Where do I go from here? Examining the Transition of Undocumented Students Graduating from College

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Approximately 427,000 undocumented students are enrolled in college across the United States. Currently, most of them lack protections from the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program (Higher Ed Immigration Portal, 2023). DACA is an executive action enacted by President Obama in 2012 that provides two primary benefits to eligible undocumented immigrants: (a) access to a two-year renewable work permit and (b) protections from deportation (United States Citizenship and Immigration Services [USCIS], 2023).¹ Depending on the state, DACA allows beneficiaries to have access to additional benefits, such as state driver’s licenses and in-state resident tuition (ISRT) rates at public colleges and universities (Higher Ed Immigration Portal, 2023). New reports estimate that about 181,000 undocumented college students count with DACA-eligibility, representing 42.39% of the entire undocumented college student body (Higher Ed Immigration Portal, 2023). When undocumented students with and without DACA enroll in higher education, they encounter numerous barriers affecting their ability to persist toward degree completion (Covarrubias & Lara, 2014; Salazar et al., 2023). The American Federation of Teachers (2017) reports that 1-3% of all undocumented college students graduate each year; many of them take over 6 years to complete their bachelor’s degrees and transition out of higher education.

Undocumented students’ transition to new settings has been explored largely over the last few decades, especially as they progress from high school to college (Abrego, 2006; Gámez et al., 2017; Gonzales, 2011; Macías, 2022). Numerous scholars focus on the structural challenges these students face, and the role that schools and school personnel play in their access and transition to higher education (e.g., Abrego, 2008; Muñoz, 2015; Nienhusser, 2013; Pérez Huber & Malagón, 2007). Gonzales (2011) cataloged the process of nearing the point of high school

¹ Currently, DACA is undergoing judicial challenges, so no new applications are being accepted. Only, DACA renewals are being processed (USCIS, 2023).
graduation as the “transition to illegality” (p. 606). He examined how undocumented youth “learn to be illegal” from ages 18 to 24, after they engage in a period of discovering the meaning of their unauthorized immigration statuses (Gonzales, 2011, p. 612). This work illuminates the challenges that undocumented youth face due to legal limitations as they pursue new adult roles after high school and provides the foundation for our scholarship.

A noteworthy transition that undocumented students experience but has not yet been examined extensively in the literature (Morales-Hernandez & Enriquez, 2021; Pérez Huber, 2015; Zamacona, 2022), is their college graduation and movement out of higher education settings. Like other college graduates, when undocumented students transition out of higher education, they must reorient themselves and make meaning of their post-graduation pathways. However, unlike their peers with authorized immigration statuses, undocumented students may need to reconfront limitations associated with their social location as they leave the relative protected context of higher education. Given the growing number of undocumented college students with and without DACA for the past 10 years (Higher Ed Immigration Portal, 2023), we seek to examine how they navigate the college graduation process and transition out of higher education. Little is known about this significant life event that can involve numerous new challenges and opportunities for undocumented students. Thus, to begin understanding this transition, we engage in an exploratory qualitative investigation guided by the following research questions: (a) How do undocumented students perceive their college graduation process and transition out of higher education?, (b) What are the challenges that undocumented college students encounter as they approach their graduation from college?, and (c) What strategies do

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2 Recognizing the harmful impact terms like “illegality” and “illegal” have on undocumented people, we strike them through when referencing the work of scholars who use such terminology. Within our scholarship we avoid using such terms to humanize the experiences of undocumented communities.
undocumented students implement to transition out of higher education? Next, we offer a review of relevant literature.

**Literature Review**

We begin our review of relevant literature by examining existing research on the experiences of college students as they transition out of higher education. Then, we examine the scant research focusing on this transition among undocumented college students.

**College Students Transitioning Out of Higher Education**

Research centering the experiences of college graduates as they transition out of higher education and into the workplace overwhelmingly describes the challenges they encounter during this period (Chao, 2005; Murphy et al., 2010). Chao (2005) found that recent college graduates have trouble adjusting to new roles in the workplace, such as developing a professional identity in lieu of identifying as a student. Many college graduates also experience discontent due to unfulfilled work expectations or when they encounter difficulty in their work duties (Chao, 2005). Similarly, Murphy et al. (2010) found that college graduates entering the workforce struggle relating to their coworkers because of age differences and work socialization norms. These norms differ from those in college where they learned to socialize with peers.

To navigate this difficult transition, college graduates engage in numerous strategies (Ashford et al., 2007; Bauer et al., 2007; Cable & Parsons, 2001). Through a meta-analysis of studies investigating workplace integration, Bauer et al. (2007) found that recent college graduates seek information from more experienced peers in ambiguous situations, resulting in role clarity, feelings of self-efficacy, and greater acceptance by their coworkers. Ashford et al. (2007) found that for college graduates, engaging casually with coworkers about topics other than their shared work responsibilities helps them feel more comfortable in their work
environments throughout the transition. Overall, the literature shows that proactive efforts on the part of employees are more effective in promoting workplace adjustment than company-led efforts, such as formal peer mentorship programs (Ashforth et al., 2007; Cable & Parsons, 2001).

