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DACA AND THE DIFFERENTIATED LANDSCAPE FOR COLLEGE ACCESS: EXPERIENCES FROM A NEW DESTINATION STATE

MARIE PRICE and IVANA MOWRY-MORA

ABSTRACT. The differentiated legal landscape that undocumented students face varies considerably across the United States. This study articulates the multiscale and socio-legal contexts that frame the limitations and opportunities for undocumented youth accessing higher education in a new destination state. The Virginia experience as a southern and new immigrant destination is instructive. Virginia is the only southern state that offers in-state tuition for DACA holders, and then expanded tuition equity to all undocumented youth who graduate from high school in the state. Through surveys, a focus group, and coordination with a not-for-profit organization, we were able to survey 117 students, the majority of whom have Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). We conclude that local and state-wide actors, institutions, and networks exist in Virginia that are critical to understanding the necessary pathways for undocumented youth to obtain higher education. Yet the ability of these students to remain in the US as skilled workers and/or college students is currently threatened at the federal level, especially with efforts to eliminate DACA. **KEY WORDS:** *undocumented youth, DACA, tuition equity, new destinations, Virginia.*

*I*mmigration, and particularly the fate of undocumented immigrants in the United States, has become a major political and social issue that plays out nationally and across discrete jurisdictional scales within the territorial state (Ellis 2006; Varsanyi 2010; Walker and Leitner 2011; Svajlenka 2019; Castañeda 2019). In this article we focus on undocumented youth in the United States, particularly those who seek higher education using with their Deferred Action-for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) status in the state of Virginia.¹ DACA is a national program, but students with DACA experience both obstacles and support structures based on the community and/or the state in which they reside (Wong and Garcia 2016). By focusing on new destination state, within the regional context of the U.S. South, the differentiated access that undocumented youth experience is underscored. This is contrasted with the institutional support structures formed in northern Virginia, where those who attend college with DACA are concentrated.² We argue that to understand whether or not undocumented youth access higher education, a nested multiscale and place-based analysis is needed. Of course legal structures contingent on jurisdictional boundaries matter, but the existence of institutional supports and social networks that can support or hinder college access for undocumented youth are also important.

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Although there have been no new DACA applicants since the fall of 2017, there are still nearly 700,000 undocumented youth with DACA who retain their status by renewals every two years. Yet the ability to retain this status is under review by the U.S. Supreme Court, which may decide to eliminate it completely. The DACA program provides a temporary and quasi-legal status for undocumented youth who mostly came to the United States as children, studied in primary and secondary schools, and generally feel that they belong within the social fabric of the country (Burciaga 2016).

The distribution of DACA holders is uneven but tends to reflect both established immigrant destinations and newer ones. The majority of DACA holders are in two states: California (197,000) and Texas (113,000) account for 45 percent of immigrant youth with DACA in the United States. These two states also have the largest foreign-born populations in the country. Illinois hosts the third largest DACA population at 35,600 and New York state is fourth with 32,900. Nearly four-out-of-five DACA holders were born in Mexico, so one would expect the states with large numbers of Mexican immigrants to be more represented in the data, which can explain some differences. Table 1 compares seven new destination states in the U.S. South and the number of DACA holders.³ Combined, these seven states have just under 75,000 DACA recipients. North Carolina and Georgia are the leaders, accounting for 60 percent of the DACA holders in this table. Virginia is ranked third with 9,710 DACA recipients.

Table 1 also summarizes state policies towards undocumented youth accessing higher education in the South. California and Texas both passed legislation in 2001 that permitted undocumented youth who graduated from high schools in these states to qualify for in-state tuition in public universities (Price and Svajlenka, in press). In contrast, with the exception of Virginia, all of the southern states in Table 1 have no tuition-equity programs or bar undocumented students from accessing in-state tuition under any circumstances, even with DACA. As the South comes to terms with its new destination status, state-based policies towards undocumented youth reflect an unwillingness to create inclusionary paths. This tends to affirm a pattern in the contemporary U.S. South, according to geographer Jamie Winders, that “subtly reinforce where Latinos/as fit—as temporary, invisible workers (not families) outside the boundaries of community” (Winders, 2007, 927). Given this racialized structure, there has been little political will to grant undocumented youth access to higher education in the region.

In this paper we are interested in the experiences of undocumented youth accessing higher education in Virginia. At the national level, the Trump Administration has aggressively sought to eliminate programs such as DACA that provide legal status to undocumented youth. Yet many states (as well as cities, towns, and counties) have divergent policies about the rights of the

TABLE 1—DACA HOLDERS IN NEW DESTINATION SOUTHERN STATES

STATES	DACA HOLDERS (2019)	STATE POLICY TOWARDS IN-STATE TUITION FOR THOSE WITH DACA
North Carolina	24,480	No tuition-equity policy
Georgia	21,110	Bar students from accessing in-state tuition
Virginia	9,710	Offered in-state tuition for those with DACA (2014-2020). Tuition equity for undocumented youth signed into law April 2020.
Tennessee	7,790	No tuition-equity policy
South Carolina	5,850	Bar students from accessing in-state tuition
Alabama	4,030	Bar students from accessing in-state tuition
Mississippi	1,340	No tuition-equity policy
Total	74,310	

Source: Migration Policy Institute DACA data tool; Price and Svajlenka (in press).

undocumented and how they should or should not be integrated into society (Varsanyi 2010). This is especially true for undocumented youth (with or without DACA) who are often portrayed sympathetically as living in the United States as a result of their parents' decisions and thus should be treated differentially.

