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Cristina Lacomba

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The educational incorporation of DACA recipients in multilayered immigration policy contexts

Cristina Lacomba

Department of Sociology, Harvard University, Cambridge, United States

ABSTRACT

This analysis examines how multilayered policy contexts of reception shape the educational experiences in higher education of the recipients of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. DACA recipients fell into liminal legality between the documented and undocumented categories that exposed them to state-level interpretations of the program. Though recent scholarship debates the effects of immigration laws and policies within the national level on the lives of immigrants, we know little on how DACA recipients are faring in universities that follow state provisions. Building on this scholarship, this study shows that the development of a sense of belonging or exclusion for DACA recipients in college is contingent on the interaction of national and state laws at the local level. The analysis derives from 194 interviews with DACA students in public universities across six states in the United States. Findings show that immigration policies at the federal and state levels raise financial difficulties to the educational incorporation of these students. Furthermore, campus social environments can either help or further complicate DACA students' experiences in college. The study demonstrates how multilayered policy contexts within a federal system can either promote or impede the inclusion and success of liminal legal students.

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Introduction

On June 15, 2012, former United States President, Barack Obama, launched the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. DACA is an administrative program aimed at providing deportation relief and two-year renewable work authorisation to undocumented immigrants who entered the country before the age of sixteen, were under the age of thirty-one before obtaining DACA, had established residence in the U.S. continuously since 2007, were still in school or had graduated from high school (or completed a General Educational Development certificate), or if they were properly released Veterans of the United States Coast Guard or the Armed Forces, and had not been convicted of a felony or a significant misdemeanor (U.S. Department of Homeland Security 2020). As of November 2020, the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services is not processing new DACA applications and is processing pending and

future renewal requests for one year only (U.S. Department of Homeland Security Memorandum, July 28, 2020). Between June 2012 and September 2017, the United States government granted about 800,000 undocumented youth DACA status. Most notably, DACA provided young beneficiaries with tangible incentives (i.e. access to lawful employment and 'driver's licenses) to complete college and find better jobs (Capps, Fix, and Zong 2017; Gonzales et al. 2017; Gonzales, Terriquez, and Rusczyk 2014; Lee, Valdivia, and Brant 2015; Wong et al. 2013).

As an administrative program, 'DACA's inclusionary power is limited: it does not provide a pathway to legalisation, as it only offers temporal protections, and does not address exclusions from federal financial aid, which would help undocumented students with the cost of college. Without these provisions, DACA recipients have fallen into liminal legality (Menjívar 2006), a grey area of legal membership between the documented and undocumented categories, that exposed its recipients to different state-level implementations of the executive order. DACA recipients experience liminality by the temporal status of their work permits. Also, DACA holders lack immigration status and legal stability. For example, states within the U.S. federal system can interpret the administrative program as they see fit. Moreover, born as an executive order, DACA permits can be revoked, and recipients can fall onto legally invisible lives.

Because DACA did not change its beneficiaries' immigration status, state legislators have enacted state-level enforcement of the federal program, creating many different contexts of reception for DACA holders (Arellano 2012). 'States' legislatures have taken the initiative and enacted their laws and policies regarding the undocumented population residing within their state boundaries. As such, at the local level, there is a wide variety of educational policies toward the undocumented student population state by state. Given the liminality in which DACA recipients find themselves and the multilayered policy context they navigate, questions arise regarding their incorporation in public colleges and universities.

Thus, this article asks how multilayered policy contexts of reception shape the sense of belonging (or exclusion) of DACA recipients in public universities across different U.S. states. Sociologists attest to the importance of belonging as a socially constructed primary human need contingent to time, space, and social groups (Alba and Foner 2015; Anthias 2009; Wimmer 2013). In education, researchers show that a sense of belonging in college is consequential for student success in general (Hurtado and Carter 1997; Hurtado, Carter, and Spuler 1996; Ostrove and Long 2007; Engle and Tinto, 2008; Strayhorn 2012; Tinto 2012). This analysis draws from 194 interviews with DACA recipients who, in 2015, attended public universities in the United States.

While the DACA recipients in this analysis share similar socioeconomic characteristics (most interviewees' parents are undocumented and hold low-paying and unstable jobs) and federal protections across the United States, their access to postsecondary education varies depending on state education policy. This comparative investigation focuses on DACA holders who live in states that have enacted policies supporting undocumented students with in-state tuition (California, Illinois, and New York) and in states with exclusionary policies that charge them out-of-state tuition (Arizona, Georgia, and South Carolina).

The analysis uses sense of belonging as a social construct to analyse DACA students' perceptions of their incorporation in public higher education institutions they attend.

Theoretically, it builds on recent scholarship that shows how specific laws and policy conditions create different contexts of reception that shape the educational incorporation of undocumented students (Golash-Boza and Valdez 2018). The analysis also builds on scholarship centred on United States colleges and the barriers these students face in completing their degrees (Contreras 2009; Enriquez 2011; Gonzales 2016, 2011; Terriquez 2015).