Numerous studies have focused on the different circumstances that college graduates face in their transition into the workplace based on their race (Frett, 2018; Green et al., 2014; Nunley et al., 2015; Treager-Huber, 2010; Triana et al., 2015). For example, research shows that African American/Black and Hispanic college graduates often experience financial challenges, such as paying for their basic living expenses, post-graduation (Frett, 2018; Green et al., 2014; Treager-Huber, 2010). Data from national surveys of recent college graduates suggest these financial challenges may be due to different labor market outcomes when compared to their white counterparts, including higher unemployment rates (Roksa & Arum, 2012). Earning lower salaries than white college graduates also contributes to the financial challenges that Black college graduates often face right after graduation (Strayhorn, 2008). Additionally, racial discrimination at work is a distinct challenge that African American college graduates encounter once they transition out of higher education, which has a detrimental impact on their physical and emotional health (Triana et al., 2015).

Scholars have found that to manage their transition out of higher education, some African American/Black and Hispanic college graduates rely on the faculty and staff relationships they established while in college (Frett, 2018; Green et al., 2014; Treager-Huber, 2010). Through these interactions, they can acquire the social and cultural capital considered valuable in U.S. society, helping them navigate the unique post-graduation challenges they face. For example, Frett (2018) found that it was helpful for Black and Hispanic graduates to have their resume critiqued by faculty and practice for job interviews as they prepared to graduate from their
institutions. The literature also shows that African American/Black and Hispanic college graduates often feel motivated to persist through post-graduation challenges by thinking about the efforts of their supporters and mentors (Frett, 2018; Green et al., 2014).

There is comparatively less literature illustrating the experiences of college graduates as they transition into graduate school. From this small body of research, it is clear that college graduates also experience challenges during this time (R. Perez, 2016; Fernandez et al., 2019). For instance, R. Perez (2016) found that college graduates who pursue advanced degrees shortly after graduating from undergraduate studies often feel unprepared through their coursework to complete tasks associated with their graduate assistantships and their research; this affects how they make meaning of their post-graduation experiences. Research shows that to alleviate some of those challenges, recent college graduates seek the support of more experienced peers, who can help them navigate the ambiguity of what it means to be a graduate student (R. Perez, 2016). They also try to find additional faculty to build a network of supportive mentors who can offer them assistance as needed, rather than relying solely on their advisors (Fernandez et al., 2019).

Undocumented College Students Transitioning Out of Higher Education

Research on the experiences of undocumented youth has been growing for the past two decades (Cadenas & Nienhusser, 2021; Contreras, 2009; Gonzales, 2016; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2011). This body of research has primarily focused on the transition of undocumented students from high school to college (Gonzales, 2011; Nienhusser et al., 2016), and the experiences of undocumented students with and without DACA while in college (Muñoz & Vigil, 2018; Perez & Rodriguez, 2011). Overwhelmingly, this scholarship has revealed the challenges undocumented students navigate because of their immigration status. Even after the enactment of DACA in 2012, research on the experiences of beneficiaries of the executive action demonstrates
that they continue to encounter limitations to and through higher education (Salazar et al., 2023; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015).

The literature shows that financial challenges are predominant among undocumented college students (Abrego & Gonzales, 2010; Terriquez, 2014; Salazar, 2022). These are created by undocumented students’ ineligibility for federal financial aid (Higher Ed. Immigration Portal, 2022), as well as various socioeconomic limitations connected to the limited, low-paying positions they can access with an unauthorized immigration status (Togun-Butler, 2018). Research shows that while DACA recipients may hold authorized work permits, they still experience financial difficulties because they are often responsible for contributing to their family’s income (Murillo, 2021). Financial stressors therefore affect undocumented students’ ability to persist in higher education (Salazar, 2022).

Additionally, research has shown that undocumented students encounter a myriad of socioemotional challenges while in college (Cervantes et al., 2015; Muñoz, 2016; Takeuchi et al., 2013; Yasuike, 2019). For instance, Muñoz (2013) found that their ineligibility to participate in various campus activities, like work study and study abroad programs, prevents undocumented students from fully participating in college life and feeling connected to their peers. Many undocumented college students also experience fear of deportation and hypervigilance of revealing their status to their peers while on campus (Muñoz, 2016; Yasuike, 2019). A recent study examining the impact of immigration status on college students’ health also found that undocumented college students experience greater symptoms of anxiety and depression than students with authorized immigration statuses (Nienhusser & Romandia, 2022).

