

**JLER**

Vol 7, No 2

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<http://journals.sfu.ca/cvj/index.php/cvj/index>**“IT’S LIKE WHERE DO I BELONG?”: LATINX UNDOCUMENTED YOUTH  
ACTIVISM, IDENTITY, AND BELONGING IN NORTH CAROLINA**

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**ABSTRACT**

This qualitative case study explores how undocumented students in North Carolina navigate their identity, belonging, and decision-making about activist efforts. Drawing on fieldwork and interview data (2017-2019), we provide policy context and empirical evidence through the voices of undocumented youth about their everyday realities and dilemmas that being undocumented with the benefits from the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program (DACA) present. We shed light on local resistance and the complexity of undocumented youths’ lives as they navigate their immigration status and find belonging in the local community of activists.

*Key Words:* Undocumented; State Policy; New Latino South; Activism

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**Introduction**

A recurring question related to the experiences of undocumented youth that we encounter as Latinx scholar-activists and critical researchers is: Where do I belong (Rodriguez, 2017, 2018)? This question was uttered to Sophia by undocumented student activists as we discussed on-going organizing efforts. The concern about belonging is connected to the “dilemmas” undocumented immigrants face as college students and recipients of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program (DACA),<sup>1</sup> and as activists in a community in North Carolina. In other words, undocumented students, such as those in this article, are included to some extent as college students and as recipients of the temporary benefits of DACA; however, they remain in “limbo” (Gonzales, 2016) in many ways as outsiders to the citizen community, and yet distinct from other undocumented peers who may be ineligible for DACA.

The utterance, “Where do I belong?,” links belonging with identity dynamics and undocumented youths’ experiences of exclusion from educational and social opportunities due to anti-immigrant policies (Rodriguez, 2017; 2018). In the current U.S. political context these questions of belonging are particularly dubious. Research about undocumented youth experiences of belonging and identity often focuses on how they grapple with their immigration “status” in society--a status informed by discourses of “illegality” (Rodriguez, 2017; Gonzales, 2016; Menjívar, 2006) that position these youth as criminals, and thus undeserving of governmental resources or access to opportunity (Chavez, 2013). Belonging is not a benign term; rather, it refers to larger external forces that shape undocumented students’ identities, relationships, interactions, and access to opportunities. Juana, the composite identity featured in this paper, has experiences that are emblematic of other ways that undocumented youth face exclusion and fragmented moments of belonging.

While belonging is central to immigrants’ lives (Rodriguez, 2017; 2019; Jaffe Walter & Lee, 2018; Malsbury, 2013), more pressing policy constraints and encounters with the racialized crimmigration system threaten the lives of undocumented youth. By crimmigration, we refer to the intersection of immigration and criminal law, and how bureaucratic entities are enforcing immigration law (Armenta, 2016; Arriaga, 2017). Their belonging is experienced in relation to larger discourses of illegality, and perceptions of their deservingness are built into policies, laws, and institutional practices (Lopez & Reyna Rivarola, 2021; Nagel & Ehrkamp, 2016; Patel, 2015; Patler & Gonzales, 2015; Reyna Rivarola, 2017; Rodriguez, 2018; Yukich, 2013). Furthermore, the ongoing hostile rhetoric and actions of the Trump administration and long-standing history of racialized U.S. policies and the recruitment of undocumented labor to contribute to southern economic sectors--most notably agriculture, meat processing, and construction—continue to shape the lives and positionality of undocumented immigrants (Guerrero, 2017; Marrow, 2011; Ribas, 2015; Weise, 2015), as do complex race relations (Rodriguez, 2020; Brown, Becker & Jones, 2018; Jones, 2019). Given the underrepresentation of undocumented youth voices in the scholarly literature, this exploratory case study of undocumented youth activism in the New Latino South describes the policy context and showcases how undocumented youth struggle to navigate anti-immigrant policy contexts and increase their belonging as activists. Drawing on fieldwork and interview data (2017-2019), we provide policy and empirical evidence through the voices of undocumented youth about their everyday realities. We shed light on local resistance and the complexity of undocumented youths’ lives as they navigate their immigration status and find belonging in the local community of activists.

We situate this study in previous research on undocumented youth activism, the politics of belonging for undocumented students, and how policy contexts shape opportunity and access in North Carolina. Our data from DACA-recipients revealed their perspectives of immigrant justice locally. Additionally, we raise important questions about how undocumented youth perceive the activism and their organizing efforts in the larger context of the stratification within the undocumented community. This means, not all undocumented youth are eligible for DACA and DACA as policy is precarious in nature; and, it is important to understand the diversity and complexity within the undocumented community and to problematize the dreamer narrative (Abrego & Negron-Gonzales, 2020).<sup>2</sup> While we are cautious not to generalize, we find that current research has not addressed such complexities about navigating “undocumentedness”—the realities, relationships, and barriers—in our focal state of North Carolina; we aim to provide analytic insights from this exploratory case study (Firestone, 1993; Rodriguez, 2020).

## Previous Research

### Barriers for undocumented students: An overview

Despite the visibility of undocumented youth activism both in K-12 and higher education settings (Munoz, 2015; Reyna Rivarola, 2017), less is known about the uncertainty as to where undocumented youth fit in with other Latinx populations and undocumented affinity groups. In other words, not all undocumented students are eligible for DACA; therefore, groups such as “dreamers,” face stratification, difference, and dilemmas within the undocumented community, and sometimes within their own families, especially if one sibling is eligible for DACA while another may not be.”<sup>3</sup> As dreamers are part of a larger social movement-building, the dreamer-identity or label refers to undocumented youth that have mostly lived American childhoods (Flores-Gonzales, 2017; Gonzales, 2016), and has largely been applied to those eligible for the Obama-initiative, Deferred Action For Childhood Arrivals (DACA, 2012). Much of the previous research has yet to account for the variation and stratification within the undocumented community as only *some* are eligible for reprieve from deportation through DACA while having family members who are ineligible and restricted from access to public and social resources and instead focuses on how DACA and other supportive in-state tuition policies allow for access to education and other forms of inclusion (Abrego, 2008). For example, roughly 700,000 recipients of DACA are in the U.S. with additional immigrant students eligible for it but not accessing due to fears or financial constraints (Ee & Gandara, 2019), and more recently arrived students do not qualify for it.

To complicate this further, much of this research does not account for the many undocumented youth who do not qualify for DACA, such as more recently arrived newcomers (Rodriguez, 2019; 2020). We underscore the precarity of DACA, as a policy that promotes deservingness and hierarchies that exclude some from benefits (Ybarra, 2018), while also excluding the many undocumented youth who fold into the local landscape. We problematize DACA as a temporary policy that serves some, and that also varies by state context (Cebulko & Silver, 2016). Given this, the current study centers on the variation of belonging and tensions within the undocumented youth community.

