contributes to the still minimal understanding of the incorporation processes of these students into mainstream America. Previous studies have not accounted for this particular population without relating it to U.S. citizens and permanent residents or labeling them as “invisible” in terms of their association to the segmented assimilation theory. Therefore, it’s critical to have more adequate understanding of the various paths taken by this immigrant youth, along with the factors that influence their decision. In particular, when it comes to providing more interdisciplinary approaches to the divergent experiences of undocumented youth, not just their socio economic restrictions as it has often been done. Altogether, this study could provide support to the present legal analyses that continue to examine possible alternatives to currently established policies. There is no doubt that the enactment of DACA by the Obama administration on June 15, 2012 is a small step forward for some undocumented youth, but it is still does not provide the support necessary to strive for a better future. If there is no change to these policies, instead of giving this youth the opportunity to advance their career development, their hard work will simply be wasted on low-end and low-paying jobs further expanding the creation of an immigrant underclass and spreading the inequality and prejudice experienced by many immigrants in the country.

“Yeah, I mean I don’t remember much about Mexico. I don’t remember any of it, I went to preschool here, kindergarten, and 1st grade until graduation! I went to community college here and now I’m going to a CSU. So, yeah this is everything, this is like my place – this is my home you know. I don’t really know anything else, but here. You know California, that’s it…[the U.S.] this is my country, this is where I’m from.”

– Liz, 21, CSU transfer student.
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Appendices:

*Appendix 1: Data Sample*

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<th>Age of Arrival</th>
<th>Current Age</th>
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