



Article

University and Professor Practices to Support DACA and Undocumented Students: DACA Student Experiences, Teacher Knowledge, and University Actions

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Abstract: The United States immigration policy Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) which protects some individuals from deportation was enacted in 2012, phased out in 2017 and is now under court challenges. There are still thousands of DACA students currently in higher education. The article highlights promising practices that professors and universities can put in place to support DACA students in the United States. Several semi-structured interviews were conducted with DACA students and Dream Center Directors in California universities to gauge students' barriers and bridges to their higher education success. DACA students articulated public policy suggestions that universities and professors can immediately enact and have tangible results. Three themes were revealed in the interview data: the need for teacher knowledge, diversity of DACA student experiences, and for actions. These were explained as (1) knowledge of student's lives, and, conversely, students' access to information necessary for navigating college life; (2) the diversity of students' life stories and experiences of trauma suffered during and after DACA rescinding decision; and (3) actions that should be taken by the faculty, staff, and the university community that would help students succeed academically.

Keywords: undocumented students; DACA; higher education; high impact practices; minorities; university



Citation: Banh, Jenny, and Jelena Radovic-Fanta. 2021. University and Professor Practices to Support DACA and Undocumented Students: DACA Student Experiences, Teacher Knowledge, and University Actions. *Social Sciences* 10: 346. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci10090346>

Academic Editor: David Barker

Received: 19 July 2021

Accepted: 3 September 2021

Published: 16 September 2021

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1. Introduction

Undocumented and Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) students in higher education has been an important topic of conversation in universities on how best to address the needs of this student body. There are currently over 800,000 undocumented students who have attained Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) status in the United States, which gives them a two-year reprieve from deportation (Bjorklund 2018; Muñoz and Vigil 2018). "There are more than 616,000 current DACA recipients". (USCIS 2021).

The number of undocumented students and their diverse experiences point to the urgency of a better understanding of their road to academic success. Research reveals that in their transition to college, undocumented students encounter a series of obstacles shaped by (1) their inability to obtain financial aid (Flores 2016); (2) their fear of deportation (Abrego 2011; Bjorklund 2018; Mena Robles and Gomberg-Muñoz 2016; Pallares and Gomberg-Muñoz 2016; Suárez-Orozco et al. 2008); (3) a sense of not fully belonging (Mena Robles and Gomberg-Muñoz 2016; Menjivar 2006); (4) and difficulty navigating their undocumented identity with peers, faculty, and staff. Examining these obstacles and, inversely, the experiences that foster a sense of belonging are both key to understanding the barriers and bridges to academic success. This article examines the lived experiences of DACA students under the presidency of Donald Trump and its lingering effects. These narratives

serve a double function in the manuscript: making visible the invisible complexities of the DACA and undocumented identities, and at the same time offer pointers for pedagogical recommendations from the students themselves in addressing gaps for student support.

The 2016 election of President Donald Trump came with a campaign program promise to end the DACA program. In September 2017, Attorney General Jeff Sessions announced that the Trump administration was rescinding DACA and giving Congress six months to create alternative legislation. This announcement was met with resistance in the form of community, faculty, and student protests (Pallares and Gomberg-Muñoz 2016). The Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act is a piece of legislation first introduced in 2001 that would provide legal status, right to work, and other provisions to undocumented immigrants who were brought to the United States as children. DREAMers refers to the undocumented youth that would benefit from this act, which has also become a movement that addresses issues of citizenship, education, and, more broadly, immigration. In a significant ruling that took place June 2020, the Supreme Court allowed DACA to continue. In 2021, a federal judge in Texas ruled against allowing new DACA applicants but would not rescind current DACA holders (O'Connor and Foley 2021). There is ongoing litigation from various sides of this legislature.

This article addresses undocumented students' college experiences in the post-2016 climate. It will highlight promising practices that the university can put into place to support DACA and undocumented students. This research draws on qualitative research methods conducted before and after the 2016 presidential election in the form of open-ended interviews, surveys, and participant observation with DACA students and Dream Center Directors in California's public universities. The objective is to examine the barriers and bridges to academic success in order to best support first-generation DACA students on their path to graduation. Specifically, we ask: what are the biggest barriers to your academic success? What were the biggest bridges or helpful organizations to help you in your academic journey? What programs benefited you and what further programs do you need to succeed? How are you feeling now about your DACA status and how is this affecting your family?

Three themes were revealed in the interview data: teacher knowledge, diversity of DACA student experiences, and university actions. Teacher knowledge refers to knowledge of students' lives, and conversely, students' access to information necessary for navigating college life. Second, the data reveals the diversity of students' experiences of trauma suffered during and after Trump's post-election decision. Third, students were vocal in expressing what actions they want faculty, staff, and the university community to take that would help them succeed academically. Understanding these three areas is key in strengthening the bridges for academic success to DACA and undocumented students.