Scholars also draw attention to the criminalizing forces and mechanisms underlying immigrants' lives in the U.S.—both the symbolic and discursive violence the undocumented community faces. Armenta (2016) argued that in the area of law enforcement, U.S. society witnessed the emergence of the “so-called crimmigration system,” in which the immigration enforcement system is intimately intertwined with the criminal justice system. This means that Latinos in particular are highly targeted and racialized as criminals, and have to “navigate their everyday illegality” (De Genova, 2002; Negron-Gonzales, 2015).

Additional constraints are placed upon Latinx immigrants specifically as these crimmigration systems threaten what are supposed to be safe spaces--schools. Schools, as protected spaces under the Supreme Court case *Plyler v. Doe*,<sup>4</sup> are compromised by the threat of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in an institution that suffers from limited due process, enhancing the “culture of surveillance” in many communities such as the one in this study (Rodriguez & Monreal, 2017). Scholars (Rodriguez, 2018; Roth, 2017) note that in places like the New Latino South, where this study occurs, states like Alabama and South Carolina are not protecting undocumented children from law enforcement. For example, the encroachment of immigration policy into schools, as part of a larger immigration surveillance apparatus, paired with racialization processes in schools leads to a school-to-prison-to-deportation pipeline (Hlass, 2018). These surveillance apparatuses are rising and sustained in communities and schools. This is

important context for understanding the everyday realities and barriers that undocumented youth face. Despite strides in immigration reform or political wins, there remains deep variation and stratification within the immigrant and undocumented communities (Gonzales & Ruiz, 2014).

### **Anti-Immigrant Contexts in the New Latino South**

This research builds upon previous scholarship that seeks to understand the ways in which immigrants in the South are excluded from public spaces broadly and schools specifically. As state and local level legislation related to immigration rises dramatically (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2017; Odem & Lacey, 2009), it is necessary to understand why local/state legislatures seek/adopt immigration policy. Chavez and Provine (2009) found that common rationale such as “threat” rhetoric and negative economic and criminal perceptions, are not associated unilaterally with restrictionist legislation. Building on that research, Ybarra, Sanchez, and Sanchez (2016) used cross-section time-series analysis to find that economic recession paired *with* changing demographics were correlative of increased immigration policy at the state level. Interestingly, local growth in the Latinx population yields increased restrictive policies while Asian population increases had no measurable impact, which speaks to the racialized hierarchies of immigrant groups. Specifically, the model minority stereotype positions Asians as honorary whites and not a significant threat to the social or economic status quo in many states (Goodman, 2015; Rodriguez, 2015, 2018). Thus, anti-immigrant anxieties, and the ensuing racialization of immigrant groups (Sáenz & Douglas, 2015; Verma et al., 2017) are tied directly to the expansion of Latinx populations in the historically segregated, Jim Crow South (Winders & Smith, 2012).

Another reason Southern states enact strict immigration laws creating restrictive local policy contexts for newcomers relates to popular, white supremacist attitudes in the formerly Jim Crow South. Odem & Lacy (2009) argue more exclusionary state and local immigration policies are the result of shifting popular attitudes in the region writing, “most official rhetoric and policy in the Southeast in recent years...seeks to limit especially unauthorized immigrants’ access to employment, transportation, housing, health care, higher education, and public benefits” (p. 150). These scholars, and others (Oboler, 2010), argue that many local ordinances in Southern localities aim to discourage flows of immigration, make life harder for immigrants, or drive out those already there. For example, communities in Georgia and the Carolinas maintain housing regulations that require landlords to verify immigration status and incur fines for renting to undocumented immigrants (Odem & Lacy, 2009). This racialized practice is akin to what Bonilla-Silva (2015) calls the “new racism,” in which aspects of social life are restricted through policies, processes, and mechanisms that undercut or outright deny minoritized groups access to standard quality of living or living wage jobs. Local unease is compounded by the former presidential administration that sought tighter enforcement of immigration laws while rolling back protections such as the DACA program. Latinx communities in the South must also worry about increased ICE activities and re-established 287(g) programs (Nguyen & Gill, 2010)<sup>5</sup> that seek to further constrain their lives.

In addition to state policies being enacted out of fear or explicit legacies of racist and white supremacist attitudes, state policies are also seeking to criminalize immigrant groups. For example, specific policies like those criminalizing living arrangements are proposed by localities to control immigrants in the New Latino South. Rodriguez and Monreal (2017) explore how policy discourse produces problematic categories of knowledge about immigrants creating the necessity for restrictive legislative actions. Rodriguez and Monreal (2017) found that state level policy constructed immigrants to be dangerous Others, an economic and security threat to the residents

of the state. Immigrants thus become the subject of specific types of knowledge and the object of targeted policies like increased law enforcement surveillance and continual verification of one’s (legal) status. This research is especially pertinent because the construction of a threatening immigrant subject sets forth the perception that immigrants are undeserving of state resources like schooling and access to equitable funding.

The examples above illustrate how state policies in the South impact undocumented immigrants’ everyday lives and suffocate their protected status in school and right to educational opportunity under *Plyler*. The examples also underscore the powerful processes of racialization and disciplinary surveillance. Such racialization processes like profiling practices, increased disciplinary encounters, and deficit-based ability discourse frame immigrant students as deviant and threatening to the fabric of the state(s) in the South with broader connections nationally given the anti-immigrant political landscape. We note these examples to point out the uniquely anti-immigrant context of the New Latino South and how this context bears upon immigrants’ lives, shaping their access to educational and social resources, and how they choose to engage in activism or mobilization efforts to fight for their rights. These examples illustrate that immigration and education policies are highly influential and act jointly in the context of the U.S. South.

### **Activism and North Carolina as a Focal State**

Our collective empirical work in North and South Carolina over the past decade showcases how local contexts, particular policies and discourses, shape undocumented immigrants’ lives and the precarity in which they engage in activism and mobilization efforts to obtain resources (Rodriguez & Monreal, 2017; Rodriguez, 2018). Despite the many barriers undocumented immigrants face, movement-building and community resource-sharing occurs. North Carolinians participated in the mass mobilizations of Latinos in 2006 and Zepeda-Millan (2017) suggests the decline of that protest wave was the result of an increase in raids, deportations, hate crimes, and state and local anti-immigrant ordinances. Although other campaigns persisted—namely a fight for tuition equity and driver’s licenses—the emphasis on local deportation practices did not. It is only relatively recently that campaigns—led by some of the participants central in the 2006 protests—have resurfaced to target these practices at the local level. And not until 2018 did persistent campaigns targeting Sheriffs and their participation—both voluntary and unquestioned practices—in local immigration occur. These unquestioned practices of adoption, particularly of biometric screening practices, mirror the rational ignorance typically reserved to describe when citizens, “do not appear to have concerns intense enough to provoke participation and information gathering” about a particular issue (Robbins et al., 2008).