The literature also shows that undocumented college students use various resources and strategies to manage the challenges they face throughout their time in college (Cervantes et al.,
Many undocumented students describe familial support, whether financial or emotional, as helpful in persisting through higher education (Gámez et al., 2017; Muñoz, 2013; Salazar, 2022). A few studies indicate that undocumented students may receive information about scholarships from trusted institutional agents, helping them alleviate financial stressors (Gonzales, 2010; Salazar et al., 2023). Undocumented youth also describe participating in advocacy for their communities as a way of making meaning of the arduous experiences they endure due to their immigration status (Cervantes et al., 2015; Yasuike, 2019). On campus, undocumented student organizations help undocumented students build relationships with peers who share their circumstances and engage in activism efforts (Muñoz, 2016). These connections and resources combined, promote the college persistence and success of undocumented students.

The scant research about the experiences of undocumented college students as they transition out of higher education indicates that they face challenges finding work and professional opportunities post-graduation (Morales-Hernandez & Enriquez, 2021; J. Perez, 2016; Pérez-Huber, 2015). Consequently, they often have trouble paying for their living expenses (J. Perez, 2016). This hardship can be caused partly by their ineligibility to secure jobs that require professional licenses (Sanchez, 2022). Most states limit undocumented immigrants, even those who are DACA beneficiaries to obtain licensure (Higher Ed Immigration Portal, 2022). While in college, DACA beneficiaries in particular, may have greater access to professional development opportunities that help them prepare for post-graduation careers (Morales-Hernandez & Enriquez, 2021). However, despite the advantages that DACA confers, research shows that DACA beneficiaries who graduate college continue to feel excluded by the executive action restrictions post-graduation (Pérez-Huber, 2015). These limitations include...
regulated opportunities to travel outside the United States, which constraint the professional
ambitions of undocumented college graduates (Pérez-Huber, 2015). Furthermore, undocumented
graduates with and without DACA describe feeling uncertain about their futures, lessening their
ability to make post-graduation plans (Zamacona, 2022). Transitioning out of college for
undocumented students without DACA can present additional challenges because opportunities
to use their higher education and grow their careers are further restricted.

Literature about the experiences of undocumented college students transitioning into
graduate school after completing their undergraduate studies, also describes the challenges they
encounter (Freeman & Valdivia, 2021; Lara & Nava, 2018; Pérez-Huber, 2015). Lara and Nava
(2018) found that some undocumented college students decide to pursue a graduate education
due to ineligibility for authorized employment upon their graduation. However, in this process,
undocumented college graduates experience obstacles obtaining reliable information about
graduate and professional schools, mostly because resources do not specifically address their
needs based on immigration status (Freeman & Valdivia, 2021). Pérez-Huber’s (2015) research
uncovered that undocumented college graduates are often deterred from pursuing graduate study
by their ineligibility for financial aid, even in state contexts that offer access to ISRT fees.

As states have been passing legislation to extend access to ISRT fees and state financial
aid to undocumented students since 2001, their enrollment in higher education has continuously
been increasing (Higher Ed Immigration Portal, 2022). While data on the college graduation
rates of undocumented students and number of undocumented college graduates are non-existent,
we speculate that more undocumented students are graduating from college nowadays than 20
years ago. Hence, it is essential to investigate their post-graduation pathways and understand
how they make meaning of their transition out of higher education to better support their success.
Theoretical Framework

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

According to Sargent and Schlossberg (1988), individuals can effectively cope with various kinds of major changes through a systematic process consisting of four elements, also known as the 4 S’s: (a) situation, (b) self, (c) support, and (d) strategies. The first S—situation requires the individual experiencing the transition to examine several factors, such as the timing of the event, the changes in roles involved, the duration of the transition, the number of other stressors present, and their ability to plan for it (Anderson et al., 2022). No situation is evaluated the same by two individuals; and the evaluation of their circumstances influences each individual’s ability to cope with the changes they are experiencing (Schlossberg, 2008).
The second S—self, relates to the personal characteristics and internal psychological resources of the individual experiencing the transition (Anderson et al., 2022). Personal and demographic characteristics, such as age, gender, and socioeconomic status, affect how a person going through a transition perceives the changes. Psychological resources such as self-efficacy and resilience can help individuals manage the changes effectively, while the lack of these inner resources can make the transition more challenging (Sargent & Schlossberg, 1988). Individuals who positively cope with change tend to feel challenged rather than overwhelmed during the transition. In addition, they tend to feel a sense of control over the situation and have a more optimistic outlook in life (Schlossberg, 2008).

The third S—support, refers to the aid an individual experiencing a significant life event or non-event has in place at the time of the transition (Anderson et al., 2022). Although support is a general concept, Schlossberg (2008) incorporates the work of Kahn and Antonucci (1980) to identify three main functions of support: (a) affection, (b) affirmation, and (c) assistance or aid. During a transition, each individual may need different kinds of support (Schlossberg, 2008). For example, someone who is deciding to discontinue their higher education may need affirmation about their choice, while someone else encountering the same situation may need assistance in the form of information about career prospects that do not require college degrees. People experiencing change may receive support from many different sources, including intimate relationships, family, friends, communities within institutions and organizations, and even strangers (Schlossberg, 1981).

