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Where Do I Go from Here? Examining the Transition of Undocumented Students Graduating from College

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ABSTRACT

In this longitudinal qualitative study, we examined how 23 undocumented college students with and without DACA navigated the college graduation process and transitioned out of higher education. Despite the growing number of undocumented students with and without DACA enrolling and graduating from college over the past 10 years, few studies have been conducted about this significant life event that can involve numerous new challenges and opportunities for them. We used Schlossberg's (2008) transition theory to design the study and analyze our data. We found that undocumented students with and without DACA perceived their transition out of higher education as an expected change with unanticipated conditions and non-events out of their control. Surprisingly, the data showed that having DACA did not translate into more stability for participants at the time of graduation. The uncertainty connected to participants' immigration status, coupled with the ambiguous sociopolitical climate and the COVID-19 pandemic, continuously created unpredictable situations that clouded their ability to navigate the changes with confidence. In this article we present our findings through two in-depth participant narratives to bolster humanizing and counterstorytelling practices in higher education scholarship. We offer implication for research, policy, and practice.

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Approximately 427,000 undocumented students are enrolled in college across the United States. Currently, most of them lack protections from the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program (Higher Ed Immigration Portal, 2023). DACA is an executive action enacted by President Obama in 2012 that provides two primary benefits to eligible undocumented immigrants: (a) access to a two-year renewable work permit and (b) protections from deportation (United States Citizenship and Immigration Services [USCIS], 2023).[1] Depending on the state, DACA beneficiaries have access to additional advantages, such as driver's licenses and in-state resident tuition (ISRT) rates at public colleges and universities (Higher Ed Immigration Portal, 2023). New reports estimate that about 181,000 undocumented college students are DACA-eligible, representing

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42.39% of the entire undocumented college student body (Higher Ed Immigration Portal, 2023). When undocumented students with and without DACA enroll in higher education, they encounter abundant barriers affecting their persistence and graduation (Covarrubias & Lara, 2014; Salazar et al., 2022). The American Federation of Teachers (2017) reports that 1–3% of all undocumented college students graduate each year; many of them take over 6 years to complete their bachelor's degrees and transition out of higher education.

Undocumented students' transition to new settings has been explored largely over the last few decades, especially as they progress from high school to college (Abrego, 2006; Gámez et al., 2017; Gonzales, 2011; Macias, 2023). Numerous scholars focus on the structural challenges these students face, and the role that schools and institutional agents play in their access and transition to higher education (e.g., Abrego, 2008; Muñoz, 2015; Nienhusser, 2013; Pérez Huber & Malagón, 2007). Gonzales (2011) cataloged the process of nearing the point of high school graduation as the "transition to ~~illegality~~" (p. 606).[2] He examined how undocumented youth "learn to be ~~illegal~~" from ages 18 to 24, after they engage in a period of discovering the meaning of their unauthorized immigration statuses (Gonzales, 2011, p. 612). Gonzales' work illuminates the challenges that undocumented youth face due to legal limitations as they pursue new adult roles after high school and provides the foundation for our scholarship.

A noteworthy transition that undocumented students experience but has not yet been examined extensively in the literature (Morales-Hernandez & Enriquez, 2021; Ortiz & Hinojosa, 2010; Zamacona, 2022), is their college graduation and movement out of higher education settings. Like other college graduates, when undocumented students transition out of higher education, they must reorient themselves and make meaning of their post-graduation pathways. However, unlike their peers with authorized immigration statuses, undocumented students may need to reconfront limitations associated with their social location as they leave the relative protected context of higher education.

Given the growing number of undocumented college students with and without DACA for the past 10 years (Higher Ed Immigration Portal, 2023), we seek to examine how they navigate the college graduation process and transition out of higher education. Little is known about this significant life event that can involve numerous new challenges and opportunities for undocumented students. Thus, to begin understanding this transition, we engage in an exploratory qualitative investigation guided by the following research questions: (a) How do undocumented students perceive their college graduation process and transition out of higher education?, (b) What are the challenges that undocumented college students encounter as they approach their graduation from college?, and (c) What strategies do undocumented students implement to transition out of higher education? Next, we offer a review of relevant literature.

Literature review

Over the past two decades, there has been a growing body of research on the experiences of undocumented youth, with a primary focus on their transition from high school to college (Gonzales, 2011; Nienhusser et al., 2016), and their experiences while in college (Muñoz & Vigil, 2018; Pérez & Rodríguez, 2011). These studies have revealed the numerous challenges undocumented students navigate because of their immigration status, such as unwelcoming educational environments (Muñoz & Vigil, 2018), and lack of financial aid (Abrego & Gonzales, 2010; Terriquez, 2014). Even after the enactment of DACA in 2012, research on the experiences of beneficiaries of the executive action demonstrates that they continue to encounter limitations to and through higher education.

Financial challenges are predominant among undocumented college students as they are ineligible for federal financial aid and face limited employment opportunities with low wages (Higher Ed Immigration Portal, 2023; Togun-Butler, 2018). While DACA recipients may hold authorized work permits, they still experience financial difficulties, often due to their responsibilities to contribute to their family's income (Murillo, 2021). These financial stressors affect undocumented students' ability to persist in higher education (Salazar et al., 2023).

In addition, undocumented students face a myriad of socioemotional challenges while in college (Cervantes et al., 2015; Gonzales et al., 2013; Muñoz, 2016; Yasuike, 2019). For instance, Muñoz (2013) found that their ineligibility to participate in various campus activities, like work-study and study abroad programs, prevents undocumented students from fully partaking in college life and feeling connected to their peers. Many undocumented college students also experience fear of deportation and hypervigilance of revealing their status to their peers on campus (Muñoz, 2016; Yasuike, 2019). Consequently, undocumented college students experience higher levels of anxiety and depression compared to students with authorized immigration statuses (Nienhusser & Romandia, 2022).

To navigate these challenges, undocumented students use various resources and strategies (Cervantes et al., 2015; Gonzales et al., 2013; Muñoz, 2016; Yasuike, 2019). Familial support, whether financial or emotional, plays a crucial role in their persistence through higher education (Gámez et al., 2017; Muñoz, 2013; Salazar, 2021). Trusted institutional agents provide information about scholarships, helping alleviate financial stressors (Gonzales, 2011; Salazar et al., 2023). Also, undocumented youth engage in community advocacy as a way of making meaning of the arduous experiences they endure due to their immigration status (Cervantes et al., 2015; Yasuike, 2019). On campus, undocumented student organizations help students build relationships with peers who share their circumstances and engage in collective activism efforts (Muñoz, 2016). These connections and resources combined, promote the college persistence and success of undocumented students.

Limited research exists about the experiences of undocumented college students as they transition out of higher education. This body of work shows that they often encounter challenges finding work and professional opportunities post-graduation, leading to difficulties in meeting their living expenses (Morales-Hernandez & Enriquez, 2021; Ortiz & Hinojosa, 2010; Perez, 2016; Pérez Huber, 2015). Their ineligibility for jobs requiring professional licenses further exacerbates this hardship (Ortiz & Hinojosa, 2010; Sanchez, 2022). In college, DACA beneficiaries specifically, have greater access to professional development opportunities that help them prepare for post-graduation careers (Morales-Hernandez & Enriquez, 2021). However, once they graduate college, DACA beneficiaries continue to feel excluded by the executive action restrictions (Pérez Huber, 2015). These limitations include restricted travel opportunities outside the United States, which hinder the professional ambitions of undocumented college graduates (Pérez Huber, 2015). Zamacona (2022) found that undocumented graduates with and without DACA feel uncertain about the executive action because of unstable sociopolitical realities; this impedes their ability to make post-graduation plans.

