DACA RECIPIENTS NARRATIVES: PURSUING NONCREDIT OCCUPATIONAL TRAINING

by

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An applied dissertation submitted to the faculty of
The University of North Carolina at Charlotte
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Education in
Educational Leadership

Charlotte

2021

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ABSTRACT

ANDREW GARDNER. DACA Recipients Narratives: Pursuing Noncredit Occupational Training. (Under the direction of DR. MARK D'AMICO)

This adapted in-depth qualitative interview study explored and documented the lived experiences of four DACA recipients that pursued noncredit occupational training opportunities at a community college in North Carolina. The purpose was to understand what experiences led DACA recipients to enroll in noncredit occupational education in the community college setting, insight about their educational experiences in higher education, and how they used the education they gained through noncredit occupational education. Participant interviews styled after Seidman (2019) served as the primary means of data collection. Following Seidman (2019) protocols for an adapted in-depth qualitative interview, participants put their life into context, provided detailed accounts of certain critical life experiences, and reconstructed their experience within the framework of the study. Upon completion of all interviews and transcription, a detailed six phase thematic analysis guided by Braun and Clarke (2006) was completed. Though their experiences varied, four major themes were identified during the analysis process. Themes generated spoke to the personal, professional, and social experiences that shaped their journey and aspirations. The findings provided insight about each participant's desperate path to pursue higher education and how noncredit occupational training provided them a "hidden" opportunity. Family played the greatest role in motivating and supporting participants during their journey. A high level of determination and perseverance was displayed. Participants combated obstacle after obstacle to enroll in postsecondary education and successfully leveraged it to embark on their professional career. Three conclusions were reached: (1) policies influence DACA students; (2) DACA students receive a lack of guidance; (3) DACA students leverage credentials.

DEDICATION

This is dedicated to all the dreamers who have great aspirations and yearn for a permanent pathway to citizenship. Let education be your guiding light. May your voice be amplified!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to my family, for supporting me through my journey. Tommie, Olivia, and Jake you inspired and motivated me. To my wife, Dawn for her selflessness and boundless confidence in me. Without everyone's encouragement and support, this great accomplishment would not be possible. I am grateful and blessed to have such a great family.

Thank you to my parents for their support and endless sacrifices they made over the years. I am appreciative of all the opportunities I was provided, that you all did not have. Most importantly, I am grateful for the guidance and values you instilled in me. You set me up for success and I am forever thankful.

Thank you to Dr. Mark D'Amico, my mentor, advisor, and committee chair. Your passion for higher education inspired and motivated me. Your professional and scholarly guidance was exceptional. Thank you to my committee members, Dr. Spencer Salas, Dr. Janet Spriggs, and Dr. Jimmy Watson, for their support and feedback throughout each part of this process.

Lastly, thank you to the DACA recipients who volunteered to take part in this study and share their experiences. Your stories are remarkable, inspiring, and important. I truly believe your stories will inspire positive change. You have paved the way for future generations. I am deeply honored and humbled by this experience.

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Statement of the Problem

In 2019, nearly 98,000 undocumented students secured high school diplomas in the United States (Zong & Batalova, 2019). However, only 5% to 10% of undocumented students will progress to postsecondary education (Gonzales, 2016). From this group the majority of them will elect to attend a community college (Abrego, 2008; Flores & Horn, 2009). Undocumented students are defined as "any person who does not hold legal residency in the United States, including not holding an appropriate visa, green card, or U.S. citizenship" (Gildersleeve & Ranero, 2010, p. 20). Undocumented students encounter a range of economic, legal, and social obstacles to accessing and progressing in higher education (Bjorklund, 2018; Cervantes et al., 2015; Crisp et al., 2015; Pérez et al., 2010; Teranishi et al., 2015). To make matters more complicated, some may be of mixed-status families. Mixed-status families include one or more sibling being a U.S. born citizen and the other being undocumented (Passel & Cohn, 2009). In 2009, 6.8% of U.S. public school students lived in mixed-status families (Passel & Cohn, 2009). This unique variable presents an interesting dynamic when journeying through life and embarking onto higher education and employment aspirations. Additionally, many undocumented students came to the United States as young children and have only experienced education in the United States (Wong et al., 2012).

When President Obama signed into law the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) through executive order in 2012, it afforded undocumented individuals who came to the United States as young children a status that temporarily deferred deportation (Cervantes et al., 2015; Teranishi et al., 2015). The DACA program granted undocumented individuals U.S. citizen like status for a duration of two-years at a time. They were able to work legally in the United States and receive a temporary social security number. Undocumented individuals that

applied and were granted status into the DACA program are referred to as “DACA recipients.” “Between August 2012 and July 2018, the United States accepted 908,456 applications for the initial DACA program, and 822,008 were approved” (National Immigration Law Center, 2018, p. 1). “Between June 2014 and July 2018, 1,280,782 renewal applications were accepted, and 1,234,394 were approved” (National Immigration Law Center, 2018, p. 1).

The passage of the DACA program did not shield undocumented students from the context of their circumstances and the culture war at hand regarding the southern border. Debate continued state by state about what rights should be afforded to DACA recipients. When President Donald Trump took office in 2017 the rhetoric concerning the need for a southern border wall, illegal immigration enforcement, and deportation was backed by action. Through executive order, President Trump ramped up illegal immigration enforcement and deportation (Muñoz & Vigil, 2018). His message set the tone for his presidency. As of September 2019, undocumented students participating in the DACA program were in a state of limbo due to their temporary legal status (Barnhardt et al., 2017). DACA was revoked by President Trump’s administration in September of 2017 prior to its March 2018 expiration date (Muñoz & Vigil, 2018). However, federal judges in multiple states ruled against the administration’s revocation adding even more uncertainty around the DACA program (Muñoz & Vigil, 2018).

President Obama’s DACA policy attempted to address a hole in federal law that addresses undocumented immigrants that arrived to the United States as children (Muñoz & Vigil, 2018). Scholars admittedly attest that the program has had substantial positive influences on undocumented students(Muñoz & Vigil, 2018). Numerous studies have designated that the DACA program improved the number of opportunities available to undocumented students by permitting them to pursue new employment opportunities, access to increased earnings,

postsecondary education, driver's licenses, and, in some states in-state tuition (Teranishi et al., 2015). For numerous undocumented students, DACA provided renewed hope, opportunity, and identity (Teranishi et al., 2015). In comparison to undocumented students, DACA recipients exhibited increased participation levels across campus in conjunction with a greater sense of acceptance into the campus community and society (Muñoz & Vigil, 2018).

While there is some evidence that DACA has improved the higher education experience for undocumented students, it is not a long-term solution nor was it intended to be (Gonzales & Bautista-Chavez, 2014). Academics have stressed that "DACA is, at best, a second-class status" for recipients (Gonzales & Bautista-Chavez, 2014, p. 16). However, the DACA program has created an opportunity for undocumented students to have greater access to higher education and future employment opportunities.

The North Carolina Community College System affords employers a discount when sponsoring a DACA student. Pursuant to N.C.G.S § 115D-39(a), if a DACA student is sponsored by a North Carolina business they will receive in-state tuition (NCCCS, 2020). Unfortunately, unless a qualifying employer sponsors a DACA student they are not offered in-state tuition. The challenge is that most students need the education before they can be employed, creating a conundrum for DACA students.

In 2020, it was deemed that 65% of jobs required postsecondary education beyond high school (Carnevale et al., 2012). This clearly demonstrates the need for DACA recipients to pursue higher education to best secure employment. One pathway DACA recipients may pursue in order to obtain postsecondary training beyond high school is through noncredit training at a community college. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2016) characterized noncredit as "A course or activity having no credit applicable toward a degree, diploma,

certificate, or other formal award" (p. 22). Noncredit has wide-ranging categories and functions within this definition, with the applicable focus of this study centered on the noncredit category titled "occupational training" categorized by D'Amico et al., (2014). According to D'Amico (2017) "noncredit occupational training is tailored toward individuals seeking to gain or improve job skills leading to initial or better employment opportunities" (p. 59).

In contrast with for-credit programs, noncredit programs are believed to successfully meet the needs of non-traditional students (D'Amico, 2017). For example, noncredit occupational training programs offer a multitude of schedules and locations and may serve as the initial point adult learners acquire postsecondary education and increase their abilities to secure and retain employment opportunities (Milam, 2005). This flexibility, combined with their lower cost, means that noncredit courses are thought to serve students with the most significant financial and academic barriers (Grubb et al., 2003), potentially offering an option for economic and social mobility for these group of students (Xu & Ran, 2015). Additionally, without the burden of external factors and regulations such as accreditation, noncredit occupational training programs are able to provide superior and effective responses to fluid workforce demands by enhancing student's skills in a flexible manner that is beneficial to employer's needs (Grubb et al., 2003; Van Noy & Jacobs, 2009).

The American Association of Community Colleges (2018) stated that nearly five million noncredit students enrolled in United States community colleges, encompassing nearly 40% of all enrollment. The aspirations of non-traditional students are believed to be served by noncredit programs and is a viable option for adult learners to enter higher education and the workforce (Xu & Ran, 2015). There is a dearth of research that evaluates students' and their experiences pursuing and or completing a noncredit occupational training program. Current literature

regarding noncredit occupational training at the community college level examines this concept from the perspectives of institutional, policy, and funding. (Dougherty & Bakia, 1999; Milam, 2005; Van Noy et al., 2008; Xu & Ran, 2015). The limited knowledge regarding students' experiences pursuing noncredit occupational training at a community college and the sheer number of students pursuing this higher education option warrants further study. In 2009, only 38 states required community colleges to report data on their noncredit programs (Van Noy & Jacobs, 2009). Community colleges generally focus solely on data regarding student enrollments (Van Noy & Jacobs, 2009). For example, there is not a national database or expected standard when it comes to collecting data regarding noncredit students (Jenkins & Boswell, 2002).

While noncredit occupational training is an understudied topic of higher education, limited information is known concerning the students that pursue and complete these types of programs. Xu and Ran (2015) provided evidence that there hasn't been any systematic evaluations of potential dynamics that influenced the transition of students that pursued and completed a noncredit program. Additionally, D'Amico (2016) echoes Xu and Ran stating that there have been few attempts to study noncredit students.

Since the inception of the DACA program in 2012, undocumented individuals were able to pursue educational and workforce opportunities that were not previously available. DACA recipients are "productive members of the economy, contributing over a quarter of a trillion dollars in economic growth, thanks in large part to their ability to earn an advanced education" (ACE, 2019, p. 3). Advanced education is a broad term, so this study took a deeper dive into the experiences and outcomes of DACA recipients that completed a noncredit occupational training program as their advanced education option. The study provided greater insight surrounding the

intersection of DACA recipients' educational pursuits, experiences, and employment opportunities that noncredit occupational training programs afford them.

Nearly all new jobs created since 2008 have been allocated to individuals with at least some postsecondary education (Carnevale, Jayasundera, & Gulish, 2016). The importance of noncredit occupational training is on the rise because it has greatly aided in providing the necessary postsecondary education needed to obtain and retain a job in the United States. In North Carolina, as of 2019, approximately less than half of North Carolinians ages 25-44, and even fewer from socially and economically challenged backgrounds, currently hold a high-quality post-secondary degree or certification (myFutureNC, 2019). Generally speaking, studies have shown that DACA recipients are characterized as economically disadvantaged. This fact implies that there is a high likelihood that in North Carolina many DACA recipients have not pursued postsecondary opportunities which has limited their employment opportunities. This study intended to capture the experiences of those DACA recipients that did pursue a postsecondary opportunity via noncredit occupational training. Increased awareness of DACA recipients' experiences in noncredit occupational training programs will inform decisions on how to meet North Carolina's goal of ensuring that "two million North Carolinians between the ages of 25 and 44 have a high-quality postsecondary degree or credential by 2030" (myFutureNC, 2019, p. 3).

More than ever, the burden of providing postsecondary training programs rests on the shoulders of community college noncredit occupational training programs. To effectively address this priority, in 2019, North Carolina's Governor budgeted over $11 million with the goal of providing an increase in noncredit occupational training programs at the community college level (Governor NC, 2019). In addition to allocating financial resources to noncredit

occupational training programs, the North Carolina Community College System has started a campaign to more effectively connect and assist undocumented students with and without DACA status. They have done so by hosting numerous conferences, webinars, and workshops to increase awareness about DACA recipients' experiences, legal challenges, available resources, and best practices to assist DACA recipients.

Purpose

The purpose of this adapted in-depth qualitative interview study is to explore and document the lived experiences of DACA recipients who pursue noncredit occupational training at a community college in North Carolina. The following research questions guided my study:

1. What experiences led DACA recipients to enroll in noncredit occupational education in the community college setting?
2. What do the stories told by DACA recipients reveal about their educational experiences in higher education?
3. How do DACA recipients plan to use the education they gain through noncredit occupational education?

Epistemological Perspective

Crotty (1998) differentiated between diverse frameworks of research based on their grounding in epistemology. Epistemology provides the foundation for research. The interpretive framework in this study was conducted through a social constructivist lens. Social constructivism is an interpretive framework that allows individuals to generate their own understandings and meanings based on their experience (Creswell, 2013). Social constructivism is the lens of choice, as it provides the foremost opportunity to understand specific influences as well as experiences, which lead DACA recipients to enroll and complete noncredit occupational training

programs at the community college level in North Carolina. This lens allows me to further explore and understand the phenomenon I witness first hand as an administrator that oversees noncredit occupational training programs at a community college in North Carolina.

Overview of Methodology

This study seeks to explore the experiences of participants, which leads to the justification of selecting a qualitative research approach as the most appropriate methodology (Creswell, 2007). An adapted in-depth qualitative interview guided my study. The application of in-depth interviews, when executed effectively, can illuminate experiences that may not arise when a researcher uses multiple methods (Seidman, 2019). This assertion becomes more apparent when methods based on diverse assumptions attempt to interpret the experiences of others (Seidman, 2019). As a result, an adapted in-depth qualitative interview research is the most appropriate method to capture firsthand accounts of DACA recipients' experiences in higher education.