Finally, the fourth S—strategies, refers to the actions individuals take to cope with the transition (Sargent & Schlossberg, 1988). These coping strategies fall into three main functional categories: (a) modifying the situation, (b) controlling the meaning of the transition, and (c)
managing the stress after the change has occurred (Schlossberg, 2008). Within each category, individuals can engage in various coping strategies, such as seeking advice for example when trying to change the situation or making positive comparisons when aiming to alter the meaning of the transition (Anderson et al., 2012; Goodman et al., 2006). Often, individuals may apply several of these strategies simultaneously to cope with changes (Schlossberg, 2008).

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

**Methodology**

We used a participatory action research (PAR) approach and a narrative inquiry methodology to examine how undocumented students with and without DACA navigated the college graduation process and transitioned out of higher education. As a result of a PAR approach, current and former undocumented students served as co-researchers throughout the study, generating and analyzing data (Hacker, 2013). This resulted in the individual and collective empowerment and transformation of all co-researchers, allowing each of us to enhance our critical consciousness (Salazar et al., 2022). With a grown understanding of systemic
injustices and the experiences of undocumented students navigating a critical transition, we each plan to advocate for social justice in different capacities within our own microenvironments.

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

**Recruitment and Sample**

We began recruiting participants in April 2021 soon after obtaining approval from the Institutional Review Board at Texas A&M University (IRB #2021-0039). To partake in the study, participants had to fulfill the following criteria: (a) Be graduating or have just graduated with a bachelor’s degree from any four-year college or university in the United States between April and September 2021, (b) Be an undocumented student with or without DACA at the time of their college graduation, and (c) Be at least 18 years old. As part of the recruitment process, we asked participants to complete an interest form to confirm their eligibility and provide their availability for interview scheduling purposes. We posted the study’s information on various social media platforms and groups, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. We also sent the
study information to key higher education organizations and individuals working in multicultural affairs, undocumented student resource centers, and diversity offices across the nation. When qualified participants opted into the study, we engaged in snowball sampling techniques by asking them to refer us to other people they knew met the criteria (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

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

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

**Data Collection**

To generate data, we designed a longitudinal study that involved 3 interviews with each participant over one year, starting in May 2021. Each interview protocol was planned to last 60-90-minutes and included between 15-20 open-ended questions. The first two authors of this paper conducted most interviews, generating a total of 68 hours of interview data. In addition to opting into 3 interviews, we asked participants to complete 2 demographic questionnaires. Participants completed the first questionnaire before the first interview and the second survey before the third interview. The first questionnaire aimed to obtain basic demographic information about participants’ personal and academic backgrounds. The second survey obtained updated information on the participant a year after graduating, including graduate school experience and post-graduate professional pathways. Both questionnaires had the option for participants to submit a link to their LinkedIn profiles or their resumes. All participants selected pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality throughout the study.

We met with 23 participants between early May 2021 and early November 2021 to conduct the first interview. Most participants completed the first interview by late July 2021. The first interview protocol was designed to understand how participants experienced the transition out of higher education at the time or immediately following their college graduation. We also asked participants to share their goals and aspirations as recent college graduates entering the workforce and/or graduate school. At the end of the first interview, each participant received a resource document that contained information on graduate school, entrepreneurship and income generation methods, and professional development opportunities. The resource also included
techniques to navigate bias, discrimination from employers, and acts of violence against immigrants. Lastly, we also included links to transition guides, blogs, and social media pages designed to support the undocumented community.

The second interview with each participant was conducted 6 months after our first meeting with them, which was between late November 2021 and early May 2022. A total of 19 participants completed the second round of interviews. The four participants we lost did not reply to our multiple communication attempts. During the second interview we asked participants to share more details about how their post-graduation plans were emerging and how they were navigating their post-graduation environments, such as the workforce and/or graduate school. We also asked them about the challenges they were experiencing, support systems, specific annual goals, and concerns about their roles.

We began the last round of data collection in early June 2022 and finished by early November 2022. We had a 100% retention rate from the second to the third interview process. During the third interview we asked participants to reflect retrospectively on how their higher education institutions provided them support and resources as they graduated from college as undocumented students. We also inquired if and how participants’ goals and aspirations had changed a year after graduation. All participants received a $25 Amazon gift card for their participation after each of the interviews completed.

Data Analysis

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

**Trustworthiness**

The systematic data analysis process we engaged in allowed us to identify central themes in connection to the research purpose and theoretical framework guiding the study. Throughout the entire data collection and analysis processes, the first two authors met on a bi-weekly basis to discuss the central themes that emerged from each interview. In our bi-weekly peer-debriefing discussions, we reflected on how each participant navigated the college graduation process as an undocumented individual, and later compared themes across participants to recognize differences and commonalities in their experiences. This process helped us reduced the data and identified key findings presented in this manuscript. Memoing after each interview and reviewing our memos throughout the analysis process also enhanced the trustworthiness of the study.