The study contributes to this scholarship by focusing on how DACA students are faring in public colleges and universities in states with different educational policies directed toward them. More broadly, the contribution rests in showing how multilayered policymaking contexts shape immigrants' lives in general (JEMS Special Issue, 2018) and those of the undocumented (Newton 2018).

The multilayered policy contexts of reception DACA students navigate shapes the educational incorporation experiences of the DACA recipients in this study. At the federal level, DACA students have the same protections, but their opportunities to develop a sense of belonging and succeed in college depends in part on the state educational policies and the local contexts they encounter. As the article demonstrates, educational policies at the state level and university social environments complicate the range of experiences DACA holders have, despite the proven benefits and inclusionary objectives of the program.

Simultaneous feelings of inclusion and exclusion that derive from the federal, state, and local social environments DACA holders navigate demarcate the possibilities of incorporation for these young adults. This comparison allows us to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the conditions that circumscribe feelings of belonging (or lack thereof) and how these experiences shape the pathways to higher education incorporation and success of students with DACA.

Undocumented students in the United States

In 2013, an estimated 775,000 undocumented children and youths under the age of 18 were living in the United States (Passel et al. 2014, 2016). Owing to the *Plyler v. Doe* (1982) Supreme Court decision, undocumented immigrant students can access United States public secondary (K-12) education. Some estimates indicate that around 65,000 undocumented students graduate yearly from high school (Passel 2003). Nonetheless, this population has limited access to higher education in the country. Despite impediments, in 2014, an estimated 200,000-225,000 undocumented young adults attended postsecondary educational institutions in the United States (Suárez-Orozco et al. 2015). However, a small percentage of these students ever complete their degrees for several reasons.

The local context: undocumented students in higher education institutions

Given their experiences with lacking immigration status and the threat of deportation, these young adults frequently avoid seeking help (Abrego 2006; Gonzales 2007, 2009; Abrego 2011; Abrego and Gonzales 2010; Bean, Brown, and Bachmeier 2015; Contreras 2009; Glesson and Gonzales 2012).

Undocumented students cannot apply for federal or state financial aid, the costs of college are soaring in the United States (Lee 2015), and they are many times required

to pay out-of-state tuition rates (Abrego 2006; Abrego and Gonzales 2010; Gonzales 2016; Greenman and Hall 2013; Cebulko 2014; Yoshikawa, Suárez-Orozco, and Gonzales 2017). Out-of-state tuition rates are much higher than resident tuition rates and make college and university unaffordable for the families of undocumented students (Fortuny, Capps, and Passel 2007; Passel and Cohn 2009; Terriquez 2015). For these reasons, undocumented students are over-represented in more affordable community colleges that impose fewer financial burdens (Abrego 2008; Flores 2010; Flores and Horn 2009; Gonzales 2016, 2010; Hubert and Malagon 2007; Teranishi, Suarez-Orozco, and Suarez-Orozco 2011).

Given the structural limitations undocumented students face, some scholars have examined the academic resilience of undocumented students in 2-year and 4-year higher education institutions (Flores and Chapa 2009; Gonzales 2008; Muñoz and Maldonado 2012; Pérez Huber 2009). For instance, in a study of undocumented Latino students, Pérez et al. (2009) show that while students who perceive social rejection, have parents with low levels of education, and are employed during school, undocumented students with supportive parents and friends who engage in school activities report increased levels of academic success. Pérez, Huber, and Malagon (2007) study the obstacles that undocumented undergraduate students face during their college careers, which include uninviting campus climates, lack of support services, and the need for financial support.

Terriquez (2015) shows that even though undocumented students attend community colleges at higher rates due to their relatively low costs, undocumented students continue to stop out of these schools. They tend to stop out at much higher rates than their documented peers (Teranishi, Suarez-Orozco, and Suarez-Orozco 2011). In a large study that includes undocumented students from different ethnic groups across United States community colleges and 4-year public and private universities, Suárez-Orozco et al. (2015) find similar outcomes for undocumented undergraduate students. In general, students reported staff, faculty, administration, the unavailability of safe places, and the lack of other support such as financial aid, counselling, and information on how to navigate campus as components of what it takes to make an ‘undocufriendly’ campus environment. This empirical reality lends credence to the distinction in higher education discourse between access and graduation.

DACA and higher education

The introduction of DACA in June 2012 partially and temporarily resolved some of the issues for young undocumented people who qualify under the program. Upon obtaining DACA, these young adults do not directly transition into ‘illegality’ and exclusion (Gonzales 2011). DACA offers relief by allowing qualifying undocumented youth to work with government authorisation. Undocumented students use these jobs to pay for college tuition and other expenses (Gonzales, Terriquez, and Ruszczyk 2014). Unlike before implementing the program, DACA recipients can now obtain ‘drivers’ licenses, a key to their ability to move when juggling several jobs and school schedules effectively (Capps, Fix, and Zong 2017; Gonzales et al. 2017; Wong et al. 2013).