2. Theoretical Framework

Critical pedagogy, most famously associated with Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2000), provides a useful framework for understanding both the challenges faced by DACA and undocumented students and the most effective solutions to those challenges. This theoretical framework questions and challenges power and privilege in educational settings (Darder 2017; Freire 2000; Giroux 1997; Varenne and McDermott 1999). Freire argues that teachers have been using the "banking" method where they "deposit" knowledge in so-called empty student vessels. In this sense, traditional educational approaches are top-down and disregard the knowledge and individual learning needs students bring to the classroom. Freire further argues that the top-down education model ultimately supports elite efforts to oppress the subalterns by not attending to their pedagogical needs of the whole student to receive caring and understanding as an individual (Freire 2000). For example, Latinx youth enter an "education system that can simultaneously validate and invalidate all that makes them fully human and capable of developing their full potential" (Martinez et al. 2016, 131). One can use critical pedagogy to argue that DACA and undocumented students have specific humanistic pedagogical needs that the

traditional banking system cannot fully address, such as their real fears of deportation and separation from their families (Martinez et al. 2016). Students, who bring a wealth of knowledge, are a key component in this theoretical and applied pedagogical approach. Thus, educators should work and struggle with—not for—students to decolonize the educational system and make it more equitable and just.

Critical pedagogy is further elaborated by theorists examining how the United States schools use an arbitrary labeling system that defines K-12 students as “successful” or “failures”, thus building a system of “successful failure” (Varenne and Mcdermott 1999). For example, the legal status of a student should be irrelevant to accessing a democratic, emancipatory education where their experiences are respected and welcome. Henry Giroux (1997) writes that “critical educators [need] to fashion an alternative and emancipatory view of authority as a central element in a critical theory of schooling” (96) which means that—even though undocumented students are technically not “authorized” to be in the United States—teachers should practice pedagogies of love. “According to Freirean ideals, all pedagogy is political and requires radical reconstruction of teaching and learning (as cited in Martinez et al. 2016, 134). Antonia Darder (2017) further expands Giroux and Friere’s work by offering examples of teachers engaging in liberatory democratic teaching called pedagogy of love which can be applied to all students, especially to DACA and undocumented students. Pedagogy of love means understanding the background and experiences of your students and taking steps to address all of their needs. Critical pedagogy asks us to understand the backgrounds and experiences of DACA and undocumented student, and, thus, take steps to optimally support their learning. Understanding the barriers and the bridges to academic success with DACA and undocumented students will foster a broad approach that is based on a pedagogy of love that will lead to academic success.

Social Capital, Counterstories, and Ways of Knowing

Freire states “The truth is, however, that the oppressed are not “marginals” . . . They have always been “inside” . . . The solution is not to “integrate” them into the structure of oppression, but to transform that structure . . . ” (Freire 2000, 293 quoted from Hodges). A large body of literature on undocumented students and, more broadly, on the non-traditional student population focuses on the challenges and obstacles they face in an unequal education system. In particular, the discussion centers on how immigrant and racial or ethnic minority students navigate an educational system with a dominant white and anglo-centric focus. Students frequently express unfamiliarity with the dominant cultural and social capital of higher education (Bourdieu 1986) and face a hidden curriculum, defined as “unwritten norms, values, and expectations that unofficially govern the interactions among students, faculty, professional staff, and administration” (Smith 2013, xiv). This project uses qualitative methods to identify what these barriers and bridges are.

Although the importance of identifying barriers to success for undocumented and DACA students is clear, there is a need to move beyond a *deficit model*, which “sees students as lacking capital as opposed to valuing and utilizing the capital they do have” (Bjorklund 2018, 24; Yosso 2005). Focusing solely on social capital risks overlooking the stories and experiences that students bring with them that foster resilience and academic success. A growing body of literature focuses on counterstories and narratives and the ways of knowing of immigrant or transnational youth (Kasun 2015). By approaching life experiences as a significant source of knowledge, not only are we moving away from the “banking method”, but we draw in what students already have that push them towards academic success. In doing so, a diversity of life experiences is welcome into the classroom as a source of knowledge, thus transforming the predominant educational model of “integrating” those from the margins.