Significance of Study

This study intersects two topics in higher education, DACA recipients and noncredit occupational training, which have not been explored in great detail. Previous research shows that the majority of undocumented students, who may or may not have DACA status, enter higher education via the community college (Abrego, 2008; Flores, 2010; Flores & Horn, 2009). Furthermore, the fact that 40% of the community college population in the United States consists of noncredit students makes it highly likely that DACA recipients are pursuing and completing noncredit occupational training programs. This study provides detailed insight concerning DACA recipients' experiences that pursued and completed a noncredit occupational training program at a North Carolina community college. North Carolina was selected as the geographic

location of the study due to the fact studies regarding the stories of DACA recipients are mostly focused on the states of California, New York, and Texas. North Carolina must be taken under consideration as a research location on the topic of DACA recipients in higher education based on the fact that in September of 2019 there were approximately 10,000 DACA recipients residing in the state (USCIC, 2019). Lastly, this study raises awareness about the opportunities noncredit occupational training programs in North Carolina can provide to DACA recipients.

Delimitations

The scope of the study was limited to only community colleges in North Carolina. The lived experiences communicated in this study may not be representative of all DACA recipients who have completed a noncredit occupational training program at a community college in another state. Since participants had to meet strict criteria for the study and recruitment hinged on snowball sampling, a large sampling of participants was not available. This was the case because the topic of DACA was in a state of limbo and a sensitive topic. The study was limited to participants who were willing and able to communicate their story. An effective adapted in-depth qualitative interview requires the participants to effectively communicate their story, so that the researcher can obtain rich data. This is another reason the sample size was small.

Assumptions

The primary assumptions that are representative of this study are that participants effectively and honestly communicated their lived experiences. All participants in the study were honest and forthright about their status as an active DACA recipient. This study was able to provide an insightful window into DACA recipients' experiences who have completed a noncredit occupational training program at a community college in North Carolina.

Definition of Terms

Undocumented students are defined as "any person who does not hold legal residency in the United States, including not holding an appropriate visa, green card, or U.S. citizenship" (Gildersleeve & Ranero, 2010, p. 20).

*Workforce Education "*refers to courses or activities that prepare people for employment requiring technical skills or enhance incumbent worker skills" (Van Noy et al., 2008, p.13). "It can be customized for a particular company or generalized to a specific technology (such as welding) or a specifically defined occupation (such as physical therapy assistant). It can include credit or noncredit instruction" (Van Noy et al., 2008, p. 13).

DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) USIC (2014) defines this as "an American Immigration policy launched in 2012 by the Obama administration calling for deferred action for certain undocumented young people who came to the U.S. as children. DACA allows young people who were brought illegally to the United States as children, and who meet several key criteria to be considered for temporary relief from deportation or from being placed in removal proceedings. DACA does not provide lawful status. Once granted, DACA is valid for two (2) years and may be renewed. Individuals granted deferred action will also be eligible to request employment authorization (EAD) . DACA applicants go through extensive background checks, and it is granted on a case-by-case basis. USCIS began accepting applications for the program on 15 August 2012" (p. 2).

Noncredit Education is *"*A course or activity having no credit applicable toward a degree, diploma, certificate, or other formal award" (NCES, 2016, p.22).

Noncredit occupational training is tailored "toward individuals seeking to gain or improve job skills leading to initial or better employment" (D'Amico, 2017, p. 59).

Summary

This chapter introduces the significance of why research about the experiences of DACA recipients that pursue noncredit occupational training at a community college in North Carolina is relevant and needed. The study first highlights the prevalence of undocumented students graduating from high school and not pursuing higher education. Next, findings are presented showcasing that most undocumented students that pursue higher education do so via the community college. Additionally, background information about the DACA program is presented and in regards to the method in which it affords undocumented students opportunities to combat their undocumented status. Noncredit occupational training at the community college is then connected with the suggestion that DACA recipients pursue this higher education option to obtain postsecondary credentials and skills to obtain new or gainful employment opportunities.

Chapter 2 then delineates a robust literature background concerning undocumented students, policies, noncredit occupational training, and the various barriers and facilitators that have been experienced by undocumented students and DACA recipients. Throughout chapter two linkages between DACA recipients, public policy, and noncredit occupational training are consistently interwoven thorough the review of literature. The literature gap regarding the experiences of DACA recipients in North Carolina that have completed a noncredit occupational training is effectively demonstrated and led to a call to action. The call to action was to conduct an adapted in-depth qualitative interview about the lived experiences of DACA recipients that have completed a noncredit occupational training program in North Carolina at a community college.

Chapter 3 outlines the methodological approach to the study. Specifically, an adapted in-depth qualitative interview guided the study. Participants were selected primarily through

personal connections and the research relied heavily on snowball sampling. All data was collected through semi-structured interviews. In order to effectively document the lived experiences, three interviews took place to ensure the entirety of the DACA recipients' lived experience is documented. Existing personal relationships played a critical role in obtaining ample participants for the study. The study was composed of four participants.

Chapter 4 presents the results from the adapted in-depth qualitative interviews. The documentation and coding of the interviews was done by applying a thematic analysis. Thematic narrative analysis allows the scholar to focus on the content of each story and generate meaning from each element rather than from categories (Riessman, 2008).

Chapter 5 provides a solid conclusion regarding my findings and provides recommendations for future research. A good story can beat the best argument, so this study will ultimately be the counter argument to those that wish to marginalize DACA recipients that pursue higher education and employment opportunities.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

In 2019, nearly 98,000 undocumented students secured high school diplomas in the United States (Zong & Batalova, 2019). However, only 5% to 10% of undocumented students will progress to postsecondary education (Gonzales, 2016). From this group the majority of them will elect to attend a community college (Abrego, 2008; Flores & Horn, 2009). Undocumented students encounter a range of economic, legal, and social obstacles to accessing and progressing in higher education (Bjorklund, 2018; Cervantes et al., 2015; Crisp et al., 2015; Pérez et al., 2010; Teranishi et al., 2015).

This chapter provides an overview of literature that describes undocumented students, the policies that impact their ability to pursue higher education in the United States, the barriers they encounter, and the facilitators that enable them to pursue and succeed in higher education. Additionally, a literature review of noncredit occupational training will take place to better understand why and how this is a viable higher education option for undocumented students with DACA status. Table 1 outlines how this literature is presented.

Table 1

DACA Recipients: Noncredit Occupational Training Literature Review Summary Table

Theme	Subtheme	Literature
Undocumented Students		Abrego & Gonzales, 2010; Anguiano & Gutiérrez, 2015; Bjorklund, 2018; Buenavista, 2016; Cebulko & Silver, 2016; Conger & Chellman, 2013; Diaz-Strong & Meiners, 2007; Gonzales, 2016; Rincón, 2008
Policy Impact	Immigration Acts of the 1980's and 1990's	Flores & Chapa, 2008; Gonzales, 2016; Rincón, 2008
	DREAM Act(s)	Abrego, 2008; Barron, 2011; Diaz-Strong & Meiners, 2007; Diaz-Strong et al., 2011; Flores & Chapa, 2008; Flores & Horn, 2009; Frum, 2007; Gonzales, 2016; Mendoza, 2015; Potochnick, 2014; Rincón, 2008; Thangasamy & Horan, 2016

	DACA	Bjorklund, 2018; Cervantes et al., 2015; Gonzales & Bautista-Chavez, 2014; Gonzales, 2016; Muñoz & Vigil, 2018; Pérez, 2014; Teranishi et al., 2015
Barriers and Facilitators	Financial	Abrego, 2008; Barnhardt et al., 2013; Bjorklund, 2018; Cebulko & Silver, 2016; Conger & Chellman, 2013; Contreras, 2009; Darolia & Potochnick, 2015; Diaz-Strong et al., 2011; Flores, 2016; Gonzales, 2016; Greenman & Hall, 2013; Ibarra, 2013; Kaushal, 2008; Nienhusser et al., 2016; 2016; Pérez, 2010; Sahay et. al., 2016; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015; Terriquez, 2015; Teranishi et al., 2015
	Social Identity and Discrimination	Bjorklund, 2018; Buenavista, 2016; Cebulko, 2014; Gonzales & Chavez, 2012; Gonzales et al., 2013; Gonzales, 2016; Jacobo & Ochoa, 2011; Morales et al., 2011; Muñoz & Maldonado, 2012; Muñoz, 2013; Muñoz, 2015; Nienhusser et al., 2016; Pérez, 2009; Roberge, 2009; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015
	School Staff Involvement	Abrego & Gonzales, 2010; Bjorklund, 2018; Cebulko, 2013; Contreras, 2009; Diaz-Strong & Meiners, 2007; Gonzales et al., 2013; Gonzales et al., 2015; Gonzales, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2016; Ibarra, 2013; Lin, 2001; Muñoz, 2015; Muñoz, 2015; Nienhusser et al., 2016; Nienhusser, 2013; Nienhusser, 2014; Pérez & Rodríguez, 2012; Silver, 2012
	Student Persistence and Resiliency	Anguiano & Gutiérrez, 2015; Cervantes et al., 2015; Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Dozier, 2001; Ellis & Chen, 2013; Enriquez, 2011; Erisman & Looney, 2007; Flores, 2016; Gonzales et al., 2013; Gonzales, 2016; Jauregui & Slate, 2009; Luthar, et al., 2000; Morales et al., 2011; O'Neal et al., 2016; Pérez, 2009; Pérez & Rodríguez, 2012; Suárez- Orozco et al., 2015; Teranishi et al., 2015; Van Noy & Jacobs, 2009
Noncredit Occupational Training	Noncredit Occupational Training Overview	American Association of Community Colleges, 2018; Bahr, 2010; Bandura, 1997; D'Amico, 2016, 2017; Grubb et al., 2003; Milam, 2005; NCES, 2016; Ozmun, 2012; Scott-Clayton, 2011; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2004; Van Noy & Jacobs, 2009;Van Noy, Jacobs et al., 2008; Xu & Ran, 2015
	Meets Workforce Needs	American Association of Community Colleges, 2018; Bailey et al., 2003; Carnevale et al., 2012; Carnevale et al., 2010; Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Dougherty & Bakia, 1999; Grubb & Lazerson, 2005; Milam, 2005; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2004; Van Noy & Jacobs, 2009; Van Noy et al., 2008; Voorhees & Milam, 2005; Xu & Ran, 2015

Entry Point to Higher Education	Cronen & Murphy, 2013; D'Amico, 2016; Grubb et al., 2003; Van Noy & Jacobs, 2009
Limited Data	D'Amico, 2016; Jenkins & Boswell, 2002; Van Noy & Jacobs, 2009; Xu & Ran, 2015

Undocumented Students

Bjorklund (2018) concluded that six major themes shared by all undocumented students exist:

(a) They face financial burdens that documented students do not.

(b) They are confronted by unique psychological and social burdens and are rarely given tools to address them.

(c) They are not given access to vital social capital.

(d) They bring a host of assets to college campuses, but these are undervalued and underutilized.

(e) Non-Latinx undocumented students and undocumented students from different geographic contexts have different experiences.

(f) State legislatures and institutions of higher education are taking positive steps to increase access and persistence for undocumented students, but they are not implementing sufficiently (pp. 638-639).

Undocumented students share diverse experiences in their transitions from high school to postsecondary education, during postsecondary education, and through their transitions to the workforce (Bjorklund, 2018). Plyler v. Doe (1982) Supreme Court case ruled that undocumented students are legally permitted to attend K–12 schools, but did not authorize them a legal opportunity to pursue postsecondary education (Gonzales, 2016). Since there is not a definitive legal federal precedent that allows undocumented students the right to pursue postsecondary

education, they must be resourceful and persistent if they wish to enter and succeed in higher education.

Undocumented students encounter immense challenges more so than their documented peers (Crisp et al., 2015). These experiences include, but are not limited to, financial hardship, sense of belonging, and clear direction on how to enter higher education (Crisp et al., 2015). Families understand and accept the financial challenges associated with higher education as they provide as much financial support as possible to assist family members pursuits (Abrego & Gonzales, 2010; Diaz-Strong & Meiners, 2007). Financial burdens often prevent undocumented students from enrolling and completing postsecondary programs. (Conger & Chellman, 2013). Lacking a sense of belonging and knowing their legal standing in the United States can transition into distrust and leave students feeling vulnerable, insecure, and detached (Anguiano & Gutiérrez, 2015). Understanding the challenges undocumented students encounter is one facet to understanding why community college and its' noncredit occupational training option is a viable access point to higher education. The other facet is the need to better understand the context from which undocumented students must operate within.

Progress for undocumented students has been convoluted, with states passing limiting policies that impede undocumented student's access to resources and rights (Cebulko & Silver, 2016). An example of this is HB56 in Alabama that impedes undocumented students advancement towards higher education by restricting their ability to attend a publicly owned college or university (Buenavista, 2016). The Georgia Board of Regents implemented policies like Policy 413 excluding undocumented students from some schools (Muñoz et al., 2014). Additionally, some favorable state laws have been weakened by federal laws and policies, such as the repeal of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), that negatively impacted

undocumented students' access, ability to persist, and the uncertain future of these individuals along with their families (Gonzales, 2016; Rincón, 2008). State and federal policies have contributed to an array of opportunities and barriers for undocumented students. Comprehending these policies is imperative to better understanding why undocumented students with DACA status pursue noncredit occupational training programs offered by community colleges.

Policy Impact

Immigration Acts of the 1980s and 1990s

Due to an uptick in undocumented immigrants in the 1980s and 1990s the United States federal government decided to take measures to reduce the flow of immigrants through the passage of various reforms (Gonzales, 2016). The Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986 was passed to stop undocumented immigration by removing and limiting employment opportunities available to them (Flores & Chapa, 2008). The provisions outlined would punish employers for hiring undocumented immigrants. However, enforcement of the law was not observed as real risk, so it did little to curb the flow of undocumented immigration (Flores & Chapa, 2008).

Another significant act that impacted undocumented students was the passage of the Illegal Immigrant Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996, which significantly altered the due process rights available to undocumented students (Rincón, 2008). Not only did the passage of the bill reduce the rights of undocumented students, it perpetuated an atmosphere of fear, resentment, and xenophobia (Rincón, 2008). In the early 2000's new consideration on illegal immigration would commence.

DREAM Act(s)

The Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act was presented to Congress in 2001 with bipartisan support, but it did not pass (Barron, 2011). The bill would have offered undocumented students temporary residency for six years, that would require them to attain at least an associate degree or achieve two years of military service (Diaz-Strong et al., 2011). To be eligible, students would need to have arrived in the United States prior to turning 16, be a resident for at least five years, be of morale character, and have no major criminal offenses on their record (Diaz-Strong & Meiners, 2007). All that met these requirements after six years would be offered a permanent pathway to citizenship (Diaz-Strong et al., 2011). Modified versions of the bill were reintroduced between 2001 and 2010, but nothing was ever approved (Barron, 2011; Gonzales, 2016). There is wide speculation that the terrorist acts that took place on September 11, 2001 hindered the passage of the DREAM Act and ceased any movement toward either legalizing undocumented immigrants (Flores & Chapa, 2008).