It is particularly instructive to study a southern state such as Virginia, which has a mixed or negative record towards assisting undocumented youth. Most of the youth represented in this study are from Northern Virginia, an area of the state that is included in metropolitan Washington D.C. The metropolitan area is the fifth-largest immigrant destination in the country with over 1.4 million foreign-born residents in 2017 (ACS, five-year estimate). Virginia, due to the more liberal leaning and diverse suburbs of Northern Virginia, has recently emerged as the only state in the "South" to offer some form of tuition equity for undocumented youth. In the early 2000s, the Virginia legislature was like the other Southern states and unwilling to support undocumented youth; legislatures even tried to pass laws barring undocumented youth from attending public universities. Then in 2014, Attorney General Mark Herring made an unprecedented decision to allow students with DACA who graduated from Virginia high schools the ability to receive in-state tuition. Part of his justification was economic, saying "if we are to have the economic future we want, we cannot continue to place limits on talented students" (Chandler 2014). Those with DACA were just a small slice of the much larger population of undocumented youth, but the lucky ones with this designation saw their tuition costs cut by two-thirds.

Figure 1 shows the distribution of 1,358 students with DACA enrolled in public colleges and universities in Virginia in the fall of 2017 (the most comprehensive term to date). Schools in Northern Virginia account for 69 percent of the DACA-enrolled students. In particular, Northern Virginia community colleges

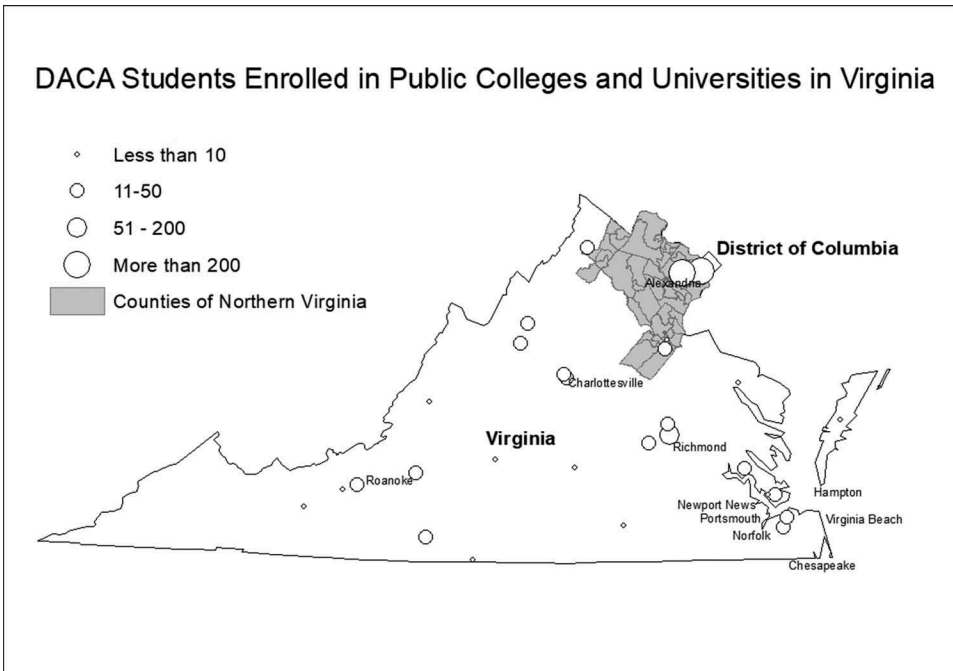


FIG. 1—Map of DACA enrollment in Virginia

(688 students) and George Mason University (225 students) serve the most DACA students in the state. There are clusters of students around Richmond (Virginia Commonwealth University), Newport News and Norfolk (various community colleges and universities), Charlottesville (University of Virginia), and around Roanoke (Virginia Tech). Even though the policy is for the entire state, students with DACA are much more likely to attend college in Northern Virginia. For this reason, our area of focus is Northern Virginia.

What follows is a literature review that highlights the barriers that undocumented youth face in accessing higher education. Given the precarity of the DACA program, it is an economically and psychologically volatile time for these youth. We contend that the nested hierarchy of household, locality, metropolitan area, and state play a critical role in the ability of undocumented youth to access higher education. Most studies of undocumented youth in college come from three states: California, Texas, and New York. By focusing on the experience of students in Virginia, and more specifically the suburbs of Northern Virginia, we believe our understanding of undocumented youth will be deepened, especially in new destination states. In particular, we examine the impact of particular settings, locations, and structures that are most supportive to this resilient yet vulnerable population, or what Edelina Burciaga refers to as the “nested socio-

legal contexts (that) shape both inclusion and exclusion for Latino undocumented young adults in different key dimensions of their lives” (2016, 19).