The present political climate—characterized by the blatant anti-immigrant rhetoric during the 2016 U.S. presidential elections that continues today—has also encouraged local resistance against immigration enforcement partnerships. In some ways, this reflects conditions similar to the 2006 Latino waves of protest, which emerged under 1) Republican Party control, 2) strong nativist sentiments after 9/11, and 3) looming legislative threat in the Sensebrenner Bill of 2005 (Zepeda-Millan, 2017). Furthermore, few national efforts prior to the former presidential administration have forced the Democratic Party, both locally and nationally, to take on these concerns. With limited national movement among this two-party political system, this research contributes to a call by Polletta (2002) to focus on local movement organizations and leadership, lower profile efforts to ensure local changes, and the organizational structures that facilitate this.

We argue that grassroots activists, mainly Latinx immigrants, critical of both political parties, are able to work in coalition with nonprofits while maintaining tactics and goals created

outside of the “sealed-off political realm” (Kalir & Wissink, 2015). Although previous survey research describes political participation prior to the 2006 protests, highlighting that Latinx immigrants are less likely than U.S. born Latinx and other racial and ethnic groups to engage in non-political activities (Leal 2002; Leighly & Nagler, 2013; L. Martinez, 2005; Martinez, 2008; Verba et al., 1995), this is not the case currently. Furthermore, the national and state climate facilitates a limited two-political party solution to local immigration enforcement and more progressive efforts like tuition equity, which provides a unique opportunity for immigrant grassroots activists not to be beholden to those parties in order to construct a more expansive platform.

We note all of this to set up the context for the challenges that undocumented youth are encountering as they attempt to decide which immigration reforms to fight now (described below). Next, we outline the research context of North Carolina for this particular study, our research methods, and empirical evidence from undocumented youth activists.

### **Conceptual Influences**

As we noted, undocumented students face barriers to education and social mobility. Their undocumentedness (Rodriguez, 2020), while complex and varied, is embedded in contexts of reception and other economic, social, and political frames that positions them as “illegal,” “good” or “bad,” and “deserving” or “undeserving” of resources and access to opportunities (Abrego & Negron-Gonzales, 2020; Rodriguez, 2018). The conceptual frames of illegality and deservingness shape the conditions that undocumented youth live (Rodriguez, 2018; Patel, 2015) and are useful in this study to understand how undocumented young people are living through their status of illegality and engaging locally in movement-building and activism. Similar to Menjivar & Kanstroom (2013), we begin with the assumption that illegality can be experienced, defined, and lived differently across groups (p. 8). Connecting the lived experience to local contexts, these authors argue, “The importance of context— social cleavages shape not only how individuals experience illegality but how they have responded, organized, and mobilized” (p. 7). We build upon the frames of illegality as undocumented youth respond to these structures and how they contextualize notions of “deservingness” as it relates to their eligibility for DACA by showcasing the dilemmas that are entangled within this DACA identity. Grounding our study in these concepts while also being attentive to undocumented youth perspectives help build case knowledge about undocumented youth activism and belonging. In this article, we are interested in sharing how the local context of North Carolina sets up the conditions for undocumented youth to engage in activism and what identities and sense of belonging are available in this context, which results in a tenuous struggle for positive identity and belonging for many undocumented youths.

### **Research Context and Methods**

#### **North Carolina & Population**

North Carolina is located on the southeastern coast of the continental United States. It is estimated that North Carolina's population has reached 10,273,419 through Census Bureau Projections in 2017 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). In comparison to other states, North Carolina is the 9<sup>th</sup> largest state in terms of population size (NC.gov, 2018). According to the demographic profile of Hispanics in North Carolina in 2014, the total Hispanic population in North Carolina is 890,000 making it 9 percent of the total state population (Pew Research Center, 2014), and while seemingly small, much of this population is undocumented and is isolated in rural parts of the state.

A total of 350,000 undocumented immigrants comprised 43 percent of the immigrant population and 3.4 percent of the total state population in 2014 (American Immigration Council, 2017). As time has passed, the trends report an increase across the board in North Carolina’s Hispanic population and undocumented populations. More than 25,000 Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) recipients live in North Carolina (American Immigration Council, 2017). While the age breakdown of undocumented immigrants varies, for this investigation, the age range from 16 to 24 is used to understand the experiences of this population given that the participants in this study are in this range and enrolled in a local private college with DACA support. Within the age range of 16 to 24, it is reported that 59,000 were in this category in 2014 (Migration Policy Institute, 2014). The Latinx immigrants in North Carolina come from various parts of Central and South America. The countries of birth of most of this population include: Mexico and Central America, Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador (Migration Policy Institute, 2014).

The shift in destination for the Latin American migrant stream is part of a larger demographic trend that includes new immigrants from other countries as well as people relocated from all parts of the United States seeking to take advantage of the cheaper cost of living and the economic advantages of the South (Gill, 2010). North Carolina presents a place for opportunity for Latinx immigrants to lay roots due to the lower cost of living and higher labor opportunities (Marrow, 2011; Ribas, 2015).

### **Research Questions**

While many states felt the brute force of a shifted political climate when Trump was elected, New Latino Southern geographies have been restricting access to social and public resources for Latinx immigrants broadly and undocumented immigrants specifically for decades. In this focal state, studying activism, divisions, and diverse challenges in the Latinx undocumented community was central. The project was grounded conceptually in concepts of deservingness, illegality, and belonging, and social movement literature (Enriquez, 2014), asking the following research questions as part of the larger study:

How are Latinx undocumented immigrant youth engaging activism in their local communities? How do Latinx undocumented youth talk about the dilemmas they face due to their status and sense of belonging?

The primary objective of this article is to understand the policy context of North Carolina and how it shapes undocumented youths’ activism and sense of belonging. We also hope to intervene in some of the dreamer narrative as a unified experience of DACA-recipients and instead reveal the complexities that DACA-recipients face as they navigate their status and make decisions about activist efforts. This contributes to previous literature by examining tensions within the undocumented community on issues related to their activism and status as undocumented.