Conversely, state DREAM acts have been successfully passed since 2001. The state of Texas took the lead by passing H.B. 1403 in 2001, granting undocumented students access to in-state tuition and delaying any deportation processes (Potochnick, 2014). Between 2001 and 2016, 20 states passed legislation or Board of Regents policies that offered in-state tuition rates for undocumented students, 16 by state legislation and four through state university systems (Thangasamy & Horan, 2016). The six states of California, Washington, New Mexico, Minnesota, Oregon, and Texas offered state managed financial resources to undocumented students (Thangasamy & Horan, 2016). While in-state tuition policies allowed undocumented students to pay in-state rates, numerous pieces of legislation did not afford undocumented students access to state or federal financial aid (Abrego, 2008). Sadly during this same time

frame four states barred undocumented students from receiving in-state tuition rates and two banned undocumented students from enrolling at public universities (Mendoza, 2015).

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 stated "that any immigrant who was not in the United States lawfully would not be entitled to any federal public benefit including retirement, welfare, health, disability, public or assisted housing, postsecondary education, food assistance, unemployment, or any other similar benefit" (Frum, 2007, pp. 84-85). Furthermore, it disallowed undocumented students from receiving federal financial assistance (Frum, 2007). The law did not deter states from passing legislation, such as the California Dream Act, to offer state financial aid to undocumented students (Rincón, 2008).

Though some progress was made, several states struggled to increase opportunities for undocumented students. States like Arizona, South Carolina, and Georgia, passed rules to forbid access and opportunities for undocumented students (Potochnick, 2014). The consensus among states in opposition to DREAM Acts is that without citizenship a postsecondary degree will not afford them employment opportunities and effectively supply the labor market (Flores & Horn, 2009).

DACA Policy

On June 15, 2012, President Obama signed into law the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) through executive order in 2012, it afforded undocumented individuals who came to the United States as young children a status that temporarily deferred deportation (Cervantes et al., 2015). The DACA program granted undocumented individuals U.S. citizen like status for a duration of two-years at a time. They were able to work legally in the United States and receive a temporary social security number. Eligibility into the program mirrored those outlined in the proposed DREAM Act (Pérez, 2014). Obama expanded the DACA program in

2014 to an estimated 30,000 more people (Pérez, 2014). DACA was repealed by the Trump administration in September of 2017 prior to its March 2018 expiration date (Muñoz & Vigil, 2018). However, in 2018, federal judges in multiple states ruled against the repeal, leaving the program in limbo (Muñoz & Vigil, 2018).

President Obama's DACA policy aspired to provide a pathway forward for undocumented citizens. Many scholars have attested that the DACA program has affected undocumented students positively (Muñoz & Vigil, 2018). Research has concluded that the DACA program increased the number of opportunities by allowing undocumented students access to new careers, increased earning potential, driver's licenses, and, in some states, access to postsecondary financial resources (Teranishi et al., 2015). The DACA program afforded students a greater sense of belonging, and renewed hope in a more permanent future in the United States (Cervantes et al., 2015).

In contrast to other undocumented students, DACA recipients were more engaged on campus and did not feel as stigmatized (Muñoz & Vigil, 2018). Scholars also noted that DACA recipients experienced greater stability when it came to housing and transportation, and were more likely to secure an internship in comparison to non-DACA students (Bjorklund, 2018). Teranishi et al. (2015) completed a report that illuminated the various challenges 909 undocumented students experienced across 34 states from 55 different countries (Teranishi et al., 2015). The undocumented students attended a variety of postsecondary institutions, which included both two-year and four-year public and private colleges (Teranishi et al., 2015). Teranishi et al.'s (2015) survey stated that 86% of participants conveyed that DACA had a positive effect on their educational experience. In contrast, states with less favorable immigration

laws obstructed or derailed their progression to and through postsecondary education (Teranishi et al., 2015).

Although DACA provided some sustenance, it has not been encompassing enough for all undocumented students, as applications across the various states in the United States has not been consistent (Cebulko & Silver, 2016). Undocumented students are not granted the right to legally work in the United States except under the protection of the DACA program or an alternative work permit option (Gonzales, 2016). Due to this fact most are subjected to accepting low-wage jobs and work long hours or multiple jobs to provide for themselves and their families (Gonzales, 2016). While DACA has increased access and opportunities in higher education for undocumented students, DACA was not a permanent and sustainable fix (Gonzales & Bautista-Chavez, 2014). Researchers have emphasized, "DACA is, at best, a second-class status" for recipients (Gonzales & Bautista-Chavez, 2014, p. 16). Lastly, DACA has not tackled the issue of undocumented students access to financial aid and indirectly limits their access to higher education.

Barriers and Facilitators

Financial Access

"Financial concerns are the greatest obstacle facing undocumented students as they transition to and persist in higher education" (Bjorklund, 2018, p. 639). Therefore, it is critical that financial aid options be further evaluated to understand the barriers that exist for those undocumented students looking to pursue higher education. While legislation has been passed in numerous states to improve financial access, the financial struggle continues to persist in higher education (Conger & Chellman, 2013). The cost remains unreasonable, campuses are not

inclusive, and support programs are not descriptive enough to meet their unique needs (Conger & Chellman, 2013).

Most undocumented students who elect to pursue higher education begin at community colleges, and this lower cost option proves to be overwhelming (Terriquez, 2015). In the United States, students that pursue higher education also encounter financial constraints similar to undocumented students, with nearly 70% of all college students receiving financial aid (Gonzales, 2016). However, most documented students are able to access other financial resources that undocumented students generally cannot (Nienhusser et al., 2016). Applying for scholarships as an undocumented student is complicated and deters them from applying or receiving funds (Gonzales, 2016). Bureaucratic obstacles are abound for undocumented students since all states and institutions have various laws and policies (Barnhardt et al., 2013; Flores, 2016; Ibarra, 2013; Sahay et. al., 2016). Scholarships are sparse for undocumented students, highly competitive, and usually do not cover the full cost of higher education expenses (Diaz-Strong et al., 2011). Outside a dearth of information, unease about revealing their status deter undocumented students from applying for scholarships (Pérez, 2010). To make matters worse nonprofit advocate groups that attempt to provide support lack consistency and clear direction when serving undocumented students (Flores, 2016; Teranishi et al., 2015).

Studies have shown that in-state tuition policies can influence the enrollment of undocumented students in postsecondary education (Jauregui & Slate., 2009). Flores and Horn (2009) discovered that Latinx undocumented students living in states with in-state tuition policies are just as likely to persevere in higher education as their documented Latinx peers. In-state tuition policies for undocumented students promote enrollment; however, a fair amount of these students are enrolling part time, rather than full time in community colleges, indicating that

finances continue as a potentially large barrier (Darolia & Potochnick, 2015). The gap in literature is that we do not have information on how in state tuition policies impact undocumented students' enrollment in noncredit occupational training.

Even with state policies available that provide support to undocumented students a lack of an encompassing federal policy, undocumented students enrollment and progression into higher education will be hindered (Greenman & Hall, 2013). Bjorklund (2018) review found that numerous undocumented students do not pursue higher education due to the cost, and that most cannot progress without financial assistance (Cebulko & Silver, 2016; Contreras, 2009; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015). Upon graduation from high school, undocumented students must decide whether they pursue higher education, or start working to financialy support their families, most elect to work (Gonzales, 2016).

Social Identity and Discrimination

The Plyler ruling gave Generation 1.5 undocumented students in the United States a sense of stability during childhood and delayed negative impacts brought on by being undocumented (Gonzales, 2011). Roberge (2009) defines Generation 1.5 as "those who immigrate as young children and have life experiences that span two or more countries, cultures and languages" (2009, p. 4). Gonzales (2016) professed, "for undocumented youth, the transition to adulthood is accompanied by a transition to illegality" (p. 11). Most students are oblivious to their undocumented status until they encounter various adulthood milestones such as, getting a driver's license, getting a job, or applying to college (Gonzales, 2016; Jacobo & Ochoa, 2011). The finding of their undocumented status is usually met with emotional and social burdens that adversely influence their life progression, especially those with aspirations to pursue higher education (Bjorklund, 2018). Bjorklund (2018) found that students expressed feelings of deep

shock, fear, stigma, shame, embarrassment, and frustration when learning about their status (Buenavista, 2016). Gonzales et al. (2013) and Gonzales and Chavez (2012) suggested that this recognition is devastating to students' character, self-efficacy, and drive. Mental concerns adversely affects many undocumented students' postsecondary pursuits. Worries of being outed often limit their relations with instructors and peers, leading to less motivation for pursuing higher education (Cebulko, 2014). Additionally, the recent mindfulness of their undocumented status brings feelings of broad distrust (Buenavista, 2016). The fear of deportation is a constant worry of undocumented students and leads to a general sense of mistrust of peers and school personnel (Buenavista, 2016).

Suárez-Orozco et al. (2015) established that atmosphere on campus was the second leading factor that influenced college selection by undocumented students. According to Nienhusser et al., undocumented students felt that college campuses are not inclusionary and described occurrences of discrimination as well as sentiments of seclusion and lack of support. For example, situations where an undocumented student needs to obtain a student identification card can become terrifying when they are required to provide a social security card (Muñoz, 2013). This can make the student feel isolated and unsupported by the institution since they are not accommodating their unique needs (Muñoz & Maldonado, 2012).

School Counselor Involvement

Educational and administrative support is vital for assisting undocumented students create social groups and accessing means to meet their needs (Nienhusser, 2014). Inclusive communities that support the distinctive needs of undocumented students and endorses their experiences can aide in their success (Gonzales, 2016). Success is defined as successful completion of a program and job attainment. Positive experiences with educational and

administrative staff members can help undocumented students better circumnavigate postsecondary bureaucracies they encounter (Contreras, 2009; Nienhusser, 2014; Pérez & Rodríguez, 2012). Contreras (2009) identified school diversity offices as the top resource provider for undocumented students.

Additionally, faculty and staff play a critical role in influencing and inspiring undocumented students to progress in the educational setting (Gonzales et al., 2013). Inherent is the notion that undocumented students that build social capital will produce positive outcomes (Bjorklund, 2018). Students' social capital derives from relationships with peers, teachers, administrators, and parents and generates critical resources to help students thrive in school and ascend into postsecondary education (Bjorklund, 2018). Social capital is critical for all students but, is vital for undocumented students, as they need support and precise resources to help navigate their barriers to postsecondary education (Cebulko, 2013). Their capability to connect with advocates in academic settings is critical to acquiring and building social capital, and accessing resources (Gonzales, 2010; Muñoz, 2015).

Often, undocumented students are unable to develop strong relationships and social capital in the education setting (Cebulko, 2013). Most are the first in their families to enter postsecondary education and lack guidance from family members about the enrollment processes and expectations (Gonzales, 2016). Many are dependent on their high schools to effectively prepare them for the process (Diaz-Strong & Meiners, 2007; Gonzales, 2010, 2016; Muñoz, 2015; Nienhusser, 2013). Twelve studies in Bjorklund (2018) review established that encouraging relationships, strong networks, and direction from compassionate adults are the most significant factors in undocumented students gaining entry into higher education (Abrego & Gonzales, 2010; Ibarra, 2013; Nienhusser, 2013). Often undocumented students attend urban or

rural high schools that are ill funded; these schools offer fewer opportunities and resources to prepare them for the shift to higher education (Gonzales et al., 2015).

Furthermore, schools and colleges often fail to facilitate college awareness and access for undocumented students (Gonzales, 2016). Undocumented students who lack supportive relationships in schools frequently drop out before graduating because they do not receive adequate support and information they need (Gonzales, 2016). Unfortunately, many undocumented students are not often viewed as college bound by high school staff and consequently are not given vital college and financial aid information (Nienhusser et al., 2016).

Student Persistence and Resiliency

Despite the assortment of barriers encountered by undocumented students in postsecondary education, several display a great amount of motivation, dedication, and perseverance (Gonzales, 2016). Scholars assert that the challenges and hardships they have encounter in their journey have made them more resilient and more equipped to navigate the problems they encounter (Ellis & Chen, 2013).

Scholars identified that undocumented students overcome immense barriers to ascend in higher education by displaying a remarkable amount of motivation and aspiration to succeed (Jauregui & Slate, 2009). Undocumented students regularly use their limitations to inspire their motivation (Flores, 2016). Other undocumented students feel they are privileged to attend higher education, which promotes motivation (Anguiano & Gutiérrez, 2015). O'Neal et al. (2016) noted that many undocumented students exhibit grit, which they described as "passion and perseverance towards long-term goals" (O'Neal et al., 2016, p. 449). It is evident that internal and external motivation empowered undocumented students to flourish academically (O'Neal et al., 2016).

Resilience is the ability to continue and accomplish positive results while encountering significant adversity (Luthar et al., 2000). Several studies have discovered that undocumented students in postsecondary education display a high level of resiliency during the transition from high school to higher education, despite the numerous barriers they encounter (Cervantes et al., 2015). The inspiration to thrive academically, combined with family support, helps to promote resilience and progression for many undocumented students (Ellis & Chen, 2013).

Optimism is an additional source of resiliency undocumented students' embrace to navigate various barriers (Ellis & Chen, 2013; Morales et al., 2011). Resilience can be reinforced by strong social networks and social capital (Enriquez, 2011, Pérez, 2009). Undocumented students display very similar attributes, such as persistence, to those that elect to enter higher education by enrolling in noncredit occupational training classes. To best understand the connection further literature was reviewed.

It is apparent from the literature that challenges in access to postsecondary education, general cost and constraints to federal and state financial aid, thwart undocumented students from enrolling in college even if they are academically eligible (Arriola & Murphy, 2010; Pérez, 2009). Access is key to undocumented students entering postsecondary education. Community colleges have a reputation for being accessible, affordable, and offering an array of courses ranging from basic skills, technical training, and occupational training for noncredit seekers (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). Many undocumented students observe community college as the most available path to postsecondary education, permitting them to acquire critical skills to advance their employment opportunities and serving as an option to advance to a bachelor's degree and acquire citizenship (Erisman & Looney, 2007). Community colleges are instrumental in

motivating and aiding undocumented students access higher education (Erisman & Looney, 2007).

Furthermore, under the community college umbrella, noncredit occupational training can serve as a bridge to best connect undocumented students to higher education. Noncredit occupational training is a viable bridge for undocumented students because the financial burden of enrolling in a noncredit course is significantly lower than credit bearing courses. The lower cost limits the need for students to rely on federal financial aid. Currently, federal financial aid is unavailable to undocumented students and noncredit occupational training students. Additionally, noncredit occupational training provides entry-level instruction to develop unprepared students by enhancing their knowledge base and occupational skills, with the prospect of leveraging their new skills to transfer into a credit-bearing program (Van Noy & Jacobs, 2009).