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a small but growing literature on the challenges and opportunities that undocumented youth face in accessing higher education (Bjorklund 2018; Burciaga 2016; Gonzales 2011, 2016; Terriquez, 2015; Suárez-Orozco and others 2015; Price and Rojas 2020). One of the key findings in the literature is the significance of DACA as a “master status” in the lives of undocumented youth who have it (Gonzales, 2016). DACA has been described as a shield that protects youth from deportation and a vehicle that provides opportunities for legal employment, access to higher education, and ultimately higher-status jobs and temporary social inclusion. Yet, a broader understanding of how differentiated and stratified educational pathways structure undocumented lives in distinct settings is not fully understood (Gonzales and others 2014).

Not surprisingly, undocumented youth share many of the at-risk characteristics of youth likely to drop out of higher education, as many come from “lower socio-economic and Latino backgrounds” (Terriquez 2015, 1307). However, due to their uncertain legal status, a number of unique challenges emerge in the literature. Specifically, financial barriers, access to social capital, and psychological burdens. At the same time, the literature shows that undocumented youth engage in activism and assert high levels of agency.

FINANCIAL BARRIERS

Exacerbated financial burdens for undocumented youth is a theme central in the literature, with one-third of the children of undocumented immigrants living in poverty, at nearly double the poverty rate for children of U.S.-born parents, and with nearly half of all undocumented children uninsured (Passel and Cohn 2009). College students, especially those with lower socioeconomic status, are eligible for federal financial aid by completing the FAFSA form and thus qualifying for Pell Grants or other financial aid. Undocumented students, even with DACA, are not eligible for any federal aid or loan programs. This places them at an obvious disadvantage. Consequently, undocumented youth are much more likely to leave college because they cannot afford it (Terriquez 2015; Bjorklund, 2018).

Paying for school has added challenges, especially for those living under cost-prohibitive conditions in states without in-state resident tuition (ISRT) policies in place for undocumented students (Flores and Horn 2010). In a study of undocumented community college students in California, Veronica Terriquez found that:

These undocumented students averaged higher grades in high school than their counterparts, indicating that they are better prepared to succeed academically than

many of their peers. At the same time, these students encounter greater economic hardship, as the majority of undocumented students come from households unable to pay utility bills at some point within the previous year. (2015, 1311)

Financial pressures, working difficult and multiple jobs to pay expenses, and employer inflexibility with regard to work hours can conspire to undermine student performance and degree completion.

LIMITED SOCIAL CAPITAL AND SOCIAL NETWORKS

Even if undocumented students have the resources to attend college, they often lack role models or social networks to assist them in achieving higher education. Factors such as parents with limited education, residence in segregated neighborhoods with concentrated poverty, and low-performing schools limit social capital and networks that could improve socioeconomic outcomes (Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 2001). The same authors also found that high-performing schools that are inclusive of diverse groups can create “fields of opportunity” for immigrant students (2001, 133). Research on undocumented student success underscores that positive relationships, strong community organizations, family networks, and guidance from caring adults are perhaps some of the most important factors (Gonzales and others 2014; Bjorklund 2018).

UNIQUE PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL BURDENS

In Gonzales’ (2011) seminal essay titled “Leaning to be Illegal,” he argues that in high school undocumented students are relatively protected and institutionally included due to access to K-12 education established in *Plyler v. Doe* (1982). Upon leaving high school, however, their experiences of social and institutional exclusions are more pronounced. They enter the “labyrinth of liminality” in which uncertain legal status complicates a normal progression into adulthood (Suárez-Orozco and others 2011, 443). Coming to terms with this liminality often has various mental health repercussions, such as depression and anxiety (Bjorklund 2018).

Burciaga observes that while learning to navigate their status as young adults, undocumented youth experience “a sense of emotional exclusion that permeates their institutional participation” (2016, 16) in college or the wider community. Moreover, many college counselors and mental health providers are often unfamiliar with the issues that undocumented students face, and thus students do not feel comfortable discussing these matters with them, which means they are less likely to speak up and seek help (Bjorklund 2018). Institutional support for undocumented students within the university setting, such as peer support groups, is often a critical factor in their retention (Flores and Horn 2010, 73).

Uncertainty causes stress, and undocumented youth in the United States are experiencing extreme uncertainty, especially with the rescinding of DACA in 2017. But living in households where many people are undocumented has many

unique burdens, especially the fear that at any moment a household member could be detained and deported (Roche and others 2018; Castañeda 2019). Research shows that there are lifelong physical and mental health problems associated with such social disadvantage, and perhaps “the costliest consequences of unauthorized status will emerge later in the life course” (Suárez-Orozco and others 2011, 457).