The absence of federal laws outlining a clear policy for undocumented students in postsecondary institutions has led states in the United States to create their policies, and sometimes students are unaware of them (Flores 2010; Flores and Chapa 2009).

States allow youth with DACA status to attend colleges and universities, and in some states, they qualify for in-state tuition. However, some states still limit undocumented students access to in-state tuition (Nienhuser 2015). The federal legislation further restricts DACA recipients from access to federal financial aid or federally funded work-study. Thus, students must rely on their work and the few private scholarships available to them (Gonzales 2016; Teranishi, Suarez-Orozco, and Suarez-Orozco 2011; Gleeson and Gonzales 2012; Teranishi, Suarez-Orozco, and Suarez-Orozco 2015).

This research seeks to understand the experiences of DACA recipients attending college in diverse state and local contexts of reception (Golash-Boza and Valdez 2018; Portes and Rumbaut 2006). It builds from the body of scholarship that focuses on how *place* specific immigration laws and policies shape young adults' experiences with DACA status in United States public postsecondary institutions.

Multilayered immigration policy contexts

Immigration scholars have long acknowledged that the reception context to which immigrants arrive has significant consequences for their incorporation into the new environments (Portes and Rubent 2001; Portes and Rumbaut 2006). The scholarship also shows that state legislation grows when there is a lack of policy consensus at the national level (Newton 2018).

In the absence of immigration reform at the federal level in the United States, state immigration policies have become integral to the experiences of undocumented immigrants (Flores 2010; García 2014; Rodríguez, Chishti, and Nortman 2010; Varsanyi et al. 2012), and the educational environment is no exception (Nelson, Jennifer Robinson, and Anna Bergevin 2014). For this reason, new scholarship on undocumented migration is focusing on the analysis of how context – federal, state, and local— shapes the everyday lives of undocumented immigrants (Cebulko and Silver 2016; Wong and García 2016; Golash-Boza and Valdez 2018; Silver 2018).

For instance, at the United States federal level, undocumented students in California benefit from applying for DACA if they fulfil its prerequisites. At the state level, laws such as AB540 (passed in 2001) and AB 130, AB131 (adopted in 2011) help these students financially by granting them in-state tuition, access to private scholarships, and Cal Grants. Golash-Boza and Valdez (2018) refer to 'nested contexts of reception' to show the effects of federal and state immigration policies on undocumented students in a university that is inclusive of them. In universities that provide institutional support and promote a social environment in which students with similar social experiences can cultivate a sense of belonging, undocumented students can persevere and succeed, despite immigration law enforcement and the threat of deportation.

However, not all states hold inclusive policies toward their undocumented population. State policies such as Arizona's Proposition 300, which became law in 2006, oblige undocumented students to pay out-of-state tuition rates. Georgia's Senate Bill 492 (SB 492) prohibits access of undocumented students to selective state universities, and South Carolina outlaws undocumented students from its public universities (National Conference of State Legislatures 2015).

These policy differences are consequential to undocumented young adults. For instance, Cebulko and Silver (2016) compare the effects of immigration policy in

Massachusetts and North Carolina. They find that DACA recipients sensed more the inclusive effects of the federal program in North Carolina where the political climate is more restrictive and the environment and policies more hostile than in Massachusetts, where the context is less hostile. In a study of undocumented youth in a small town in North Carolina, Silver (2018) draws a parallel between tectonic plates and the incorporation of undocumented youth. Silver's theoretical contribution shows how multiple contexts (from friends and family to organisations, educational institutions, and local policies and law enforcement) intertwine to create shifting contexts of reception for the 1.5 undocumented immigrant generation in the United States. The young adults in Silver's study find themselves constantly changing their plans and identities as they respond to the uncertain political environment around them.

This study builds on this scholarship to compare how the intersection of immigration laws and policies shapes students' sense of belonging with DACA status in public colleges and universities. Varsanyi et al. (2012) show how a 'multilayered jurisdictional patchwork' of immigration enforcement has emerged in the United States federal system. Building on their work, I refer to 'multilayered immigration policy contexts' to highlight the more extensive United States federal political immigration system under which these policies and programs occur. Concretely, this study focuses on how states within the United States have interpreted the DACA federal program in the domain of the public higher education system.

Methodology

The study highlights the educational policies aimed at the undocumented population because DACA holders carry the experience of being fully undocumented with them, and their federal protections are under threat of removal as of 2020. The study includes six state contexts and educational policies.

As shown in Table 1, three of the metropolitan areas examined (Phoenix, Atlanta, and Columbia) uphold stringent immigration state policies, and one state (South Carolina) explicitly banned the enrollment of undocumented students in public postsecondary institutions in 2015 (and continues to do so as of June 2018). The state of Georgia prohibits undocumented students from enrolling in selective public universities, so they may access only non-selective public colleges and universities by paying out-of-state tuition

Table 1. Provisions to undocumented students in public colleges and universities in 2015.