Noncredit Occupational Training

Noncredit Occupational Training Overview

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) defined noncredit as "a course or activity having no credit applicable toward a degree, diploma, certificate, or other formal award" (NCES, 2016, p. 22). The NCES definition mirrored Van Noy et al., (2008) who defined noncredit education as "courses or activities carrying no academic credit applicable toward a degree, diploma, certificate, or other formal academic award at the institution or within the postsecondary education system" (p. 8). The American Association of Community Colleges (2018) stated that 5 million noncredit students enroll in community college each year.

Noncredit occupational training is tailored toward individuals that aspire to obtain or advance their job skills that may lead to initial or gainful employment opportunities (D'Amico,

2017). Courses are generally accessible through an open registration process, do not adhere to a standard semester schedule, are not paid for by federal financial aid, but rather paid for by individuals with their own resources or through third-party funding (D'Amico, 2017). Course fees vary based on program area, duration, and the state funded resources (D'Amico, 2017).

Noncredit education enrolls a variety of students with unique backgrounds and circumstances. Noncredit education provides educational opportunities to "individuals without a high school diploma and those with advanced degrees" (D'Amico, 2017, p. 60). Noncredit courses are generally offered based on individual and industry demand, which results in a significant connection to local workforce needs (D'Amico, 2017). Noncredit programs offer a range of deliverables and student outcomes, encompassing a variety of industry credentials and licensures and continuing education units (CEUs) (Van Noy & Jacobs, 2009).

D'Amico (2017) identified four key elements across noncredit programs that make them highly sought opportunities for economic mobility and value add to the community.

- The first is region and industry specificity. As community colleges embrace their local workforce needs, noncredit is a strategic tool.
- The second is the ability to provide flexible funding.
- The third is directly addressing local needs.
- The fourth characteristic of noncredit education is the development of stackable credentials and recognition of noncredit-to-credit articulation agreements, that encourages pathways to obtain higher level skills, certifications, and postsecondary completion.

Noncredit programs are believed to more effectively serve the needs of non-traditional students in comparison to credit-bearing program for a variety of reasons (D'Amico, 2017). One

example is that without robust accreditation requirements and bureaucratic oversights noncredit programs can more effectively service fluid workforce demands, providing training that is flexible and responsive to industry needs (Van Noy & Jacobs, 2009). In addition, noncredit education's flexibility in scheduling and delivery format allows adult learners to access postsecondary education, increase their job prospects, and elevate their abilities to shift to a new skill demand (Milam, 2005). This flexibility, combined with their lower cost, implies that noncredit courses are thought to enroll a significant amount of students that have a lower educational performance and are challenged economically (Grubb et al., 2003), potentially offering a viable pathway to social and economic opportunity (Xu & Ran, 2015). It is unknown whether or not these populations include undocumented students, but the characteristics of noncredit students align with the characteristics of undocumented students previously introduced in the review of literature.

Students enrolled in noncredit occupational training programs are often adult learners and are categorized as having a lower socioeconomic background than students that enroll in a credit-bearing program at a community college (Xu & Ran, 2015). Ozmun (2012) conducted a study that focused on students that enrolled in noncredit education courses at a community college in Texas. Using Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory, Ozmun (2012) completed a phenomenological study to comprehend the lived experiences of students completing a noncredit education program. The results identified that noncredit occupational training students recognized the value of education and compassionate teachers, had a realistic outlook on education that coincides with the workplace, and identified themselves as college students (Ozmun, 2012). This identified connection validates the role and significance of noncredit education within the community college environment (Ozmun, 2012). This message further

bridges the gap and justifies why noncredit occupational training can effectively serve undocumented students.

Bahr (2010) found that students pursuing noncredit education in the noncredit displayed a high level of persistence among. Since persistence was an identifying characteristic of undocumented students, it seems logical that these may be the same students within the study, but this is unknown. Bahr (2010) did recognize a significant limitation that sheds light on noncredit research. Students without valid Social Security numbers, who were "disproportionally Asian and of citizenships other than the U.S." (p. 746), were excluded from the study, and they may have been underrepresented in the study. Bahr (2010) acknowledged that the noncredit group was most likely greater than reported in the study. Noncredit data is often not captured reliably throughout the United States and further highlights the challenges of conducting enrollment focused research on noncredit students (D'Amico, 2016). This notion gives more credence to the need for a study of undocumented students entering noncredit occupational training through the community college.

Regardless of the type of noncredit course students pursue they generally tend to be low-performing and low-income adults (Bahr, 2010). Students are able to use noncredit education to circumnavigate the academic, financial, and time constraints that are involved with pursing certificate and degree programs (Scott-Clayton, 2011; Xu & Ran, 2015). In this respect, noncredit programs have numerous advantages that include, but are not limited to; low cost, open enrollment, and flexibility, have the means to provide attainable access to postsecondary education, compared with credit-bearing programs (Xu & Ran, 2015). This is a key option for undocumented students that are challenged by cost, inflexible work schedules, and barriers to entering credit-bearing programs.

Meets Workforce Needs

Postsecondary noncredit education is an ascending higher education option, and many community colleges enroll more students into noncredit education programs than credit-bearing programs (Bailey et. al., 2003). An increase in noncredit education enrollment is attributed to its strong connection with the workforce and industry training demands that offers workforce instruction and contract training (Bailey et al., 2003). These programs are recognized for their key role in responding to fluid workforce demands and providing flexible and responsive training that meets employer needs (Dougherty & Bakia, 1999). Noncredit occupational trainings direct link to the workforce makes it an attractive and viable educational option for undocumented students wishing to gain new skills for gainful employment opportunities.

With 65% of jobs requiring education post-high school in 2020, and many of the required skills being accessible through noncredit occupational training (Carnevale et al., 2012), community colleges are in a key position to deliver this training through noncredit education. Currently, the American Association of Community Colleges (2018) reports 12.1 million students are enrolled at a community college, of which five million are noncredit students. It is unknown how many of these individuals are undocumented students. However, noncredit education, where five million students obtain their needed workforce skills, remains what Voorhees and Milam (2005) called the “hidden college.” At a time when community colleges are on the primary topic regarding workforce education and economic competitiveness, there has been minimal research on noncredit students (Vorhees & Milam, 2005). Understanding its significance and influence remains a challenge (Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Milam, 2005), primarily due to the lack of noncredit data and outcomes of noncredit funding. The identity of noncredit

occupational training in the community college mirrors that of undocumented students. They are perceived as hidden, so it is critical that both areas are further explored.

According to Grubb and Lazerson (2005), promotion of improving occupational skills is heavily influenced by shifts in the economy and technological advancements. This notion further exemplifies why noncredit occupational training is a critical and viable option for undocumented students to pursue higher education via the community college. This higher education option puts undocumented students in a strategic position for better employment opportunities and the necessary skills to assist a shifting economy and technological advancements. Noncredit education has developed into a critical educational option for supporting a healthy economy (Carnevale et al., 2010). Furthermore, noncredit education is recognized by many organizations, policymakers, and researchers as a strategic resource for addressing the need for postsecondary education (Van Noy & Jacobs, 2009; Van Noy et al., 2008; Voorhees & Milam, 2005; Xu & Ran, 2015).

Entry Point to Higher Education

Grubb et al. (2003) identified noncredit education in the community college setting as a viable entry point to accessing postsecondary education due to its ability to combat admission and affordability concerns, plus it is able to respond more quickly to industry and community needs. Again, all related issues undocumented students encounter when looking to enter higher education. Reasons for pursuing noncredit education vary, some seek this option to quickly obtain an in-demand skill/credential, meet a job requirement, or secure an increase in pay, or personal enrichment for lifelong learning fulfillment (Cronen & Murphy, 2013). Lower cost noncredit registration fees have a strategic advantage in serving economically challenged adult learners because programs better serve and meet the needs of low-income populations and

support efforts to increase postsecondary and progression (Van Noy & Jacobs, 2009). Examination into noncredit education in the community college setting is critical and an underrepresented focus in existing higher education literature (D'Amico, 2016). This especially holds true for the underrepresented undocumented student populations that are enrolled in noncredit occupational training.

Grubb et al. defined noncredit courses as a "first step into college" for many economically challenged students (p. 223). For this reason, it makes logical sense that noncredit occupational training is a viable option for undocumented students since many meet this profile description. As data is lacking in this area, so it is critical that further research is conducted to explore the topic of undocumented students enrolling in noncredit occupational training classes.

Limited Data

Since noncredit occupational training encompasses a variety of populations, standard and more robust data is necessary to further evaluate their goals and needs. Only 38 states mandate community colleges to report data on their noncredit programs and the majority only provide student enrollment totals (Van Noy & Jacobs, 2009). Noncredit education data is mostly unavailable and inadequate. For example, there is no national record of noncredit students or data collection standard for noncredit students (Jenkins & Boswell, 2002).

Xu and Ran (2015) provided evidence that there has not been significant research that identifies the various factors and influences that promote the transition and credential outcomes of credit-bearing students who began their higher education journey through noncredit education. According to D'Amico (2016) scholars have only researched the noncredit function, but not the noncredit student and their experiences. This study fills this gap by studying DACA recipients experiences who enroll in community college's noncredit occupational training programs.

Gaps in the Literature

Generally speaking, research on undocumented students in the United States is lacking (Diaz-Strong et al., 2011). The experiences of undocumented students has not been thoroughly explored (Cebulko, 2014). Some scholars have conducted research in this area (Cebulko & Silver, 2016), but additional work is necessary in order to gain a greater understanding of the experience of undocumented students and their rationale for pursuing noncredit occupational training at community colleges.

Additionally, there is a dearth of information about the postsecondary pursuits and experiences of non-Latinx undocumented students (Buenavista, 2016). Research overwhelmingly focuses on the experiences of undocumented Latinx students (Cebulko, 2014). The majority of undocumented students in the United States are primarily members of the Latinx community, but there is fair representaiton of non-Latinx undocumented students (Passel, 2015). For example, Asian immigrants make up approximately 12% of the undocumented population (Buenavista, 2016). Undocumented Asian student populations are significant in California (Gonzales, 2009).

Furthermore, most research is focused on undocumented student's experiences in California, New York, and Texas (Cebulko, 2014). Undocumented student's higher education pursuits and experiences in other states are not available (Cebulko, 2013, 2014). Further evaluation of North Carolina's undocumented student population in higher education is needed based on the information previously provided, specifically those that enter into community college's noncredit occupational training programs.

Xu & Ran (2015) identified that despite noncredit occupational trainings important role in higher education and workforce initiatives, minimal information about noncredit courses, student experiences, and educational accomplishments is published. It is vital that further

research be conducted to better understand the function of noncredit occupational training and how it intersects with undocumented student's pursuit of postsecondary education.

Conclusion

The reviewed literature primarily highlights barriers undocumented students encounter during their pursuit of postsecondary education, but does recognize some positive steps in state legislation and at postsecondary institutions. However, the literature reviewed also showcases a failure at the federal level to provide a coherent opportunity for undocumented students to pursue higher education and lack of knowledge about the noncredit occupational training option many undocumented students may or do pursue. The noncredit occupational training option provides a quick and efficient avenue for undocumented students to obtain skills and credentials to become securely employed at a livable wage. Due to the lack of research concerning both undocumented students and noncredit occupational training, a detailed study that reviews both and how they intersect is needed.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Researchers note that DACA recipients' pathways to higher education via community college is greatly influenced by financial, social, and legal barriers and facilitators (Bjorklund, 2018; Cervantes et al., 2015; Crisp et al., 2015; Teranishi et al., 2015). Community colleges have traditionally served as a viable entry point to higher education for those that seek increased employment opportunities. Research shows that in 2020, it was deemed that 65% of jobs required postsecondary education beyond high school (Carnevale et al., 2012). This fact makes it even more critical that DACA recipients pursue higher education and understand their higher education options. By pursuing postsecondary education or obtaining training beyond high school, DACA recipients will be able to best solidify their economic opportunity while their legal status in the United States is finalized.

Within community college, noncredit occupational training programs provide significant options for students to obtain greater employment opportunities. Noncredit occupational training programs provide short-term training solutions that lead to credentials that businesses desire from applicants and employees. The state of North Carolina through the *myFutureNC* initiative has established a goal that by 2030 at least 2 million citizens of North Carolina between the ages of 25 and 44 will have secured a high quality postsecondary degree or credential (myFutureNC, 2019). This goal has heightened the importance of further understanding noncredit occupational programs at community colleges in North Carolina. Furthermore, North Carolina is home to approximately 10,000 DACA recipients (USCIC, 2019). These DACA recipients will be looking for options to increase their employment opportunities and provide a future for them and their family.

The purpose of this study was to explore and document the lived experiences of DACA recipients that pursue noncredit occupational training at a community college in North Carolina. This study was guided by the following three research questions:

1. What experiences led DACA recipients to enroll in noncredit occupational education in the community college setting?
2. What do the stories told by DACA recipients reveal about their educational experiences in higher education?
3. How do DACA recipients plan to use the education they gain through noncredit occupational education?

Methodology

Qualitative research was the best method to guide this study. Qualitative research is an analysis method of understanding constructed on specific methodological processes of investigation that explores a social or individualized problem (Creswell, 2007). The researcher forms a multifaceted, all-inclusive representation, evaluates words, reports detailed interpretations, and conducts the research in an organic setting (Creswell, 2007).

Epistemology

The interpretive framework from which this study was conducted from was through a social constructivist lens. Social constructivism is a process of interpretation that individuals explore meaning by cultivating their own understandings that correspond to their experience (Creswell, 2013). Social constructivism was the lens of choice because it provided the best opportunity to understand what influences and experiences lead DACA recipients to enroll and complete noncredit occupational training programs at community colleges in North Carolina. This lens allowed me to further explore and understand the phenomenon I witnessed first hand as

an administrator that oversees noncredit occupational training programs at a community college in North Carolina.

Design and Rationale

This study sought to study the experiences of participants, which lead to the justification of selecting a qualitative research approach as the most appropriate methodology (Creswell, 2007). More specifically, an adapted in-depth qualitative interview research was the most fitting research method for exploring the experiences of DACA recipients that have completed a noncredit occupational training program at a community college in North Carolina because it is a qualitative research design for seizing the lived and spoken stories of research participants. The major intent of an adapted in-depth qualitative interview is in understanding the lived experience and the meaning they make of that experience (Seidman, 2019). As a result, adapted in-depth qualitative research was the most appropriate method to capture firsthand accounts of DACA recipients' experiences in higher education.