3. DACA Background

On 25 April 2001, Democrat Luis Gutiérrez introduced the unsuccessful “Immigrant Children’s Educational Advancement and Dropout Prevention Act of 2001” ([H.R. 1582 2001](#)). Later that year in August, Senator Orrin Hatch and Senator Dick Durban introduced the identical “DREAM ACT” which stood for Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act. There has been over a decade of sustained grassroots activism to try to pass the Dream Act ([Chavez 1997](#); [Gonzales 2015](#); [Pallares and Gomberg-Muñoz 2016](#)), yet the Act had failed to become law. Latino activists in California and Chicago have long protested by creatively self-naming themselves “Dreamers” as an empowerment tool ([Seif 2016](#)). [Negrón-Gonzales \(2013\)](#) argues that these undocumented activists were unafraid and unapologetic in their long fight to pass the Dream Act. Other examples of long-term undocumented student activism are: petitions, sit-ins, protests, and marches ([Pallares and Gomberg-Muñoz 2016](#)). The larger point here is that this sustained activism was necessary in order to keep this issue alive to the legislators and public and ultimately was one of the main reasons that DACA passed one decade later.

In 2011, there was yet another attempt to pass the DREAM Act, but it was voted down by the Senate. Then, on 15 June 2012, Secretary of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano, who would be the University of California President for seven years and step down in July 2020, wrote the Homeland Security Memorandum stating that law enforcement would not remove undocumented individuals who came to the United States as children. This Memorandum became known as DACA which stands for “Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals” and it derives from the executive action that then President Barack Obama made on 15 June 2012. There are an estimated 11.3 million undocumented immigrants in the United States with 1.5 million undocumented students in the United States. Of these, only 800,000 have been given DACA status ([Mena Robles and Gomberg-Muñoz 2016](#); [Gonzales 2015](#); [Passel and Cohn 2019](#); [USCIS 2015](#)).

To be DACA-eligible, the unauthorized individual must have arrived in the US before the age of 16 and have lived in the US for at least five consecutive years before the 2012 Napolitano Memorandum and must also currently reside in the United States ([USCIS 2015](#)). In addition, DACA-eligible individuals must either be in school currently, be a high school graduate, or must have attained a general education (GE) certificate. DACA eligible students can also be US military members with honorable discharges. DACA eligible individuals must have a clean criminal record and must not have committed a serious offense against the United States ([Mena Robles and Gomberg-Muñoz 2016](#)). Last, to qualify for DACA applicants must also be below 31 years of age as of June 2015. If an individual fulfills all of these requirements, she or he may receive a work permit and a reprieve from being deported for two years; however, DACA status is not a pathway to citizenship ([Passel and Lopez 2016](#); [USCIS 2015](#)). The United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) has stated that DACA recipients must apply for DACA every two years or be disqualified. The precarious nature of this undocumented immigrant Act became that much more evident in September 2017.

On 5 September 2017, Attorney General Jeff Sessions announced that the Trump Administration was rescinding DACA and that President Trump sent the bill back to Congress to legislate. Attorney General Jeff Sessions announced that the “Trump administration will stop considering new applications for legal status dated after Tuesday but will allow any DACA recipients with a permit set to expire before 5 March 2018, the opportunity to apply for a two year renewal if they apply by October 5” ([Edelman 2017](#)). The rescinding of DACA sent shockwaves of panic through and beyond many college campuses. Before this announcement, more than 600 college and university presidents signed a statement that asked the president to maintain DACA ([Fattal 2017](#)). Following the announcement, community members, students, professors, staff, and allies took to the streets with acts of civil disobedience and arrests taking place in various locations across the United States ([Marquez-Benitez and Pallares 2016](#); [Pallares and Gomberg-Muñoz 2016](#)). Former University of California President Janet Napolitano is suing the Trump administration, arguing

that the due process of both the university and its students is violated by the repeal because the university will lose those students' "contributions" (Dinan 2017).

4. DACA Literature Review

Peter Bjorklund Jr. "Undocumented Students in Higher Education: A Review of the Literature, 2001 to 2016" (2018) presented a critical review of the literature on undocumented students. Bjorklund reviewed over 81 studies on undocumented students. DACA students are more likely to be enrolled in junior colleges versus four-year universities (Abrego 2006; Gonzales 2016). These students have significant financial, social, and legal struggles to access and stay in higher education (Gonzales 2016; Teranishi et al. 2015; Thangasamy and Horan 2016).

Many campuses are not significantly supportive of undocumented students and do not have Dream Centers that offer legal advice to DACA students (Abrego 2011; Gonzales 2016). They also face mental health issues because of their undocumented status as they fear they will be deported (Abrego 2006; Muñoz and Vigil 2018; Suárez-Orozco et al. 2008). Attending colleges can increase hope and economic opportunities for these students (Luna and Montoya 2019; Muñoz and Vigil 2018; Gonzales 2016).