### **Research Design and Methods**

This exploratory case study was conducted between 2017-2019 of undocumented youth who became activists during high school and who are activists in higher education and community settings in a focal state, North Carolina. The college-going youth attend a small religiously affiliated private institution known for its inclusion and tolerance. The college-going students are recipients of DACA, but many of their family members are undocumented or ineligible for DACA. Case study design can be instrumental when trying to understand a particular phenomenon

(undocumented youth activism) in a particular context (New Latino South and North Carolina) to show particulars about their movement building efforts and struggles of solidarity within the undocumented community (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2016; Yin, 2014). Case study is also useful when attempting to bound local systems in order to build case knowledge about particular phenomena. Prominent researchers in methodology agree that case study research is an “an empirical enquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (Yin, 2014), and that the “thick description” of a singular case in particular is useful for understanding the complexity of phenomenon in order to provide significant detail such as the insights gained in this article from the unique and tenuous experience of undocumented youth activists (Geertz, 1973). While case study, and singular case analyses are often subject to criticism, including threats to validity, replicability, and generalizability, in this study, the fact that undocumented youth are a hidden, silenced population as well as the location of this anti-immigrant context, necessitates a dire need to study this population from the grassroots-level. We do this in order to build understanding about how immigration reform is needed and impacts their everyday lives and intergroup relations.

### **Participants and Data Sources**

Participants were recruited through an initial connection made with a local community organization that partnered with the high schools to support immigrants’ rights as well as through professional networks by the two faculty co-authors of this article given our decade-long work as local organizers (Felicia) and mentors within the community (Sophia). From these initial connections, additional participants were recruited through snowball sampling given the sensitive status of this population (Rodriguez, 2017; Golash-Boza, 2016). All participants reached out to the researchers via phone on their own and then met in person. The participants were told the purpose of the study and agreed to share their experiences being organizers and activists on their university campus, in their high schools prior to going to college, and in more state and national venues. The nature of the organizations that they were involved, since some were involved in multiple groups, included mostly undocumented youth and sometimes their family members. The organizations were largely made up of DACA recipients. In some cases, one organization was solely comprised of undocumented immigrants, some with DACA and some without it. The participants self-reported as undocumented. They also shared that they were from Mexico and had lived in the community or elsewhere in the state since early childhood, similar to what Gonzales (2016) has called the 1.5. generation. This refers to undocumented young people who arrive at young ages and live mostly American childhoods, i.e., attending school and becoming integrated into local communities in North Carolina (Jones, 2019).

Semi-structured interviews typically lasted from 60-120 minutes. The participants included in this article were interviewed between 2017-2019 and developed a mentor/mentee relationship with Sophia due to shared interests in sociology and immigration reform, including three of the participants attending Sophia’s graduate level classes in sociology and research methodology, and meeting regularly with her for coffee or a meal to discuss current organizing efforts over the course of the two-year study.

Sophia also engaged in participant-observations. These were conducted at organizing activities, including protests, workshops, community meetings, and vigils. Sophia assisted undocumented youth working on activist projects such as researching state policy (Rodriguez, 2017; 2018) and assisting them in preparing letters to senators and providing workshops through



a college access program at the local university that has a long-standing relationship with the undocumented community. One additional event included a protest and vigil outside of the local ICE agency where undocumented immigrants along with others painted fake tombstones. Undocumented immigrant youth activists read the stories of undocumented young people who had been living in this southern state and had been recently deported, which resulted in their death upon their return to Central America. Sophia regularly attended workshops organized by undocumented youth to share resources for undocumented families to learn about policies, educational rights, and the college admissions process. Sophia attended and participated if asked by the youth and often served as a resource for youth in various ways, typically by supplying policy information or speaking at events that were organized in the area at local universities. Felicia has extensive experience providing strategic advice within the broader undocumented immigrant community in the local community where this study occurred as well as at the state level. Felicia, in this capacity, has contributed to and led workshops with local groups around increasing awareness of immigration enforcement, police accountability, and access to higher education.

### **Methodological Decisions and Composite Identity for Participants:**

The focus on the participants will all be under the pseudonym, Juana, which is a composite identity. To be clear, we did not delete or leave out the diversity of voices in creating a composite identity; rather, we present a composite that incorporates all undocumented youth voices. The purpose of the composite identity is two-fold. The first reason we chose to develop a composite is to protect the confidentiality of the youth in these organizing spaces who are entangled in a larger crimmigration regime in the state, especially given the heightened threats this community faces and the local cooperation between ICE and local law enforcement (Arriaga, 2017). We wanted undocumented youth voices to “expose hegemonic power arrangements” such as the very policies that sustain the undocumented youth in this study’s marginalization and invisibility in society (Baez, 2002, p. 35). The power dynamics and explicit forms of exclusion and discrimination against the undocumented community are significant factors that informed our desire to protect the identities of the participants and thus warranted the methodological choice to leverage the composite identity.

Second, the composite identity is a type of “counter-narrative” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002), and it relies on multiple People of Color who have experienced a particular context. Further, Harper (2009) argues, “Composite stories are useful for representing the often-disregarded experiences of a larger group through a smaller subset of ‘characters’ who represent the group” (p. 702). And, finally, Harper (2009) posits, “Composite characters in the story reject commonly held assumptions regarding their limited potential” in society or in relation to social mobility (p. 702). The youth in this project were eligible for the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program (DACA) and held views that they had some privilege with DACA status (Gonzales, 2016). This tenuous status, however, did not mean that they were exempt from discrimination and racism in the community or policy context. At times, the youth felt empowered but also felt limited in what they could accomplish. They struggled to articulate how their voices mattered in society, but through organizing, explored how they could contribute to “the movement” as they referred to it. Important to their experience was learning the limitations of the DACA status as well as how it situated them within the larger undocumented community, which included recently arrived undocumented immigrants and those with family members who had been deported and/or were ineligible for any protections. These things came to bear on the participants’ mental health and

opened up their learning about the stratification in the undocumented community and the false narratives surrounding their unity.

Indeed, the undocumented youth in this study offered critical perspectives that reject the common assumptions about Latinx immigrants that are used against them in punitive ways in American society. The youth here comprise a voice that rejects deficit discourses and resists the oppressive assumptions about the Latinx community and undocumented youth that they are “bad hombres” or “stealing jobs.”<sup>6</sup> Instead, they are long-standing members of the communities and engage in civic action and organizing for their rights. Participants in the study shared similar concerns and experiences of struggling with activism and focusing on a singular composite case analysis provides a particular kind of depth to the case study and phenomenon (Roulston, 2012). Because this population is underrepresented, and due to the exploratory and sensitive nature of the topics, participants requested to be de-identified. Thus, we also made this methodological decision to protect their identities and continued efforts to engage locally, knowing that their views were evolving (Arriaga, 2017). What is reflected here is the result of these two years of the project.