**Reflexivity Statement**

Our interest in this topic stems from our lived experiences as currently and formerly undocumented people. As immigrants who arrived in the United States at different points in time
from distinct countries, we have experienced unique migration and education journeys. Yet, we all shared barriers and complications resulting from an immigration system designed to cast us out of U.S. society. All of us migrated and navigated higher education in different states that enacted various laws to prohibit, limit, or discourage our presence in postsecondary institutions. Our contexts of reception dictated the opportunities we were afforded within and outside colleges and universities, shaping our aspirations as college graduates.

Our experiences inform our critical epistemologies about multiple and interconnected social systems affecting undocumented college graduates. Consequently, our critical perspectives impacted the research design and methodological choices. As we connected the theoretical framework to the population under study, we reflected on our past and current realities to design a longitudinal study and create interview protocols that allowed each participant to share openly about their life. The study’s design process also started on the cusp of the 2020 presidential elections and the COVID-19 pandemic, which ignited different feelings, debates, and concerns about undocumented immigrants with and without DACA. Thus, we considered all these issues as we engaged in conversations with participants and when we analyzed data to understand their post-graduation pathways. Ultimately, as scholars from distinct disciplines with a shared commitment to undocumented communities, we sought to critically investigate their transition out of higher education with the goal of advocating for inclusive research, policies, and practices.

Findings

The 68 hours of longitudinal data generated as part of this study were rich and complex. Each participant moved in, through, and out of their college graduation transition distinctively based on the 4 S’s associated with their experiences (situation, self, support, and strategies). Yet, the data revealed some commonalities among undocumented participants without DACA ($n = 5$)
and those with DACA (n = 18). To humanize the experiences of participants as undocumented people and honor the principles of our methodological approaches, we chose to represent the findings via two distinct narratives. First, we present the story of Ally, who graduated college without DACA. Then, we present the narrative of Ani, who graduated college with DACA. Each narrative is organized around key concepts connected to Schlossberg’s (2008) theoretical framework, illuminating themes that cut across the entire dataset.

**Ally’s Transition**

Ally (she/her/her) was born in Mexico and arrived in the United States when she was 1 year-old. She was 22 years-old at the time of her first interview. Ally graduated in May 2021 from a private not for profit predominantly white college located in Pennsylvania. Her school prides itself in college affordability, dynamic programming and curriculum, and a commitment to student success. Ally graduated college in 4 years with a bachelor’s degree in criminal justice and a minor in business administration. She was the first person in her family to graduate from college and moved away from home to pursue higher education. She utilized different financial resources to pay for her tuition and overall cost of attendance, such as scholarships, and relied on parental help to cover some of her college expenses. Growing up, Ally was constantly told she could “accomplish anything” she wanted, so she “kept that mindset throughout” her life, especially as she navigated her education. As graduation approached, she began to doubt this perspective after realizing the challenges her status represented for post-graduation life, particularly because she did not have DACA.

**Situation: “I applied for DACA . . . I’m sort of in a limbo.”**

Ally started college aspiring to become a federal prosecutor, but she soon realized that without a social security number, it was going to be hard for her to pursue a career in the
criminal justice sector. Then, she relied her hopes on DACA to obtain a work authorization as she was approaching graduation. She submitted her DACA paperwork when a short window of time opened for new applicants as the executive action was going through the judicial process. With the hopes of being granted DACA, Ally began preparing herself for the transition out of higher education and into the workforce. She built her professional skills by engaging in unpaid internships and shadowing professionals in different positions. She also increased her GPA in the last months of college to have a stronger portfolio when seeking career opportunities. Sadly, the unexpected pandemic negatively affected USCIS processing timelines, so as Ally was in the process of moving back to her home state of Arizona post-graduation, she was still waiting on her DACA approval. During her first interview, she said: “I’m currently working to get DACA, I already applied but I’m still in the works and because of COVID, things are really backed up.” For Ally, her anticipated graduation and transition into a first professional job turned into a non-event because she did not receive her DACA approval by the time of graduation.

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

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

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

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

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

The developments of DACA made Ally feel defeated. As the hype of the graduation milestone passed, she “cried a lot” when her plans did not turn out how she had hoped. Yet, she kept moving forward and found ways to generate income using her ITIN. She began providing legal
secretarial services for an attorney. Through this time, Ally put her dreams on hold and felt lost in an overworked and underpaid position despite her skills. She began to confront the negative impact of being undocumented without DACA, which temporarily altered her perception of self.