	In-State Tuition	Out-of-State Tuition	Ban on Enrolment
Undocumented Students	<p>California (A.B. 540 students, passed in 2001)</p> <p>New York (9612-A students, passed in 2002)</p> <p>Illinois (HB 0060 students, passed in 2003)</p>	<p>Arizona (Proposition 300, law since 2006)</p> <p>Georgia Gives access to undocumented students <i>only</i> in non-selective colleges and universities (SB492)</p>	<p>South Carolina Prohibits undocumented students from attending any public postsecondary institutions</p> <p>Georgia Prohibits undocumented students from enrolling in selective public universities (since 2010)</p>

rates. Undocumented students in Arizona may access all public colleges and universities by paying out-of-state tuition rates.

The other three metropolitan areas examined (Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York City) are in states with more inclusive immigration policies toward DACA and undocumented students. As shown in [Table 1](#), states such as Illinois, New York, and California have offered in-state tuition to undocumented students since the early 2000s. California has provided qualifying undocumented students with scholarships to public colleges and universities since 2012 and financial aid since 2013. Since 2011, the state of Illinois has allocated a private scholarship fund to undocumented students.

As shown in [Table 2](#), in May 2015, the Arizona Board of Regents began to accept DACA students at in-state tuition rates so long as they fulfilled the ‘state’s residency requirements. Moreover, DACA holders were able to pay in-state tuition rates until the Supreme Court decided on the *State of Arizona v. Maricopa Community College District* case. In April 2018, the Board announced the implementation of out-of-state tuition for DACA students due to the ‘case’s final resolution. In 2013, the South Carolina Commission on Education sent out a written statement granting DACA ‘recipients’ admission into public higher education institutions on out-of-state tuition rates. In 2010, ‘Georgia’s state Board of Regents ruled that the University System of Georgia must verify the lawful presence of students who seek in-state tuition rates. Under this ruling, DACA students would qualify under in-state tuition rates due to the federal recognition of their lawful presence in the United States. However, as of June 2018, DACA recipients in Georgia continue to pay out-of-state tuition rates, per election of the University of Georgia Board of Regents.

This analysis stems from the larger National UnDACAmented Research Project (NURP). A large team carried out the interviews with members deployed in each of the metropolitan areas. The interviewers used different entry points in each area, after which interviewees were reached by snowball sampling. Altogether, the NURP team gathered 476 interviews in 2015. The respondents arrived in the United States at the age of 15. In the larger sample, 78 percent of respondents arrived from Mexico, followed by other respondents of Latin American origin, the Caribbean, Asian, and very few European and African origin. About two-thirds of the respondents were women. The interviews covered a variety of topics systematically: experience growing up in the United States, experiences from Kindergarten to 12th grade (K-12), higher education experiences, work trajectories, health, and the impact of DACA. The NURP team coded the interviews according to topics beyond this study’s scope. For this study, the author analysed 194 in-depth interviews with DACA beneficiaries attending public postsecondary education in 2015 ([Table 3](#)). Of this subset, 15 per cent arrived from Asia, and the rest of the interviewees came mainly from Mexico in all states, followed by a few Central and South American.

Table 2. Provisions to DACA students in public colleges and universities in 2015.

	In-State Tuition	Out-of-State Tuition
DACA Students	California New York Illinois	Arizona (Prior to May 2015. Reversed by the Arizona Board of Regents in April 2018) Georgia (since 2010) South Carolina (since February 2013)

Table 3. Distribution of interviews across the states.

	Number of interviews per state	Totals
California	38	
Illinois	45	116
New York	33	
Arizona	44	
Georgia	10	78
South Carolina	24	
Totals		194

The author draws from the larger study's questions that focused on the respondents' experiences in higher education institutions. The interviewees shared their experiences in the postsecondary institutions they attended, what they did and did not like about their colleges, and whether they had stopped-out and returned to college. The interviewers also asked respondents to reflect on how their immigration status shaped their college experiences. Then, they queried about their sense of belonging to the colleges they attended.

In this study, I define sense of belonging in higher education as the degree to which students feel they are relevant to others and fit into the campus community (Hurtado and Carter 1997; Hurtado, Carter, and Spuler 1996; Locks et al. 2008; Lee and Claytje 2000; Maramba and Samuel Museus 2011; Tinto 2012).

The author coded the interviews with categories previously identified by the scholarship on sense of belonging in higher education, such as 'campus ethno/racial climate,' 'diversity,' 'engagement in activities,' 'class size,' 'friendship,' 'family feelings,' and 'feelings of not belonging' or the times in which the students reported not fitting into the campus community. I added the category 'immigration policy' to code the instances in which students related their legal status experiences. To protect participants, their names, organisations and colleges are pseudonyms.

The state selection reflects the intention to include traditionally inclusive contexts of minorities and those with more conservative conceptions of membership. These states hold symbolic value to the broader American society, and they are treated as localities for symbolic meaning making around perceptions of belonging. These state contexts are especially crucial for understanding belonging because students must navigate different policies to access college, which influences them during their stay in school.

Restrictive education policies and belonging in college

This section shows how restrictive policies at the state level, together with local socio-educational contexts, shape DACA students' feelings of belonging in public colleges and universities. In Arizona, Georgia, and South Carolina, students feel both included through the federal DACA program and excluded from the educational institutions they attend by way of how immigration laws and policies come to life on their campuses.