Beyond the inclusion of adapted in-depth qualitative interviews and the formation of participant bios, field notes and archival research was completed to add greater depth to the contents of the study. Field notes are a key method for capturing local knowledge and understandings (Emerson et al., 1995). Creswell (2013) notes that archival research that involves reviewing and including documents and audiovisual materials are excellent ways to supplement interviews and add additional depth to a study. It is important to recognize the importance of including various forms of archival data. Fieldnotes and archival research for this study focused on the institution the participants attended, the noncredit programs offered, and the community. Detailed descriptions of the institution, the programs, and the community were derived by my own observations, informal conversations with faculty, staff, and a review of institutional records

and websites. The goal was to provide rich descriptions about the environment/setting the participants are navigating and triangulate the data to the interviews in order to strengthen the data set.

Positionality Statement

As the Dean of Continuing Education at Montgomery Community College in Troy, North Carolina I'm able to witness firsthand DACA recipients enroll in noncredit occupational training programs. Additionally, I'm able to hear from the students about how their noncredit occupational training program helped connect them to a viable employment opportunity and enhanced their livelihood. I'm passionate about helping students and yearn to understand what brings them to the community college campus and how the college can help them be successful in life and best achieve their goals.

Noncredit occupational training is a postsecondary education option that has not been researched in great detail or is well known in the higher education community. Therefore, most are not as familiar with this higher education option. My intimate knowledge and passion for this area may influence my assumptions about the positive impact this higher education option provides DACA recipients. To mitigate any pre-conceived ideas or assumptions I crafted questions in my interview protocol that are open ended.

My interest in this topic spans beyond my role as Dean of Continuing Education at Montgomery Community College. Growing up in a military family I have been exposed to many cultures and walks of life. This exposure has led me to have many friends that are not American by birth. This experience has allowed me to hear and learn about non-American life experiences. Some of these friends self-identified as undocumented. I am an American and my family has lived in America since the early 1900's, so I have no direct knowledge of what it means to be

undocumented in America. Furthermore, to date, I have never enrolled nor participated in a noncredit occupational training course. The potential consequences of my background may limit my participants' ability to feel comfortable enough to communicate their stories In short, they may feel that they cannot connect or relate to me. This would challenge my ability to obtain rich data.

My undergraduate studies in public administration at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia has influenced me in a manner that is connected and passionate regarding public policy. In 2020 there was an elevated political climate regarding undocumented individuals in America. The topic of DACA is very controversial. Some Americans view DACA as an illegal act/status that should not be afforded to undocumented individuals. Others believe it is an important program that has greatly benefited undocumented individuals and the United States as a whole. Various federal and state policies have impacted DACA participant's ability to enter higher education or remain in the United States for that matter. This topic is very controversial and has a direct impact on higher education. Collectively this has led me to study the story of DACA recipients that pursue noncredit occupational training in North Carolina at a community college.

Critically speaking, my beliefs have lead me to assume that DACA recipients choose to enroll in community college because it is their only financially feasible option to enter higher education. I believe they select noncredit occupational training classes specifically because the classes are cheaper than credit bearing classes, the programs are shorter in length, and the programs offered are more closely aligned with careers that are most likely to hire DACA recipients. I believe the noncredit occupational training option is the best choice for DACA recipients because they are not eligible for financial aid and aligns with viable career options.

My experience has exposed me to primarily undocumented Latinx students, so my assumptions of DACA recipients is centered on Latinx students. As the Dean of Continuing Education at Montgomery Community College, I must adhere to an open door policy, so I service all walks of life. Through these experiences I subconsciously typecast who and what kind of individuals enroll in our noncredit programs. I classify almost all of these individuals as low income and the most vulnerable population of the community. These experiences over the years have led to preconceived thoughts and assumptions that may influence my research.

Lastly, I am a United States citizen that identifies as white. I have been a United States citizen since birth, so I don't know or understand what it is like to be undocumented. This status may create a potential barrier with my participants. One of the barriers I anticipated encountering was the ability to recruit participants, especially due to the current political climate in the United States. Another barrier I anticipated was the participants' willingness to fully divulge the intricate details of their life story. My goal was to combat this by building a strong rapport with my participants through my strong interpersonal abilities and display of empathy. In order to manage my perspective/potential biases, I utilized my doctoral cohort group to debrief and ensure I am not negatively impacting the study.

Researcher Role

For this study, I was at the grassroots level collecting and analyzing data to best tell the story of my participants. I was intimately involved with soliciting and collecting the necessary participation and data for this study. Daily detailed reviews of current events broadcasted through news outlets, periodicals, and scholarly articles on the DACA program and noncredit occupational training were instrumental in best preparing me to understand the context of the time for my participants. This was especially critical as I conducted adapted in depth qualitative

interviews with participants to best convey their lived experiences and the context that impacts their life story.

Protection of Human Subjects

Prior to beginning data collection, permission from UNC Charlotte's Institutional Review Board was secured. The purpose of this activity was to provide evidence to the review board that my study design follows their guidelines for conducting ethical research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). DACA recipients are currently in a state of limbo regarding their future citizenship status in the United States: I was very mindful of their situation. I took into consideration that I will be receiving a lot of information about them, so it was critical that I maintained their trust by following through on any promise I made and I stayed extra vigilant in protecting their identity.

Once participants were secured, they were interviewed individually over the phone. This option was selected to be mindful of the current pandemic and keep my participants safe and healthy. To protect the identity of the participants, I assigned pseudonyms and did not require them to sign a consent form. To best protect the identities of the participants, all other names of people, institutions, and geographic locations were de-identified.

All devices that contained electronic data from the study were passcode protected and all hard copy records were locked in my office and desk at Montgomery Community College in Troy, North Carolina. Due to the uncertainty of the DACA program in the United States, this study strongly adhered to the rules and regulations set forth by the Federal Education Rights Privacy Act (FERPA) to best protect participants' non-directory information.

Sampling

Since my research focus requires participants meet a strict criteria, I relied heavily on existing relationships with community advocates that work with DACA recipients in the Latinx

community. I used existing relationships to communicate the significance of my research study to secure participants. The primary resource for referrals was a local small business owner in the Latinx community. All study participants were referred to me via word of mouth. I did not know any participants prior to the study. Once initial participants' interviews concluded snowball sampling was used. The purpose of snowball sampling is to obtain interest from people who can identify other people who know can provide data to the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). My study required participants to trust in me, so I did not pursue a digital recruitment campaign. Though a digital outreach would have casted a wider recruitment net, I was fearful many would not feel comfortable answering to an online recruitment advertisement. The goal was to secure four to six participants for my study. I was able to secure four participants. To mitigate the potential of being overwhelmed with participants, I only secured participant referrals one at a time until my study reached a saturation point.

Participants for my study had active DACA status and successfully completed a noncredit occupational training program at a community college in North Carolina. The decision to only recruit active DACA recipients as opposed to those without active status was to decrease participants' vulnerability, since they all had legal status at the time of the interviews. Assuring each participant that their identities would be protected allowed participants to feel less vulnerable and comfortable sharing their story. Since my participants are considered marginalized, I needed to make sure they felt safe and welcomed in order to have effective dialogue. By allowing unguarded natural dialogue, I was able to build rapport with each participant. Dickson-Swift et al (2007) identified that by developing a strong rapport with participants access to the interviewees' lives would be better enhanced and produce in-depth detail about their experiences.

The scope of being exclusive to North Carolina community colleges allowed me to have reasonable accessibility to participants. Research that explores the experiences of DACA recipients in higher education lacks a North Carolina perspective. Most studies focus on DACA recipients in California, New York, and Texas. North Carolina is home to approximately 10,000 DACA recipients' and their stories communicate a story about their noncredit pursuits, life experiences, and future plans. The details of these DACA recipients in North Carolina give a greater understanding about the influences and barriers they experienced pursuing noncredit occupational training at a community college in North Carolina.

Data Collection

Participant interviews styled after Seidman (2019) served as the primary means of data collection. Four participants were interviewed between June 2020 and August 2020. Following Seidman's protocol, the first interview allowed participants to put their life into context and detail their life story. First interviews ranged from 40 to 65 minutes. The second interview concentrated on the concrete details of the participants lived experience and each interview ranged from 45 to 60 minutes. In the third and final interview, participants made meaning of their lived experiences and critical incidents that they described in the first two interviews. All final interviews ranged from 30 to 35 minutes. The time between each interview ranged from three to seven days, so that each participants' previous interview was fresh on their mind. Upon completion of all interviews and transcription, a detailed thematic analysis guided by Braun and Clarke (2006) was completed.

An adapted in-depth qualitative interview that closely followed Seidman's (2019) guidelines was utilized. An in-depth qualitative interview was originally planned, but due to the dynamics of the pandemic, interviews with participants were short. The interviews were rich in

data, but they did not meet the 90-minute requirements, thus I adapted the study. Semi-structured interviews were used. The goal of the adapted in-depth qualitative interview was to use, primarily, open-ended questions (Seidman, 2019). The first interview established the context of the participants' experience/life story. The second interview allowed the participant to give more detail regarding critical life experiences divulged in the first interview (Seidman, 2019). The third and final interview allowed the participant to reconstruct their experience within the framework of the study (Seidman, 2019). Seidman's (2019) three interview guideline allowed me and participant to investigate the experience and to place it in context. Participants' conduct becomes significant and logical when placed in the context of their lives and the time (Schuman, 1982). Without context, one is not able to adequately make meaning of an experience (Patton, 1989).

All interviews were recorded by an audio device (iPhone) that was passcode protected. Interviews were semi structured and included open ended questions that were general and focused on the central phenomenon of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Once each interview concluded, I transcribed the interview data using Rev, a reputable third party transcription service. The transcribed data was then saved to a passcode-protected computer. I maintained the audio recordings on my Iphone and on the Rev phone app to review periodically throughout my analysis. Having access to the recorded voice during the writing of the final reflection helped me effectively connect with the essence of my study and participants.

Interviews were conducted to hear about the experiences of the research participants and give them a voice. An interview protocol was utilized to collect details regarding the experiences of the participants. The interview protocol for each meeting involved direct and open-ended questions to offer comprehensive details about each participant's experiences. These questions

also included probing questions. With the DACA program being in a state of limbo, controversial undocumented individuals needed an amplified voice. Interviews produced moving stories and best amplified their voice that was needed more than ever.

Data Analysis

The data collected from the interviews was subject to thematic analysis. Thematic analysis empowers the researcher to theorize from each story and not categorize each story (Riessman, 2008). Thematic analysis is a tool that offers the researcher the ability to obtain rich and detailed data (Riessman, 2008). Braun and Clarke's, (2006) six-phase thematic analysis process, guided the thematic analysis.

Phase 1: Data Familiarization

The first step in my analysis was to individually read each participant's initial interview twice before making any notes/highlights. By focusing on each participant's interview one by one, I was able to familiarize myself with the data. I followed this same first phase process when evaluating each participant's interview. Again, my analysis only moved to the next participant once all six phases of the thematic analysis process were complete. On my third read of the participant's interview, I checked the original transcripts against the original audio recordings. During the third read, I also started making notes about codes I wanted to revisit in other phases in the analysis process.

Phase 2: Generate Initial Codes

The next step in my analysis process involved highlighting words and quotes within the participant's transcript that gave insight about their life experience as it pertained to the three research questions. I also documented reoccurring patterns in the participant's transcript. During

this phase, I also coded miscellaneous items that did not link to the three research questions, but may give perspective and greater context to participant's life story.

Phase 3: Search for Themes

During this phase, I started to develop preliminary themes based on the patterns and codes I highlighted in the participants' transcripts. I listed the preliminary themes into an excel spreadsheet tab and created separate tabs for each thematic category. Within each thematic category tab, I began to type either direct quotes or keywords from the participants' transcripts. Each participant was assigned a dedicated spreadsheet document where I coded and labeled the preliminary themes.

Phase 4: Review Themes

In this phase, I started to refine my themes. I started eliminating themes that did not have data to substantiate the initial theme. I read all collated extracts for each theme, and considered whether they formed a coherent pattern. Those that did not form a coherent pattern were removed.

Phase 5: Define Themes

In this phase, the essence of each theme was identified and reflected accordingly within each participant's spreadsheet. Now only the themes that aligned with the three research questions and showcased a pattern were left. Each theme was presented like the foundation of a house and builds upon one another. The thematic house that is built tells the life story of each participant and insight about being a DACA participant that pursued noncredit occupational training at a community college in North Carolina.

Phase 6: Final Analysis

In the final phase of the analysis, the major themes were condensed into a final report. The final report first provided a visual to reflect the major themes. Following the visual aid, key extracts from the interviews were presented within the thematic analysis section. Vivid examples and analytic narratives provided, addressed the three research questions guiding this study.

Trustworthiness

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) trustworthiness allows researchers to persuade themselves and others that their research findings are credible and noteworthy. Credibility addresses the connection between participants' views and the researcher's representation of them (Tobin & Begley, 2004). Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested the following techniques to address credibility; well stated positionality statements, member checking, and peer debriefing.

To ensure credibility, I completed a detailed positionality statement to acknowledge possible researcher bias. Credibility may be accomplished through the practice of member checking to test the results and interpretations with the participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I conducted member checking in order to achieve credibility. This process added credibility by allowing the participants to test the findings and interpretations. Member checking is a process where the participants have an opportunity to review the final report, description, or themes to allow them to provide context or alternative interpretations (Creswell, 2013). Participants also reviewed each interview transcript. This process aligned with the social constructivism approach that guided my study. This allowed context and the participants' interpretation to communicate the narrative of their experience.

Most importantly, I sought guidance from my dissertation chair Dr. D'Amico, methodologist Dr. Salas, and a University of North Carolina at Charlotte doctoral classmate to serve as a peer-debriefer to examine and provide an external check on the research process to

increase credibility. Specifically, I had them review all interview protocols, procedures, consent forms, and thematic analysis, and have them advise me on all ethical considerations regarding my study.

Transferability is a key concept that must be applied when considering the merit and trustworthiness of my study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that transferability is established by providing readers with evidence that the research findings may be generalizable and applicable to other contexts. The researcher does not know where and how their findings will be applied, so the research is accountable for offering detailed descriptions to increase the effectiveness transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Limitations

Limitations are unintended influences (Creswell, 2013). Limitations of the study included enforced de-socialization brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic, identifying people that meet the strict criteria for the study, willingness of participants to partake in the study, and their ability to effectively communicate their life stories into data rich narratives. Three 90-minute interviews over the phone proved to be problematic. Challenges that arose included time constraints, cellphone service, inability to read body language, and participants did not meet the 90-minute per interview target. Due to these challenges, the study transitioned to an adapted in-depth qualitative interview.

