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Life After College: Liminal Legality and Political Threats as Barriers to Undocumented Students' Career Preparation Pursuits

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Abstract: Prior research has established that undocumented immigration status disrupts students' transition into life after college, but limited research has examined their preparatory experiences in college. Drawing on interviews with 154 undocumented college students and 32 alumni, we examine how immigration status impacts undocumented students' career planning and preparation. We find that professional development opportunities and college social networks facilitate successful career transitions for both those who received DACA and those who did not. Although DACA facilitates access to a wider variety of professional development opportunities in college, a lack of permanent legal status continues to pose barriers. Yet, both those with and without DACA identify persistent feelings of uncertainty that constrain their career planning, particularly in the face of ongoing political threats to the DACA program. In all, we contend that DACA has supported the post-college transitions of undocumented young adults, but its effects are substantially constrained because it is an increasingly compromised form of liminal legality. We assert that experiences of liminal legality are shifting due to the increasingly temporary and threatened nature of contemporary immigration policy making.

Keywords: undocumented students, undocumented alumni, DACA, post-college, liminal legality, career preparation

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“Whew. (Laughs). [Discussing my career plans] makes me feel nervous. It gives me anxiety because I don't know what's going to happen. I don't know who's going to win the [2016 presidential] election in November. I know that that's going to have a huge impact on whether or not DACA stays.” - Victoria

Having graduated from UCLA a month before, Victoria felt apprehensive about her career plans. Prior research suggests that undocumented college students like Victoria struggle to transition to post-college life and use their degrees to pursue upward mobility because they lack employment authorization (Gonzales, 2016). However, Victoria had the ability to work, a privilege granted to her in 2012 through the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. As a result, she had identified specific career areas to explore and was participating in an internship with an environmental non-profit organization. Yet, Victoria and the other DACA recipients we spoke to still felt uncertain about their futures, a feeling that was shared by their peers who had not qualified for DACA. Prior research has conceptualized DACA protections as a form of liminal legality, an in-between status that offers some legal protections and benefits but no guarantee of a permanent lawful status (Cebulko, 2014). However, Victoria highlights persisting uncertainty as she ties her future to the political threat imposed by the 2016 presidential election and then candidate Donald Trump's promise to rescind the DACA program. Recognizing the increasingly threatened nature of legal protections like DACA, this paper explores the consequences of uncertainty and political threats for undocumented students' post-college transitions.

Previous research has focused on undocumented young adults' ability to access higher education and their experiences attending universities (Bjorklund, 2018); however, little research examines how undocumented students prepare for life after college. Drawing on focus groups and interviews with 154 undocumented college students and 32 alumni in California, we explore

how immigration status impacts undocumented students' post-college plans and preparation. To examine the role of liminal legality in this process, we explore differences between undocumented students who are beneficiaries of the DACA program and those who have no legal status. Drawing on the experiences of alumni, we first establish that professional development opportunities and college social networks facilitated successful career transitions for both those who received DACA and those who did not. We then show how DACA recipients have access to a wider variety of professional development opportunities while in college, but a lack of permanent legal status continues to bar access. Finally, we trace how persistent feelings of uncertainty constrain students' career planning, particularly in the face of ongoing political threats to the DACA program. In all, we contend that DACA has supported the post-college transitions of undocumented young adults, but its effects are substantially constrained due the fact that it is an increasingly compromised form of liminal legality.

DACA as a Form of Liminal Legality

Liminal legality captures the “uncertain status—not fully documented or undocumented but often straddling both—[that] has gone on for years and permeates many aspects of the immigrants' lives and delimits their range of action in different spheres” (Menjívar, 2006, p. 1001). With it, Cecilia Menjívar aimed to capture the uniquely in-between status of Salvadoran and Guatemalan undocumented immigrants who negotiated a protracted legal limbo due to complex immigration policies that provided temporary work authorization and protection from deportation. Conceptually, the term highlights the growing grey areas between documented and undocumented status through which individuals are neither fully included nor fully excluded from society. This in-between status becomes detrimental when “extended indefinitely” (Menjívar, 2006, p. 1007) because it breeds uncertainty as immigrants do not know if or when

they may face deportation and are constrained in their ability to plan for the future.

Established via executive order by former President Obama in 2012, DACA functions as a new type of liminal legality available to eligible undocumented young adults age 16-30 (Cebulko, 2014). It functions as a liminal status because it conveys legal benefits—access to a work permit and protection from deportation—but offers no guarantee of citizenship or a more permanent lawful status. DACA beneficiaries also continue to experience structural exclusion including the denial of rights and benefits afforded to lawful permanent residents and U.S. citizens, such as access to federal financial aid and in-state tuition rates in many states.