In 2015, DACA recipients were considered nonresidents in the states of South Carolina, Georgia, and Arizona (as of May 2015) and had no access to financial aid. During the years preceding this study and part of 2015, DACA students were unable to pay in-state tuition rates in Arizona (they could from May 2015 to April 2018). In 2006, the state approved Proposition 300 which made students who are not United States citizens or permanent residents ineligible for in-state tuition or state financial aid. This

consideration meant these students paid the much higher cost of college at out-of-state tuition rates. As a result, many participants in this study stopped out and eventually dropped out of school.

For instance, Alex arrived from Mexico to Arizona at the age of two. At the time of the interview, Alex was twenty-four years of age and was working full time to pay for part-time tuition at a community college in Phoenix. When we asked Alex about his experiences during college, he mentioned ‘The rules and the law made it impossible to afford college. Then they raised the bar even further in my second year of college. That’s when I dropped out.’ (Arizona, 2015)

Alex received DACA in March 2013, which means that before that date, he ‘didn’t have the right to work,’ as he recalled. The high tuition rates meant for Alex to stop out of college for two years. Even if Alex felt protected and with better life opportunities thanks to the DACA federal program, when Alex returned to college as a DACA recipient, he found it hard ‘to get warmed back up to the motion of being in school.’ For Alex, these laws and policies send explicit unwelcoming political messages:

They all decided to increase pricing for out-of-state students, which was deliberately aimed at undocumented students because the people on that board were part of the Tea Party movement. It just was very hurtful to know that extremists were representing the most Latino-dense community college and they had seriously stabbed people in the heart by taking away their opportunity to educate themselves. –Arizona, 2015

Out-of-state tuition policies devise an economic exclusion that intertwines with students’ positive feelings of deservingness and belonging to their institutions. For instance, although Alex told us he felt he belongs in higher education due to his hard work and his federal DACA protections, the implementation of stricter immigration policies at the state level led him to feel unwelcomed.

State level legal factors that translate into economic hardship for these students also intertwine with social factors at the local level. Campus social environments shape the feelings of belonging of these students as they pursue their degrees (Hurtado and Ponjuan, 2005; Johnson et al. 2007; Lim 2015; Maramba 2008). In Alex’s case, the mentioning of the conservative Tea Party Movement illustrates an ideologically polarised local context.

As another example, Lina arrived at the age of six to Arizona from Mexico and received DACA in February 2013 at the age of twenty-six. At the time of the interview, Lina was twenty-eight years of age and was getting her associate’s degree at a community college in the state. When Lina responded about her feelings of belonging to her college, she replied:

No. I was part of student government, and I was elected as a representative. They made sure to know that I didn’t belong. They excluded me from meetings. They switched the date on meetings, right before the meetings sometimes. It was just really bad. They wouldn’t keep me in the loop. I would ask, and they just didn’t—and they were all white Republicans. –Arizona, 2015

The scholarship shows that a campus ethno-racial environment can have different effects on undocumented students’ (Hurtado 1992; Hurtado, Carter, and Spuler 1996; Hurtado and Carter 1997; Maestas, Gloria Vaquera, and Zehr 2007; Harper and Hurtado 2007); Lina felt other ethnic groups did not share or understand her experiences. The stress she puts on the ethno-racial background and political ideology in

‘they were all white Republicans’ signals clicks between ethnic groups and political ideologies on campus, which translates into experiences of exclusion for these students. The discrimination Lina perceived motivated her to transfer to a different community college in the same county. Both of Lina’s colleges enroll about 54 per cent minority students and are Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs). However, in her new college, Lina’s experiences with diversity at large changed. When we asked Lina if she felt she belonged in her second college, she shared:

Yes, I did, the environment was more accepting in [name of new college]. They had a lot of events that weren’t necessarily the required events, for Hispanic Month, for Women’s Month. They were just so much better at being welcoming to women of colour. – Arizona, 2015

In the new college, Lina was involved in the Hispanic organisations on campus, which as a woman of colour made her feel she could fit-in.

Mar, on the other hand, had a different experience as Latina and with the student associations present on her campus. Legal status shapes these students’ access to college and the experiences they have with their college peers. Mar arrived from Mexico to Georgia at the age of six. At the time of the interview, she was 20 years of age, had received DACA in May 2013, and was attending a community college in Georgia. As a Latina, Mar sought support from her college’s Latino organisations, but as an undocumented student, she did not find it. When Mar responded to whether she belonged to her college, she recalled:

No, because I’m still in the same hole if you can say that. [...] yeah, you’re not banned from there [college], but you still must pay out-of-state, so, how can you really fit in? I would feel that was my place to be if they accepted that I’ve been here [in Georgia] for so long, that I could pay in-state tuition. –Georgia, 2015