Literature about the experiences of undocumented college students transitioning into graduate school after completing their undergraduate studies, also describes the challenges they encounter through these pursuits (Freeman & Valdivia, 2021; Pérez Huber, 2015). Lara and Nava (2018) found that some undocumented college students decide to pursue a graduate education due to ineligibility for authorized employment upon their graduation. However, in this process, undocumented college graduates experience obstacles obtaining reliable information about graduate and professional schools, mostly because resources do not specifically address their unique needs (Freeman & Valdivia, 2021). Their ineligibility for financial aid, even in state contexts that offer access to ISRT rates also deters undocumented college graduates of pursuing graduate degrees (Pérez Huber, 2015). Often, lack of reliable information and financial aid dissuades them from applying to graduate school, limiting their professional prospects.

As states have been passing legislation to extend access to ISRT rates and state financial aid to undocumented students since 2001, their enrollment in higher education has continuously been increasing (Higher Ed Immigration Portal, 2023). While data on the college graduation rates of undocumented students and number of undocumented college graduates are non-existent, we speculate that more undocumented students are graduating from college nowadays than 20 years ago. Hence, it is essential to investigate their post-graduation pathways and understand how they make meaning of their transition out of higher education, including the challenges they navigate and strategies they implement to cope with the change.

Theoretical framework

We used Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory to guide this study. Transitions are defined as "the changes — good or bad, expected or unexpected — that unsettle us" (Schlossberg, 2008, p. 215). For most individuals, transitions revolve around noteworthy events that occur expectedly or unexpectedly, such as moving to a new place or becoming a parent. Changes are sometimes connected to social milestones, such as graduating high school, and other times result from individual choices like getting married (Schlossberg, 2008). Transitions can also be caused by unforeseen circumstances, such as a sudden death. Unexpected transitions do not always have to be negative though. For example, individuals may experience unanticipated positive changes when they get recruited for a job they were not seeking, which will take them to live closer to loved ones. "Non-events" can also prompt people to transition (Schlossberg, 2008, p. 9). These are the changes individuals anticipate happening but do not, such as being promoted or having a baby. Regardless of the transition type, if it is major, it will change four aspects of a person's life including "roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions" (Schlossberg, 2008, p. 12).

According to Sargent and Schlossberg (1988), individuals can effectively cope with various kinds of major changes through a systematic process consisting of four elements, also known as the 4 S's: (a) situation, (b) self, (c) support, and (d) strategies. The first S — situation requires the individual experiencing the transition to examine several factors, such as the timing of the event, the changes in roles involved, the duration of the transition, the number of other stressors present, and their ability to plan for it (Anderson et al., 2022). No situation is evaluated the same by two individuals; and the assessment of their circumstances influences people's ability to cope with the changes they are experiencing (Schlossberg, 2008).

The second S — self, relates to the personal characteristics and internal psychological resources of the individual experiencing the transition (Anderson et al., 2022). Personal and demographic characteristics, such as age, gender, and socioeconomic status, affect how a person going through a transition perceives the changes. Psychological resources such as self-efficacy and resilience can help individuals manage the changes effectively, while the lack of these inner resources can make the transition more challenging (Sargent & Schlossberg, 1988). Individuals who positively cope with change tend to feel challenged rather than overwhelmed during the transition. In addition, they tend to feel a sense of control over the situation and have a more optimistic outlook in life (Schlossberg, 2008).

The third S — support, refers to the aid an individual experiencing a significant life event or nonevent has in place at the time of the transition (Anderson et al., 2022). Although support is a general concept, Schlossberg

(2008) incorporates the work of Kahn and Antonucci (1980) to identify three main functions of support: (a) affection, (b) affirmation, and (c) assistance or aid. During a transition, each person may need different kinds of support (Schlossberg, 2008). For example, someone who is deciding to cease their higher education may need affirmation about their choice, while someone else facing the same situation may need assistance in the form of information about careers that do not require college degrees. People experiencing change may receive support from many different sources, including intimate relationships, family, friends, communities within institutions and organizations, and even strangers (Schlossberg, 1981).

Finally, the fourth S — strategies, refers to the actions individuals take to cope with the transition (Sargent & Schlossberg, 1988). These coping strategies fall into three main functional categories: (a) modifying the situation, (b) controlling the meaning of the transition, and (c) managing the stress after the change has occurred (Schlossberg, 2008). Within each category, individuals can engage in various coping strategies, such as seeking advice for example when trying to change the situation or making positive comparisons when aiming to alter the meaning of the transition (Anderson et al., 2022; Goodman et al., 2006). Often, individuals may apply several of these strategies simultaneously to cope with changes (Schlossberg, 2008).

For Schlossberg (2008), during times of change, individuals move from preoccupation to integration of the transition over a period that varies according to the 4 S's. Building from this work, Goodman et al. (2006) conceptualized transitions as events or nonevents consisting of a series of phases in which individuals *move in*, *move through*, and *move out* of the transition. For some people moving through and out of the transition may take longer than others depending on the situation they are experiencing, their self-characteristics and internal resources they possess, the support systems they have in place, and the coping strategies they implement (Goodman et al., 2006). In this study, we used the concepts associated with Schlossberg's transition theory to guide the study design, including the data collection instruments and data analysis process.

Methodology

We used a participatory action research (PAR) approach and a narrative inquiry methodology to examine how undocumented students with and without DACA navigated the college graduation process and transitioned out of higher education. As a result of a PAR approach, current and former undocumented students served as co-researchers in the study, generating and analyzing data (Hacker, 2013). This resulted in the individual and collective empowerment and transformation of all co-researchers, allowing each of us to enhance our critical consciousness (Salazar et al., 2023). With a grown

understanding of systemic injustices and the experiences of undocumented students navigating a critical transition, we each plan to act against injustice and advocate for social change within our own microenvironments.

Because PAR does not limit the use of methodologies and methods (Hacker, 2013), and given our exploratory research purpose and questions, we chose a narrative inquiry methodology to carry out our investigation. Narrative inquiry centers the first-person accounts of participants and allows researchers to co-construct the meaning of those stories through in-depth individual conversations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Narrative inquiry methodologists believe that reality is socially constructed; thus, they need to get close to participants to better understand their stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In narrative inquiry studies, researchers typically gather data via two or more interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this way, participants have multiple opportunities to share their stories and the meaning of such events while researchers expand their understanding of participants' interpretations and perspectives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Recruitment and sample

We began recruiting participants in April 2021 after obtaining approval from the Institutional Review Board at Texas A&M University (IRB #2021-0039). To partake in the study, participants had to fulfill the following criteria: (a) Be graduating or have just graduated with a bachelor's degree from any four-year college or university in the United States between April and September 2021, (b) Be an undocumented student with or without DACA at the time of their college graduation, and (c) Be at least 18 years old. We posted the study's information on various social media platforms and groups, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to recruit participants. We also sent the study details to key higher education organizations and individuals working in multicultural affairs, undocumented student resource centers, and diversity offices across the nation.