*S elf: “I know what I’m worth as a person, and not just because I have a degree.”*

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

A few months after graduation, Ally’s self-confidence returned. Her positive explanatory style helped her cope with the stressors of not securing the job of her dreams and returning to Arizona. During her second interview, she explained: “I’m not where I wanted to be, but I feel 1000% better than what I did back then.” While Ally recognized the situation was not what she expected, she acknowledged the progress in her emotional wellbeing. She also spoke confidently about her self-beliefs: “I’m not going to let anyone treat me differently because I’m not from here. I’m not. Especially in a career. I’m not going to let someone treat me that I’m less than them.” Despite the initial challenges she experienced post-graduation, Ally regained a sense of control quickly, particularly over ideas about her self-worth.
Having the opportunity to generate income by providing secretarial legal services also helped Ally feel more secure. In her second interview she commented: “My sense of self skyrocketed. Again, I know what I’m worth, and I’m a good asset.” However, in this process, she confronted work mistreatment as she was underpaid and overworked., she explained:

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

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

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

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

**Support: “They try to help me, but they don’t really know all that much about it.”**

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

I took one criminal justice class, my freshmen, sophomore year, and I absolutely fell in love with it. I fell in love with this perfect system that in theory would work but obviously that’s not the reality of things. And I fell in love with it, and I found a passion in it where I could hopefully help make a change in the system. And my professors helped with that. Seeing how, I don’t want to be rude, but seeing how the white kids here treated the minority kids here, it just didn’t seem fair to me or how you know security or how the police here in Pennsylvania treated the minority groups here, it just didn’t seem fair to me.

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

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

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

Because Ally did not have DACA, she felt the need to disclose the limitations of her immigration status to institutional agents on campus, who wanted to help her secure internship opportunities. She felt more comfortable speaking to her faculty than the career advisor about her background, but realized that they did not have the knowledge necessary to help her despite their intentions: “So my professor and the career advisor, they don’t really know, so they are more like, ‘You might as well just . . .’ They try to help me, but they don’t really know all that much about it.”

Furthermore, Ally spoke about how her college did not really have resources to support undocumented students at the time of graduation:

They don’t offer all that many resources to help post-graduation, you have the career advisor and your academic advisor, and they you know they try to help you find stuff, but their hands are pretty much tied because there’s nothing out here where you can work under the table.

Ally clearly recognized that her support system in college wanted to help her; yet they lacked knowledge about alternatives to generate income for undocumented students without DACA. The institutional agents in charge of guiding her professionally failed to provide her with the services she required, leaving her with no clear pathway to follow as she transitioned out of
higher education. As time passed, the support and communication with her college professors became email dependent and impersonal as the resources failed to adapt to the Arizona context. Hence, the forced move interrupted her convoy of social support and moved it closer to her inner circle composed of family, an old high school mentor, and new partner.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Her mother encouraged Ally to not give up on her dream of going to law school, which elevated her perception of the self and reminded her of her ability to manage the transition.

In Arizona, Ally engaged in a new romantic relationship and also received affirmation and emotional support from her boyfriend. During her last interview, a year after graduating, Ally said: “My boyfriend has been very, very supportive and has just told me, ‘Hey, you know you want to do this [law school]. What steps are you taking to do this?’” For Ally, receiving encouragement from her loved ones helped her refocus on her goals as she adjusted to her new reality after college, she said:

   I’ve honestly gotten stronger and even the guy that I’m dating now, I feel like he’s helped me a lot as well, especially in making better decisions. I still have a really, really good support system, thankfully. . . . Honestly, it was my family, and it was my new boyfriend, who helped me. They’ve, in the last 6 months, they helped me really focus and really
think about what I wanted. . . . I think they’ve been the ones that have helped me refocus, if I’m being honest.

With all the affirmation, affection, and aid provided by her new convoy of support, Ally’s perception of the situation and even herself shifted throughout the year. She felt “stronger” and invigorated to think of the future, implementing various strategies that allowed her to effectively manage the transition.

**Strategies: “My mindset has changed, honestly.”**

As Ally navigated the transition out of higher education, she engaged in a series of coping mechanisms that helped her manage post-graduation stressors and work toward her initial goal of going to law school. When reflecting about her forced return to Arizona, unexpected DACA disappointment, and lack of professional prospects immediately after graduating, Ally talked about still having a sense of optimism and hope. During her second interview she said:

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

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

When her DACA paperwork was not processed, she was shook. Nonetheless, she did not wallow and took actions to modify the transition. She tried to solve the problem and sought to generate income in different capacities. She rearranged her priorities and focused on finding financial stability rather than using her college degree. She talked about her situation among her social networks and sought help from them. To her surprise, these actions paid off. Six months after graduating, she explained:
So, I didn’t imagine myself actually being able to work, someone understanding my situation, saying, “Hey, it’s okay. As long as you pay your taxes, we don’t really care.” I didn’t imagine that, so I’m grateful. I’m honestly so grateful.