Summary

This chapter highlights the research methods used to explore the experiences of DACA recipients that completed a noncredit occupational training at a community college in North Carolina. Seidman (2019) adapted in-depth qualitative interview technique guided the process. The data collection method used was semi-structured interviews. The data obtained from the

research method used thematic analysis and coding for identifying emerging themes using process coding. To ensure the confidentiality of participants and protect the research participants' rights, an informed consent form was given to the participants and pseudonyms were applied. The stories told by the DACA recipients of this study provided compelling insight about their journey. Additionally, this study raised awareness about noncredit occupational training and the opportunity it afforded DACA recipients that were looking for a higher education option.

Chapter Four: Findings

As I have explained, the goal of this adapted in-depth qualitative interview study (Seidman, 2019) was to explore and document the lived experiences of DACA recipients pursuing noncredit occupational training opportunities at a community college in North Carolina. To reiterate, data collection included three rounds of interviews with four participants. The following research questions guided my study:

1. What experiences led DACA recipients to enroll in noncredit occupational education in the community college setting?
2. What do the stories told by DACA recipients reveal about their educational experiences in higher education?
3. How do DACA recipients plan to use the education they gain through noncredit occupational education?

Four participants were interviewed between June 2020 and August 2020. The first interview allowed participants to put their life into context and detail their life stories. First interviews ranged from 40 to 65 minutes. Second interviews concentrated on the concrete details of the participants' lived experiences and ranged from 45 to 60 minutes. In the third and final interview, participants made meaning of their lived experiences and critical incidents that they described in the first two interviews. All final interviews ranged from 30 to 35 minutes. The time between each interview ranged from three to seven days, so that each participant's previous interview was fresh on their mind. Upon completion of all interviews and transcription, a detailed thematic analysis guided by Braun and Clarke (2006) was completed.

In this chapter, I present the findings rendered from the interview data. I begin with profiles of each of the participants, Maximo, Aleiram, Andrea, and Alma. I continue with a series of themes and discuss these in the context of the literatures that informed the study. My analysis

underscores the importance of family, identifies various obstacles they encounter while pursuing higher education, opportunities noncredit occupational training provides DACA recipients, and the transactional nature of noncredit pursuits.

Participant Profiles

Maximo

Maximo was a 33 year-old male who was born in Mexico, but considered himself more American than Mexican because he had lived in the United States most of his life. He arrived in the United States when he was nine years old. His mother and father were both from Mexico and were making less than $10 per day when they decided to come to the United States for new opportunities. Maximo's father was the first to arrive to the United States. Maximo's mother followed a couple of years later with his younger twin brothers. Maximo and his older sister were left in Mexico with his Aunt to care for them while his parents were establishing themselves in the United States. A year later, Maximo's Aunt helped him and his sister cross the border into the United States. All his siblings arrived in the United States undocumented. Maximo was married to a DACA recipient and was a father of three daughters.

Early Life

Maximo arrived to the United States with mixed emotions. "I was very excited because I was coming to a new country. But at the same time, I was very scared." His parents had settled down in North Carolina. At the time of Maximo's arrival, his town had a very low Latinx population. He did not have anyone around to help translate, so in school his teachers would use picture cutouts to communicate with him. His teachers would send home the cutouts for him to study. This practice helped build his confidence and ability to communicate in English with his classmates. It took Maximo about two years to adapt to the new culture and language. Up until

that point, Maximo's teachers would cautiously hold his hand everywhere; he went out with fear he would get lost due to the language barrier. Maximo's family relocated a couple of years later to an adjacent town and his new school was composed of predominantly Latinx students.

The composition of Maximo's neighborhood was primarily African American families. The community was poor, proud, and happy. Maximo and his undocumented friends did not know the struggles they would encounter growing up nor their legal status. Life was good in his earlier years up until the latter part of high school years when the realities of the world came into focus. Maximo summarized his early life well when he said, "So I grew up happy, I was very excited until I got into high school and I was getting ready for college preparation. That's when I knew things were not right."

Coming of Age

While in high school, Maximo excelled in soccer. He aspired to be a professional soccer player, but would settle for a college scholarship to play at the next level, if given the opportunity. Recognized for his skills, Maximo was offered a scholarship to play at the college level. Unfortunately, it was not a full scholarship and the cost of attending this particular college was just too expensive. Maximo was unsure about his college options and did not receive any direction from his high school teachers and counselors. Maximo used his abilities to help translate for his family, community, and school. He became a leader in high school and helped bridge the gap between the Latinx community and the educators. He did this by helping teachers and Latinx families communicate better, serving as a volunteer interpreter. "We need to do the right thing. So that's why I volunteered to make sure the parents understand everything the teachers were saying."

Higher Education

Maximo decided to attend his local community college and pursue an Associate in Arts degree to become a business professional and transfer to a four-year university. His local community college was a small college that offered many technical training programs to support the local manufacturing and healthcare industries. The community college was predominantly white and catered largely to dual enrolled students (i.e., high school students taking college classes). There was very little Latinx representation at the college. The decision to attend his local community college was not easy because Maximo still had to pay out-of-state tuition and was not eligible for federal financial aid.

> I know that a lot of people say that a community college is cheaper, but I actually paid, I think, triple the amount. I remember every semester I had to come up with $10,000 or less, depending on how much was the scholarship. So that was very stressful.

Maximo and his father worked tirelessly to make sure his tuition was paid. Both worked double shifts almost every day to cover the out-of-state tuition cost and all the other educational expenses. Beyond the struggle to financially afford community college with the out-of-state rate, Maximo faced numerous uncomfortable situations when he had to register for classes. Maximo said, “It was so stressful, embarrassing, and since it was not under your control, you didn't know what to do, other than you just shake your head and be like, I don't know.” However, year after year, things changed and they did not bother him anymore as they did the first time. Maximo became more confident with his identity and continued to persevere to reach his academic and professional goals.

Another factor that helped facilitate his college completion was the support of the local community college president. Maximo took it upon himself to seek out financial assistance options and made an appointment with the college president. The college president connected

Maximo to financial resources to help offset the high tuition rate he had to pay due to his status. Maximo showed tremendous perseverance through his higher education journey.

> Memories I have are of when I graduated. It was one of the most rewarding moments because even though I struggled a lot, I was able to obtain what I wanted, I never gave up. So that's one of the best memories I have. I guess other memories I have is, there shouldn't be an excuse not to finish your education because if I had barriers and some people don't, I don't see why they can't go to school.

Maximo's initial higher education path led him to pursue a two-year degree, but sought alternative higher education options to enhance his employment opportunities. Prior to the DACA program's existence Maximo attempted to complete a notary program at his local community college. "I remember I signed up for that class (Notary) years ago, but I couldn't finish it because they needed, at least my work permit that I didn't have back then."

He was unable to complete the course because he did not have the proper paperwork due to being undocumented. The Notary Public program is a foundational credential offered as a noncredit occupational training program that introduces the statutes that regulate the acts of North Carolina notaries public. The purpose of the education requirement is to enable students to become a responsible, qualified candidate for Notary Public commission. Notaries are found in a variety of industries, including banking, finance, medical, legal, government, and insurance. "Now that I have it (DACA), I was able to attend the class and finish the class." With the passing of DACA, Maximo became eligible to enroll in the notary program. Since Maximo was already familiar with his local community college, he elected to complete the notary program there. Maximo located the notary class by reviewing his local community college's website. Maximo completed a registration form that required minimal information, paid $70 for the class, and

purchased the required book through the campus bookstore. The class took place on a Saturday for eight hours and concluded with a certification exam. Maximo successfully passed the exam and obtained his Notary Public Certification. Maximo's noncredit occupational training experience was transactional. This new credential opened up many new opportunities for Maximo to help people both personally and professionally.

> Well, every time I know people that want to notarize a title or they need help. For example, sometimes the schools require a notary to sign paperwork. Some Hispanic people don't understand the language, they want me to translate and have me notarize the documents that they need to. So that has helped the Hispanic community tremendously. That's part of my job too, I really know how they feel.

In comparison to Maximo's two-year degree experience, the enrollment and completion of the noncredit occupational training program were seamless. As Maximo put it, "easy." The noncredit occupational training program Maximo completed provided a quick return on investment and provided him with a new credential. He was able to put his new credential into practice almost immediately.

Employment

In order to support his family and his educational ambitions, Maximo worked at a fast food restaurant for many hours each week, continuing this feat for years. He worked both second and third shifts regularly, making sure he still made it to his morning college classes. Three hours of sleep was his norm. Once Maximo completed his associate's degree, he was not able to secure the professional/non service industry related job he aspired to. "My hopes were getting down every year. And there was one time where, and that was after college, I was like, Man, what was

the point of me getting that two-year degree if nothing has changed? I felt like it was just a waste of money."

He continued to work hard at his job, help his community, and continued applying for other job opportunities. His luck changed when a friend from a pick up soccer game asked about his career ambitions. It so happened that this friend worked at a local financial institution and was seeking someone with Maximo's skillset to fill a financial representative position. Maximo applied for the position and was offered the job he had been patiently waiting for. "So it was a long step, but it was everything I had worked for."

Maximo's hard worker mentality carried over into his new position and he quickly asserted himself as a top employee. Maximo was more motivated than ever. "So working for a financial institution motivates me more." Maximo continued to further his education by completing his new training requirements at his financial institution. Maximo was able to pass exam after exam and receive the necessary credentials to maintain his position and best serve his new customers. The Notary Public Certification Maximo obtained at the local community college proved to be a great tool both personally and professionally. Professionally, Maximo was able to use this credential to notarize documents for customers at the financial institution and maintain his job.

Personally, Maximo was able to use this credential to help the Latinx community by being available to verify and certify documents. Trust is a major factor in the Latinx community, so by being a member of this community he is able to leverage his credential and services. With his position, credential, and standing in the community he sought out to assist others with their DACA renewals. "I have always liked to help the Hispanic community, and I know that there's a need for Hispanics notaries." He does not charge them for this service as he is happy to give

back to the community. Maximo's notary credential and position at his financial institution gave him the credibility to be in a position to help others.

DACA

Maximo was on a vacation paid by his ex-boss when the news of the DACA program was announced. He cried all day with excitement about the potential opportunities ahead of him. "And then DACA came and that saved my life, saved my career." Maximo was eager to take advantage of all the opportunities and hopeful about his future "So you're part of the society. Let's put it that way."

As many doors opened, it did not alleviate all the constraints or stigma of Maximo's undocumented status. "They have to check your fingerprints. Pretty much your biometrics every two years. I think that that should change because... I mean, yes, they are helping us a lot, but you still feel like you're a criminal."

Maximo is still unable to travel abroad to visit with family members he hasn't seen in years. Maximo will still have to pay out-of-state tuition if he decides to complete his bachelor's degree in North Carolina unless his employer elects to sponsor him. Additionally, Maximo will not have access to federal financial aid and will have to seek other options to fund his education. Beyond the educational aspects of the DACA program, financial implications are still a factor. "I have to struggle every two years to pay for my wife and for me, renewals. But I mean, there's no problem. I mean, I don't have any choice anyway." To him it is worth it because it allows him the opportunity to drive freely, work, and have access to better employment and pay. This fact is only compounded now that the DACA program requires recipients to renew every year now and pay the same $500 fee.

Conclusion

Maximo believes that you have to work hard in life for what you want. The DACA program "saved his life and career." The doors that DACA opened motivated him to complete his four-year degree and acquire a noncredit occupational training credential. Even though the DACA program was in limbo, he continued to be positive and hopeful about his future and status in the United States. He positioned himself the best he could personally and professionally with the opportunities the DACA program afforded him. He wanted to do it to be a good example for his family and community.

> Even my kids are happier that I have a professional job. They look up to me. They want to be like me. And I'm not saying fast food is bad, it's just that, as a parent, I don't want my kids to work in a fast food restaurant all their lives. So working for a financial institution motivates me more because I know that if I can do it, more than likely my kids are going to find a better career. I want to be a good example for my kids and I want to show my parents that I'm very grateful for their efforts.

Without the support of his parents, he would not be where he is today. Family is everything and now that he has a family of his own, he wants to make sure they follow his example. With his children having U.S. citizenship, Maximo knows the opportunities are endless for them and he needs to be there to encourage them along the way.

Aleiram

Aleiram was a 31-year-old mother of three who came to the United States from Mexico. Aleiram's father first brought her mother and her younger twin brothers, who were three years old at the time, to the United States. Aleiram and her brother stayed with an Aunt while their parents were getting situated. Aleiram was seven years old when her Aunt brought her and her older brother, who was nine years old, to the United States. Aleiram's older brother and one

younger twin brother had DACA status. The other younger twin brother was ruled ineligible for the DACA program due to his criminal record.

Early Life

When Aleiram and her brother arrived to their new rural home in North Carolina, they were two of the few Latinx students in school. It was hard for her to communicate with the teachers. It was even difficult for Aleiram to communicate with another Latinx classmate because she would only speak to her in English even though she knew how to speak Spanish. This experience made Aleiram feel even more isolated and unwelcomed in her new school. The experience did, however, motivate Aleiram to learn the English language quickly. “and I had to learn English quick because if not, I wasn't going to be able to communicate with anybody.” The family would soon relocate to an adjacent town that had a higher Latinx population. However, the community she relocated to was composed of primarily African American families. Her home was small, but she had her family.

> It was very small, but it was a happy place. I mean, I can tell you that. My parents always provided us with the necessities, the stuff that we really needed. We didn't really have a lot of Christmases where we would get a bunch of gifts, but we were all there as a family.

Aleiram’s new school had more support in place to help native Spanish speakers learn the English language. One example is that the school offered a summer camp program for Latinx students. The combination of additional educational support systems and a higher Latinx student population allowed Aleiram to better adjust to her new home in the United States. Aleiram was still unaware of her undocumented status and what challenges she would soon encounter.

> But back then, I didn't know nothing that you needed a Social Security number to go to college. I didn't know anything that you needed a Social Security to work. I guess

> because I was more like... You know, my parents wouldn't really tell us that. So my 6th, 7th, and 8th grade year, I didn't need any of those to... We had a student ID. So I thought the student ID was the Social Security number.

As she progressed into high school she would soon learn about her status and what that meant for her higher education and professional aspirations. As Aleiram put it, "After my 8th grade graduation that's when things got real."