Undocumented students also have differential access to social capital that many upper-class students can access (Abrego 2011; Bourdieu 1986; Gonzales 2016; Luna and Montoya 2019). Concurrently DACA and undocumented students have a lot of cultural wealth (Borjian 2016; Yosso 2005). They come to the university with assets, such as civic engagement and resilience (Borjian 2016; Teranishi et al. 2015; Yosso 2005).

There needs to be more studies on the different ethno-racial differences between different groups of DACA students (Buenavista 2016; Chan 2010). It is important that the diversity of DACA and undocumented students' experiences be acknowledged by the academic community. For instance, despite public perception, not all DACA students are Latino/a or Latin American. According to the AAPI Bits (2021) one in seven Asians or 1.7 million are undocumented in the United States. One Dream Center director commented that "there were more Asians who were coming in after the election". She added that Asian DACA students tended to email more than physically come in. There are some differences in engagement as there are numerous undocumented organizations that are geared towards Latinos compared to other races, a fact that often conceals the experiences of undocumented students from other parts of the world (Buenavista 2016; Chan 2010).

Bjorklund contends "researchers have not adequately explored the impact of institutional, state, and federal programs designed to help undocumented students" (2018). A University of California study found that DACA students were significantly better integrated into society by the DACA protection, financial aid, and university support programs (Enriquez et al. 2019). Enriquez et al. argues that institutional policies significantly increased access to education and had a host of socioeconomic benefits.

There are studies on how to help DACA students in college, but there needs to be more literature on this topic bridges academic challenges, cultural assets, and lived experiences (Bjorklund 2018; Cebulko and Silver 2016; Thangasamy and Horan 2016). This article addresses this gap examining experiences of resilience and trauma in order to better support DACA and undocumented students.

5. Methods

The methods used were participant observation, semi-formal recorded interviews, and surveys. The interviews were conducted with six first-generation minority students who were graduating senior students at three public universities in the University of California and California State University systems (Bailey 2006; Bernard 2011). My methodological tools were fieldnotes, multi-sited fieldwork, and open and closed questions that are useful for minority population studies (Bailey 2006; Bernard 2011; Emerson et al. 2011). To gain access to participants I used snowball method, social media, and specific targeted methods for the study (Bailey 2006). All the participants are first-generation immigrants and were

graduating or had already graduated from college. Most of these interviewees responded that they intended on going to graduate school in the future.

The interview questions included open and closed inquiry (Bernard 2011). The questions asked included biographical information, such as their age, ethnic group, geographical origin, family makeup, and educational background, among others. The bulk of the questions were open ended and addressed the experiences of being a DACA student, challenges faced as a college student, academic opportunities and successes, and what they saw as barriers and bridges to academic success (Bailey 2006). They were also asked what public policy recommendations they would make to help more minority students like themselves to graduate. Within this interview group were a smaller subset of students who answered that being undocumented and having DACA status was a bridge to their academic success. The data findings are from the analysis of interviews with six DACA-identified students, informal conversations with six Dream Center directors, and participant observation in the Dream Centers.

The interviews were transcribed and coded for emerging themes. The transcriptions were returned to the interviewees for them to give approval and make any corrections to the transcript. The methods of interview analysis I used to interpret the interviews were thematic coding from the qualitative data (Bailey 2006; Bernard 2011; Mace et al. 1994). Because of the sensitive nature of the interviews all names are pseudonyms and any identifying information has been changed.

Participants

The participants in the study were chosen because they were graduating college seniors or had already graduated. When asked how they self-identify, the students replied as either Mexican or Oaxacan. Oaxaca is a state in Mexico, with its main indigenous populations being Mixtecos and Zapotecos. These young people's motivations are unique, but also resemble other student advocates who are shaped by their individual history, community relations, and previous experiences in their actions (Davies 1999; Fung and Adams 2017). Three DACA students interviewed in are from the Riverside County area in Southern California and three are from Central Valley, California. Their ages range from 26 to 36 years. The majority of the participants are from working-class backgrounds and are first-generation DACA graduating or graduated college students. All the interviewees worked and significantly contributed to their family households at the time of the interview.

6. Findings

Amidst the stories of racism, poverty, and grit that I anticipated, I was introduced to unexpected stories from first-generation minority students who shared that having DACA was a bridge to their success. Family resilience counters the existing political narratives that portray undocumented as public threats (Luna and Montoya 2019). In exploring barriers to college success, many of the participants revealed their undocumented status. It quickly became clear that undocumented students, while facing many of the same challenges faced by their documented first-generation peers, also had to navigate a variety of unique obstacles on their path to graduation. Many undocumented students I interviewed also highlighted the importance of DACA as an invaluable resource for academic success and, ultimately, graduation (Wong et al. 2017) "After almost failing out of my Economic Major I had a friend in Econ honors who suggested that I take a break. I said, Sorry but f* you man. I will keep going ... I have DACA ... " (Joshua, University of CA, Economics major 2018).