Most research on DACA has highlighted its benefits. DACA recipients report higher wages, stable salaried jobs, access to driver's licenses or state identification cards, opening of bank accounts, and obtaining credit cards (Gonzales et al., 2014). Having employment authorization greatly facilitated DACA recipients' ability to financially support themselves and many also had the means to provide for their families (Abrego, 2018; Amuedo-Dorantes & Antman, 2016). Recipients also report improved psychological wellbeing for themselves (Patler & Laster Pirtle, 2018) and their family members (Hainmueller et al., 2017).

Despite the benefits of DACA, recipients experience uncertainty associated with liminal legality. For example, Menjívar (2006) details the uncertainty and anxiety associated with having to renew one's legal protections, filing paperwork, managing requirements and changing deadlines, and awaiting decisions. Enriquez (2020) finds that DACA recipients were concerned about the temporary and renewable nature of their benefits. They felt uncertainty about the potential lapse of benefits, costs associated with the renewal, and the future possibility that the program could end, potentially compromising the financial and social gains they had made. This precarious identity also compromised mental health and wellbeing (Siemons et al., 2017).

Yet, a new dynamic of uncertainty exists for DACA recipients due to its threatened temporariness. DACA was established by executive action; thus, the Presidential order only remains intact if they or their predecessor does not cancel or revoke the order (Johnson, 2017). The potentially temporary nature of the program was made clear when lawsuits challenged the legality of then President Obama's subsequent executive action which sought to extend eligibility for DACA and create a similar program for undocumented parents of U.S. citizens and permanent residents (Coutin et al., 2017). Then, during the 2016 Presidential election, then candidate Donald Trump threatened to rescind the program and did so in September 2017 (Preston & Medina, 2016). Complicated phase-out policies were followed by lawsuits challenging the legality of the rescission. The program remained in limbo until the U.S. Supreme Court decided the rescission violated administrative procedures in June 2020, but did not bar the administration from trying again (NILC, 2020). These political threats have worsened DACA recipients psychological wellbeing (Mallet & Garcia Bedolla, 2019).

The prolonged threat of DACA's rescission underlines how immigration policymaking has been pushed to the margins given the political impossibility of federal immigration reform. In addition to the use of executive action, immigration law making has shifted to the executive branch as well as the state and local level (Gulasekaram & Ramakrishnan, 2016; Rodríguez, 2008). This patchwork of local, state, and federal policies has fostered a shifting, and sometimes contradictory, policy context that prevents undocumented young adults from following a linear path to incorporation. Silver (2018) defines this as tectonic incorporation in which individuals must navigate political structures that move unpredictably, forcing them to constantly adjust to a new and complex legal landscape. We contend that the changing nature of immigration policymaking has reverberated into how liminal legality is experienced. DACA recipients are

now facing an explicit and threatened temporariness, rather than an extended time of in-betweenness. In other words, liminal legality is becoming even more liminal. Building on this framework, we examine how increasing uncertainty and political threats function as a barrier to undocumented students' career preparation and pursuits.

Undocumented Students in Higher Education and Beyond

Prior research on undocumented students has focused on their access to and persistence in higher education. Studies have established that undocumented status creates structural and socio-emotional barriers to accessing higher education (Abrego, 2006; Enriquez, 2011; Gonzales, 2016). State educational access laws have been integral to facilitating access to higher education and increasing its affordability. Indeed, Flores (2010) finds that states that have implemented tuition equity policies to see increases in undocumented student enrollment. Though there are fewer barriers to university enrollment, many undocumented students come from low-income families and face high financial barriers to affording college (Diaz-Strong et al., 2011), making them vulnerable to stopping out or sacrificing their academics to work (Enriquez, 2017; Terriquez, 2015). Undocumented students may also experience institutional neglect, hostile campus contexts, and difficulty accessing resources, which can decrease their feelings of belonging and compromise their persistence (Muñoz & Vigil, 2018; Negrón-Gonzales, 2017; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015). Social capital and institutional support are thus crucial to aiding undocumented students in identifying policies and resources that can facilitate their access to higher education (Contreras, 2009; Enriquez, 2011).