We recruited 23 participants. Our sample was racially and ethnically diverse consisting of participants who were Mexican ($n = 11$), Guatemalan ($n = 2$), Dominican ($n = 2$), Argentinian ($n = 1$), Bahamian ($n = 1$), Bolivian ($n = 1$), Ecuadorian ($n = 1$), Honduran ($n = 1$), Salvadorean ($n = 1$), Peruvian ($n = 1$), and Palestinian ($n = 1$). Only two participants did not identify as Latinx. Most participants were DACA recipients ($n = 18$). The average age of arrival was 4 years old with the youngest participant arriving to the United States as a 3-month-old and oldest as a 15-year-old. Most participants' pronouns were "she/her/hers" ($n = 19$). Three participants' pronouns were "he/him/his," and one participant's pronouns were "they/them/theirs." Some participants disclosed optional information about their salient social identities including being low-income, a member of the LGBTQ+ community, and practicing Christianity.

All participants were first-generation college students. They pursued degrees in social sciences ($n = 11$), humanities ($n = 4$), science, technology, engineering, and, mathematics ($n = 4$), education ($n = 3$), and business ($n = 1$). Most participants did not work while enrolled in college ($n = 15$); the rest worked in various on-campus positions (e.g., financial aid student assistant, undergraduate admission representative) or off-campus jobs (e.g., preschool teacher, Spanish tutor, restaurant manager). The average age at the time of graduation was 22 years old with the youngest participant graduating as a 20-year-old and oldest as a 28-year-old. See Appendix A for the table of participants.

Data collection

To generate data, we designed a longitudinal study that involved 3 interviews with each participant over one year, starting in May 2021. Each interview protocol was planned to last 60–90-minutes and included 18 open-ended questions. Examples of interview protocol questions include: Can you describe how the past few months have been for you as you began approaching your college graduation? How did you feel overall when you thought of not being in college as an undergraduate student anymore? Can you share more about the challenges you have experienced since graduating from college 6 months ago, if any? What are some changes that you have been experiencing since graduating from college? Reflecting on the relationships you had on campus, to what extent have you been able to maintain those relationships a year after graduating? In what ways, if any, has your status influenced the challenges and opportunities you have experienced in the last year? The first two authors of this paper conducted most interviews, generating a total of 67 hours of interview data. We also asked participants to complete 2 demographic questionnaires. Participants completed the first questionnaire before the first interview, which aimed to obtain demographic and academic information about them. We requested the second survey before the third interview to obtain updated information on the participant a year after graduating, including graduate school and professional details. Both surveys had the option for participants to submit a link to their LinkedIn profiles or attach their resumes. All participants selected pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality during the study.

We met with 23 participants online between early May 2021 and early November 2021 to conduct the first interview. We designed this protocol to learn how participants experienced the transition out of higher education at the time or immediately following their college graduation. We also asked participants to share their goals and aspirations as recent college graduates entering the workforce and/or graduate school. At the end of the first interview, each participant received a resource document that contained

information on graduate school, entrepreneurship and income generation, and professional development opportunities. The resource also included techniques to navigate bias, discrimination from employers, and violence against immigrants.

We conducted the second interview with each participant 6 months after our first meeting with them. A total of 19 participants completed second interviews. The four participants we lost did not reply to our many communication attempts. During the second interview we asked participants to detail how their post-graduation plans were emerging and how they were navigating their post-graduation environments, such as the workforce or graduate school.

We conducted the third interview a year after the initial meeting; all 19 participants who completed the second interview remained part of the study. During the third interview we asked participants to reflect retrospectively on how their higher education institutions provided them resources as they graduated from college as undocumented students. We also inquired if and how participants' goals and aspirations had changed a year after graduation. All participants received a $25 Amazon gift card for their participation after each of the interviews completed.

Data analysis

As we generated data, we hired an external provider to transcribe verbatim each data source. Because we needed to further understand participants' narratives before we met with them a second and third time, data analysis took place simultaneously as we collected data. The first two authors analyzed all data and the process consisted of various systematic steps that we completed after each interview. First, we wrote analytical memos using Schlossberg's (2008) theory as a guide to reflect on the conversations about how each participant was navigating the college graduation process individually. Second, we verified each transcript for accuracy, giving us the opportunity to listen to each interview a second time and read the transcripts line by line. This helped us get closer to the data. Third, we completed a summary of each interview after the verification process. Each summary illuminated central topics about the participants' transition experience. Lastly, we read and analyzed each transcript one additional time to identify emergent themes across participants' narratives. The research questions guided this process.

Trustworthiness

The systematic data analysis process we engaged in allowed us to identify central themes in connection to the research purpose and theoretical framework guiding the study. Throughout the entire data collection and analysis processes, the first two authors met on a bi-weekly basis to discuss the central

themes that emerged from each interview. In our bi-weekly peer-debriefing discussions, we reflected on how each participant navigated the college graduation process as an undocumented individual, and later compared themes across participants to recognize differences and commonalities in their experiences. This process helped us reduced the data and identified key findings presented in this manuscript. Memoing after each interview and reviewing our memos throughout the analysis process also enhanced the trustworthiness of the study.

Findings

The 67 hours of longitudinal data generated as part of this study were rich and complex. Each participant moved *in*, *through*, and *out* of their college graduation transition distinctively based on the 4 S's associated with their experiences (situation, self, support, and strategies). Yet, the data revealed some commonalities among undocumented participants without DACA ($n = 5$) and those with DACA ($n = 18$). For example, all participants regardless of DACA protections experienced unexpected situations during an anticipated period of change. While participants knew their college graduation was approaching, their immigration status added unforeseeable circumstances and stressors, impeding them to fully strategize and plan for the changes. In this process, participants' sense of self diminished. They doubted if they were going to be able to adjust to their new routines, relationships, and roles. Adapting to not being in college was particularly difficult for participants who had formed a strong student identity. To manage these changes, participants mostly relied on their families. Unfortunately, most of them did not receive concrete help from institutional agents at their campuses on how to navigate the transition out of higher education as undocumented people. In this section, we present the findings via two distinct participant narratives. Grounded in our positionality as current and former undocumented immigrants, it is essential for us to humanize the experiences of participants as undocumented people and honor the principles of our methodological approaches. First, we present the story of Ally, who graduated college without DACA. Then, we present the narrative of Ani, who graduated college with DACA. Each story is organized around key concepts connected to Schlossberg's (2008) theory, illuminating themes that cut across the entire dataset. We discuss these themes in detail in the next section of the paper.

Ally's transition

Ally (she/her/hers) was born in Mexico and arrived in the United States when she was 1 year-old. She was 22 years-old at the time of her first interview. Ally graduated in May 2021 from a private not for profit predominantly white

college located in Pennsylvania. Her school prides itself in college affordability and a commitment to student success. Ally graduated college in 4 years with a bachelor's degree in criminal justice and a minor in business administration. She moved away from her home state of Arizona to pursue higher education. She utilized different financial resources to pay for her tuition and overall cost of attendance. Growing up, Ally was constantly told she could "accomplish anything" she wanted, so she "kept that mindset throughout" her life, especially as she navigated her education. As graduation approached, she began to doubt this perspective after realizing the challenges her status represented for post-graduation life, particularly because she did not have DACA.