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

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

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

For Ally, dealing with adversity post-graduation helped her become more resilient. She was able to contemplate her goals and come up with concrete steps toward them. Ally decided to seek alternative professional opportunities that would allow her to earn more and save money for law school. She also wanted to be in a less stressful setting where she could have more mental capacity to study for the Law School Admissions Test (LSAT). She continued:

I did [leave the legal services opportunity]. I’m working from home now for a small handyman company. It’s not in the field that I want to work in, but it’s a job, and I’m in
an LSAT program, and I should be finishing that in November-ish, so yeah, and I am studying for LSAT now.

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

A year after graduation, Ally reflected on her past experiences, which provided her with some perspective on how she had rearranged her priorities and the meaning of the situation:

I was in an office behind a computer all day, and even now, I’m still behind a computer or screen all day, but that’s just helped me really think about everything that I really do want to do. Again, that’s really helped me figure out that I don’t want to be stuck behind a desk the rest of my life. Doing that courtroom, being that litigation is what’s fun.

For Ally, navigating professional conditions that were not ideal as a result of her immigration status did not propel her to give up on her dreams. Like her early post-graduation days, she managed the stressors by reframing the situation. With combined strategies, Ally felt she had effectively cope with change. During her third interview she said:

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

Transitioning out of college was not easy for Ally. Her relationships, roles, and routines changed, but her assumptions about the future and her potential did not: “My expectations of what I can do haven’t changed. I know I could still do what I want in life and get the career that I want. I just think it’s a small setback.” Ally believed that not moving into her dream career or law school immediately after graduating college was not a defeat. She only perceived it as a small hitch.
Ani’s Transition

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

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

Ani started college hoping to graduate with a degree in computer science and work with her credentials in a government-related branch in Washington, DC. As a DACA recipient and student activist, she had not really felt limited pursuing many of her aspirations while in college. However, as she started to seek professional jobs, she realized she needed U.S. citizenship to apply for most government positions, especially those related to cybersecurity and computer
science. Ani experienced numerous job rejections in the months leading up to her graduation. She feared the lack of employment would disappoint her family, which overwhelmed her, but kept applying to positions. During her first interview she spoke about what her final days in college had looked like, she said:

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

Ani had anticipated graduating from college but had not expected encountering so many rejections and limitations discussing being a DACA recipient, she noted:

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

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

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

For Ani, not securing job opportunities right after graduating and her overall transition out of college increased her unhappiness. While she felt relieved to graduate after enduring academic challenges, she felt sad to leave behind the relationships she had fostered in college. She talked about her feelings during her first interview:

In a way, I feel so relieved [to not be a student anymore]. But also, like, when I really think about it, I’m kind of like, I don’t know, sad, because I made really good friends and not being able to see them you know, that’s hard. . . . There’s like mixed feelings. Because Ani had lived on campus all throughout her undergraduate studies, she had develop a strong community of friends. She was also engaged in immigrant rights organizations, so transitioning out of college meant changes in her roles and relationships generally.
Ani began to reflect more about her next steps as graduation approached. She realized that she needed a job that would allow her to financially support herself and her family in Colorado if needed. During her first interview, she said, “Part of my aspirations were to graduate from college and be financially stable or have some sort of peace. I know money doesn’t solve all the problems, but just having the income to help my family...” Unfortunately for Ani, her anticipated graduation turned into a nonevent because she did not obtain a job after graduation, causing her to experience unanticipated stressors. Early during her senior year, she had also decided not to apply to graduate school, which altered her overall plans. Fortunately, a few months after graduating, she found a remote job as a technical support engineer that allowed her to stay in the Washington, DC area. During her second interview, 6 months post-graduation, Ani reflected more in-depth about her transition out of higher education. She stated:

Honestly, I didn’t know what to expect. I didn’t have a plan or the plan that I would have was different from where I am today. Before I thought I would be going to grad school or something like that, but now I’m working full time. My expectations were different, but I wouldn’t change anything, because I’ve been able to save up money too. And also just a break from school was nice too. And it felt really weird and different, not having to do any homework or assignments, but also, I felt empty.

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

Discussion
Our findings revealed that undocumented students with and without DACA perceived their transition out of higher education as an expected change with unexpected conditions and non-events out of their control. This complicates Schlossberg’s (2008) theoretical framework, which categorizes transitions as well-defined changes consisting of either expected events, unexpected events, and non-events. For undocumented students, their immigration statuses and ambiguous sociopolitical climate created unpredictable situations on a continuous basis that clouded the certainness of navigating a foreseen transition. While undocumented students with and without DACA expected to graduate from college and leave higher education settings, they did not know if they were going to find a post-graduation pathway that allowed them to apply their degrees and generate a steady income. Having DACA did not translate into more stability for participants at the time of graduation. On the contrary, they were continuously on the edge, anticipating the complete rescission of the executive action as it was the case of Ani. This limited their ability to plan long-term, pushing them to focus on the present and forcing them to think of their futures in 18-24-months chapters. For undocumented students without DACA, graduating from college reminded them of their high school graduation process. Although it was challenging for them to determine next steps, they did not stop planning and dreaming of their career goals as demonstrated by Ally.