### **Analytic Processes and Decisions**

While this research was a collaborative effort, meaning the study took form as relationships with the youth deepened, there were overarching research questions for this project, which was noted above as: How are Latinx undocumented immigrant youth engaging activism in their local communities and talking about belonging in relation to it? How do Latinx undocumented youth talk about the dilemmas they face due to their status and sense of belonging? Using these questions as a guide, relationships developed with local undocumented youth activists as they reached out to Sophia. Sophia wrote analytic memos after each interview and observation as a form of preliminary analysis, often checking in with youth to ensure data were captured according to their experiences (Birks et al., 2008). The youth wished to remain anonymous due to the politics of their activism. The story of “Juana” is told here to showcase the dilemmas and tensions that came with the mobilization efforts.

As qualitative researchers, we used traditional coding methods. Data were analyzed utilizing common techniques in qualitative research, specifically through open and analytic coding processes (Saldana, 2013). After engaging in four to six 60–100-minute interviews that engaged life histories of undocumented students with DACA for this project in North Carolina, all interviews were transcribed by an outside service. Transcribed interviews were uploaded to NVivo coding software and coded by the researchers. We used open and “flexible coding” techniques to allow for maximum understanding of undocumented students’ experiences (Deterding & Waters, 2018). Under open and flexible coding processes, we developed the overarching code of “dilemmas of being undocumented,” which helped us organize Juana’s narrative. For the analytic coding, we examined developed codes such as belonging, identity, deservingness, privilege, and illegality because those are common themes in the research literature we noted above and themes which we wished to expand upon. The coding processes resulted in two categories, e.g., *policy constraints* and *dilemmas of activism* with subcodes that we describe below such as *belonging and identity*, *the right type of activism and disrupting the dreamer narrative*, and *organizing as “taking the good with the bad”* (described in findings).

An overarching finding, then, is the ways that immigration policies shape the fragmented sense of belonging and constrained activism of undocumented young people in the study. There are limitations in this study. As we noted, we intend to build case knowledge about one set of undocumented students within a particular context and do not claim to generalize these experiences

across all undocumented students. To protect the identities of the youth, we use certain details and piece together details from multiple students. We use and contribute the composite as a methodological strategy to protect the identities of the undocumented youth and organizers we work with (Rodriguez, 2017), and at their request to protect their identities, including gender, racial/ethnic backgrounds, and institutions and activist groups they are involved in to the best of our ability. We were given permission by them to disclose certain identity-markers such as being an undocumented Latinx immigrant and recipient of DACA. We value the single story of the multiple to complicate the dreamer narrative and assumptions that all DACA recipients experience inclusion. Instead, we share the dilemmas, tensions, and challenges to belonging for undocumented youth like “Juana.”

### Findings

From our research with undocumented youth and our policy analyses, three key findings emerged related to policy: college access and state-policies, proposed legislation, and financial barriers. The second part of this findings section focuses on the lived experiences of undocumented youth activists through the composite identity in the study, Juana. We organize the findings around the policy constraints as an overarching theme we found in our policy and empirical analysis. Then, we narrate the responses to such constraints as the key findings related to the undocumented students’ experiences of dilemmas, including how their status and as recipients of DACA impact their identity and belonging and shape their engagement and reflections about activist efforts for immigration justice.

### Policy Constraints

**College Access:** The state’s inconsistent policies on college admissions, cost, etc. make it challenging for any DACA and undocumented young person to successfully enroll, pay for, and complete a college education. Furthermore, both DACA and undocumented students must pay out-of-state tuition in North Carolina to attend a 2- or 4-year college/university.

There are two loopholes that should be highlighted: non-profit/employer sponsorships are available to community college students who are DACA recipients if the administration is knowledgeable about the process, and in 2018, tuition was lowered for three 4-year universities within the UNC-system (see, NC Promise).<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, two of those schools are historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), subject to different funding allocation structures and challenges. And in the absence of a multi-racial/issue coalition pushing back against this reduction in tuition, these universities may see drastically different trajectories. Then Senator Apodaca who advocated for Western Carolina University, the sole non-HBCU, explicitly stated he was in favor of the change because it would provide affordability for lower-income and undocumented students, mostly in line with his previous support of tuition equity. According to the Adelante Education NC Coalition’s website, between 2004 and 2014, the policies pertaining to DACA or undocumented students in the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS) changed or were clarified nine times. In 2004, this included allowing schools to have the discretion as to whether to admit students and whether to make them pay out of state tuition. In 2008, undocumented students were banned from enrolling in the community college system, even after the Department of Homeland Security and the NC Attorney General decided it was discretionary. In 2010, undocumented students were once again allowed to enroll in community colleges but were required to pay out-of-state tuition and forced to wait to enroll in courses to ensure legal residents or citizens were first guaranteed course selections. In 2013, business sponsorships

became available for DACA recipients attending community colleges. Throughout most of this time, continuing into the present, undocumented and DACA recipients were not able to obtain a professional licensure even though they could enroll in the coursework.

**Proposed Legislation:** Unfortunately, the tension undocumented students face and what Juana describes below about her identity and the idea of the “good” immigrant is reflected in various versions of proposed statewide tuition equity language and rhetoric (Rodriguez, 2018). The most recent version of a tuition equity bill was proposed in the 2017-2018 legislative session through House Bill 734 or the In-State Tuition Equity Bill. Like previous iterations of this proposed legislation, there were requirements for those who would be eligible. These included: 1) a high school diploma or GED, 2) attending school in NC for at least 2 years prior to enrollment, 3) proof that the individual would apply for legal status, and 4) be accepted and enrolled at an institution.<sup>9</sup> Unlike previous versions of proposed legislation that were expected to make it past committee readings and find favor with Republicans, this proposed legislation did not have GPA requirements.

**Cost:** As previously mentioned, undocumented and DACA recipients<sup>10</sup> must pay out-of-state tuition costs at 2- and 4-year public schools in North Carolina. Private schools often classify them as “international” students, forcing them to pay more than “domestic” students. Within both of these systems, students are unable to obtain financial aid from the state or federal government. They may apply for private scholarships, but there is a limited pool of these available, although The Golden Doors Scholarship<sup>11</sup> has gone a long way to provide support for many students.

Each of these themes were discussed across interviews and observations of various organizing meetings and activities. These policy issues and barriers to higher education (Sief, 2004) shape the lives and opportunities of undocumented youth. Thus, as a result, they strategize at local levels to combat the injustices they face. Next, we discuss the experiences of our composite identity Juana and how youth respond to policy constraints. Utilizing Juana’s experience, we show the challenges that undocumented youth like her face generally, but also the “dilemmas,” she endures due to her feelings of uncertainty about being a DACA recipient when many in the community are either ineligible for DACA, cannot afford to apply, or are scared to apply for it. Our intention is to share Juana’s experience in order to complicate the perceptions of the undocumented community as all similar or united as one, and to share the ways that incongruent and unjust immigration policies impact undocumented young peoples’ lives, opportunities, and well-being.