ADVOCACY AND AGENCY

Scholars also note distinct identity politics and levels of advocacy among undocumented youth who came to the United States as children and were schooled here. Roberto Gonzales makes the case in his book *Lives in Limbo* (2015) that undocumented youth have a different relationship with their community than their parents, and that “their sense of place and belonging grow out of deeper, more intimate and local experiences” (2015, 27–28). Attending U.S. public schools and spending formative years in U.S. communities mark undocumented youth as both insiders and outsiders, which is a source of their advocacy strength but also intensifies their sense of exclusion. Walter Nicholls’ (2013) monograph on the role of undocumented youth in transforming the immigration debate in the United States underscores the role of these activists in changing the narrative about what it means to be undocumented. It is encapsulated in the slogan “Undocumented, Unafraid and Unapologetic,” in which undocumented youth challenge the popular Dreamer narrative of good students who play by the rules and are here through no fault of their own. Undocumented youth helped to push for the creation of DACA in 2012, and another executive order, Deferred Action for Parents of Americans (DAPA) in 2015, which was never enacted. Nicholls, Uitermark, and van Haperen (2019) contend that grassroots and undocumented youth groups have evolved into a national social movement towards immigrant rights and policy reform.

SCALAR AND REGIONAL DIMENSIONS

This research adds to the literature of undocumented youth accessing higher education by situating their experience within the U.S. South. Yet it also considers the nested hierarchies and locality-specific contexts that undocumented youth navigate to access higher education. Geographer Jamie Winders’ work on new destination Southern states elaborates on the multiscalar “overlap of growing immigration to the South since the late 1990’s and growing nativist sentiment across the U.S. since 9/11” that has connected “new *regional* racial demographics to new *national* border anxieties” (2007, 920). Processes of racialization in the South vary across social spaces, such as “neighborhoods, schools, and other spaces and institutions through which residents live their lives and come to know one another” (Winders 2012, 234). Geographers have been especially interested in the experience of place and its impact upon belonging, along

with the nested identities that most people experience in place and over time (Herb and Kaplan 1999; Nelson 2007; Smith and Winders 2008; Mee and Wright 2009; Walker 2014; Furuseth and others 2015).

While higher education for undocumented youth in the South has been severely limited, we are interested in those settings, especially local governments, institutions, and school districts, that contribute to a deeper sense of belonging and inclusion for undocumented youth seeking higher education. Thus, our research questions are multiscalar and sensitive to locality. They consider:

1. What is the role of locality and specific institutions in shaping the opportunities and outcomes for these youth?
2. How does Virginia, as a Southern state, influence the ability of undocumented youth to attend college?
3. Does living near the nation's capital influence the likelihood of undocumented youth to engage in advocacy either nationally or in Virginia?
4. How do these students deal with feelings of liminality and precarity, especially with the election of Donald Trump and the rescinding of DACA?

METHODOLOGY

This research was possible through close collaboration with the Dream Project-Va, a nonprofit organization formed in 2010 to support immigrant youth who graduate from Virginia high schools and face barriers to access higher education because of their legal status. The Dream Project provides renewable annual scholarships, along with mentoring programs for high school seniors and summer gatherings for college students. The organization is based in Arlington, which is a Virginia suburb of metropolitan Washington, D.C. One of the coauthors has served on the board of this organization for many years, and thus has had extensive opportunities to participate in Dream Project events and speak with many of the program's participants.

Through the consent of the Dream Project, the research team was able to receive summary data from the organization's annual survey. The online survey, administered in November 2018, includes results from current students receiving Dream Project scholarships⁴ ($n = 97$) as well as former scholarship recipients who have graduated from college ($n = 20$) for a total of 117 surveys. Survey findings are shared throughout the results section.

To better understand the experiences of those who graduated from college, the authors conducted a focus group with seven recent college graduates. This was conducted in a private home and a meal was served. Most of the respondents knew each other as past scholarship recipients, so there was a lot of social trust among this group. The focus group lasted for nearly two hours and addressed the key research questions of this study. Participation in the focus group was voluntary.

FINDINGS

The survey data provide several important characteristics of undocumented youth in Virginia. The vast majority are from Latin America (Bolivia, El Salvador, Mexico, Guatemala, Peru, Honduras, and Argentina), but over 20 countries are represented including Ethiopia, Mongolia, South Korea, and the Philippines. Unlike the national trends, Mexicans are underrepresented in Virginia and in these data. Nearly two-thirds of the students have DACA (61 percent) and 6 percent have Temporary Protected Status (TPS). About 18 percent are undocumented (without the benefit of DACA or TPS) and 8 percent have adjusted their status to be legal permanent residents (green card holders) over the course of their college years or after graduation. Given the rescinding of DACA in 2017, the legal precarity and uncertainty for this large cohort of students/workers is especially dire. Finally, four-out-of-five of the current students and over half of those who graduated from college are the first in their family to attend college or university. The difference in the proportion of first-generation students among the current students compared with the college graduates reflect national trends, regardless of legal status, student completion rates are higher in households where parents have higher education. This finding also affirms the point made in the literature that there is a stratification among undocumented students based on race, class, and social capital (Gonzales and others 2015, 321).

Data from the youth in this study confirmed many of the obstacles confronted and strategies used by undocumented youth found in the literature. Surveyed students had strong and consistent responses with regards to what helped them access and stay in college. The top reasons for staying in school included financial support from other scholarships or institutions (70 percent), financial support from family/friends (61 percent), in-state tuition (55 percent), and the ability to self-support through work and savings (50 percent). Similarly, for those respondents (ten in total) who were not in college and had not graduated, their stated reasons for not staying in school were largely financial (need to work and/or lack of financial resources) or personal (need to stay at home and help family, lack of guidance, and/or psychological burdens associated with my status).