Situation: "I applied for DACA . . . I'm sort of in a limbo"

Ally started college aspiring to become a federal prosecutor, but she soon realized that without a social security number, it was going to be hard for her to pursue a career in the criminal justice sector. Then, she relied her hopes on DACA to obtain a work authorization as she was approaching graduation. She submitted her DACA paperwork when a short window of time opened for new applicants as the executive action was going through the judicial process. With the hopes of being granted DACA, Ally began preparing to transition into the workforce. She built her professional skills by engaging in unpaid internships and increased her GPA. Sadly, the unexpected pandemic negatively affected USCIS processing timelines, so as Ally's graduation came around, she was still waiting on her DACA approval. During her first interview, she said: "I'm currently working to get DACA, I already applied but I'm still in the works and because of COVID, things are really backed up." For Ally, her anticipated graduation and transition into a first professional job turned into a nonevent because she did not receive her DACA approval by the time of graduation. This made her decide to move back to Arizona, which was not what she desired neither anticipated.

Despite rising anti-immigrant climates in the United States, undocumented youth are typically less scrutinized, so Ally did not foresee being denied DACA. Ally recognized she was afraid of not having any protections while waiting for the paperwork though, and shared these sentiments during her first interview:

> I'm terrified at being deported . . . I applied for DACA and there shouldn't be a reason why they [USCIS] would deny it but it's still, you know, it's still a possibility you know? It's still a huge possibility and they don't deport you just because they deny it, but I drive back home because it's a big city, what if I get pulled over one day? It's not a sanctuary city, so what if I get pulled over one day and they [police] decide to call ICE on me? Or what if I'm in the wrong place at the wrong time? You never know what could happen and all that terrifies me so much, then everything that I did here in the United States for the past 20 years just went down the drain.

For Ally, her transition out of college and return to Arizona exacerbated the vulnerability she felt as an undocumented individual. She had hoped to stay in Pennsylvania where she "had a job lined up" in a probation's office. Yet, as a college graduate obligated to return to her home state due to restricted career pathways, she was no longer inside the protective environment of a college campus neither close to the state context where she had some professional connections. Ally felt more exposed to interactions with law enforcement post-graduation and constantly thought of what would happen if she were to be deported.

Ally's hopes and dreams at the time of her graduation reflected the common aspirations of recent college graduates, such as finding a job associated with her education, establishing a stable income, and living independently. Then, the court halted all first-time DACA applications, including those under review. Ally had not anticipated this additional stressor and found herself out of professional options. During her second interview, she shared how the 6 months following her graduation had been:

> They've been hard, I can't lie to you. I did get a job without DACA, thank God, with my ITIN [Individual Taxpayer Identification Number]. I've been working like that, but I was still waiting for DACA, and then with the ruling by the judge, the district judge in Texas, now I'm sort of in a limbo. That was probably the toughest thing, especially with all that hope that I had, but other than that I've been okay.

The developments of DACA made Ally feel defeated. Yet, she kept moving forward and found ways to generate income using her ITIN. She began providing legal secretarial services for an attorney. Through this time, Ally put her dreams on hold and felt lost in an overworked and underpaid position despite her skills and education.

Self: "I know what I'm worth as a person, and not just because I have a degree"

Ally felt overwhelmed when she started to confront life as an undocumented immigrant outside higher education. Although Ally had worked "hard labor" before, "cleaning houses and shit," she had not expected to engage in in such kind of work post-graduation. While Ally respected people who engaged in "hard labor," she expressed how she had study hard to step away from such jobs. During her second interview she said: "I worked my ass off for 4 years to get a degree so that I don't have to do that anymore because I worked hard labor my whole life." Ally's sense of self was significantly disrupted by the DACA news and lack of professional career prospects early on. This was uncommon for her because she grew up with a high self-esteem. She continued: "I have a huge ego. That sounds terrible . . . but my self-esteem, in myself, is like . . . I know what I'm worth as a person, and not just because I have a degree."

A few months after graduation, Ally's self-confidence returned. Her positive explanatory style helped her cope with the stressors of not securing her dream job and returning to Arizona. During her second interview, she said: "I'm not where I wanted to be, but I feel 1000% better than what I did back then." While Ally recognized the situation was not what she expected, she acknowledged the progress in her emotional wellbeing. She also spoke confidently about her self-beliefs: "I'm not going to let anyone treat me differently because I'm not from here. I'm not. Especially in a career. I'm not going to let someone treat me that I'm less than them." Despite the initial challenges she experienced post-graduation, Ally regained a sense of control quickly, particularly over ideas about her self-worth.

Having the opportunity to generate income also helped Ally feel more secure. In her second interview she commented: "My sense of self skyrocketed. Again, I know what I'm worth, and I'm a good asset." However, in this process, she confronted work mistreatment as she was underpaid and overworked., she explained:

> I'm severely underpaid . . . . The fact that I'm ~~illegal~~, I think, it has everything to do with that, because if it wasn't I would leave. They would know that I could find a job anywhere else, but at this point they're like, "Listen, it's either this or you struggle again." I 1000% think they're taking advantage of me, that they can just overwork me.

Ally attributed her immigration status as the reason why she was experiencing labor abuse. However, she did not internalize the stigma associated with being an undocumented person without DACA and was still able to recognize her strengths. She realized she earned the opportunity for her qualifications. She explained this awareness during her second interview:

> The only way that they're helping me is by giving me a job, but that's not even helping me because I'm overqualified for this job. I'm so much more qualified in other things because I know how to go throughout the court system, I know how to work through all that. They don't even work with the court system, but I can do everything that they give me to do, and then some. Again, I'm overqualified for this job, I'm underpaid, I've been threatened to get fired multiple times over stupid shit.

Ally refused to let her immigration status or people's perception of the vulnerability of her social location, limit her aspirations. She did not accept her work condition as a permanent problem but rather recognized she deserved better; thus, 6 months after graduation, she began seeking alternative income generation opportunities. In this process, Ally needed a great deal of assistance despite her resilience and optimism. The transition engaged her with support systems that strongly encouraged her to refocus her hopes and dreams.

Support: "They try to help me, but they don't really know all that much about it"

Ally's systems of support varied throughout her transition out of higher education as she needed different resources to adapt back to her environment in Arizona. The support started with a few institutional agents in Pennsylvania and switched to family and friends as she moved to her home state. When Ally attended college, she found professors that nurtured her career ambitions. During her first interview she shared:

> I took one criminal justice class, my freshmen, sophomore year, and I absolutely fell in love with it. I fell in love with this perfect system that in theory would work but obviously that's not the reality of things. And I fell in love with it, and I found a passion in it where I could hopefully help make a change in the system. And my professors helped with that.

For Ally, her professors fostered her sense of career direction and helped her develop a critical perspective about the criminal justice field and U.S. society.

In addition, Ally talked about how faculty and administrators helped her find professional development opportunities. She continued: "My professors here, they've helped me find internships and stuff like that, that I can get experience from. There's a lady here who helps you find jobs within your field." For Ally, it was important to gain professional experience as a student, so she could be better prepared to secure a job upon her graduation. In this process, she disclosed information about her immigration status to those supporting her, she said:

> My professors, they know, I've told them [about immigration status], I keep them updated regarding my DACA stuff just because they want to know that stuff, they're excited for me to finally be able to hopefully be legal. With the . . . I don't want to call her a counselor but she's a career advisor, that's what she does, she knows but I haven't really discussed it with her all that much.