### **Juana’s fragmented identity and activist dilemmas**

Juana initially shared her story of becoming an activist during the first interview in December of 2017, which to our surprise dated back to her middle school days. She said that she lived in a trailer park in a small town near several major research universities in the South. She explained that often friends or siblings in high school or at the university would attempt to recruit middle or high school students for activism because the undocumented community was long-standing in the surrounding North Carolina communities. Juana revealed that she was a DACA recipient early on in interviews because Sophia attended a local university to speak with undocumented students and their families about navigating college. Juana explained that being undocumented with DACA was a struggle because she observed undocumented people in the community that she felt should have the opportunity to go to college, including those she was involved with in local activist groups, and her siblings and friends. For instance, Juana revealed, “Like, I feel really guilty that like I have DACA and me and my mom didn’t push to help my

brother. He doesn’t have it.” The tensions or “dilemmas” as they are referred to that surfaced throughout the interviews speak to how undocumented students’ identities are fragmented, and their belonging is a challenge within and beyond the undocumented community. Below, we map three interrelated themes from Juana’s grounded experience to illustrate the tensions of being undocumented with DACA and how it impacts belonging and decision-making about activist efforts. These themes all relate to “dilemmas” of being undocumented, including: identity and belonging, the *right* type of activism, and organizing as “*taking the good with the bad.*”

### **Identity and Belonging**

While Juana desired empowerment and belonging as many undocumented students do, she was confronted with a contentious landscape of activism and was learning to understand what her identity as an undocumented student and DACA recipient meant in the local context. She struggled with her DACA-status, seeing it as a “privilege” when compared with other undocumented students. She said, “I am oppressed in certain ways but I’m also privileged in others. And recognizing that, I think is pretty important. I sometimes try to like blame like a white person like, you have privilege, you have it all but like, in reality, I have privilege even if we don’t call it privilege with scholarships and networks, and DACA” (12/2017). Juana explains this awareness of her DACA status and being in college as a “dilemma” and as having an impact on her decision-making about how to be an activist within the undocumented community.

Relatedly, Juana repeated the phrase “learning that organizing language matters.” Juana described that as she was trying to understand her “own place in the movement,” she had to confront and combat phrases from external forces about her (and the larger undocumented community’s) label of “criminal.” She said, “I’m not a criminal. But, you feel like it. That’s the phrase I always hear about us. They’re criminalizing our people” (Interview, 2/2019). Juana shared how she struggles to accept her own, what she refers to as, “privilege,” of being a DACA-recipient within the community while also feeling the competing agendas and interests with regard to activism efforts. And yet, members of her undocumented community, together, have to navigate their status of “illegality” and thus are assumed to come together in solidarity despite the fragmented feels toward that identity marker and status (Gonzales, 2016).

In addition to managing her “master status” of being undocumented and an immigrant in the South (Gonzales, 2016), Juana noted that she is also still “just in college” and learning who she is. She explained:

We face all this stuff. In high school, it’s the worst, it’s so hard. I was lucky I was in honors classes but a lot of people of color and immigrants don’t get that opportunity. And high school is all about status and identity and you know, like who’s the cool kid, and all this dumb stuff. I was set up to go to college, though. Then when you get to college, you are like free to explore who you are and it’s like if you could just make it there, you know, then you might have a chance to really figure out who you are. You know? (12/2017)

She explained that despite the struggles of undocumented immigrants in her family and community, she felt “privileged” in a sense to be in college, but carried “guilt” about her positioning. She noted:

When it comes to like this whole like, getting an education thing, I think I was a force of upward mobility for a lot of my friends that wanted to go to college. Even now, like they like hit me up and they’re like, “How do I get my transcripts?” Or like, “How do you think I should do this?” Like I know a lot about it. (12/2017)

It’s one way that she can extend her knowledge and capital within her local friend group and community—a small form of her “activism.” Finally, managing the burden of being undocumented with the general adolescent development is not without its isolation. Juana recalled, “I want to help people while I am trying to figure all this out. Sometimes I can’t help people with all their questions. I just cry afterwards” (12/2017).

### **The *right* type of activism and disrupting the dreamer narrative**

In addition to understanding her undocumented identity and how its meanings align with the DACA status in the local landscape, Juana grappled with additional dilemmas. She explained

I’ve been having this dilemma lately. One activist group wants the undocumented community to support the Succeed Act.<sup>12</sup> I’ve been in the dilemma of like, is what they’re doing like conforming? This dilemma is becoming very internalized to me. I feel like I should conform, and go along with that group, but there are too many scary restrictions in the Act. (Interview, 1/2019)

Juana’s “internalizing” of this dilemma speaks to the challenges of being an activist and choosing which reforms to support within her community. Moreover, this dilemma highlights her ability to pursue higher education, a pathway inaccessible by some and undesired by others. Though conflicted, Juana attends multiple organizing meetings to understand the details of legislation and efforts to support immigrants’ rights.

The interviews revealed a community divide witnessed and experienced firsthand by undocumented youth. Juana explained that “the undocumented community isn’t all unified.” She expressed that some activists in the local community are fighting for the Dream Act, which some of her activist peers call “unrealistic,” while others support the aforementioned Succeed Act. Relating to the Dream Act, Juana contends that one activist group argues, “Dreamers are political pawns. The Dream Act isn’t gonna happen.” She notes that the division between supporting comprehensive immigration reform (Dream Act) or acts like Succeed with a number of concessions is not an easy choice for her. She said that supporting the Succeed Act feels like saying, “You guys are the good immigrants [referring to those with DACA]” when there are others who deserve a chance to go to college. She said that since she is a recipient of DACA and another prestigious scholarship, she feels like she is “a good immigrant,” and this is troubling to others because she doesn’t “always want to be in that group. Because there are other all types of undocumented people here. It feels like it shouldn’t be you’re either a good immigrant or bad one” (Interview, 3/2018). Yet, she feels that her choice to participate in the Succeed Act group perpetuates these notions of good or bad immigrant rather than seeking a more just and inclusive immigration reform bill. Thus, her dilemma is “figuring out if I am putting my energy into the right side of the movement.” While we learned of many specific state level and local level policies that the activists were learning about, the larger point we make here is that through the eyes of Juana, it was not always clear which efforts to put energy into because of the competing agendas within the undocumented community, and some securing benefits from some policies (i.e., DACA) while others were more excluded from education and social resources. On a similar note, DACA recipients also had to fight for a “clean” driver’s license. Once DACA became a federal law, each state could decide various parameters. In North Carolina, proposed legislation would have forced these individuals to obtain a driver’s license with a pink stripe across it, a move meant to distinguish them from other motorists, further emphasizing their illegality, and potentially leading to racial profiling in encounters with local law enforcement. For some young people with DACA,

this would still provide a previously unavailable privilege while others feared the stigma it would continue to perpetuate.