Undocumented students must also negotiate the potential barriers their immigration status raises for their future mobility. Scholars have established that educational motivation has been shown to decline among undocumented students as they wonder what they will do with their

degrees after graduating (Abrego, 2006; Enriquez, 2017; Gonzales, 2016). Those in college may struggle to obtain an internship due to requests for a background check or social security number (Kantamneni et al., 2016). Further, Gonzales (2016) shows that undocumented youth who earn educational degrees struggle to transition into the job market without work authorization; they often find themselves in the same types of job as undocumented peers who did not pursue higher education. However, few have examined how undocumented college students may be planning and preparing themselves to overcome these barriers after college graduation, particularly in light of the creation and threatened rescission of the DACA program.

Having employment authorization through the DACA program appears to have mixed effects on undocumented students' ability to pursue college and prepare for post-college mobility. Some research has suggested that because DACA recipients are now formally able to seek employment, they have greater economic means to pursue a higher education (Gonzales et al., 2019). They may also be more optimistic about their ability to use their degree to secure economic returns (Abrego, 2018). However, Hsin and Ortega (2018) find that DACA recipients attending four-year colleges were more likely to drop-out than those in two-year colleges; they suggest that "DACA had led undocumented students to leave school or reduce course loads in order to take advantage of the (renewable) two-year work permit"(p. 1504). Amuedo-Dorantes and Antman (2017) similarly find that DACA reduced the likelihood of college enrollment.

For those in college, having DACA opens up access to internships and employment that will help students prepare for their desired careers. A 2020 survey of undocumented students attending the California 4-year public universities revealed that 38% of respondents had participated in one or more professional development experiences: 18% held an unpaid internship, 15% a paid internship, 14% a credit-based internship, and 15% a career-relevant job

(Enriquez et al, this issue). Rates of participation varied significantly by immigration status as 41% of DACA recipients had participated in one or more of these opportunities, compared to 29% of those with no legal status. However, DACA recipients still struggle to access professional development opportunities; a recent national survey of undocumented students, most of whom had DACA, found that many remained uncertain of what they want to do for their career and only 30% had participated in some type of internship (TheDream.US, 2020). Limited access to professional development opportunities, such as internships, may pose a significant barrier to undocumented students' post-college mobility because such opportunities are associated with higher academic performance, post-graduation job attainment, and early career success (Nunley et al., 2016). Indeed, Martinez (2014) finds that DACA recipients who had already graduated from college felt that their work authorization would not quickly facilitate their upward mobility because they lacked relevant work experience. Building on this work, we examine how undocumented students negotiate post-college preparation.

Data and Methods

The article draws on qualitative data collected for two projects. Alumni data is drawn from Enriquez' project which explored how illegality impacts undocumented young adults' incorporation. Current student data is from the Undocumented Student Equity Project, in which Morales Hernandez and Enriquez both participated; it examined the experiences of undocumented undergraduates attending the University of California system.

Alumni Data

We draw from Enriquez' longitudinal data which contains interviews with 100 Latina/o undocumented young adults conducted between July 2014 to August 2015. We focus on a subsample of 32 participants who had earned a Bachelor's degree from a California State University

or University of California campus. Of these, 16 identified as women and 16 as men. Eight had received DACA during college, four received DACA within a year after graduation, fifteen received DACA over a year after graduation, and five had no legal status.

Enriquez recruited respondents through snowball sampling which she initiated through her established social networks. Respondents received a \$15 cash incentive for their participation in the second wave of interviews. Interviews lasted an average of 1.5 to two hours and were directed by a semi-structured guide. Part of the interview guide focused on DACA, including questions about its impact on educational and employment experiences. Interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and index coded to identify discussions about their lives after graduation and their work experiences. We then applied analytic codes including securing jobs, leaving jobs, social networks, and professional development experiences. To better understand the effect of DACA on their trajectories, we compared participants by the timing of when they received DACA relative to their college graduation date.

Current Student Data

Focus groups and interviews were conducted during the 2014-2015 and 2015-2016 academic years with undocumented students attending the nine University of California undergraduate campuses. We spoke to a median of 14 students per campus, with three to four students participating in each focus group. In total, there were 32 focus groups and 29 interviews. Focus groups and interviews took place on campuses and lasted an average of two hours. Of the 154 participants, 125 were DACA recipients and 29 had no current legal status. The sample has an overrepresentation of females and Latinas/os: 74% of participants identified as female and 26% as male. 85% of respondents identified as Latina/o origin and 15% did not, with most of these identifying as Asian American and Pacific Islander.