Because Ally did not have DACA, she felt the need to disclose the limitations of her immigration status to institutional agents on campus, who wanted to help her secure internship opportunities. She felt more comfortable speaking to her faculty than the career advisor about her background, but realized that they did not have the knowledge necessary to help her despite their intentions: "So my professor and the career advisor, they don't really know, so they are more like, 'You might as well just . . . ' They try to help me, but they don't really know all that much about it." Ally clearly recognized that her support system in college wanted to help her; yet they lacked knowledge about alternatives to generate income for undocumented students without DACA.

When Ally left Pennsylvania, she began relying on new networks in Arizona to obtain information about income opportunities and bring some stability to her life. For example, Ally found the legal services position through social ties, she said:

> It was literally by word of mouth, which is how you find any job nowadays, especially for undocumented people. It was just by word of mouth. I knew someone that knew someone else who was married to a woman that works that [legal services], so it's like that, and thankfully I was good enough and was qualified enough.

As Ally pointed out, she had to rely on complex networks to find professional opportunities. While in college, she had also kept in contact with one her high school counselors, who kept offering her guidance as she figured out her post-graduation plans, she talked about his support:

> I've known him for a long time. He's always helped me you know, "You have to look at this, look at this graduate school you know, if you want to go and get your master's, you might want to work at the college," type of things like, he's always giving me tips about what I can do after college just so that I don't get stuck where I am.

For Ally, receiving assistance from her high school counselor was important because he knew about her immigration status. Ally trusted him and valued his advice.

Her parents and new partner also instilled in Ally a sense of stability she badly needed, albeit their support was more affective than practical. Her mother provided advice that motivated her to pursue her dreams, particularly as Ally encountered challenges post-graduation. During her second interview Ally explained how she wanted to go to law school and the role her mom played in her aspirations:

> My mom [keeps me motivated]. Because we argue a lot, but she has all the faith in me. All the faith that she can ever give, she has in me. She says that I will be accomplished, "Que voy hacer una abogada bien machin" [I will be an excellent lawyer]. She has a lot of faith in me, and I think she helps me a lot, especially when I'm really beating myself up over something, over law school specifically. I was looking at places and she just tells me, she's like, "Listen. It's going to be hard, but you're going to have a good career. You're going to do what you like." She's like, "You're not going to have to take shit from anyone." She literally, she's that little voice in my ear that helps me feel that what I'm doing is 1000% worth it.

Her mother encouraged Ally to not give up on her dream of going to law school, which elevated her perception of the self and reminded her of her ability to manage the transition. With all the affirmation, affection, and aid provided by her new convoy of support, Ally's perception of the situation and even herself shifted throughout the year. She felt "stronger" and invigorated to think of the future, implementing various strategies that allowed her to effectively manage the changes.

Strategies: "My mindset has changed, honestly"

As Ally navigated the transition out of higher education, she engaged in a series of coping mechanisms that helped her manage post-graduation stressors and work toward her initial goal of going to law school. When

reflecting about her forced return to Arizona, unexpected DACA disappointment, and lack of professional prospects immediately after graduating, Ally talked about still having a sense of optimism and hope. During her second interview she said:

> I didn't know what I was going to do [post-graduation]. I just had all this hope and all these aspirations, but I didn't know what was going to happen, because again, I was waiting for DACA. I was waiting for something to hold on to.

For Ally, the uncertainty of her future did not take away her dreams. She changed the meaning of the situation by reframing it as temporary and not letting go off her aspirations.

When her DACA paperwork was not processed, she was shaken. Nonetheless, she did not wallow and took actions to modify the transition. She tried to solve the problem by generating income in different capacities. She rearranged her priorities and focused on finding financial stability rather than using her college degree. She talked about her situation among her social networks and asked for help. To her surprise, these actions paid off. Six months after graduating, she explained:

> So, I didn't imagine myself actually being able to work, someone understanding my situation, saying, "Hey, it's okay. As long as you pay your taxes, we don't really care." I didn't imagine that, so I'm grateful. I'm honestly so grateful.

Ally's optimistic actions promoted her financial stability, which was one of the main stressors she encountered post-graduation. She felt accomplished when she started providing legal services, helping her reassert herself as a college graduate.

After the urgency to generate income had diminished with the opportunity to provide legal services, Ally began reflecting more about her aspirations and overall transition out of higher education. A year after graduating she said:

> My mindset has changed, honestly. I feel like in the 4 years that I was in college, I had a plan, but in the last year alone, I think I've set it in stone. I had to refocus on what my plan actually was and what I really wanted to do. I always knew what I wanted to do, but I just messed around with the idea, and in the last 6 months, and last year, actually, I really had to refocus and made sure that I was taking the steps towards my plan and my goals . . . . I am studying for LSAT now.

For Ally, bouncing back post-graduation did not take long. She was able to contemplate her goals and come up with concrete steps toward them. Ally decided to seek alternative professional opportunities that would allow her to earn more and save money for law school. She also wanted to be in a less stressful setting where she could have more mental capacity to study for the Law School Admissions Test (LSAT).

Taking optimistic actions and asserting her professional goals throughout her transition out of college helped Ally see the future in a different light. She

continued: "I was in an office behind a computer all day, and even now, I'm still behind a computer or screen all day, but that's just helped me really think about everything that I really do want to do." For Ally, navigating professional conditions that were not ideal as a result of her immigration status did not propel her to give up on her dreams. Like her early post-graduation days, she managed the stressors by reframing the situation. With combined strategies, Ally felt she had effectively cope with change. During her third interview she said:

> I don't feel like the transition is as bad anymore. I feel like I've adjusted better now. Even 6 months ago, I was still adjusting. I was still trying to get used to getting into this new cycle, into this new schedule and pattern, right? . . . But now I have my schedule. I have my pattern.

Transitioning out of college was not easy for Ally, but she remained hopeful. She said: "My expectations of what I can do haven't changed. I know I could still do what I want in life and get the career that I want. I just think it's a small setback." Ally believed that not moving into her dream career or law school immediately after graduating college was not a defeat. She only perceived it as a small hitch.

Ani's transition

Ani (she/her/hers) was born in Mexico and arrived in the United States when she was 2 years-old. She was 22 years-old at the time of her first interview. Ani graduated in May 2021 from a research-intensive private PWI university in the District of Columbia (DC). Ani graduated from this university with a double major in computer science and sociology in 4 years. Ani moved away from her home state of Colorado to pursue higher education. She worked between 6–10 hours per week on-campus and relied on scholarships to finance her education. Thru her 4 years in college, Ani struggled academically, socially, and personally. She received bad grades in numerous classes and overall experienced poor advising. She also encountered discouraging classmates and a lack of support from institutional agents. During her senior year, her grandfather passed away, taking a toll on her well-being. As graduation approached, Ani struggled to find opportunities in computer science because of security clearance requirements available to U.S. citizens only. The few job prospects she secured were unfamiliar with DACA, and as a recipient, she felt scared to uncover details of her immigration status. These experiences made Ani reanalyze and question the limitations of DACA and her future.

Situation: "I didn't know what to expect . . . the plan . . . was different from where I am today"

Ani started college hoping to graduate with a degree in computer science and work with her credentials in a government-related branch in Washington, DC.