Coming of Age

Aleiram began her high school experience by enrolling in health occupation classes to best prepare her for a career in healthcare. Aleiram's mother was sick growing up and inspired her to want to pursue a career in healthcare. "I think she was my main inspiration to decide to work in the healthcare field." She wanted to be in a position to care for her mother and others like her. In her 10th grade year, one of Aleiram's healthcare instructors nominated her for a scholarship to go to a national youth leadership forum in Boston, Massachusetts for future healthcare leaders. That was her dream. She was awarded the scholarship and received a lot of extra financial support from other teachers and community members in addition to her own money she earned by working part time at a store. The funds allowed her to go to Boston for six days and a chance to visit the largest children's hospital in Boston. "Ever since then, I knew that it was my dream. That's what I wanted to do. I wanted to be a nurse." This experience solidified her future ambitions that she wanted to be a nurse.

In her junior year, Aleiram completed the Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) 1 class through her high school that prepared her for the certification exam to become registered with the state of North Carolina. This is when Aleiram started to gain a greater understanding about her status. The high school instructor requested a copy of her driver's license and Social Security

card. She was able to provide a North Carolina issued driver's license because at that time those who were undocumented were allowed to have a driver's license with their tax ID number, which is called an ITIN number. Similar to the student ID assumption, Aleiram assumed her ITIN number would suffice for a Social Security number. The teacher informed her this was not the case and from that point she had to become resourceful in order to achieve her goals. "So you know there, I was like, What am I going to do? What am I going to do? I want to be a CNA. I want to work as a CNA."

Aleiram did not receive much guidance from her high school teachers or counselors, because at the time they did not know how to best advise students in her situation. "Back then, whenever I was growing up... I don't know. I think the involvement was not as much as it is now today. I think nowadays kids know more about... There's more involvement with the Hispanics and the counselors." Aleiram leaned heavily on her family during this tough time and her own thirst for knowledge. She received great financial and emotional support from her parents. "They were always supportive. They were always... And even till this day, they're supportive about whatever we want to do with life, they're 100% for it." However, her older brother seemed to be the most encouraging. "We're always there for each other, no matter what. My brother always pushed me to do better." He would always let her know about opportunities to better herself and push her to continue her education.

Higher Education

Aleiram applied to a public university in North Carolina and was accepted, but was not able to attend due to financial barriers. Aleiram was not awarded any scholarships or financial aid to help offset the out-of-state tuition expense. "Unfortunately I didn't get any scholarships, and I wasn't able to go because of the money. And because of my situation, being illegal here."

To add insult to injury at this time the North Carolina Community College System was not allowing undocumented students to enroll, so Aleiram's higher education options were sparse. Aleiram was unsure of what to do. Her teachers gave her hope that the CNA 1 program would be her gateway to advance her healthcare career, but they did not know her limitations. "As a CNA, you can always grow more. I would really never say nothing because of my situation. Back then it was embarrassing because you don't know what kind of reaction you're going to get from people."

It was not until five years later in 2012 when Aleiram decided to enter higher education and leverage the CNA 1 certification she had received while in high school. The announcement of the DACA program motivated Aleiram to restart her educational journey. "And when that happened, I decided to go back for my CNA 2." She chose to enroll in a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) 2 program at her local community college. Her local college was a small college that offered many technical training programs both as a degree and as noncredit occupational training to support the local manufacturing and healthcare industry. The community college was predominantly white and catered largely to dual enrolled students (i.e., high school students taking college classes). There was very little Latinx representation among the students.

Aleiram's resourcefulness led her to locate this educational opportunity. Aleiram was able to find out about this opportunity through independent internet research. Aleiram chose to enroll in a noncredit occupational training program to avoid paying out-of-state tuition. Aleiram was highly discouraged to pursue an Associate's Degree in Nursing. "Waste of time." At that time, if she were to complete the degree she would not have been eligible to become a Registered Nurse in North Carolina because of her undocumented status. The CNA 2 class was offered in the evenings four days a week over the course of four months. The curriculum was highly

focused and accelerated to best prepare students for future employment. “So it prepared me more for a hospital setting.” She successfully completed the program and earned her CNA 2 certification.

She continued to utilize the internet to find educational opportunities to grow her skills for personal and professional use. “All the time I've always had researched. Like even now, I go on community college websites. And I always look at their continuing education programs, just because I always like to learn new things.” Examples of the other noncredit occupational training programs she has completed at various North Carolina community colleges include activity director and entry-level medical interpreter. When asked about why she selected noncredit occupational training as opposed to other higher education options, Aleiram emphatically responded, “way cheaper.” Due to the lower cost and shorter time commitment, Aleiram primarily sought out noncredit occupational training programs at various colleges in the state. Aleiram also pursued noncredit occupational training through a private for-profit educational provider. She earned an advanced interpreter certificate that made her eligible to take the nationally recognized certified medical interpreter exam. The cost of the national exam is over $1,000, so Aleiram decided not to take the exam due to the cost. Aleiram did believe that the combination of the DACA program and completing a noncredit occupational training program has positively affected her life. “Having DACA, going to a community college and getting my certificate; it's made me have a better, higher paying job, more opportunities to learn more things about the medical field.”

Employment

After Aleiram successfully completed her CNA 1 credential in high school, she secured a part-time job at a small assisted living facility. They did not use E-Verify at this facility, so she was able to apply without any questions about her citizenship status.

> And like I said, back then, they weren't really doing the E-Verify, so I was able to get a job during my 11th grade year. I was working part time, and I was going to high school, at an assisted living. And I loved taking care of the residents. That was my first experience as a CNA, and I honestly loved it there.

Aleiram continued to work at this facility for just above minimum wage even as her family continued to grow in size. Unfortunately, her relationship with her children's father did not work out and was left without any financial support. To make ends meet as a single mother of three, Aleiram worked multiple shifts. Aleiram felt good about the work she was doing and remained at this facility until 2012.

In 2012, the DACA program was announced and Aleiram immediately applied for and was accepted into the program. Her new status afforded her the opportunity to explore new job opportunities. After securing her CNA 2 certification she applied for a position at a reputable hospital located approximately 40 minutes from her home. "And then after I did get my certificate, I was able to work at the hospital and work as a CNA 2, and get a full time job. And get paid of course a little bit more money than I had been making before." The new position afforded her the financial compensation she had been seeking to better care for her children. The accelerated and focused makeup of the CNA 2 equated to a quick return on investment. Aleiram proved early on that she was an asset and leveraged her bilingualism to become an interpreter at the facility. Aleiram continued to do the work she loved at the hospital and proved to be an essential employee.

DACA

When the DACA program was announced in 2012, Aleiram was eager to apply and take advantage of the newly announced program and potential opportunities.

> Whenever the Obama administration decided that they were going to do the DACA, it was a relief. I was praying and hoping that that was going to come through so I could be able to become some kind of legal here. Like on our license, it says lawful persons, no legal status, something like that. So I was really relieved. I was really grateful.

Specifically, she was most interested in the access to workforce opportunities the program offered. DACA allowed her to apply for job opportunities she was previously ineligible to apply for because she did not have a Social Security number. However, by entering the program, it made Aleiram feel extremely vulnerable because she was no longer in the shadows. Aleriam thought the reward outweighed the risk.

> I guess I learned that a lot of people don't really care to know about DACA. I'm basically on my own all the time. I have shared it with some of my coworkers now that I work with... I was embarrassed about it before, but now that I'm older, I'm like you know, it's something to be proud of. I've been here in this country for so many years and I've done so many things that maybe a lot of people haven't gotten the chance to do. And I have a good job.

The program met her workforce expectations by enabling her to secure a new job, but it did not open as many doors when it came to higher education. Aleiram had to pursue nontraditional routes to enter higher education because the DACA program did not provide her access to federal financial aid or guarantee her in-state tuition. Since the inception of DACA, it has been legally contested and forced many recipients like Aleriam to be in a state of limbo due to its

uncertainty. This level of uncertainty made Aleiram feel even more vulnerable than before in 2020.

> And then COVID started. And I was like, do I think about COVID or do I think about my DACA? I'm one of the people that work on the front lines, because I work at a COVID testing site. And I would just tell my mom, because I would come home and tell mom, You know mom, they can't stop this. They need me. I'm an interpreter there. I register patients. I help people out. They need me. They can't stop this.

As vulnerable as Aleiram may have felt she still exuded hope and confidence about her future:

> But I was like how can people be so cruel if a lot of the front line workers are DACA recipients? And I consider myself one of them because I'm working in the heat. I'm working... I mean first we started working in the cold because back then it was still cold. We would freeze ourselves outside waiting for people to come and get tested for COVID. And then it started getting hot, and now we burn ourselves in the heat. And I'm like they can't stop this.

She continued to renew her DACA application upon each renewal period and scraped together the funds to cover the application fee in hopes it would allow her to keep pursuing and dreaming.

Conclusion

Lifelong learning is something Aleriam valued and saw as a tool to help her grow personally and professionally regardless of her citizenship status. The knowledge she gained is something she knew could not be taken from her and wanted to set a good example for her children. Noncredit occupational training proved to be the most economical and practical option for Aleiram to further her education as a DACA recipient.

> And when I came to work at the hospital where I'm working at, it only took me maybe a year to make even more money than what I was making before. So having DACA, going to a community college and getting my certificate; it's made me have a better, higher paying job, more opportunities to learn more things about the medical field.

Aleiram knew the opportunities for her children are endless in the United States because they are citizens, so she encouraged them to be their best and take advantage of all opportunities.

> And I would tell my kids that... I've done this and I've done that and I always tell him, Go to college, graduate, have a career because one day, you're from here. You're born here. You can pay in-state. You can go to college, and I'm going to support you. I always tell them that I'm always going to support them.

Aleiram hoped her life journey and story would positively affect and influence her children. "I always bring up my stories... In order for them to realize that they can always accomplish whatever they want to. It's emotional but, at the same time, I feel very proud of everything I have accomplished." Aleiram wanted her message to go beyond just her children, but other Latinx students.

> Well, if people like me have the opportunity to go to school, especially younger people; high schoolers, I would tell them not to stop with a high school diploma, to further their education, to keep going. And if they have the support system to help them financially, emotionally, to keep going, and if they have DACA, to take care of it, don't do anything crazy. Use it to benefit you, use it to have a better job, to have a better education, to make their parents proud, and just keep moving forward with it. To make their family proud and say they went to college and they had a career and they have a good job.

Aleiram summed up her thoughts best when she stated, “sometimes I think I don't even belong here because like me, I'm Mexican, but I don't really know the history from Mexico. So, I feel like I'm not from here, but I'm not from there either.” Until a pathway to citizenship is established, Aleiram will always feel unsettled navigating a future for her and her family.

Andrea

Andrea was a 31-year-old woman born in Mexico. Her dad was living in the United States at the time of her birth working in the agriculture industry in Texas and sending money home to his family. Andrea’s mother joined her husband a few years later. Andrea and her brother were left in Mexico with her grandmother for several months while her mother walked across the border to join her husband. Andrea was five years old when her parents went back to Mexico to bring her and her brother to the United States. Andrea had a younger sister and older brother. Her older brother was born in Mexico and would later be deported back to Mexico and has since passed away. Her younger sister was a U.S. citizen and was born in North Carolina a year after Andrea arrived.

Early Life

Andrea enrolled in kindergarten a couple of months after arriving to the United States, embarking on her educational journey. As a kid, Andrea aspired to become a medical doctor, “I wanted to be in the medical field all my life as far as I can remember.” She knew early on that she wanted to be in the medical field and that she needed to do well in school. Andrea performed very well in school. Every year she earned plaques and awards for being a straight A student. “I have always loved school. I was always an over achiever.” The more impressive fact is that she did it without any assistance from her parents. Her parents did not speak English, so they were

not able to assist her with her homework. Andrea was self-sufficient and motivated. This trait would serve her well during her life's journey.

She grew up in a small rural community of mostly Latinx families. She had several extended family members that lived in the community, so it was a close-knit community.

> I pretty much know everybody here. It's mostly Hispanics here actually. I have a cousin that also has DACA but he lives across the street. I pretty much know a lot of... I know everybody here because I've been here since I was five.

The community was a split of undocumented and documented Latinx families. The community was composed of families that worked in either agriculture or manufacturing facilities. They were happy and made enough money to make sure their families had the essentials like food, shelter, and love.

Coming of Age

After taking numerous healthcare career prep classes in high school, she decided she rather pursue a career as a Registered Nurse as opposed to a medical doctor.

> Well, when you're a kid, you want to be a doctor, that's what I wanted to do. But then as you get older, you're like, Having a doctorate is going to be a lot harder. That's why I wanted to do nursing because you get to start somewhere lower. Then I realized I couldn't do nursing.

Andrea continued to excel academically and in high school; she graduated third in her class. Her future shined bright and she was eager to start tackling her educational and professional goals. While in high school Andrea began to learn about her undocumented status. She did not receive much guidance or information from her counselors about educational and career options. She had to research and review her options by herself without support from her parents or counselors. Her

senior year was when she found out she could not apply for financial aid and that she would need to reconsider her higher education options. It wasn't until Andrea applied to community college that she fully learned about her undocumented status and the limitations it posed. "That's whenever I really realized though, that there's going to be blocks."

Higher Education

Upon completing high school, Andrea enrolled at a community college located approximately 40 minutes from her home to pursue an Associate Degree in Nursing (ADN). The community college was located in an affluent area and focused on healthcare programs and college transfers. The student population was majority white, but did have a significant African American population. Andrea originally considered not enrolling into the ADN program because she knew she could not afford the out-of-state tuition rate. However, her benevolent supervisor and owner of the drug store where she worked offered to cover the cost of her tuition.

> I said, Well, I can't afford it. It's too much money. She had asked me, how much do you need? And I said, 'that's a lot of money.' I just remember telling her it was a lot. And I had worked for three or four-years for her at the time already and she just gave me a check and she said, 'Don't worry about it.' She said she would pay for it. She gave me a check, I took it to school. She knew ever since I started working for her, I wanted to be a nurse.

Andrea was very thankful for the opportunity and took on the challenge of working and going to school full-time. It was at this community college that Andrea enrolled in her first noncredit occupational training program, CNA 1. She enrolled in the CNA 1 class while completing the ADN program prerequisites. CNA 1 is the basic credential that is required to become a Registered Nurse. It is awarded by the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and

is the foundation for practice at higher levels. CNA 1 is as an essential credential because it is a requirement to attain a higher-level degree or credential. It was then that she realized noncredit programs charged a flat, affordable tuition rate and did not include an out-of-state tuition rate. This was a great cost savings for Andrea. The CNA 1 program was very different from her other college classes. The class included reading and lecture like her other classes, but focused heavily on clinical practice. Clinical practice reinforced the necessary technical skills that she would need to be an effective on the job as a patient caretaker. Andrea expressed how helpful it was having a practitioner in the classroom to instruct and reinforce the necessary skills she would use on the job. “I did so well in her class because she was a nurse and she pretty much could tell me what we needed to know.”