Three main themes emerged from the data: knowledge, experiences, and actions. Knowledge refers to how the academic community understands the lives of DACA students. Although interviewees perceived a lack of understanding from faculty, staff, and institutions on their lives, they simultaneously expressed needing support in finding and using resources, such as financial aid. DACA student experiences refers to the trauma derived from Trump's post-election political threat to student's everyday lives. Understanding the vast array of student stories and how they are shaped by trauma (fear of

deportation and family separation) allows the university community to adequately address the students' needs. Lastly, actions emerged from participants' interviews. The students expressed desires and needs that faculty, staff, and universities can address to facilitate DACA students' academic success. We propose that these three themes are fundamental in the betterment of DACA student experiences.

6.1. Teacher Knowledge of DACA Student Needs and DACA Centers

An element of critical pedagogy is teachers' knowledge of their student's diverse background and the assets they bring to the classroom (Darder 2017; Freire 2000). Here, we refer to the information and knowledge DACA students have, and what information they need to navigate the academic environment. The lived experiences of DACA students are vastly diverse (Wong et al. 2017), and many come from communities that have cultural wealth of language, family, and traditions (Yosso 2005). Frequently, however, this richness of narratives, stories, and knowledge is overlooked or not considered as an asset for students' success in higher education. At the same time, DACA and undocumented students are often first-generation students who, compared to classmates with more resources, are unfamiliar on how to navigate the paths of higher education (Bourdieu 1986). In this section, we examine the information that DACA students oftentimes lack and the importance that Dream Centers and their websites have in providing important knowledge and information. Student interviewees reveal that they look to websites first for knowledge about the various questions they have (Canedo Sanchez and So 2015).

6.2. Understanding DACA Students' Lack of Information

"We [DACA students] are in many classes like ESL classes and we need help to get into college [and graduate]. We need a specific advisor for programs. They have to come to us. We need someone to hold our hands" (Joshua 28 May 2018).

Here, Joshua is reflecting on the missing college training that he and other DACA and undocumented students have, which students generally receive in high school. His feelings echoed that of other DACA students who lamented the lack of information and assistance when it came time to apply for college. Joshua's undocumented immigrant parents had minimal information about college, and did not actively encourage him to apply for or attend college. DACA and undocumented students are also frequently hesitant to ask for help because of their undocumented status and fear they will be turned away, humiliated, or reported. He explained that many undocumented youth wanted to go to college but did not receive any guidance in high school and college. He said that undocumented and DACA students were located in ESL classes, where college counselors explained issues such as applying for college, financial aid, and choosing class majors. It is important to note that minority interviewees in the larger study indicated the value of the California high school college preparatory program called advancement via individual determination (AVID). This program taught time management, writing skills, and helped them to apply to college. There were also many field trips to colleges that had college tours.

"When you go to the [financial aid] counselor and you ask for help as a DACA student, they send you to another counselor and then that counselor doesn't know and sends you to another counselor. They don't know where the funding is for undocumented students and it is frustrating" (Belinda DACA recipient, 21 October 2017)

Belinda, a DACA recipient, highlights the specific need for financial aid knowledge. She expressed frustration for herself and her sister who have to navigate the financial aid system by themselves. Belinda recalls visiting financial aid counselors only to be constantly referred to other people and then be referred again because that person did not know the answers. The financial aid system is a maze and DACA and undocumented students have many information barriers to what programs they can or cannot qualify for. These issues are similar to those faced by other first-generation college students; in this case, there is the added fear of being outed as undocumented and being deported. A significant number of

undocumented informants indicated that not enough tuition and scholarship information is provided by the staff and faculty. For example, some DACA and undocumented students are not eligible for federal financial aid and are eligible for only some individual grants and scholarships ([Diaz-Strong et al. 2011](#)). One DACA student told me that more staff and faculty knowledge of these issues would be useful. Both examples show how a lack of knowledge in the college-application process and financial-aid system can serve as a significant barrier to college success.