To recruit participants, the research team asked undocumented student services staff members to send recruitment announcements to their student list-serves. We also relied on snowball sampling through previous participants and the research teams' social networks. Participants received a \$15 incentive. The focus groups and interviews lasted one to two hours and were guided by a semi-structured interview guide that covered eight topics related to campus experiences. This paper draws on the subsections of career plans which contained eight questions on career plans, career preparation, and professional development opportunities offered on their campus. Conversations were audio recorded, transcribed, and index coded to identify relevant topics, including career-preparation and career plans. Analytic codes included accessing internships, obtaining relevant employment, professional development participation, and career plans. Responses were compared across participants who had DACA and those who had no legal status to identify similarities and differences.

The Importance of College Opportunities for Undocumented Alumni's Career Pursuits

Previous research suggests that professional development opportunities, such as internships, and social networks are key factors in facilitating post-graduation job attainment and early career success (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Nunley et al., 2016; Stuber, 2011). Although undocumented college students may face barriers to accessing career-preparation opportunities and post-college employment, they often strategically develop social networks to facilitate their educational opportunities (Contreras, 2009; Enriquez, 2011). Undocumented alumni demonstrate that prior professional development opportunities and college social networks facilitated successful career transitions for both those who received DACA and those who did not.

Undocumented students who were enrolled in college when they received DACA were able to prepare for their transition to post-college life while having access to campus

opportunities and networks. Sarai was in her final year of college in 2013 when she received DACA. She acknowledged that obtaining DACA was beneficial: “DACA opens up the job opportunities. But at the same time, I feel like if I didn't have DACA, I would have still had the same job opportunities just because of my relationship with people.” Before and after DACA, Sarai’s social relationships were integral to finding work. Prior to receiving DACA, her friend helped her find a job as a sales representative at a chain store; she was later promoted to assistant manager. Upon receiving DACA, Sarai quit this job: “Because I wanted to do something more meaningful with my life. I was approaching the last years of my college career, undergraduate time. And if I wanted to get a good job after college, I wanted to do something else.” She was finally able to take a job on campus working at the undocumented student center, where she had previously been active. She participated in an internship program. She continued working with local non-profits, including canvassing with the organization that she later got a job with after graduation. Having a high level of social capital, paired with employment authorization was key to setting alumni on early paths to economic mobility upon receiving DACA.

Several alumni had graduated college just prior to receiving DACA, allowing them to continue to tap into college networks, if they had them. Similar to Sarai, Antonio had developed strong social networks during college by being active in on-campus organizations and a local non-profit organization. When his friend transitioned out of a job as a community organizer, Antonio was in a strong position to take their place. This job was also more aligned with his general goal of working with and mentoring underrepresented students, particularly undocumented students. This work experience, paired with his employment authorization, helped him envision a future career plan. He would pursue a Masters’ degree in Education:

Teach at a community college, that's my go to thing ... A lot of the students there

that I've worked with, four to five years that they've been going to community college and I think part of organizing is help them continue their education and that they keep on fighting to transfer, but also I know that there's a need to have more resources to have more allies for undocumented students at the campus ... Recently there's been a lot of resource centers that have been opening up for undocumented students, I would consider working in one of those places as well, cause I feel like I could do both things; where it's like you're doing counseling, well sort of counseling, and also there's an education piece to it as well.

Being able to legally work gave Antonio the opportunity to confirm and further develop his career aspirations, something that he was not previously able to do before DACA. However, the timing meant that he had to find these opportunities on his own, outside of the college context which often facilitates these connections.

Among the alumni who had graduated well before DACA was established, there were only a handful who had managed to reposition themselves and pursue their desired career. Andrea graduated in 2008 and received her teaching credential. Despite her undocumented status, she sought out ways to continue to pursue a teaching career by working various jobs in the educational arena. Upon receiving DACA in 2012, she eagerly pursued her desired career as a teacher. Despite being out of college for several years, Andrea actively maintained relationships with prior professors and peers who had become teachers. As soon as she received DACA, she was easily able to search for positions because she had kept her credential current and maintained her social networks to aid in her job search and serve as references. This was greatly facilitated by the fact that there is a clear and concrete path to becoming a teacher. Others, like Carlos, drew on past college networks to get referrals to full-time, salaried work, but these were

often outside of their desired career area; they were looking to pay the bills rather than transition into a dream career.

On the other hand, those DACA recipients who had not had preparatory experiences in college struggled to transition into the job market. Alonso graduated in 2012 and DACA was announced around the same time. He reflected on how he expected DACA to transform his life: “You expect somebody to take away all this weight from your shoulders and you expect to fly. And then you realize you just walk like everybody else. And if you want wings, you still have to work even harder and you're behind.” He had anticipated that he would easily be able to transition into a career, but this did not transpire:

Getting a job in this economy is really difficult and my degree is practically worthless. ... And not having had any experience in the workforce beforehand. It's like, I'm at that teenage person getting their first job. It felt like I was so behind in a lot of ways. And catching up was really painful and really difficult.