As a DACA recipient and student activist, she had not felt limited in her aspirations while in college despite her academic challenges. Yet, as she sought professional jobs, she realized she needed to be a U.S. citizen to apply for most government positions related to cybersecurity. Ani experienced frequent job rejections in the months leading up to her graduation. She feared disappointing her family, but she kept applying to positions. During her first interview, she spoke about what her final days in college looked like; she said:

> It's mostly applying to jobs. Yeah. Even when I'm in class, I'm just looking at jobs too. Because I'm like, "Oh you know, my graduation is approaching and what am I gonna do after?" I feel like if I'm unemployed like, in a way, I feel like that will disappoint my family. So, like I just feel that stress … And I would get really overwhelmed by the amount of jobs I would be applying to and not hear back, or like when I will get those rejection emails.

Ani had anticipated graduating from college but had not expected to encounter rejections and limitations associated with being a DACA recipient, she noted:

> I feel like when I'm applying to jobs or like when thinking about post grad … I don't talk about my status because … Or in the interview process, like I would want to ask them, right? Like if they … would help me you know? Renew my DACA, something that could help me. But in a way … I feel like I shouldn't. The job process hasn't been going well. So, and in telling them that [being a DACA recipient] I feel like it would … I don't know, make them not want to give me a job, you know? And I don't want that.

As a student graduating from a prestigious university, she had seen many of her peers securing good-paying jobs before graduation. This gave her the impression she would encounter a similar path, but she did not. For Ani, the lack of career prospects, which she attributed in part to her immigration status, tainted her graduation achievements, she explained: "Graduating from this school like it's a big accomplishment. And, but, like in a way, I feel like it's not because I don't have a job." Without a job, Ani viewed her college graduation as a negative transition.

While Ani faced challenges finding a job, she also dealt with her grandfather's passing, which deeply affected her transition out of higher education. Her grandfather's death caused tremendous grief in Ani. He lived in Mexico, and she was unable to go to his funeral. In her first interview, Ani said: "Grieving has been hard. And I just kind of isolated myself in my room because I couldn't get myself to see anyone or open to anyone. So, it's kind of been hard interacting with people daily." The self-isolation Ani endured because of his grandfather's death was on top of the stringent COVID-19 restrictions her university had imposed. All this together did not help Ani feel mentally and emotionally stable at the time of graduation, she explained: "My mental well-being hasn't been great. So like, hopefully in the future, I can find some sort of like stability."

Ani began to reflect more about her next steps as graduation approached. She realized that she needed a job that would allow her to financially support herself and her family in Colorado if needed. During her first interview, she said, "Part of my aspirations were to graduate from college and be financially stable or have some sort of peace. I know money doesn't solve all the problems but just having the income to help my family . . . " Unfortunately for Ani, her anticipated graduation turned into a nonevent because she did not obtain a job after graduation, causing her to experience unanticipated stressors. Early during her senior year, she had also decided not to apply to graduate school, which altered her overall plans. Fortunately, a few months after graduating, she found a remote job as a technical support engineer that allowed her to stay in the Washington, DC, area. During her second interview, 6 months post-graduation, Ani reflected more in-depth about her transition out of higher education. She stated:

> Honestly, I didn't know what to expect. I didn't have a plan or the plan that I would have was different from where I am today. Before I thought I would be going to grad school or something like that, but now I'm working full time. My expectations were different, but I wouldn't change anything, because I've been able to save up money too.

Before graduating, Ani never imagined that being a DACA recipient would hold her back from achieving her career dreams. She had different expectations for herself. Yet, she persevered and found a job in a related field but struggled with feelings of emptiness and her sense of self.

Self: "I was very open about my status. I felt like I went back into no one knowing"

Ani's routines drastically changed after graduating college and revolved around fulfilling her work responsibilities remotely; this made her feel unhappy and lose her sense of self even more. Ani felt a general lack of control in her life before graduating with her bachelor's degree, and the sentiment continued as a college graduate despite her DACA protections. In her second interview, Ani said:

> It felt really weird and different [graduating], not having to do any homework or assignments, but also, I felt empty. For some reason, even now, I have this pressure to do more or even at my work, I got a cold, and I didn't want to tell my manager that I was sick or that I couldn't work because I have to show them that I'm doing really well and I'm doing so much. So, I've been trying to do that work/life [balance] because I was turning into a workaholic, I would say, because I felt that was all I had or all I have.

For Ani, feeling insecure about herself prompted her to turn into a "workaholic." Coupled with working in an industry where women are underrepresented, she felt pressure to prove herself.

Furthermore, for Ani, transitioning out of college shifted how much she embraced her experiences as a DACA recipient. During her second interview she said:

> Even when I got the job, I didn't tell them about my status. I didn't even tell them until my manager brought it up that a lawyer from the company asked him if I was working. I felt like . . . I don't even know how to explain it. It felt weird for somebody to know, even though I'm very, even though in college, I was very open about my status. I felt like I went back into no one knowing, especially in this new setting that I'm in. And it feels like I'm hiding something.

At work, Ani had not disclosed her experiences as an undocumented immigrant with DACA; she only explained her background to the Human Resources representative when she completed the hiring paperwork. This was a significant decision for Ani because her experiences as a member of the undocumented community allowed her to engage in student activism and find supportive peers in college. For Ani, concealing her status made her feel self-conscious and unstable.

At the time of her second interview, Ani was reexamining her life goals. She decided to apply for a professional development program she found via Instagram called "DREAMers in Tech," which was available without cost for selected applicants. The program offered career coaching and financial support to cover the cost of a tech-related online certification course. She said: "I applied to that [DREAMers in Tech program], and I got it . . . . Just doing small things like that, and just being happy where I'm at, at this moment. That's something that I'm working on." Ani knew she had to do something different to feel better about herself and get a sense of control over her transition. Thus, she felt accomplished when she was selected for the DREAMers in Tech program and hoped to build supportive networks thru it.

Support: "He supports me in everything"

Ani's system of support changed to a certain extent when she transitioned out of higher education. During her college years, she had numerous friends who were also undocumented. Many of the efforts that brought them together revolved around immigrant rights activism on campus, but she was no longer involve in those activities as a college graduate. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic affected those relationships prior to her graduation because most students were not allowed to live on campus. When reflecting about her friends as a support system during the first interview, she said:

> They're also undocumented. So, like it's really nice to have like that connection and be able to like talk about similar struggles that we have. Yeah. So, I think that has really helped me too, just to kind of like have someone who understands you know?

After graduating, Ani shared she had only stayed in touch with a few friends from college but had not seen them much. She missed connecting with people who understood her background, but the DREAMers in Tech program provided a good opportunity for her to start building new relationships alike. During her second interview she spoke about this:

> They [DREAMers in Tech program] provide help, people apply and they don't have to be students, it could be anyone who's trying to get in tech. So, they're trying to get more undocumented people into tech. I found that group of people and I feel like it helped me, I'm finding my way back to finding a community in a way with people with similar interests, maybe.

Although a new support, Ani was hopeful that the DREAMers in Tech program was going to offer her more than professional assistance and help her build community.

One constant in Ani's support system was her partner, who was also a student at her university and provided her validation and emotional strength. During her first interview she said: "He supports me in everything." She explained that her partner had one more year left in college and how they planned to move in together. By the second interview, Ani and her partner were already renting a studio together and had a good routine, she shared: "It's going really well. He's still at [university name], so he goes to school. While he goes to school, I work. It's a small space but it works because he's at school most of the day." For Ani, her decision to stay in the Washington DC metro area was influenced by her romantic relationship. The support her partner provided her, particularly as she experienced grief and managed the uncertainty of DACA, was critical during her transition out of college.