6.3. Dream Centers and Their Websites Provide Important Knowledge

DACA students in this study reported that they generally look first at their schools' websites to see if there is any pertinent undocumented student information to help them navigate the university. Not all universities have Dream Centers but universities that do should take note to provide more regularly updated and expansive information on their Dream Center websites. UC Berkeley's Dream Center website is a good model for other universities to follow. [Canedo Sanchez and So \(2015\)](#) article, "UC Berkeley's Undocumented Student Program: Holistic Strategies for Undocumented Student Equitable Success across Higher Education" indicates the Dream Center also offers academic, mental, and legal support. For example, there is academic counseling in the form of informing the student about graduate, technical, and professional schools. There are mental health referrals in addition to having individual counseling conducted by a psychiatrist. The individual undocumented student in the University of California system is provided with a lawyer, as well as legal services to their family.

The UC Dream Centers provide a plethora of legal information, but unfortunately it is information that students must seek out themselves. For instance, even though the Trump Administration rescinded DACA, undocumented students found legal ways to locate potential work in the US, such as owning a Limited Liability Companies (LLC) or hire themselves as a consultant (University of California: After [UC 2017](#)). This could potentially provide DACA students with employment and income. However, finding and understanding this LLC information is a challenge since not all schools have Dream Centers providing this information, in addition to this knowledge resource having limitations, because not all undocumented students want to start their own company.

In addition to the resources available at the Dream Centers and through the Department of Homeland Security, there are also other resources, such as ethnographies of undocumented and DACA youth and other online sources ([Chavez 1997](#); [Gonzales 2015, 2016](#)). These resources are likely less known to DACA and undocumented students, but could be a great resource for the students, as well as staff and faculty to better understand the histories and challenges facing this student population ([Jaffe-Walter and Lee 2011](#); [Kasun 2015](#); [Chavez 1997](#); [Villenas 2012](#)).

DACA Students Experiences of Trauma

Paulo Freire argues that teaching may mirror the oppressive society. "The teacher talks and the students listen—meekly. The teacher chooses the program content, and the students (who were not consulted) adapt to it. The teacher is the subject of the learning process, while the pupils are mere objects" (Quoted from [Hodges 2011](#), 292). Instead, Freire asserts that teachers need to understand the experience of their students so that they can meaningfully conduct social change. In this section the interviewed DACA and undocumented students shared post-election traumas that affected them and their families. For instance, one dilemma they face is coming from mixed family status backgrounds and navigating tension as they fighting for their interests and that of their undocumented family members. Second, conversations with interviewees reveal a great amount of diversity and intersectional identities amongst DACA and undocumented students.

6.4. Post-Trump Election Trauma and Mixed Family Status Dilemmas

“It was scary for a little bit . . . or actually scary for a major bit . . . Personally my family has relied on my income and my ability to move around in this culture—this ‘American’ culture. And we are going to give you DACA and now we going to take it away. It is kind of silencing us or shutting us down. The risk of being deported . . . ” (Belinda DACA recipient, 21 October 2017).

The first sub-theme in my research data involves the fear and anxiety related to the threat of deportation for DACA students and their families. Dream Center directors and DACA students alike report that DACA and undocumented students are experiencing overwhelming, intensified, post-election fear, and anxiety. DACA students have reacted with panic, anxiety, and anger in response to the post-election political threat from President Trump. “There is a lot of grief and DACA students [are] very upset and fearful of dividing their communities . . . ” (John, Dream Center Director, 9 December 2017)

DACA and undocumented students can also feel conflicted in regard to their undocumented family members who could not qualify for DACA or any amnesty programs. Many DACA students come from “mixed status” families where some family members have citizenship and some do not. There are over eleven million undocumented individuals in the United States and many cannot qualify for DACA ([Gonzales 2015, 2016](#)). There is intensified fear that their families will be torn apart. Communities can be divided by the notion of the ‘good’ productive DACA student to the ‘bad’ “pilfering” undocumented person. Sentiments like this can pit DACA students against their own undocumented family and split the undocumented community.

“DACA has divided the immigrant community. I am fighting for my rights and maybe my mother wants to protest too but [doesn’t have] DACA . . . the quote unquote ‘good immigrants’ who are contributing to the well-being of this country. My mother contributes to the country. She is working here and she did not go to school and is getting nothing back. She does not get Medi-Cal . . . and pays income taxes and her social security and she never gets that back and these are the ‘bad hombres’ that number 45 refers to” (Belinda DACA recipient, 21 October 2017)

Belinda verbalizes what DACA recipients are experiencing as they are pitted against their own families and communities. She ponders whether she should fight for her rights or the rights of her family. She stated that the government is “making us choose”. Thus, DACA recipients have to push for their own immediate status quickly in order to maintain what they have now if they want to stay in the United States legally. It is important to note that not all DACA individuals share these experiences.