He connected this in part to his approach to college: “I guess I was just following the common knowledge that we all have: go to college, get a good job, it'll all work out in the end. I didn't think there was a lot more thinking involved. I didn't think about it as a career. I just thought it was going to happen on its own and it doesn't.” As a first-generation college student, Alonso did not know how to make the most out of college’s extracurricular opportunities. Further, attending as an undocumented student prior to the availability of financial aid, he had little time to participate. He explained that his immigration status and lack of financial aid meant that he had to “commute four hours every day” and “worry about where I'm going to get the money for the next semester.” Upon receiving DACA, he was only able to find a part-time job as an English tutor through his college friends: “It's very rewarding on a personal level and I'm pretty good at

it. And I mean, the pay rate is pretty good. It's seventeen bucks an hour. Even though it's few hours, I'm getting more and more hours with more and more experience. So, it's a really decent job.” The tutoring job paid the bills and he also worked as a property manager, which covered his rent, but he was struggling to piece together opportunities and experiences that would propel him into a more stable economic situation, let alone a career.

The four alumni who did not have DACA worked as independent contractors, often relying on the social networks they built during college to find these opportunities. For example, Iliana graduated in 2011 and had been involved with community organizing since she was 18 years old; she used these extensive social networks to seek employment as an independent contractor. She was passionate about her work and felt successful, but she was exhausted from figuring out how to make independent contracting a financially stable employment strategy. At the time of the interview, Iliana expressed a desire to transition out of community organizing into education but was unable to envision a clear pathway for this if she did not obtain work authorization or permanent legal status. This group is unique in that they all had maintained social networks to college peers and local non-profit organizations, making independent contracting a feasible option. Notably independent contracting was uncommon outside of this small group of college alumni, suggesting that social capital is key for those with no legal status to be able to pursue such employment opportunities.

Limited Career-Preparation Opportunities in College

Among current undocumented college students, we find that both those with and without DACA enjoy some access to career-preparation opportunities, but also confront barriers. Students with no legal status face steeper barriers due to their lack of employment authorization but are able to draw on institutional supports to buffer against these limitations. Although DACA

facilitates access to a wider number of professional development opportunities, a lack of permanent legal status creates persisting barriers.

Students who were granted DACA were in a better position to seek professional development opportunities because they had work authorization. For example, Melisa a fourth-year student with DACA, shared, “The first [internship] I found out [about], I was just on Google, googling political campaigns that might need interns. And I came across a city council campaign that needed some people.” On the other hand, Esmeralda, a fourth-year student who did not have DACA, explained her challenges preparing for life after graduation:

Well, I think that just the simple fact that I'm an undocumented student and I don't have DACA, the notion of that being in my head is stressful and sometimes you feel like you can't compete with these other students who have access to so many more resources, who don't have to worry about any issues like deportation ... So, I mean, I feel like I have the resources to continue but I don't necessarily know if I have the resources to thrive as other more privileged students would. And how do you justify that if you're trying to apply for a job or trying to apply for an internship or you don't even have DACA. There's a lot of opportunities that you can't get that other people can.

For those like Esmerelda who did not have work authorization, they faced structural exclusion from opportunities and social-emotional barriers that left them feeling unprepared.

Notably, the institutional context equalized some of the opportunities available to those with and without DACA. Alejandro a third-year transfer student who had DACA, and Lisa, a third-year student who did not have DACA explained:

Alejandro: For me, it was just picking and choosing which one [research project]

was interesting for me. My current professor for my biochem class, he's doing research but it didn't really sound that interesting. So, I kind of had to seek out another professor from the same department and talk to him about his research work. I watched a couple of videos of his lecture online, and I thought the research work he's doing is pretty cool. So, I figured I'd approach him and talk to him a little bit more about that. And he was pretty open to talk about it.

Lisa: UndocuBruins is a research program for undocumented students and this was started last year. ... And if you're interested in a PhD program, you can do any research that you want. ... And you get a stipend. It's a two-quarter program and you get a thousand dollars per quarter.

Despite differences in their DACA status, both Alejandro and Lisa found institutional opportunities to identify mentors and gain professional experience. Many, like Lisa, shared that these were made possible by undocumented student programs that aimed to meet the unique needs of undocumented students, regardless of whether or not they have work authorization. Both had since identified more specific career plans, were considering post-graduate education, and felt more prepared for these endeavors. However, these institutional opportunities were often the only ones available to students who did not have work authorization.