Unfortunately, unlike Ally, Ani did not feel connected to institutional agents at her university. While she met close friends and her partner at her school, who provided invaluable emotional support, she felt that the tangible assistance she needed was missing. When speaking about her relationships with institutional agents she said:

> One time I went to my [academic advisor] and it was my junior year, and I was really struggling with one of my CS [computer science] classes. And he asked me if I have ever considered like getting tested for a learning disability. And then in my head, I just thought like, would you have told this to another student? You know? Knowing that I had to educate this white person on like what it means to be undocumented and like the resources on campus. And he didn't know anything, right? And he had more students too who are undocumented. And for him to tell me that like, it was just really hard. Yeah! And so right after the meeting with him, I went straight to the bathroom and just cried because I, I just couldn't believe it.

For Ani, these negative academic encounters with institutional agents who she perceived as ignorant prevented her from seeking further assistance at the time of graduation. She navigated her transition out of education without relying on her school networks and implemented strategies she thought were best for her without any guidance.

Strategies: "I'm trying to . . . prioritize me as a person"

As Ani transitioned out of higher education, she coped with her post-graduation stressors and the changes using different mechanisms. One of Ani's main worries was finances. She wanted to secure a job that would allow her to have a steady income to help her family, so she would examine the salaries as she considered positions. During her first interview, she said:

> Part of my aspirations were to graduate from college and be financially stable or have some sort of job . . . where I can feel some sort of peace. You know like? I know money doesn't solve all the problems, but just having the income to help my family . . . . I think finances is a big one [influence], especially when I'm looking at jobs. I go to Glassdoor and see what the salary is. I feel like having a job that pays well could help me in the long run, especially to start saving right and being able to have income where I could help my family and help those people who need it.

While Ani did not feel in control during her transition, she managed part of the uncertainty by looking up information about salaries and actively applying to jobs. She wanted to avoid financial stress, so she was deliberate in her job search process and very persistent. She applied to "over 40 jobs."

Six months after her graduation, Ani was using her computer science credentials and making enough money to save for emergencies and the future. With this concern out of sight, she focused on coping with stressors related to her mental health. She began to dedicate more time to herself and her interests by her second interview; she shared: "I've noticed just not feeling that much guilt for not going to a rally or a protest, and just having time for myself, and just reflect and having more time to write because I really love to write." While Ani had been a student activist in college, she realized she needed to step away from this role post-graduation, she explained: "I don't have be at all the protest and rallies. I really love to write, and so maybe writing articles is my own way, my resistance." For Ani, shifting her perspective on her role within the immigrant rights movement helped her manage the transition.

After graduating, Ani also reflected on her overall status and identity as an undocumented immigrant. This helped her modified the meaning of the changes she was experiencing, she said:

> In regards to my status, even in college, I would make it, I guess my whole identity. Okay, this is the only thing that I am! But now that I've been in my job, I've been able to just . . . have a break from it in a way. I don't check the news all the time anymore, I don't feel pressured to go to every protest and rally too. And I feel my job has helped me, not that it's still very important and I'm still trying to find a way to find community and maybe in the future I want to be part of the DREAMers in Tech. But it has helped me find balance between that part of my identity and other parts of who I am. I'm not just like my status. I am more than that.

Working full-time prompted Ani to reconsider the saliency of her undocumented immigrant identity. She seized the chance to compartmentalize because it brought more balance to her life. She continued:

> I've been trying to go on my journey of healing in a way, but with so much going on it's always been paused but I think, I think that's something that I'm starting to prioritize for myself and something that I'm trying to do for myself. That's something that I'm trying to do, prioritize me, as a person more because it's important and then help others.

When Ani graduated college, her grief and worries about job security took over. She knew she had to implement various strategies to cope effectively with change, and focusing on her wellbeing became a priority.

Discussion

Our findings revealed that undocumented students with and without DACA perceived their transition out of higher education as an expected change with unanticipated conditions and nonevents out of their control. This complicates Schlossberg's (2008) theoretical framework, which categorizes transitions as well-defined changes consisting of either anticipated events, unanticipated events, or nonevents. While undocumented students with and without DACA expected to graduate from college and leave higher education settings, they did not know if they would find a post-graduation pathway that would allow them to use their education credentials and secure a steady income. Not using their education as professionals or not obtaining a job in their career fields were nonevents they had not consider in college. The uncertainty connected to their immigration status, coupled with the ambiguous sociopolitical climate, continuously created unpredictable situations that clouded their ability to navigate the changes with confidence. For undocumented students with and without DACA, their transition out of higher education cannot be simply defined as "changes — good or bad, expected or unexpected — that unsettle [them]" (Schlossberg, 2008, p. 215). Each situation, as demonstrated by Ally's and Ani's stories, is unique and must be examined beyond Schlossberg's theoretical binary.

For undocumented students without DACA, graduating from college was challenging because they could not control neither determine their next steps. Yet, they did not stop planning and dreaming of their career goals, as demonstrated by Ally. Surprisingly, the data showed that having DACA did not translate into more stability for participants at the time of graduation as portrayed with Ani's story. The participants who were DACA recipients were continuously on edge, hoping for immigration reform or a permanent positive decision regarding the executive action. The two-year DACA periods limited their ability to plan long-term, pushing them to focus on the present and forcing them to plan for the future in 18–24-months intervals only. For

many participants, as demonstrated by Ani's narrative, having DACA constrained their career prospects as some positions required U.S. citizenship; this was a factor of the transition DACA recipients had not anticipated. These findings are notable because they reflect a more nuanced perspective on DACA; an executive action often highlighted as a positive immigration solution only, bringing relief to a subgroup of undocumented people. Our data expands conversations on DACA and its shortcomings at a critical moment in individual's lives (Zamacona, 2022).

The data showed that most participants struggled with a negative sense of self during their college graduation transition, as revealed in Ally's and Ani's narratives. Participants grappled with changes in their routines, relationships, roles, and assumptions (Schlossberg, 2008). Adjusting to not being a student was difficult for participants who had formed a strong student identity in college. The most prominent issue for participants with and without DACA was feeling overwhelmed by the possibility of lacking a job within their field of study. For participants without DACA, though, regaining a sense of self seemed to occur faster than for participants with DACA, but it did not happen without difficulties. Most participants without DACA adopted a fighting mentality and attitude (Schlossberg, 2008), typically by the second interview. This may have been influenced by prior lived experiences navigating transitions with uncertainty, such their high school graduation. Even though it took longer for participants with DACA to feel in control of their sense of self, typically by the last interview, they kept working toward their short-term goals. The ambiguity of the executive action may have affected their ability to plan for the future, but they were still trying to strategically address their immediate needs and cope with change. These findings support Goodman et al.'s (2006) argument that moving in, through, and out of transitions make take longer for some individuals than others.