Dealing with immigration policy at the local level makes DACA students’ experiences different from those of their peers, in Mar’s case, Latinos with legal status (Stanton-Salazar 2001; Nuñez 2009; Portes and Rubent 2001; Stebleton, Huesman, and Kuzhabekova 2010). Despite having spent fourteen years (out of twenty) in Georgia and graduated from a Georgia high school, Mar did not meet the state residency requirements that would allow her to pay much cheaper school tuition rates. To Mar, belonging in college is limited by the state’s educational policies that exclude her. Both colleges Lina joined had a diverse student body, but Lina’s feelings of belonging or exclusion developed according to the ethno-racial composition of the institutional bodies in which Lina engaged. Even if HSIs overall advance undocumented students’ needs (Golash-Boza and Valdez 2018), for these students the specific campus ethno-racial climate and their DACA status shape how they develop feelings of belonging to their institutions.

The case of David is also illustrative of the experiences of the DACA recipients in this study. David arrived from Mexico to Georgia at the age of twelve. At the time of the interview, he was twenty-two years of age and had received DACA in December 2012. While David mentioned DACA had ‘helped me a lot,’ he also recalled, ‘it might not have helped me a lot with school cuz it’s still really expensive. That’s the whole reason I had to drop out.’ David emphasised his community college ethnocultural diversity as positive, even if he ended up dropping out due to out-of-state tuition rate requirements for these students

in Georgia. David articulated how confusing it was for him that ‘we can’t pay in-state tuition even though we have a Social Security number, we are working here, and we’re getting charged taxes.’

The contradictions David and the rest of these students go through at the local level exemplify how liminal legality works. Although these students navigate a more inclusive context at the federal level, as DACA provides a work permit and a Social Security number, they are excluded in their higher education institutions by being treated as non-residents of the states in which they settled. Like the rest of the interviewees in the states with restrictive policies, David saw his educational opportunities blocked by Georgia’s restrictive education policies toward DACA recipients. DACA recipients sometimes know of the opportunities other contexts of reception may offer (Cebulko and Silver 2018) and try to move there to improve their prospects. For instance, David mentioned he was planning on moving to Florida to work and enrol in a college in which out-of-state tuition rates were cheaper than in Georgia.

Similarly, Daniel arrived from Mexico at the age of one to California. Then the entire family moved to South Carolina where, in 2015, had spent seventeen years. Daniel received DACA in 2012 and, at the time of the interview, he was twenty-one years of age. When Daniel did not have DACA protections at eighteen, he moved back to California to begin community college.

As soon as Daniel received DACA, he applied to school in South Carolina and the college admitted him. ‘I thought it was a perfect opportunity to go back home and experience the missed opportunities that I had,’ he mentioned. When Daniel started community college in South Carolina, he had his ‘guard up’ because he ‘knew that if it weren’t for DACA, I would have never stepped foot on that campus.’ Daniel felt that:

the opportunity to attend that school could be taken away at any moment. I felt like I had to keep my status hidden to feel accepted in the university. As soon as I started telling people, I thought that they would act like angry or unwelcoming, but it turned out to be the opposite.
-South Carolina, 2015.

The accepting social environment on campus changed the way Daniel ‘view colleges,’ but as he said, ‘not the experience itself.’ Daniel felt that DACA students ‘are just kind of lumped into the international population, although they were raised here and have so many ties to the state.’ Daniel notes that his opportunity to attend college in South Carolina is legally liminal (Menjívar 2006), as he is aware that access to higher education in this state can be reversed for DACA holders.

Although DACA federally protects these students, their higher education experiences in these states intertwine with their local institutions’ social environments. As Golash-Boza and Valdez (2018) mention, the state policies, social reception on campus, and undocumented students’ involvement in institutions of higher learning shape the experiences of undocumented students. In this study, the DACA recipients mention both welcoming and exclusionary campus environments, but in both types of experiences, the restrictive state policies toward DACA recipients supersede the local context experiences. Though social conditions on campus are suitable, as in Daniel’s case, laws and policies at the state and local level become the foremost barrier to developing a sense of belonging in college and graduate. These financial policies complicate the incorporation opportunities of DACA young adults in negative ways.

Inclusive education policies and belonging in college

In the states with more inclusive policies toward DACA recipients, the students in this study also experienced contradictions produced by the inclusive nature of DACA at the federal and state levels and the local contexts in which they live. In this section, I show the legal and social circumstances that circumscribe participants' educational experiences in the states more inclusive of them.

The students in California, Illinois, and New York, did have access to in-state tuition rates for residents. Economic burdens continued to complicate their educational incorporation. For instance, Lee left China and arrived in New York City alone at the age of eleven. At the time of the interview, he was 26 years of age. Lee obtained his associate's degree and transferred to a state university he could afford. Without financial aid, Lee's college experience lacked what he needed most. Paying for in-state tuition was a significant burden for Lee, who worked seventy-two hours per week to save for college.