Although DACA recipients could pursue other non-institutional forms of professional development, such as career-relevant jobs or external internships, they were often denied opportunities because they lacked U.S. citizenship or lawful permanent residency. Eddie, a third-year student who had DACA, discussed the difficulty he had in pursuing an engineering internship: "I had an opportunity to be an intern for one of the big companies ... they do aerospace engineering. ... Basically, I wasn't able to do it because of my status. I feel like stuff

like that's really crucial for developing those skills to go into the industry. It definitely backfired on me.” Eddie had been offered an internship, but once they discovered that he did not have U.S. citizenship his offer was rescinded. He continued to search for engineering-related internships or jobs, but often he was barred from these opportunities because he was not a U.S. citizen. Berlyn, a fourth-year student who had DACA, talked about being denied access to an internship in the medical field: “I was trying to volunteer at [a medical center]. But then when I applied, they were like, are you a citizen or resident? And they rejected me because they didn't know about DACA. So, then I just stopped trying to volunteer there. I haven't done anything medical related.” She believed that not having such internship experiences would compromise her ability to earn admission into post-Baccalaureate programs and eventually medical school.

Many participants also aspired to post-graduate education and reported their ineligibility for preparation programs aimed at supporting underrepresented students in this endeavor. One of the most well-known programs is the Ronald E. McNair Scholars program which provides participants with the opportunity to prepare for doctoral studies through research and other scholarly activities. Several students mentioned this program as a preparation opportunity to which they were denied access. Yvette, a third-year student who did not have DACA, explained:

We do have a lot more resources now [as undocumented students] in comparison with the past but I still think that we still lack ... in terms of graduate school and post undergrad [preparation]. So, like the McNair program and things like that that are federally funded for fellowships. There's not a lot of opportunities for [undocumented] students in that way.

Other students who did have DACA also mentioned that they are denied access to the McNair program. This is because students must be U.S. citizens and permanent residents to be granted

access to such federally-funded programs.

Career Planning Amid Uncertainty and Political Threats

In addition to negotiating the reduced availability of professional development opportunities, undocumented students must also anticipate the changing socio-legal landscape. Particularly relevant was the ongoing threat to the DACA program, which also signaled the larger impossibility of future legal, or even liminally legal, status. In addition to concerns about the temporary nature of the two-year protection, DACA recipients faced ongoing political threats to the program's continuance. We find that both those with and without DACA reported that these feelings of uncertainty and temporariness shaped their long-term career planning.

Some DACA recipients experienced immediate relief from these protections because they anticipated that their work authorization would allow them to sustain themselves financially during and after college. This allowed them to focus on planning for their desired career. Katherine, a first-year student who had DACA, spoke about what she wants to do after graduation: "I want to go to law school. So, I know I have to take the LSAT ... I don't have time to study for the LSAT during my undergrad. I'll probably take a year off and study for the LSAT like most people tend to do." Katharine assumed that her path to law school will be similar to her citizen peers. Further, in the state of California, undocumented immigrants are eligible to receive their license to practice law. For these reasons, Katharine did not anticipate many barriers to achieving her desired career and was instead focusing on becoming a competitive candidate.

Although many DACA recipients initially responded like Katharine, deeper questioning highlighted feelings of uncertainty about their future immigration status. Undocumented students' feelings of uncertainty led them to think critically about their career plans and encouraged them to make adaptable plans that could respond to changing immigration laws.

Eduardo, a third-year transfer student with DACA, described how he anticipates lacking permanent legal status will complicate reaching his career goals:

For me, I have two main kinds of career paths. One is just going to grad school and getting a Master's in International Affairs. However, the problem with that is because my interest is more internationally related, it's difficult for somebody that's undocumented to really do that. Because it would involve me traveling a lot outside of the country. ... I would really love to do that, [but] I don't know if I'm in a position right now to actually pursue that career path. ... The other thing that I hope I can do, or my other option is just going to grad school, going to law school or going straight to a Ph.D. program. Just because I feel like it would give me enough time that during hopefully those years something might change in the immigration system and I didn't waste my time just working; instead I was continuing to pursue my education. So those are really my two paths right now.

Eduardo identified two different career paths to accommodate scenarios in which he would either remain undocumented or experience future changes in immigration law that would allow him to adjust his status. In establishing multiple plans, students attempted to strategically manage the consequences of unpredictable changes to immigration laws, but such efforts also jeopardized their ability to successfully prepare for their desired career. Instead of committing themselves to developing skills and participating in opportunities that would help them attain their primary career choice, they spread themselves thin to attempt to prepare for multiple outcomes.