The data showed that most participants embraced a negative sense of self during their college graduation transition as revealed in both Ally’s and Ani’s narratives. Participants found themselves struggling with changes on their routines, relationships, and roles (Schlossberg, 2008). Adjusting to not being student was difficult for participants who had formed a strong student identity while in college. Participants with and without DACA felt overwhelmed by not securing jobs post-graduation and their limitations to apply their college education. For
participants without DACA though, regaining a sense of self seemed to occur faster. By the second interview, 6 months later, most participants without DACA had adopted a fighting mentality and attitude (Schlossberg, 2008). They had time to reconsider their plans and felt empowered to keep working toward their goals despite the limitations of their immigration status. This outlook could have been caused by previous experiences with uncertainty, such as time they graduated high school. While undocumented students with DACA did not give up, it took them longer to feel in control of their sense of self. The post-graduation stressors took a toll on them emotionally and on their perceptions of their abilities. It was not until a full year after their graduation that they started to feel in control of the situation. These findings support Goodman et al.’s (2006) arguments that moving in, moving through, and moving out of transitions make take longer for some individuals than others even if the change is perceived to be similar in nature.

Across the data, participants overwhelmingly spoke about receiving affective support and affirmation from their families, including their partners (Schlossberg, 2008). Even when family was physically at a distance, participants relied on their loved ones to manage stressors at the time of graduation as it was the case of Ani. This finding adds to research on the role family plays on undocumented students’ college access and persistence (Gámez et al., 2017; Muñoz, 2013; Salazar, 2022). It also shows how familial support is critical as students navigate post-graduation decisions and changes. Unfortunately, few participants spoke about other sources of support outside family members. While participants did not speak poorly about institutional agents on campus, they could not articulate how they received concrete assistance from faculty, administrators, and staff as they transitioned out of higher education as demonstrated by Ally’s story. Participants with and without DACA talked about moments where they were unable to
obtain information they needed about post-graduation opportunities, or where they felt that the resources provided at their institutions did not account for their unique needs as undocumented people. The lack of support participants encountered on their campuses did not seem to add to the stressors they were managing because they appeared to have low expectations of institutional agents, but it did not alleviate their burdens either. Overall, this contributed negatively to their sense of self and how they perceived their college graduation.

Lastly, our findings showed that undocumented students with and without DACA engaged in a multiplicity of strategies to cope with the changes they were experiencing.

**Implications**

Undocumented students are present at colleges and universities across the United States. They are increasingly attending higher education because of accessible ISRT state policies (Higher Ed Immigration Portal, 2023), and while exact statistical data on their college graduation is unavailable, it can be easily concluded that more undocumented students nowadays are navigating the transition of graduating from higher education than 10 years ago. While a few scholars have examined this phenomenon (Morales-Hernandez & Enriquez, 2021; Pérez Huber, 2015; Zamacona, 2022), there is still much more to theorize about this critical period of change. We think this experience can be studied from an interdisciplinary perspective and using various theoretical frameworks that allow for the consideration of contexts of reception (CITE), such as the setting where undocumented students graduate college or transition to post-graduation. In addition, this phenomenon can be examined using legal frameworks, such as legal violence (CITE) and legal consciousness (CITE) to unpack how this transition is further impacted by immigration policies and interactions with law enforcement agents.
Future research centering the transition out of higher education among undocumented students could also account for their multiple and intersecting identities. Undocumented students are not a monolith and examining how they navigate their college graduation accounting for their race, ethnicity, social orientation, social class, and gender among others, could shed light to the interlocking systems of power affecting how they move in, move through, and move out of the transition (Goodman et al., 2006). While the college graduation process of undocumented students may be highly influenced by their immigration status, their multiple social identities may also affect their situations, sense of selves, supports, and strategies (Schlossberg, 2008).

**Conclusion**

This exploratory investigation contributes to literature in four distinct ways. First, by studying the experiences of undocumented students as they navigate the college graduation process and as they form perceptions of their post-graduation plans, this work illuminates aspects of the undocumented college student experience that are understudied in higher education scholarship. Second, by using Schlossberg’s (2008) transition theory, this study adds to the limited empirical work framed by this model in higher education and counseling psychology research. Third, this research adds to the small body of scholarship in higher education that uses transformative research approaches, contributing to a greater understanding of how PAR can serve as a tool to conduct critical investigations. And fourth, by understanding the challenges undocumented students approaching graduation encounter and the coping strategies they apply, this study has the potential to translate research into recommendations for practice that can improve the experiences of this population within and beyond postsecondary institutions.