Lee mentioned that the school 'in some ways is accommodating, but not for DACA students'. When the interviewer asked Lee if he felt he belonged in school, Lee replied: 'I feel like I belong there, but the school is denying my existence.' For Lee, the school's denial of his financial needs created a barrier he must circumvent by stopping-out for periods of six months to a year. It took Lee four years to get his two-year associate's degree. In 2015, eight years after graduating from high school, Lee was in the process of obtaining his bachelor's degree.

At times, students found they did not meet the requirements to receive in-state tuition consideration. For instance, Carlos arrived from Mexico to New York City at the age of thirteen. He was 28 years of age at the interview time and graduated from a significant four-year university in California. Throughout his years in college, Carlos struggled with his immigration status:

[I struggled with] the uncertainty of whether I was going to stay in higher education because I was undocumented and not quite qualifying as AB540 and having to fight through that. Another one is that I used to commute. I didn't have enough money to live on campus, so that was really hard on me. - California, 2015

Before receiving DACA, Carlos did not qualify as an AB540 student, which exempts from paying nonresident tuition students who have completed at least three years of high school in California, which was not Carlos's case.

By contrast, Ana framed success by the possibility of securing private funds. Ana arrived in Chicago from Guatemala at the age of twelve. At the time of the interview, Ana was twenty-two years old and working on her bachelor's degree. During the first year at the community college, Ana received a scholarship for high-achieving undocumented students and a Dream Fund scholarship. Both support sources helped Ana finish her associate's degree. When Ana applied to major four-year institutions in Chicago, she was accepted to all of them, but could attend none:

When I went to [college name], they told me that I couldn't get it [federal financial aid]. I'm like, 'Why if I'm in Honors? 'Because you're not a citizen.' [...] Then I got just really upset, I was just like, 'I'm just gonna take a semester off to work.' My idea was to save money. I didn't go to school for that whole semester. - Illinois, 2015

After working for an entire semester, Ana decided to attend the most affordable four-year educational institution she could find. Paying for her college degree was a family

effort in which every member participated. The inclusion of DACA recipients by the federal mandate inspires them to work even harder. However, securing funding for four years is an arduous and sometimes impossible task for many participants in this research.

Many participants developed a sense of belonging upon finding groups of students on campus who faced similar legal and socioeconomic circumstances. The experience of Ana as she entered college illustrates that of the larger pool of interviewees:

I think we were the second cohort of that program. The students were in the same situation as me. I felt, 'Oh, I wasn't the only one.' I think that a lot of times I thought of that, that I'm the only one like that, but there is a lot of people. It was good to have the same people. Then I moved on with them. - Illinois, 2015

At the start of community college, Ana joined a cohort of undocumented students with whom she shared that identity and built a friendship. Emmanuel experienced similar group dynamics but, unlike Ana, Emmanuel emphasises the relational aspects of his belonging in college. Emmanuel arrived from the Philippines to Los Angeles at the age of eight months. At the time of the interview, Emmanuel was twenty-six years of age and was finishing his bachelor's degree at a major Californian university. When we asked Emmanuel about belonging in college, he mentioned:

At times yes, at times no, because I think it depends on the people around me. If the people around me know what I'm going through, or they have the same situation, then I feel like I belong. If they don't get me, then I don't feel like I belong. California, 2015

Like other participants in this study, Emmanuel's experience was one in which belonging is highly dependent on building relationships with people who understand him (Strayhorn 2012). Student organisations supply this vital need and provide students with purpose (Enriquez 2014; Verduzco Reyes 2015). For example, Amira arrived from Pakistan to New York City when she was eight years old. At the time of the interview, Amira was twenty-four and was attending a four-year institution in the city. She mentioned feeling at 'home' in college as part of the college journalists' organisation:

Even though I did have the feeling 'Oh my goodness, I'm undocumented [and] I'm all over the place,' I wasn't shadowed. I felt freer, which was the first time in four or five years that I felt that way. Then, of course, the DACA [program] came in around that time, too. That made things easier, too. I found an outlet. I met lifelong friends as a result of that. It was kind of like a haven for me because I was able to further my cause without endangering my identity. - New York, 2015

Being undocumented operates as a master status (Gonzales 2016, 2011) that permeates every aspect of a person's life, and so it operated in Amira's case, who was undocumented during most of her college years. Amira received DACA in 2013 while she was a senior in college. Participation in the college newspaper helped Amira find a voice and a writing outlet to engage in 'her cause.' Amira was able to bring light to immigration issues without compromising her own 'identity,' which is marked by her immigration status. Moreover, the student organisations included Amira in a community of peers that discussed issues of which she was passionate.