Many of these feelings of uncertainty highlighted the political threats to the program. Specifically, the temporary nature of DACA as an administrative relief program, not a legal permanent immigration status, made recipients feel insecure because it could be rescinded

abruptly. Maité, a third-year student with DACA, expressed these concerns:

I feel like I can't really make any future plans because I am a DACA recipient, but the program isn't permanent. And [2016 presidential] elections are coming up ... So, it's like this program can be removed at any time and then what do I do? ... I feel like I can't really make any future plans; it has to coincide with current events.

Receiving DACA had enabled Maité to find employment on campus, making it easier to fund her education and allowing her to accept a paid internship at the undocumented student services center. However, she was highly aware that, then presidential candidate, Donald Trump had promised to rescind the DACA program. This prominent political narrative at the time made her confront the fact that she could lose her work authorization due to events outside of her control. These anticipated shifts in immigration laws and policies resulted in students outlining multiple career plans, each contingent on inclusive or exclusive changes in immigration laws. Thus, despite benefiting from DACA, students like Maité expressed tremendous uncertainty that resembled the concerns of students who do not have DACA because they recognized that their access to legal employment is temporary and conditional.

Many DACA recipients revealed that the uncertainty about their immigration status pushed them to alter their career plans. Take the following examples:

Pamela (first-year student with DACA): There was a point where I was like, I want to be a doctor. And it was like, I came in as a Bio major and I changed to undeclared because I didn't want to do Bio. ... It's like, there's so many years of studying. How am I gonna pay for that? It's so expensive ... So that's one thing I felt discouraged and like I couldn't afford to become a doctor.

Alysa (third-year student with DACA): "I heard about the whole graduate school

and Ph.D.s and all that, and I'm like yeah, I want to be a doctor. But then I'm like wait, what if DACA gets taken away? All that work is going to be for nothing ... But if I somehow become a citizen, I'll probably go for it. Then I'll know it's worth it.”

Naadir (fourth-year student with DACA): “I also wanted to run for public office. Then I also realized that being undocumented doesn't— Things come up from your past and if I ever one day am not undocumented, then that's going to be an issue probably.”

In these examples, uncertainty stemmed from many things, including the financial strain associated with student's undocumented status, threats to the DACA program, lack of permanent legal status or citizenship, and managing others' perceptions of one's past undocumented status. Students anticipated future legal constraints and actively re-imagined their career goals to adapt to these barriers.

Students who had no legal status were also uncertain about their post-college options, often feeling like there were few. Sandy, a first-year student who did not have DACA, shared, “For the people who have DACA, I feel like they have hope because after they graduate college, they can work. But right now, I'm just like okay, I'm going to graduate college but what do I do after? I don't have the work permit. So, it's really stressful and it's just hard.” Despite being far from graduation, Sandy already understood the impact of not having DACA and anticipated barriers to seeking employment. Later in the interview, she explained that reaping the benefits from her a degree would be contingent upon whether a new policy provided her with the ability to work legally; such optimism reflected that of DACA recipients who hoped that the program would continue. Still, the stress of this unknown impacted Sandy's ability to focus on her

academics and complicated her willingness to engage in career preparation opportunities.

Students with no legal status also felt uncertain about their future opportunities because of the threats being posed to DACA. For example, Sandy explained, “I can't apply to DACA. So that's why I was really excited when President Obama announced the extension. But then that [lawsuit] happened; it just didn't work.” She continued, “DACA was like one more step into getting the actual [federal] DREAM Act where you actually, you know, the path of citizenship. If they take that away, we lose that little hope we had of getting citizenship for students.” While not directly affected by legal decisions related to the DACA program, those students without DACA interpreted these political threats as a threat to future opportunities that might allow them to obtain either a liminal or permanent legal status.

Anticipating continued political threats, some of the students who lacked work authorization desired to remain in higher education as they felt it offered unique protections. Lisa, a third-year student without DACA, discussed her post-college plans:

For me, I want to go to grad school but one of the main reasons— Not the main reason, but one of the reasons I want to go to grad school is because I feel like being in education is kind of security from out there. And as an undocumented student, I feel protected within the education system. So that's one of the reasons I want to go to grad school.

Lisa rationalizes that because she may not be able to seek employment after graduating from college, she could bide her time pursuing her post-graduate education while awaiting a more inclusive, and less uncertain, policy context.