Across the data, participants spoke about receiving affective support and affirmation from their families, including their partners as portrayed with Ani's story. This finding adds to the scant research on the role of family on undocumented students' college access, persistence, and success (Gámez et al., 2017; Luedke & Corral, 2023; Salazar, 2021). It also shows how familial support is critical as students navigate post-graduation decisions and changes. Unfortunately, few participants spoke about other sources of support outside family members. Participants with and without DACA emphasized how institutional agents were ill-equipped to guide them at the time of graduation. While many participants emphasized how institutional agents helped them with academic life and career aspirations during college, as reflected in Ally's story, they could rarely articulate how they received concrete help as they transitioned out of higher education. These negative experiences with institutional agents have been vastly discussed in the literature (e.g., Muñoz & Vigil, 2018; Nienhusser & Romandia, 2022; Salazar et al., 2022) and our work adds to

this body of scholarship showing how lack of institutional accountability persists despite growing efforts for inclusion, equity, and justice in higher education.

Additionally, it is important to discuss the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on how participants managed their roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions during a critical transition moment in life (Schlossberg, 2008). For example, the pandemic heightened the sense of isolation experienced by Ani, as she was unable to maintain relationships with college friends, thereby necessitating a transformation of her support system. Also, assumptions changed for participants like Ally, whose DACA paperwork was delayed by the pandemic. This delay led to the implementation of new DACA measures that prevented the acceptance of new applications and left her without options. These findings are noteworthy because they show the "situation" of any transition (Schlossberg, 2008) needs to be examined within a macro and historical context.

Lastly, our findings showed that undocumented students with and without DACA engaged in multiple strategies to cope with the changes they were experiencing. Our findings support Goodman et al.'s (2006) arguments that individuals can combine multiple mechanisms to effectively move in, through, and out of transitions. Participants aimed to change the situation or the meaning of it, and reduce stress when experiencing challenges (Schlossberg, 2008). For example, they took positive actions, learned resilience, sought advice, pursued new professional opportunities, changed their mindset, developed new routines, and/or focused on managing immediate needs rather than planning for the future. Regardless of the participants' challenges, the data showed that each of them adopted strategies that best fit their unique situations (Schlossberg, 2008). These findings deviate from prevailing narratives of trauma within undocumented students' research and offer asset-based and humanizing narratives that shed light to systemic injustice. Overall, using Schlossberg's transition theory and the 4 S's lenses aided in comprehending how undocumented students with and without DACA perceived their college graduation process and made meaning of their transition out of higher education.

Implications for research, policy, and practice

Undocumented students are present at colleges and universities across the United States. They are increasingly attending higher education because of accessible ISRT policies. While statistical data on their college graduation is unavailable, we speculate that more undocumented students nowadays are navigating the transition of graduating from higher education than 10 years ago. While a few scholars have examined this phenomenon (Morales-

Hernandez & Enriquez, 2021; Zamacona, 2022), there is still much more to theorize about this transition. This experience can be studied from an interdisciplinary perspective using various theoretical frameworks that allow for the consideration of contexts of reception (Portes & Rumbaut, 2014; Portes & Zhou, 1993) and nested contexts of reception (Golash-Boza & Valdez, 2018). Interdisciplinary approaches can help understand how local, state, and national policies and attitudes influence undocumented college students' transition to post-graduation life.

Also, this phenomenon can be further examined using legal frameworks, such as legal violence (Menjívar & Abrego, 2012) and legal consciousness (Abrego, 2011), to unpack how the implementation of anti-immigrant policies and practices within and outside higher education legitimize procedures that exclude and hurt undocumented communities. Current policies about professional licensure do not account for undocumented people and systematically block their career pathways. This is harmful and can influence undocumented students' college persistence, professional aspirations, and perceptions of post-graduation pathways. For example, most states require a permanent authorized immigration status to become a certified K-12 teacher (Higher Ed Immigration Portal, 2023). This policy does not account for DACA recipients who have work authorizations and wish to serve their communities as teachers.

Future research centering on the transition out of higher education among undocumented students could also account for their multiple and intersecting identities. Undocumented students are not a monolith, and examining how they navigate their college graduation accounting for their race, ethnicity, social orientation, social class, gender, and sexuality, among others, could shed light on the interlocking systems of power affecting how they move in, move through, and move out of the transition (Goodman et al., 2006). While their immigration status may highly influence the college graduation process of undocumented students, their multiple social identities may also affect their situations, self, support, and strategies (Schlossberg, 2008).

Lastly, this research has several implications for higher education practice. Institutional agents must become competent in supporting undocumented students with and without DACA at the time of graduation. Career centers and faculty/academic advisors overseeing professional internships must create lists of resources and alternative pathways for undocumented students to generate income and grow their careers. For example, career advisors should offer workshops each semester on how to generate income using ITINs and/or by offering contracting services. Academic programs that require internships must proactively build partnerships with industries and organizations that are pro-immigrant and accepting of undocumented people. Reviewing internship "hiring" policies and practices before partnering with companies for career fairs or internship matching programs should be part of institutional agents' responsibilities to

ensure that discriminatory measures are not in place. If institutions are admitting undocumented students, enrolling them, and seizing their funds, they must do better and offer them concrete resources and relevant assistance that meet their unique needs. In these efforts, it is critical that institutional agents do not become DACA-dependent (Salazar, 2020) and implement services that account for the experiences of most undocumented students enrolled in higher education, which are not DACA recipients.

Notes

1. Currently, new DACA applications are not being accepted. Only, DACA renewals are being processed (USCIS, 2023).
2. Recognizing the harmful impact terms like and have on undocumented people, we strike them through when referencing the work of scholars who use such terminology. Within our scholarship we do not use such terms to avoid the dehumanization and criminalization of undocumented communities.

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Appendix A. Table of participants

#	Pseudonym	Pronoun	Age	Age of Arrival	DACA	Self-identify Race and/or Ethnicity	Country of Origin	Interview Participation
1	Ally	She	22	1	No	Caucasian, Hispanic, Latino	Mexico	All three
2	Amy	She	20	3	No	Latina	Dominican Republic	All three
3	Ani	She	22	2	Yes	White	Mexico	All three
4	Aura	They	21	5	Yes	Latinx	Honduras	1st only
5	Blue	She	22	15	No	African American	The Bahamas	1st only
6	Eduardo	He	22	1	Yes	White	Mexico	All three
7	Gaby	She	23	4	No	Latinx	Guatemala	All three
8	Hernandez	She	22	3	Yes	White	Mexico	All three
9	Jacqueline	She	22	1	Yes	White	Mexico	All three
10	Julie	She	22	1	Yes	Hispanic	Mexico	All three
11	Laura	She	22	4	Yes	White	Mexico	All three
12	Litzi	She	22	3 months	Yes	Hispanic	Bolivia	All three
13	Manny	She	22	2	Yes	White	Ecuador	1st only
14	Maxi	She	23	11 months	Yes	Hispanic	Mexico	All three
15	NK	She	26	5	Yes	Middle Eastern	Palestine	1st only
16	Onika	She	22	2	Yes	Latinx	Mexico	All three
17	Parker	He	23	3	Yes	American Indian or Alaska Native, Latino	Argentina	All three
18	Rob	He	25	12	No	Latino	Mexico	All three
19	Ruby	She	21	5	Yes	American Native	El Salvador	All three
20	Stephanie Lopez	She/They	23	3	Yes	White	Mexico	All three
21	Valeria	She	21	7	Yes	White	Peru	All three
22	Valeria Castro	She	20	8	Yes	Latino	Guatemala	All three
23	Vida	She	28	4	Yes	Latina	Dominican Republic	All three