Within the array of students' associations, undocumented students' organisations appear of prime importance in this study, and especially in the inclusive states. For

example, Julia arrived at the age of eight from Mexico to California and received DACA in 2013 as a freshman in college. At the time of the interview, Julia was twenty-two years of age, had been a DACA recipient for two years, and was attending a major four-year university. Julia reflected over her sense of belonging:

I remember I joined [fraternity name], then I joined the [undocumented student organisation name]. I mostly like being part of the [undocumented student organisation name]. You meet other undocumented students, you share similar stories, and I just feel very comfortable. Now that we have the undocumented student program, it just feels so good to walk in here, to know that we have a safe space. Yes, I feel like I belong to this university because there are a lot of Mexican, Hispanic, Latinos here on campus and I find similar things between us. California, 2015

In general, the interviewees in these states emphasised how the undocumented student organisations in their colleges helped them meet new friends, create social networks, and become engaged in issues of their interest along with other students. Lidia provides another example of the importance of these organisations for undocumented students. Lidia arrived from Mexico to Chicago when she was seven years of age. At the time of the interview, Lidia was twenty-two and had received DACA during the year 2013, while she pursued studies at a community college in the city. Lidia shared how the undocumented student organisation she joined shaped her feelings of belonging in college:

I came to one of their events [an organisation of undocumented Latin American Students], and I was very interested in the school. Then that's when I found out there were a lot of undocumented students, and I was like, 'Hey, they are my friends, my people' I feel like that was more of friend support like, 'You're not alone. There's a lot of us that will continue to go to college. You don't have to give up your dream.' Coming here was a very good decision for me, and it made me more like, 'This is home. I belong, and I'm doing things right.' –Lidia, Illinois, 2015

During the time Lidia spent at the organisation, she met other undocumented students who encouraged her to pursue her goals and supported her through that process. In the inclusive states, the presence of a variety of student organisations available to DACA students is instrumental in the development of a sense of belonging in college. Among these organisations, those which focus on undocumented students are particularly important to this subpopulation. Once students in the inclusive states qualify for resident tuition, they are able to take advantage of the supportive institutions of their colleges. In states with stringent policies, DACA holders do not include (undocumented) student organisations at the front of their narratives of belonging. In part, this is due to the long hours students in these states spend working to pay for their out-of-state tuition rates. Even when they engage in student organizations, the political climate on campus sometimes presents an obstacle to their inclusion, as campus environments may reproduce the larger state political environment.

Conclusion

Drawing from scholarship on the effects of immigration laws and policies in the United States on undocumented students (Abrego and Gonzales 2010; Cebulko and Silver 2016; Gonzales 2016), this study analyses how state education policies shape the sense of belonging of DACA students in public higher education institutions they attend.

The study sheds light on the growing significance states within federal systems (Caponio and Jones-Correa 2018; Flores 2010; Varsanyi et al. 2012) have on either facilitating the inclusion of liminally legal students into pathways of educational success or further hindering them (Nelson, Jennifer Robinson, and Anna Bergevin 2014). Within this framework, the study has focused on the public higher education sector to show how DACA holders navigate the multilayered immigration policy context they experience. The young adults who participated in this study stress state educational policies that adjudicate residency advantages to students as central elements altering their feelings of belonging in the higher education institutions they attend. States base their immigration laws and policies on perceptions of membership and worthiness that include or exclude undocumented students in the United States (Gonzales, Sigona, and Burciaga 2016).

Findings show that the development of a sense of belonging or exclusion for DACA recipients in college is, in part, contingent on the multilayered policy context they live. Specifically, it depends on how national and state laws interact at the local level (Golash-Boza and Valdez 2018; Newton 2018; Silver 2018). The study shows that the local educational contexts in which these students pursue their degrees can protect or harm their feelings of belonging in college and shape their educational progress.

Scholars focusing on the factors involved in undocumented students' academic performance point out financial barriers and 'undocufriendly' campuses as significant factors involved in these students' educational performance (Suárez-Orozco et al. 2015; Teranishi, Suarez-Orozco, and Suarez-Orozco 2011; Terriquez 2015). Consistent with previous research findings, the participants in this study speak of facing financial hardships at every turn.

Both access to better employment through the federal DACA program and some private scholarships are helping these students pursue their academic goals. However, across the examined states, economic barriers persist and shape how DACA students experience belonging in college. Nevertheless, unlike regular students, immigration laws and policies deepen class barriers (Ostrove and Long 2007) for undocumented students. Dealing with the law, specifically by paying out-of-state tuition rates, further intensifies the students' financial burdens living in the restrictive states.

Involvement in campus organisations and the campus community, more generally, appears to be of prime importance to develop a sense of belonging. In the restrictive states, the students who attempt to join student organisations and find other support networks find that the ethnic and political climate at their institutions further exclude them. Faced with multiple forms of exclusion, these students found it more challenging to develop a concrete sense of belonging in their higher educational contexts. The students in states with more inclusive policies could take advantage of the array of support systems and networks available to them. Moreover, these students identified the importance of safe spaces and undocumented student organisations as critical elements of undocumented students' campus support.

The expansion of in-state tuition can alleviate some of the interviewees' financial burdens, freeing up time for them to take advantage of the support networks available to them. However, as this study has shown, in-state-tuition is not enough to guarantee a fair chance to finish a degree. The evidence drawn from the inclusive states shows the need for additional funding if colleges want to provide equal opportunities to all

students. New York State has taken a step in this direction by implementing The Excelsior Program, and other states could follow this lead. After all, DACA recipients and other undocumented young people mostly grew up in the country and received secondary education in the United States.

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