### **Organizing as a “taking the good with the bad”**

Another emergent theme from Juana’s perspective related to the struggle of being a college student, and undocumented immigrant, and an organizer. She noted, “organizing is draining, emotionally draining. It’s emotional labor and energy that I put out there and it takes away from homework or relationships” (Interview, 2/2019). These comments are important to emphasize that undocumented youth like Juana face much personal and professional sacrifice. Despite this, Juana finds ways to engage. She elaborated: You see the divide that we’ve talked about, right? There’s the national scene of immigration reform. And I’ve been to D.C. and done that. But then there’s the local scene like the organization here I am part of. There’s conflict. There’ll be conflict. But, there has to be a variety of tactics. It’s taking the good with the bad. (Interview, 2/2019)

While many hardships exist for undocumented youth organizers, the alternative of doing nothing or standing by is not an option. Juana recalled a story of many of the organizers. She explained:

They're like valedictorians of their high schools. They're like everything you would assume like, high achieving and like they tried doing like an activism workshop. [refers to activists in one of the groups she was involved in] I noticed that a lot of people are very hesitant because they rather protect their families, or they rather not put themselves out there. So, you have this divide. These DACA students who want to fight, and others who want to just be there but listen so as not to put their families or themselves out there at risk. (12/2017)

As she struggled to make decisions about which efforts to support, she explained how she felt belonging to various groups, recalling:

It [the organizing meetings and supportive people] like pulls people in, it's like they relate to you. It's not like someone like definitely like someone standing up and telling you what to do. But I think it was the group in [a local city] I have been involved in and it was just different in the sense of like they went through; they took the time to go through like policy. There was power in that group. People wanted us to know the policies. (12/2017)

Even though she describes the organizing efforts as “having a lot to learn,” she also highlighted how beneficial it is to share knowledge within the community. She said, “We also learn about policies and driver’s licenses and racial profiling in the community. It’s a lot but activism is a social justice issue. We can learn, lobby, protest, and stuff.” As she detailed the ups and downs and learning curve of her initial collegiate years engaging in local immigrants’ rights activism, she said, “As for if I am activist?.. I don’t really know.” (12/2017).<sup>13</sup> As these comments show, organizing efforts were stratified within the undocumented community, with Juana observing some groups with power while others remained in the shadows. Even though these descriptions were part of the evolving process of learning how to be an organizer, the takeaway for Juana was learning about policies, how to navigate them, and how to share knowledge within the undocumented community.

### **Discussion and Implications**

Undocumented youth face uncertainty in their communities broadly. Factors that impact their everyday lives include the presence of law and immigration enforcement and a constantly shifting policy landscape. For those with DACA, like Juana, they may experience some relief and access some benefits; largely, however, these youth still have family members who are not “safe”

from ICE detention, or deportation. To some extent, DACA provides a shield and with the networks in this local community, Juana was able to engage in activities to fight for equitable policies and immigration reform. The benefits of DACA, however, do not outweigh the continued stress and limitations on undocumented youth mobility and belonging. In the case of these youth, who attended a local university that had opportunities for scholarships, many youth in the undocumented community did not have the same access to financial support or were uncertain about how to navigate higher education. In North Carolina, the public-school system of higher education does not explicitly exclude undocumented students. However, they do not allow for in-state tuition support, which creates equity and inclusion issues as many undocumented students cannot afford college tuition without some support. Ultimately, undocumented students organize to increase access in the state, but tensions over how to best organize and which topics to prioritize remain within the community. And as of 2016, 3000 “unauthorized” immigrants graduated from public schools in North Carolina (Migration Policy Institute, 2019), which will continue to present opportunities to demand equitable policies.

The implications of these dilemmas and divisions make youth like Juana feel like “*Your activist work isn’t real*,” as one of her activist peers said to her, making her feel like she is on the wrong side of the movement since she had been supporting the Dream Act group. Thus, while there exists evidence of movement building, shared ideology is contestable and yet necessary for coalition-building and sustained coherence (Enriquez, 2014) in social movements. These divisions that Juana observed impact individuals and cause distress and confusion as young people try to fight for “social justice,” as Juana noted. Even with these dilemmas, Juana remained engaged, saying, “It’s all the movement.” While participants have by and large had positive experiences in college, i.e., strong relationships with peers, connections with the Latinx community and various groups on campus, and received positive grades, their perceptions of campus and the community as a safe space for organizing remain uncertain. The undocumented students attend organizing events and groups with both Dream and Succeed supporters in an effort to “figure out the right type of activism.” And yet, a precarious moment for Juana was when DACA was threatened by the Trump administration. She said, “I just don’t know what’s gonna happen and it’s scary, but we keep doing the movement.” For many of those in the movement, 2020 brought substantive changes to DACA. In June 2020, the Supreme Court blocked Trump’s bid to end DACA and in December 2020, many of those barred from applying during the Trump administration could finally breathe a sigh of relief. And effective on December 7, 2020, new DACA applicants could apply, DACA renewal requests could be submitted, and advance parole applications were available once again. The recent Supreme Court decisions will keep DACA protections in place for now. But Biden’s selections for the transition team and for the Department of Homeland Security signal Obama-like enforcement policies, so immigration enforcement and migration and border policies remain precarious. Furthermore, Biden recently appointed Cecilia Munoz—Obama’s top immigration adviser—to his immigration transition team. Some are hopeful that the DHS agency review team will assist in policy changes and Biden picking the first Latino immigrant to lead DHS may signal Latino representation at best and empty representation at its worst.

Our aim here was to showcase the experiences of undocumented youth through the composite identity of Juana, from the ground level, in order to provide insight into how anti-immigrant policies and conflicting opportunities for immigration and education reform burden and bear on the lives of undocumented young people. The effects of incoherent, inconsistent, and/or racist, xenophobic policies at the national and state level limit opportunity and access for



undocumented youth and also inhibit emotional well-being, and create stratification within their community.

### **Unfinished movement-building**

Juana’s experience speaks to the problems of both the Dream Act and the smaller legislative efforts that enshrine compromises and the criminalization of immigrants. Her visceral experience of the tension is ongoing and unfinished, mirroring the movement itself. To date, Juana remains open-minded, attending multiple local activist efforts that support undocumented communities. Youth like Juana face external and structural barriers and racism in the South even with DACA, and yet some of the most stifling dilemmas emerge in their activist communities. These instances of internal and intra-group conflict have thus far been less discussed in scholarly and public discourse. While this is a small snippet of Juana’s experience, it reflects the undocumented community’s tensions in southern localities that are also evident nationally and need attention as new debates and conversations over immigration reform take center stage in U.S. politics. Locally, Juana remains hopeful. Our collaborative work with these youth and broader undocumented community members and organizers leads to additional conversations among/across activist groups in a call for shared ideology rather than the mere recognition of a singular collective identity or experience that appears to be associated with being undocumented.