The financial challenges of a college education are significant even for those who stay in college, as 84 percent of surveyed students answered that they “Strongly Agree” or “Agree” with the statement “Finding enough money to pay for college is my greatest challenge.” Paid employment while going to college was the norm for the surveyed undocumented youth, with 81.5 percent reporting having to work while in school. These financial pressures compound to make the entire college experience more difficult. As one focus group participant explained:

Money is the source of that stress mentally, but also logistically. If you have to work to pay for school while you're going to school, then that just makes going to school harder, so a lot of those obstacles will come from that common element. I'd notice some small things, of course money and tuition, but also a lot of my classmates would meet and be like, okay, we're going to go study at Starbucks, and I'd be like, oh, I don't have money for a coffee, so maybe I'll just join you guys later if, you know, you guys decide to go to the library or something. It was just small things like that.

For nearly all of the college graduates, and many of those currently in college, being able to work is critical to completing their degrees. And, for the vast majority of the students surveyed, this ability to work is tied to maintaining DACA status. Should that status completely disappear, as the Trump Administration intends, college completion among the undocumented will likely decline. Other factors that supported student success were additional scholarships. Two-thirds of the students surveyed received scholarships outside of the one given by the Dream Project and one-third of the students received financial aid from their college or university.

Focus group respondents emphasized the role of family in graduating from college. Graduates often stated there was the expectation that they go to school. As one person replied, "since when I was little my parents would tell me I was going to college, and it wasn't an option. [Laughs] And I didn't really think about not finishing my degree while I was doing my degree, just because I had that push." Family was also key in strategizing how to pay for college and providing much needed emotional and day-to-day support with meals and a place to live. Although another participant saw family as part of an overall supportive system, "everything everyone mentioned is all pretty much a support system. Family is relative to whatever you think family is, whether that's people at school, friends, people who share your blood, just having people there to help." To underscore this point, 91 percent of students surveyed in 2018 agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "I am part of a strong supportive community that motivates me to succeed."

The literature suggests that positive relationships, strong networks, and guidance from caring adults are perhaps some of the most important factors (Bjorklund 2018). Focus group participants highlighted diverse support systems that allowed them to graduate. These included family, especially parents; study buddies; friends that provided emotional support and understood their situation; faculty who were allies; and reaching out to professional and alumni networks. Thus in many respects the students in this study affirm the financial barriers, social networks, and psychological burdens of being an undocumented college student in the United States.

The first research question concerns the role of locality and specific institutions in shaping the opportunities and outcomes for undocumented youth. Respondents recognized the positive effects of the Dream Project in helping them succeed. We anticipated that students would recognize the institutional

support of the Dream Project, as those surveyed received scholarships and, in some cases, mentoring from the organization. Of the surveyed students, 96 percent reported the Dream Project was helpful or very helpful in guiding them to succeed in college. Three aspects of the organization's efforts that respondents felt were most beneficial included: receiving financial help through scholarships (95 percent), being part of a supportive network (86 percent), and engaging in advocacy work (47 percent).

What especially interested us in the focus group discussion among graduates was their recognition of how the particular context of where they grew up influenced their college success. Participants highlighted the area's diversity, the liberal political environment of Arlington County, Virginia, the strength of the public schools, and access to Washington, D.C.'s opportunities for employment and advocacy. There was widespread agreement to this comment:

I wonder if things would have been different for me if I had grown up in a place like that instead of growing up in the suburbs of D.C., in Northern Virginia, where it's super diverse. I've always had groups of friends from all over the world, always, and it's what I'm about, and the type of people I like to surround myself with, and I wouldn't have been able to do that in Wyoming, or wherever else [laughter], so I think it's facilitated in this area.

An important element of living in Northern Virginia for these students is the strong public education system. One student who went to college in Texas before returning to Virginia notes the positive effects of well-funded public schools with a wider range of opportunities for students, saying: "since I went to school in Texas, that's really when I realized just how strong the public school systems are in Northern Virginia, and I think that in itself is such a strong privilege, because going through these schools, we get opportunities that usually, outside of this area, people have to pay their kids to go to ... I could be a competitive student because I grew up in northern Virginia." The combination of strong public schools where the expectation for most students is to go to college, contributed to an environment where college attendance was normalized. In addition, having schools that were diverse with many students being immigrants or of an immigrant background was also important in fostering a sense of belonging and developing career goals.

Students also recognized that Arlington County, in particular, tends to be more politically progressive, and consequently more supportive. This view, especially in comparison with other jurisdictions in the state, was widely held.

Growing up in Arlington and being aware of my status, I wasn't really afraid, or I didn't really feel unsafe in the community. I never felt that I couldn't tell people I was undocumented. I felt like it was a welcoming place. Arlington always has been very welcoming to immigrants. Growing up in Virginia, especially under [Governor] McDonnell and [Attorney General] Cuccinelli, during that time when the rest of Virginia would swing right, Arlington would always be the first to stand up and say "we will continue to welcome immigrants, we reject the policies of what Prince William County is doing," and to me, that made me proud

to be in that county, and it felt, even if I couldn't call the U.S. home, I could call Arlington home.