Conclusion

Previous research has established that simultaneous inclusion and exclusion disrupts

undocumented young adults' ability to access and pursue higher education (Enriquez et al., 2019; Golash-Boza & Valdez, 2018; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015; Terriquez, 2015). Building on this work, we show that the exclusionary and unpredictable nature of immigration policy constrains undocumented students' ability to engage in opportunities and long-term planning to support their preparation for life after college. College alumni show that professional development opportunities and college social networks facilitated successful career transitions for both those who received DACA and those who did not. We find that while many institutional professional development opportunities are open to undocumented students regardless of their employment authorization, DACA facilitates access to a wider variety of professional development opportunities. Yet, a lack of permanent legal status continues to prevent access to many opportunities. Further, ongoing political threats to the DACA program foster persistent feelings of uncertainty which constrain career planning. In all, we contend that DACA has supported the post-college transitions of undocumented young adults, but its effects are substantially constrained due to the reality that it is an increasingly compromised form of liminal legality.

Substantively, our findings reveal that undocumented college students struggle to prepare and plan for life after college. The little research in this area has focused on constrained post-college outcomes, highlighting the structural and socio-emotional barriers of legal uncertainty (Abrego, 2006; Enriquez, 2011; Gonzales, 2016). Turning our attention to preparatory experiences, we show that undocumented students are actively negotiating policy constraints and maximizing university resources so that they can pursue their desired careers. Despite these efforts, and the benefits afforded to some by DACA, significant barriers remain.

Our findings extend prior work on liminal legality. In line with Cebulko's (2014) argument, we confirm that DACA benefits function as a form of liminal legality in which

undocumented youth occupy an in-between status, one that is neither legal nor “illegal.” We show that DACA is far from a permanent legal status, fostering an array of structural barriers and uncertainties. Further, Menjivar (2006) suggests that liminal legality conveys an extended time of in-betweenness that prevents long-term planning. Building on this, we highlight the effects of political threats to this liminal space. We contend that liminal legality is increasingly liminal as federal legislative stalemates push immigration policymaking to the executive branch and state and local levels, where legal contestation proliferates (Gulasekaram & Ramakrishnan, 2016; Rodríguez, 2008). We show that increased political threats not only confirm one’s in-between status but also highlight its temporariness. Importantly, these threats extend uncertainties beyond beneficiaries. Our findings underscore the necessity of challenging binary understandings of (il)legality and continuing to investigate the grey areas in between. We call attention to the fact that the lived experience of this grey area is shifting and increasingly threatened, reducing the capacity of liminal legality to convey benefits and reduce the consequences of illegality. On an imaginary continuum of “legal” to “illegal,” liminal legality appears to be shifting away from sharing similarities with those who have permanent legal status and closer to those who are excluded as “illegal.”

It is important to recognize that state and institutional policies create a uniquely inclusive context for our study. Not only do financial aid policies facilitate access to higher education for undocumented students regardless of if they have DACA, but campuses often provide undocumented student services, including professional development opportunities, to address their unique needs, regardless of employment authorization (Cisneros & Valdivia, 2020). The state also permits undocumented immigrants to obtain professional licenses, paving the way to previously blocked careers. This inclusionary policy context can buffer against the effects of

exclusionary federal policy (Golash-Boza & Valdez, 2018). However, states can also curtail the potential benefits for DACA beneficiaries, creating diverging policy contexts and experiences (Cebulko & Silver, 2016; Roth, 2019). As such, undocumented students in less inclusive contexts likely have fewer opportunities for professional development, heightened feelings of uncertainty, and more difficulty with their post-college transitions. However, given the federal nature of the political threats to DACA, it seems likely that undocumented young adults in other contexts may feel a similar sense of temporariness. Future work should examine how political threats to inclusive immigration policies are affecting the experience of liminal legality in other state and institutional contexts and in relation to other aspects of everyday life.

Overall, this article contributes to growing research on the consequences of liminal legality for the upward mobility of undocumented young adults. State-level educational access policies have significantly improved opportunities to pursue college degrees, institutional practices have extended educational equity, and DACA has facilitated economic mobility (Amuedo-Dorantes & Antman, 2016; Enriquez et al., 2019; Golash-Boza & Valdez, 2018; Raza et al., 2019). However, these inclusive policies face frequent political threats that highlight the temporary nature of these benefits. These threats, coupled with a lack of permanent legal status, constrain their potential impacts. Without immigration relief at the federal level that provides a secure and permanent legal status, undocumented youth will continue to be structurally disadvantaged in their efforts to economically advance and fully participate in and contribute to U.S. society.

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