6.5. Diversity of DACA Recipients Experiences

Knowledge about DACA and undocumented students tends to gloss over the rich cultural, ethnic, and linguistic diversity of the students. For instance, DACA information flyers and posters are frequently the initial point of contact between students and their academic community. It can be particularly difficult for Asian undocumented students to access these resources, there is no one handout that can speak to all Asian students, including the dozens of Asian languages spoken on any one California campus. The larger specific suggestion is to have DACA information in different languages that can be viewed on-line or in print.

“I am a Mexican and Muslim woman. I worry all the time and do not go out because I am afraid. How will this [immigration bill] affect my Mexican family? Can I still wear my headscarf or will I be put on a Muslim registry?” (Maria, undocumented Mexican Muslim, 12 January 2016)

Minorities may be subjected to multiple intersecting oppressions—such as those based on sexual orientation, religion, race, or gender. For example, one of my interviewees shared that she had multiple identities as Mexican, Muslim, and a female DACA student. She feared being deported or being put on a Muslim registry. Students frequently experience a “fluidity of fear” where the fear of deportation is not constant, but changes over time and depends on the specific situation and people (Mena Robles and Gomberg-Muñoz 2016; Pallares and Gomberg-Muñoz 2016). This might be exacerbated as students enter higher education. Undocumented students not only live in a “liminal state”, but often encounter structural barriers that were previously not present or visible during their elementary, middle school, and high school years which compounds the levels of trauma and uncertainty to their undocumented states (Bjorklund 2018; Cebulko and Silver 2016; Gonzales 2016). Valdez and Golash-Boza argue that looking at different DACA students’ intersectionality of race, class and gender is an important tool to further understand their experiences. Some DACA students “rarely identify legal status in isolation or implicate it as the sole source of adversity. Instead, students’ reveal a sense of belonging rooted in multiple dimensions of identity including ethnicity and class” (Valdez and Golash-Boza 2020).

University, Staff, and Faculty Actions

Freire (2000) asserts that teachers have to take actions to support their students. In sharing their academic experiences, the interviewees addressed a number of actions they would like professors and universities to take to better support equity, retention and graduation of DACA and undocumented students. The interviewees suggest that universities can help by training staff, and having workshops and Dream Centers, while faculty can be discrete, can be an ally and direct the students to important services both on and off campus. These data points to areas of improvement that can be carried out and makes visible barriers that are frequently invisible.

Steps Universities Can Take to Help: Workshops and Dream Centers

Universities have a large structural and systemic role to play in supporting undocumented students such as DACA students. On the 30 November 2016, the Los Angeles Times reported, “The University of California announced sweeping actions Wednesday to protect its students who came into the country illegally, saying it would refuse to assist federal immigration agents, turn over confidential records without court orders or supply information for any national registry based on race, national origin or religion” (Watanobe 2016). The large 10-campus University of California has publicly supported their undocumented students. The University of California system President Janet Napolitano has stated that UC welcomes all undocumented and DACA students and these students have a positive effect on the campus.

Among the new University of California Systemwide principles are the following:

- Campus police will not assist local, state or federal agents to investigate, detain, or arrest students for violations of federal immigration law;
- Police will be told not to contact, detain, question or arrest individuals solely on suspicion of immigration violations;
- No confidential student records will be released without a judicial warrant, subpoena or court order unless authorized by the student or required by law;
- UC will continue to admit all eligible students without regard to immigration status and take the same stance in treatment of patients at its medical centers Source: University of California Statement of Principles in Support of Undocumented Members of the UC Community: 20 November 2016.

Universities can also offer faculty training, workshops, and dedicated Dream Centers. As one example, the university can sponsor a “Know Your Rights Workshop” where attorneys speak to students and community members about their rights should they come into contact with the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). This service was made available in the University of California (UC) and California State University (CSU) systems (Canedo Sanchez and So 2015). These free legal services are also open to give advice to the parents of UC students. UC offers faculty and staff training which gives a DACA history overview, presents a panel of undocumented students, and provides space and time for self-reflection and action for these students. Having a list of reputable law organizations to refer students to is important as there are disreputable lawyers who may take advantage of this vulnerable undocumented group (Chavez 1997).

These difficult times for DACA and undocumented students may well speak to a need for campuses to share their resources and strategies. Universities can also offer free mental health support for all students in connection with DACA-specific events. At UC Berkeley and other UC campuses, there are healing circles that are open to all DACA and undocumented students. These are led by a clinical psychologist and they give opportunities to undocumented students to gather and support one another.

It became clear very quickly in the data gathering process that higher education staff and faculty who work with undocumented students will need training and overall education on the legal aspects of the plight faced by undocumented students. One specific way to increase faculty and staff awareness about DACA students is to hold undocumented ally training in which knowledgeable professionals (such as Dream Center directors) train faculty and staff on the history of undocumented students and the best practices to support DACA or undocumented students.