This pattern of close-in diverse suburbs such as Arlington, Fairfax, and Alexandria being more supportive of immigrant youth, regardless of status, is found in many metropolitan areas (Walker and Leitner 2011). But policies in close-in suburbs do vary. Between 2005–2010, various counties in Virginia adopted 287g agreements that deputized local police to verify the status of immigrants during normal police work. This was even true in Northern Virginia in the city of Herndon (Fairfax County) and Prince William County (Singer and others 2009).

Two of the focus group participants grew up in Fairfax County, which has over 1.1 million residents and is Virginia's largest county by population. They felt benefits from living in Northern Virginia (and being near Washington, D.C.), but they did not feel that same sense of affinity and belonging that students from Arlington expressed.

I grew up in Fairfax County, specifically Reston [laughter; Reston is a planned suburban community in western Fairfax County]. I mean it's really nice over there, but there's a lot of ignorance, and I think it has a lot to do with the fact that people are less connected to the democratic process, but also the fact that people are, because they're less connected as a community, there's a lot of misconceptions and assumptions that are made about different groups of people, whereas here [Arlington], because the community is a lot tighter, there are more opportunities for citizens to learn about different countries, different backgrounds, different cultures, and therefore, I think, that makes it tighter.

The second question asked how Virginia state policies influence the ability of undocumented youth to attend college. Students in our focus group were very conscious of the advantages of growing up in Northern Virginia. State policies towards undocumented youth in Virginia public universities were quite restrictive until an executive order signed by Attorney General Mark Herring in 2014 allowed in-state tuition for youth with DACA who graduated from Virginia high schools. As the survey data show, 55 percent of students reported that having in-state tuition was fundamental to their success, significantly cutting costs to attend community college or university. But with the rescinding of DACA by the federal government, the population of high school seniors eligible to receive in-state tuition has been drastically reduced.

In response to the rescinding DACA by President Trump, and the fact that the house and senate in Virginia turned Democratic in 2020, legislation to open tuition equity for all undocumented youth passed the Virginia House (House Bill 1547) and Virginia Senate (Senate Bill 935) in February 2020. Governor Ralph Northam signed it into law two months later, making Virginia the 21st state that allows undocumented youth who graduate from high schools in their respective states access to in-state tuition. This also places Virginia in a unique status compared to other new destination states in the South. This is also likely to

increase the number of undocumented youth able to access higher education in the state. Moreover, for eight years the Dream Project organizers, supporters, and students played an active role in lobbying state legislators for these changes.

Our third research question tried to understand if living near the nation's capital influenced the students' level of engagement in advocacy work. The students surveyed showed a strong tendency towards advocacy, along with an awareness of the interlocking limitations and opportunities of living in a locality so closely tied to the workings of the federal government. The place effects of living near the nation's political center were revealed in the survey and focus group responses, but were not conclusive. We also acknowledge that there is selection bias among those in the study, as students who are part of the Dream Project are encouraged to be advocates both nationally and within the state of Virginia.

Slightly more than half of the surveyed students (52 percent) were either very involved or somewhat involved in Dreamer organizations at their universities, with several having leadership positions. Groups such as MasonDreamers at George Mason University, UndocuRams at Virginia Commonwealth, and TechDreamers at Virginia Tech have been critical in promoting policies that are accepting and supportive of undocumented youth in college. According to the SCHEV data (2017–18) from Virginia, George Mason University, which is in Fairfax County, has over half of the undocumented youth attending public four-year colleges in the state. One focus group participant explained that growing up near Washington, D.C., and being involved in Dreamer advocacy led her to pursue a law degree. Another graduate is a full-time employee of a national immigrant advocacy organization based in Washington, D.C.

Active community participation in college, as well as within the Dream Project itself, is noted in survey results and focus group discussion. This advocacy is multiscalar. Students in this study have testified in front of Virginia state officials representing undocumented youth who are part of the Dream Project. The Dream Project has also organized students and parents to participate in demonstrations to support undocumented youth and immigration reform in Washington, D.C. At the individual level, Dream Project scholarship recipients often engage in mentoring of undocumented high school students, and graduates mentor current scholars in the program. In addition, each year former scholarship recipients participate in the interviews that select new scholars. Thus through engagement with the Dream Project and university communities, advocacy networks are strengthened within Northern Virginia, across the state, and even among national advocacy programs.

Internships and the overall job market attract college students to Washington, D.C. With regard to internships, however, just 16 percent of the students surveyed held internships in college. This is a relatively low figure considering how prevalent internships are in the metropolitan area. There are

several reasons why undocumented youth, even though living near the nation's capital, might not pursue internships. In some cases their immigration status might prohibit them from getting an internship at various government agencies, but more significant are the financial pressures that preclude accepting an unpaid or low-paid internship, as well as the limited access to social capital in accessing internship opportunities. A college graduate in the focus group notes this particular barrier within the context of the Washington, D.C., area:

I think for any student, whether they're undocumented or just low-income, interning at these places in D.C. that don't pay a lot, or are unpaid, that's just something we can't do at all, and that just adds an extra barrier as we graduate.