### **Limitations**

Our purpose here has been to shed light on undocumented youths’ perspectives of belonging, identity, and activism from a grassroots-level in a local context and particular moment (2017-2019). We would be remiss to not mention the limitations here. First, case study research inevitably faces threats to validity, replicability, and generalizability. We do not aim to generalize the experiences of undocumented youth. Rather, we hope to offer insight of an invisible population in an understudied region in the U.S. since most research on undocumented activism has to date been in large urban centers with more progressive immigration policies. It was important to us, after our deep involvement with these youth and our local advocacy efforts, to highlight the North Carolina context since it informs how and in what ways undocumented youth can engage in activism. Another point here is that we wanted to highlight the critical reflection of undocumented youth who explicitly struggled with their DACA-status and perceptions of activism. This does not mean that all members of the undocumented youth activist community experience the same feelings or perspectives represented here, but our goal was to provide additional opportunities to learn from within the community.

Second, we raise an important issue of stratification in the undocumented community and thus share another methodological limitation here. This issue is not to comment that one type of advocacy is right or wrong. Rather, our aim in unraveling the dilemmas these undocumented youths face is to show the precarious nature of immigration policies and short-term ones like DACA, especially since they, and current immigrant policies, fail to serve all members of the undocumented community. We note the limitations specifically that we did not interview undocumented students who did not experience fragmented identities or the activists who made our participants reflect on the divisions they observed. We understand the competing agendas in the undocumented community and are humbled by their willingness to share their experiences with us, especially at times when we were highly aware of our privilege as citizens and academic researchers. Some of the organizing efforts we did not attend, even though we were invited to do so, because the spaces were solely undocumented members of the community and we wanted to

respect those spaces. In this case, our choice to not attend their space, left us with methodological limitations noted here such as counterexamples to the perspectives presented here. However, given our decade long work with undocumented high school and college students and organizers, we do know questions of belonging and fighting for rights are enduring (Rodriguez, 2017).

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Our aim in this paper has been modest in its singular case analysis of undocumented youth experiences in relation to the constrained policy contexts and fraught activism of the undocumented community. The dilemmas that undocumented youth face in local communities relate to coming to understand themselves and how their undocumented status impacts their life chances, and how they fit into the broader activist community and U.S. society. The project considered how undocumented youth are engaging in activism in an understudied geographic location, specifically the New Latino South and focal state of North Carolina. While anti-immigrant sentiment is pervasive, the experiences of youth like Juana humanize the effects of policies on undocumented youths’ lives. The activism and divisions they encounter trouble and complicate their sense of community and solidarity, and individual identity development at times. Nonetheless, there is always an urgency to organize and fight against injustice in this community. Voices from the Latinx undocumented community are less represented in the scholarship, and thus this project showcases the voices of this hidden population to render visible the strength and courage they exhibit in their fight for a more just society in which they are deeply a part of as activists.

### **NOTES**

1. The Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program gave young undocumented immigrants legal opportunity to work for two years and relief from deportation fears (Gonzalez-Barrera & Krogstad, 2019).
2. Abrego and Negrón-Gonzales (2020) argue, “This “affinity” for Americanness is important to recognize as central to the dreamer narrative because it is intricately wrapped up with notions of deservingness (Negrón-Gonzales, Abrego, & Coll 2015). Indeed, claims to an “Americanness” situate the right to belong in this country as the domain only of those who abandon a non-American identity, or who do not question the basic mainstream tenets of what the United States represents. Such a notion upholds a myth of meritocracy that suggests that all immigrants have the ability to pull themselves up by their bootstraps without demanding inclusion or structural changes (p. 10).
3. While many undocumented youths refer to themselves as dreamers, not all in this community, along with many of their undocumented parents, would qualify for rights under the Dream Act or other immigration-related initiatives such as DACA. For more on the division over this dreamer-identity in the undocumented community, see: <http://theconversation.com/undocumented-youth-divided-over-how-to-fight-back-against-trump-immigration-clampdown-81726>.

4. Galindo (2012) explains the paradoxical and “unfinished business” of the *Plyler* case (p. 591). Though important to protecting undocumented youth under the 14th Amendment and conferring educational rights in K-12, *Plyler* did not provide pathways for citizenship or postsecondary opportunities. Scholars have described the complicated positioning of undocumented children and youth as they have a right to K-12 education but are also “illegal” in the eyes of the broader society and subsequently criminalized (Galindo, 2012; Gonzales et al., 2015).
5. Section 287g of the Immigration and Naturalization Act allows the Department of Homeland Security to enter into formal agreements with local and state police so that local law enforcement officers can perform some functions of federal immigration agents (American Immigration Council, 2017). The Sheriff of Mecklenburg County, NC became the first Sheriff on the East Coast to adopt the 287(g) Program while the Sheriff of Wake County, NC became the first in NC to adopt a biometric screening and sharing program with ICE—both indicators of eager local law enforcement collaboration with ICE.
6. Conversations between Trump and Mexican President Pena Nieto showcase Trump’s most infamous usage of “bad hombres” (Agren, 2017). Those leaked White House documents feature Trump’s comments, “You have a bunch of bad hombres down there. You aren’t doing enough to stop them. I think your military is scared. Our military isn’t, so I just might send them down to take care of it.”
7. Elsewhere, Rodriguez (2017) has leveraged the strategy of composite identities while acknowledging their limitations. We do not claim that the views present here reflect the larger views of undocumented youth; however, this particular focal state and community share divergent views about how undocumented youth could and ought to manifest at state and national levels.
8. <https://www.northcarolina.edu/wepromise>
9. See, <https://webservices.ncleg.net/ViewBillDocument/2017/3227/0/DRH10233-LH-117B>
10. For more information, see: <https://www.ncjustice.org/publications/the-impact-of-deferred-action-for-childhood-arrivals-daca-in-the-tarheel-state/>
11. See, <https://www.goldendoorscholars.org/>
12. The Succeed Act was introduced by two senators from North Carolina and Oklahoma and argues for pathway to permanent legal status for undocumented young people if they pursue higher education. For more information, see: <http://immigrationforum.org/blog/the-succeed-act-bill-summary/>
13. The characteristics and themes shared here reflect the experiences of the participants insofar as where they live and that they were involved in activism from either middle or high school and now in college, and their feelings of uncertainty about being undocumented and being

recipients of DACA. We elected to use the singular pronoun “she” just for readability here. We note the limitations later in the article.

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