Steps Faculty and Staff Can Take

Another theme that was uniformly apparent across all interviewees was the importance of keeping confidential and private any information shared with staff and faculty by DACA and undocumented students. Professors should never “out” an undocumented student in class as it can cause the student shame, anxiety, and fear. “We had one professor who asked a student in front of the whole class what it was like to be an undocumented Dreamer. That was very shocking and humiliating to the student. It made the student not want to come to class anymore” (Ana Dream Center director, 2 December 2017). The federal law protects the privacy rights of the individual; thus, faculty and staff should not release immigration status unless the student gives permission or there is a warrant. Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) laws prohibit anyone giving away student records unless there is a warrant. FERPA is true for all students but doubly so for DACA students as it could cause retention issues and emotional harm if their undocumented status is revealed.

Although much of this information is regularly collected at the institutional and bureaucratic levels, and not by specific teachers, DACA and undocumented students feel deep anxiety and shame when they have to disclose information to anyone because they do not know the reactions that they might get. The debilitating fear of deportation is something that they must face every day. The need for privacy and confidentiality must be treated by all staff and faculty as a standard position for the promising practitioner because faculty and staff can inadvertently expose the student status.

From the student statements and Dream Center interviewees, it can be seen that one of the larger patterns or generalizations in these data was the need for formal undocumented ally training sessions on campuses and the need for informational sessions for undocumented students. These larger patterns were quite robust as the interviewee statements and the themes in the data all pointed firmly in the direction of a need for formal training for undocumented students and their faculty and staff advisors. Haphazard or intermittent advice was, therefore, anathema and cautioned against according to these data. Other patterns in the data suggested the need for undocumented students to feel that they have

an ally to turn to on their own campus, and the need in several instances for a campus policy that addresses the potential for hate speech and disallows it. Professors should send clear signals that they are allies with undocumented students and that they are safe if they want to disclose their status. One way to show DACA support is to display the “UndocuAlly” sticker (which features a butterfly) outside your office.

Professors as community leaders can challenge, reduce, and alleviate pain that they see in their students (Monzó 2016). One way to do this is to invite guest speakers, such as representatives of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) to give campus-sponsored talks or teach-ins. Students in turn can attend these talks, volunteer and even decide to join these groups. Another way is to support undocumented graduate students who need financial support. Staff and faculty can advocate for their graduate students by helping them to keep their research assistantship, teacher assistantships and scholarships. For example, professors can make sure that their graduate students can be paid through international student funds or consultant fees that are not earmarked for US citizens.

7. Conclusions

This article was written in the spirit of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) statement written in 2017 insisting that removing DACA is inhumane and unjust (AAA Statement, 2 September 2017). The AAA statement further points out that teacher-scholars have a critical role to play in supporting their undocumented and DACA students. This article asks: what do DACA and undocumented students view as barriers and bridges academic success? How do these barriers and bridges shape everyday experiences of in/visibility, uncertainty, and trauma? In order to best support students, the complexity of their realities needs to be understood and demystified. It is imperative to ask not only what gaps of student support exist, but what the textures of everyday interaction between students and institutions, support people, and resources look like. This article is also intended to present some of the useful and promising practices that administrators, staff, and faculty can ensure are put in place, voiced by the interviewees themselves, even if their campuses have not established these centers. One practice suggested is that professors and staff should be knowledgeable, sympathetic, discreet, and aware of the legislation that affects their students. In particular, professors, administrators, and staff should be aware of Dream Centers, sanctuary school practices, legitimate legal services providers and specific university and community agencies that are able to provide direct services. Another practice suggests that the college or university should not give student information to federal or state agencies without the consent of the student or a warrant—and that it is defensible conduct to take this stance under the law (Gonzales 2016; Wong et al. 2017). Regardless of the ensuing Congressional decisions about DACA students, the vast majority of the undocumented do not have DACA and will still need to be supported; the above practices can apply to all these individuals. It is in society’s best interests to have undocumented and DACA students successfully graduate from college and become fully productive individuals in our society. A nuanced understanding of students’ experiences can best inform university practices and more importantly, provide a support for the students as they navigate the path to academic success.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, J.B.; methodology, J.B.; formal analysis, J.B.; investigation, J.B.; writing—original draft preparation, J.B.; writing—review and editing, J.B., J.R.-F. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Approved by the Department of Anthropology IRB by California State University, Fresno (16 August 2017).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Acknowledgments: I would like to thank the DACA students and Dream Center Directors who agreed to be interviewed. Gregory Tanaka, Genevieve Beenen, and Yolanda Moses gave wise feedback on an earlier draft of this paper.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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