One would think that living in Northern Virginia within reach of Washington, D.C., would be an advantage for undocumented students in accessing internship opportunities that could benefit their careers. Yet the reality for these students, with four-out-of-five students having paid work while in college, means that the internship strategy to career advancement is less accessible. The region's overall job market is healthy. Of the surveyed college graduates, all were employed (85 percent full time) and more impressively, 89 percent reported that their job was related to their career interests.

Our final research question addresses feelings of liminality and precarity, especially with the election of Donald Trump and the rescinding of DACA. The findings show a mix of anxiety and resilience. As former *Washington Post* owner, Donald Graham, wrote in a recent opinion piece in support of DACA holders: "First, the dreamers and other undocumented students are arguably the most discriminated-against students in the United States. Second, perhaps because of this discrimination, they are incredibly, almost impossibly, motivated to get a college education" (*Washington Post*, 8 November 2019).

Strikingly, 98 percent of all surveyed respondents (both in college and graduates) agreed or strongly agreed with the statements: "The current political situation is difficult for Dreamers in higher education," and "My success in college is very important to my family." These findings confirm the pressure that DACA holders are under, especially during the Trump Administration. Additionally, the students face internal family obligations of "keeping the immigrant bargain" and finding a way to graduate from college (Burciaga 2016, 71). Yet interestingly, only 45 percent of current student respondents answered with a "Strongly Agree" or "Agree" to the statement, "I often feel depressed and doubt my ability to graduate." Despite the serious obstacles these students face, their levels of determination are strong.

On an individual level, the emotional toll of legal uncertainty on mental health was reflected in the focus group. One student described transferring to another university far from family support networks while balancing academics and political uncertainty.

I transferred to Charlottesville, so I didn't have my family. I was in a new city, and being a transfer student just sucks overall. It does, I don't know about you guys, but I think that just trying to be okay mentally was definitely the biggest, most difficult challenge that I had to overcome in college. Trump being elected and all that stuff, all the uncertainty, that I had to think about, and that's when I started getting the million thoughts and all of that, so it was very hard. Hands down, that was definitely the hardest thing to overcome ... I just had to learn how to live with it, be productive.

Learning how to cope with the uncertainty of liminality can pose a steep mental health challenge for undocumented students, which underscores the importance of support networks for immigrant youth in higher education, whether that be connections with family and friends or through nonprofit organizations such as the Dream Project.

The burden of undocumented status on mental health was made clear when one student eventually obtained legal permanent residence. The student observed:

I study computer science, and a lot of weight is given to personal projects, and I was so busy doing schoolwork and then working, so I didn't have time to do personal projects that a lot of people have plenty of by the time they graduate. And then I got married in 2015, and I noticed that after that, actually my grades shot up, even though I was in the most difficult classes I had been in at that point. I think a lot had to do with not having to worry about the uncertainty anymore, because I was able to adjust my status that way, and I was really lucky to have been able to do that. I noticed that I didn't feel like I was suffocated anymore, and I was surprised at how much that affected me.

The "suffocation" of status uncertainty remains an issue for all undocumented youth in college, and so the locality specific systems that alleviate this stress, such as strong public education infrastructure, diverse immigrant communities, and family and friend networks are critical in managing this anxiety. While institutional support for immigrant youth in higher education is growing, larger shifts nationally need to be made in the mental health field to increase cultural competence within existing institutions, expand access to resources and therapists for vulnerable communities such as immigrant youth, and increase the number and diversity of mental health professionals in the field (Terriquez 2015; Gonzalez and others 2014).

DISCUSSION: THE NEED FOR MULTISCALAR SUPPORTS

Both the survey responses and focus group discussion affirm the importance of a diversified array of support systems for this especially vulnerable student population. These support systems include multidimensional support from family and friends, employers, academic institutions, organizations such as The Dream Project, peers, counselors, mentors, community leaders, and immigrants' rights advocates. This multidimensional support is key, as simply offering financial support alone is not enough for this population. These interlocking support systems, from the personal to the local and state levels, are critical for

undocumented youth (even with DACA) to succeed in college. This is especially true in Southern new destination states, such as Virginia, where such systems have existed for less than a decade. Given the racial and economic history of the U.S. South, the region does not have a legacy of receiving diverse immigrants and struggles with creating supportive networks for new arrivals.

In our surveys the most critical support systems for accessing university and graduating included financial support from scholarships, institutions, family/friends, in-state tuition, and the ability to self-support through work and savings. These findings reflect the multiscale nature of support systems that undocumented students require, from individual savings to community support, institutional awards to regional and in-state tuition policy. Most students had several scholarships, including the Dream Project scholarship. The vast majority of these students work while in school, and income from work is critical to continue study. How these systems will be sustained should the federal DACA program completely disappear is uncertain, especially the legal right to work.

Outside of financial support, our research finds that strong community-level positive relationships and guidance from caring adults are also necessary. Family/friend support extends to parents, extended family, friends, others facing a similar situation, study buddies, faculty allies, and professional and alumni networks of mentors. This also reflects the multiscale nature of community, and the layered social networks at home, in community spaces, academic spaces, and spaces of employment. The multiscale element of support systems is critical to address the nested socio-legal contexts of limitations and opportunities that influence outcomes for immigrant youth (Burciaga 2016). Yet most of these support systems happen in scalar units far smaller than that of the territorial state.

As to the specific place effects for these students, the Dream Project as an organization was noted for its financial help through scholarships, its supportive network, and its engagement in advocacy work. Outside of this organization, community and regional influences that were relevant to students included Northern Virginia's diversity and large immigrant communities that led to a greater sense of belonging. The progressive political environment of Arlington County was singled out for institutional support of undocumented youth, well-funded public schools that provide a wide range of opportunities and normalize college attendance, and access to Washington, D.C.'s employment and advocacy opportunities. In this regard, Northern Virginia is far ahead of the state of Virginia as a whole, and is a unique case study within the larger context of southern new destination states. The Virginia state decision that most positively impacted those with DACA was the executive order in 2014 to offer in-state tuition to all graduates of Virginia high schools with DACA. Since the future of DACA is in peril, Democrats in the Virginia legislature passed in-state tuition equity for any Virginia high school graduate (regardless of immigration status)

who is admitted into public colleges and universities in the state in April 2020. Twenty states have such policies, but when it was signed into law in Virginia it became a significant expansion of rights for undocumented youth in the U.S. South.

The interlocking of local, regional, and federal level is unique to this destination state study, as national-level immigration debates and the seat of federal power are at the doorstep of Northern Virginia communities. This proximity to the nation's capital was reflected in the survey responses and focus group, which showed a strong tendency towards advocacy by the students and graduates, as well as an awareness of national-level contexts such as limitations on employment by status. Strong undocumented-youth student communities and student organizations at schools such as George Mason University were also noted to be a key part of the student experience for those surveyed. Although students are relatively close to many internship opportunities in Washington, D.C., the unpaid or low-wage nature of many of these positions and the fact that almost all surveyed students are already working to self-support their studies mean that these internship opportunities are not as accessible and thus less significant than we had thought. Overall, the influence of proximity to Washington, D.C., is mixed, with a heightened awareness of national-level immigration policy due to federal government dominance in the regional job market and greater access to national-level immigrants' rights advocacy efforts being the most distinct characteristics of Washington, D.C., in particular.

The feeling of "suffocation" described by a focus group participant due to her undocumented status reflects the master narrative that legal status plays in the access to higher education for those with temporary status such as DACA or those with no status at all. No matter the individual, community, regional, or state-level contexts, being formally excluded from legal permanent residence, or having one's family excluded, places enormous strains on these students and inhibits positive outcomes. The negative mental health impacts of this legal uncertainty, as well as the increasing precarity experienced by DACA holders during the Trump presidency, are concerns that came up in our work. Added to this sense of liminality are the internal family obligations and pressures, financial stresses exacerbated by status at an individual and family level, and experiences of racial, class-based, and status-related forms of discrimination. There is an unusual mix of high anxiety about all of these factors, as well as an unrelenting resilience by these students that they belong and will prevail. This resilience is thanks to individual-level characteristics and actions, and also multiscale support systems provided by families, community networks, educational institutions, scholarships, immigrant youth organizations, academic and career counselors, mentors, immigrant-friendly regional networks and organizations, in-state tuition policies, national-level advocacy networks, and federal immigration policies such as DACA.

Although the master narrative of legal status is determined at the national level for undocumented youth, differentiated opportunities at the local and state levels create varying outcomes with specific place effects. Sociologist Ernesto Castañeda argues, “Latin people see national and local identities as relevant” as they respond to growing antiimmigrant discourse in the United States (2019, 15). We argue that this variegated legal landscape shows signs of both inclusion and exclusion. Virginia is a Southern and new destination state that has only recently trended towards more inclusive policies, partly driven by the state’s changing demography and a realization of the economic value that educated immigrants bring to the state.

Studies done in new destination states such as Virginia add to the literature and enrich our understanding of the complex web of local, regional, state, and national contexts that immigrant youth must navigate to achieve higher education and future employment. We contend that the actors, institutions, and multiscale networks that exist in Northern Virginia are critical to understand pathways to immigrant youth success in context. Our work affirms the view put forward by Roberto Gonzales that the life experience of undocumented youth in the United States creates a deeper sense of belonging that is tied to particular localities in which they are embedded. It is this sense of belonging, and the multiscale responses that either include or exclude these youth, that are the heart of this research and the variegated landscape of immigrant youth rights found across the United States.

NOTES

1. DACA was created by Executive Action in June 2012 by the Obama Administration and was formally rescinded by the Trump Administration in September 2017. Since the fall of 2017, no new applications have been accepted for the DACA program but renewals are still occurring. DACA is a renewable two-year stay from deportation. Two of the major benefits of DACA status are work authorization and the ability to obtain a driver’s license.

2. The suburbs of northern Virginia, which form part of metropolitan Washington DC, are known for their diverse and educated immigrant communities (Friedman et. al. 2005).

3. The states of Florida and Texas are not considered ‘new destination’ southern states because of their much longer history of immigration.

4. Of the 97, ten of the students had received a Dream Scholarship in the past but were currently not in school and had not graduated from college.

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