Andrea successfully passed the CNA 1 class and obtained her credential with the state of North Carolina. Andrea’s undocumented status did not hinder her from being approved to obtain this credential, but left her puzzled. “I don't understand why we can get a certified nursing assistant license, but can't get a Registered Nurse license.” The state of North Carolina, at that time, allowed undocumented students to sit for the CNA 1 exam and become certified. However, she was not afforded the same opportunity to become a Registered Nurse in North Carolina.

The ADN program was academically challenging, while juggling a full-time job. Andrea completed a year and a half of the ADN program and all her required prerequisites before encountering her first academic setback. Andrea narrowly failed one of her summer courses and was advised to take a break from the program. When she reapplied to pick back up where she left off in the ADN program, she encountered another setback. When looking to reenter the nursing program, the admissions office requested various governmental documents that she did not possess. They advised her that due to her being undocumented she can enroll in the ADN

program, but would not be able to sit for the Registered Nurse exam and obtain her license. After hearing this news, Andrea thought it would be useless to continue with the program and decided to withdraw.

> They said, Well, you can keep going to school with us, that's not a problem. The problem is you won't ever be able to get your license in the state. And that's when I said, Well, it's pointless to even try to go and pay that much money if I'm not going to be able to get my license. So I dropped out at a year. I dropped that at a year and a half. Which I don't understand why we can get a certified nursing assistant license, can't get a Registered Nurse license. Pretty much I think I felt like the world closed up to me, because I just didn't even want to go back to school.

This was in 2009, three years before the DACA program was announced. Andrea focused on work for the next year or so. “I wish we could go to school, go for anything we wanted to in the state.”

As time went on, Andrea sought alternative options to jumpstart her healthcare career and increase her pay. Andrea found this new option through her local community college. Her local community college was a small college that offered many technical training programs, both as a degree, and as noncredit occupational training to support the local manufacturing and healthcare industry. The community college was predominantly white and catered largely to dual enrolled students (i.e., high school students taking college classes). There was very little Latinx representation at the college. Andrea elected to enroll in the CNA 2 program, a noncredit occupational training program, due to her limited higher education options at the time. The CNA 2 program provides training in select advanced nursing assistant procedures. Once students acquire the necessary skills and knowledge they may obtain their CNA 2 certification with North

Carolina Board of Nursing. In order to be eligible for the program students must be a CNA 1 and have no history of abuse, neglect, or misappropriation of property. Andrea made this decision to avoid paying out-of-state tuition and quickly gain a credential to secure a new job in healthcare. The class was offered in the evenings during the week, so this allowed her to work during the day. The program would only take her one semester to complete and prepare her for her future job.

> I had cousin in there with me. We both just did it for the job though. Because I wanted to work in the hospital, I wanted to work in the medical field, so we just wanted to be a CNA 2. We wanted to be a CNA 2 so we could work in a hospital. It was really easy, because a lot of the stuff, we covered in nursing school. I just needed to be certified. And it wasn't a long process. I think it was not even half of a year long, during the night.

Andrea was pleased with the short and focused nature of the CNA 2 program. She was excited and encouraged about the direct employment opportunity the CNA 2 program provided her at the conclusion of the program. To enhance her marketability to employers she obtained her Notary Public certification through the community college she attended for the ADN program. She successfully completed the notary class in two nights. Much like the CNA 2 program she completed, the notary class experience was transactional and served a very specific purpose. The noncredit occupational training programs provided her with the essential education and skills required for the job.

Employment

Andrea's first job she had was at a drug store. She worked there part-time while in high school. Eager to work more hours to earn more money, the lead pharmacist referred her to a pharmacy shop his wife operated. There she could work full-time. Andrea applied and was

offered a customer service position. She would work there from 2006 to 2020. Even after she secured a full-time position at the hospital, she continued to work part-time at the pharmacy until their closure in 2020. Andrea enjoyed the opportunity to earn a little extra money. After completing her CNA 1 certification, Andrea elected not to use this certification to work in a nursing home, “So, I actually looked into it, but all I could find was jobs that paid less than the pharmacy, so I wasn't going to do it.” Andrea was not willing to take a pay cut to use her new certification. She instead opted to use this certification as a stepping stone to her next credential and healthcare career advancement.

Immediately after completing the CNA 2 program in 2014 she applied for a night time position at a reputable hospital located about 30 minutes from her home. “I got the certification, and I remember I automatically got a job.” Within weeks she was offered the position and started working at the hospital’s heart center. Andrea would eventually move to the day shift after proving herself as an asset. However, Andrea’s progression was halted because her DACA renewal application was lost. Without her approved documentation, she was let go from her position. Her hospital supervisor thought so highly of her that she offered her a job as her nanny until her situation was resolved. Andrea did this all while maintaining her job at the pharmacy. Thankfully, her DACA renewal application was located and processed. Her job was no longer available, but was able to secure a new job at the hospital’s labor floor. She worked as a patient navigator, interpreter, and staff notary. Andrea had always aspired to be a pediatric nurse, so working on the labor floor was a dream come true. As Andrea put it, “I'm just happy with being able to work at the hospital which is where I wanted to work.”

DACA

The DACA program was announced in 2012. Andrea immediately applied for the program once it was announced and was excited about the opportunities the program could offer her. She was most excited that she would be able to work legally for any employer under the DACA program.

> But thankfully, I had heard about DACA, that was one first, as soon as they announced it, I applied for it. I just knew I would be able to work wherever I wanted instead of just a little independent owner, you know?

Andrea hired a lawyer to help her complete her initial application. Andrea wanted to be sure she completed the application correctly and would not be denied. She was successfully granted DACA status in 2012 and has religiously submitted her renewal every two years with the assistance of the lawyer. Andrea did experience a setback with the program around 2014 that gravely impacted her. Her DACA application was sent to the wrong location and her status had expired. Thankfully, she was able to advocate herself and had the matter resolved and regained her DACA status. Unfortunately, she lost her job at the hospital because she was not able to document her legal status. Once the matter was resolved she reapplied to the hospital and was offered a new position.

Conclusion

Andrea acknowledges the DACA program gave her great opportunities to work, but did not remove all her barriers. The most prominent barrier resided within the higher education system and the varying state policies. Andrea would like to have access to federal financial aid, in-state tuition access in North Carolina, and a pathway for permanent citizenship status. Without a permanent solution Andrea had to remain in a state of uncertainty. Andrea wanted to encourage citizens like her sister to take advantage of the opportunities they have and better themselves and

recognize how fortunate they are compared to their undocumented family members. “I told my sister, I tell her, You could do so much better. Being a citizen you have all of the doors open.” She continued to put her best foot forward and stands proud within the boundaries of the DACA program and the state of North Carolina. “So I feel proud of who I am. Whereas, if I didn't have DACA and didn't complete a career path, then I would not be feeling complete with myself. Feeling like I did something for myself.” Andrea still aspired to be a Registered Nurse, but until she saw a permanent solution she always just settled.

Alma

Alma was a 32-year-old mother of three who was born in Mexico. She arrived to the United States when she was eight years old. Her mother was from Mexico and was a successful small business owner in Mexico prior to her arrival to the United States. Alma’s maternal aunt petitioned her, so that she would have an active visa while living in the United States. Her father was from Guatemala and was the first to arrive in the United States for work opportunities in the agriculture industry. He has since passed away in his native country of Guatemala. She has three older sisters and two older brothers. All her siblings arrived to the United States undocumented. One brother was a DACA recipient. The other brother was deported to Mexico due to a criminal conviction. The oldest sister received a U Visa due to domestic violence in her previous marriage. The second to oldest sister remained undocumented. The final older sister married a U.S. citizen and was a resident.

Early Life

Alma’s parents divorced prior to her father leaving Mexico for work opportunities in the United States. Alma’s mother began dating another man while living in Mexico. Alma’s father would still send money home to the family in Mexico while working in the United States.

Unfortunately, a situation arose between Alma's mother's boyfriend and family that caused her father to fear for their wellbeing. Alma's father arrived to Mexico in the following months to check on his family. Alma's father arranged a dinner with all the kids and to Alma's mother's surprise he had actually devised a plan to relocate all the kids to the United States. "So it was a shock... not only is my mom left behind, but then I'm coming to a whole new country." This was the start of Alma's journey to a small rural town in North Carolina.

All the kids were brought to North Carolina to live with Alma's mother's sister who had arrived to North Carolina years ago along with her other siblings. Alma's mother would follow in the coming months to rejoin her family. Shortly after Alma's family arrived, her father relocated to Georgia for a new job and would not be as available in her life. Alma would be surrounded by her mother's family that had previously relocated to this small town in rural North Carolina. "So, of course, we came here with nothing, literally. Probably just the clothes that we had on, and that was it." Alma arrived to the U.S. with nothing and only received used clothes through donations, so her clothes were a constant target of ridicule from her classmates. As Alma put it, "Children can be cruel." The adjustment to the new culture and language were tough, especially in the school environment.

The school that Alma attended was made up of primarily white and African American students. The handful of Latinx children in the school did help breakdown the language barrier, but proved to be an inconvenience for them when they had to help interpret. Alma also leaned on new American friends to help her adjust.

I had some American friends that if I said something incorrectly, they would correct me. And it was embarrassing, but actually it was a good thing because I was able to say the

> word correctly. So that actually helped a lot. They were not being mean, they were just trying to help me to say it correctly.

Her mother was not able to be actively involved with her education because not only did she not know the language, but she lacked formal education. Alma felt this was a barrier many Latinx students encountered too.

> You don't have that parent involvement because I know for me, not that my parents didn't want to be involved, they just didn't know how to because they didn't know the language. So the language barrier kind of stopped her from knowing too much about what was going on in school.

Alma had to learn early on about self-reliance and perseverance. Alma befriended many Americans and was able to quickly learn the English language during her time in elementary school. Alma began to excel in elementary and middle school once she adapted to the new language.

Coming of Age

In high school, Alma enrolled in honors courses and began pursuing a healthcare pathway. Though Alma excelled academically she remained very much to herself and kept a close circle of friends. Her older brother would politely antagonize her about whether or not she had any friends in school. However, she did, but was just particular about with whom to be friends. While in high school, Alma found love and became pregnant with her first child her senior year. At the time, her mother was mad and concerned she would not be able to finish school and pursue her dreams. Alma moved in with her boyfriend's family for support. While in high school, Alma met with her guidance counselor to get direction on how to apply to college and understand her options once she learned of her undocumented status.

> Honestly, it wasn't until I was in high school that I realized what my status really was. I never really knew until I found out that I was not going to be able to go to college like I was told, like every one of my classmates were going to.

Alma divulged her undocumented status to the guidance counselor and was disappointed in the response she received. Her guidance counselor told her she would not be able to attend a university and was sorry that she could not help her.

> I explained to her my situation and that basically I was brought here illegally and I didn't have any documents. And she basically told me that I was not going to be able to attend a university. That as far as she knew, that was not possible. So, of course, I was very disappointed and I was saddened by that because you see all your classmates that they're getting ready for something like that, and that can't happen for you.

Alma was devastated because she saw all her classmates applying to college, getting ready for their next steps after high school, and did not think college was not an option for her. After researching online and talking with friends, she found out she could enroll at the local community college and was encouraged. Alma persevered and graduated from high school. After finishing high school Alma made the decision to pursue a career in healthcare and enrolled in a noncredit occupational training program at her local community college in North Carolina. Being a mother before completing high school made Alma grow up quickly and proved to be a motivator.

> Whether I wanted him to be my motivator, or not, but you have another mouth to feed. It's not just me at that point, so, I knew I had to provide for him. So that one, was my number one. Then just me, wanting to have better for myself. I just wanted to have better. I guess I never settled. I had a lot of hardships, like I said, like my son, having him at a

> young age, and then I had a preemie baby, where I couldn't work. I was depressed. At the end of the day, who else was going to do it for me? You know?

Alma had another boy, but she and her child's father would go their separate ways after years of trying to make it work. Alma became a single mother of two boys and felt a sense of urgency to provide for her family. Alma later found love again and married her inspiration and current husband. Alma and her husband would go on to have a boy of their own bringing the total number of boys to three. Alma navigated obstacle after obstacle to complete her education and secure job after job to provide for her family. A few of the obstacles Alma endured included health problems, prematurely born son, access to a driver's license, and financial strife. She suffers from a rare and painful medical disorder and experienced immense amounts of pain while going to school, working, and caring for her family. As if that was not enough, Alma had to provide extra care for a prematurely born son and take months off of work to care for him. While navigating these challenges, Alma's driver's license expired and was told due to her undocumented status she was no longer eligible for a North Carolina driver's license.

> When I handed the lady my paperwork, she was like, What is this? I said, Well, this is my ITIN number. She said, What you're trying to do is illegal. You need to leave, before I call the cops. I was so humiliated at the time. I was so crushed that she talked to me that way.

Alma was distraught because this made it nearly impossible to work and provide for her family. Alma patiently waited and was soon approved for a North Carolina driver's license. All this was compounded by the fact that she was not being paid a livable wage to support her growing family. She sought new opportunities to overcome these challenges.

Higher Education

Not fully understanding the limitations of her undocumented status, Alma originally aspired to become a Registered Nurse. Alma soon learned that she would have to pay out-of-state tuition if she wanted to pursue a degree in nursing at either a community college or a public university in North Carolina. The out-of-state cost priced her out this higher education option. This aspiration was thwarted by not only the out-of-state tuition she would have to pay to enter a nursing program, but also the fact that at the time the North Carolina Board of Nursing did not allow undocumented students to obtain their nursing license. “So then that discouraged me and I'm like, well I'm just going to waste my money.” This was the justification that led Alma to enroll in a noncredit occupational training program.

Alma enrolled in the CNA 1 program at her local community college to quickly secure employment and better provide for her child. “That's whenever I pursued the CNA, so I could get a job.” CNA 1 is the basic credential that is required for nursing home duties. It is awarded by the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and is the foundation for practice at higher levels. CNA 1 is categorized as an essential credential because it is a requirement to attain a higher-level credential. Her local community college was a small college that offered many technical training programs both as a degree and as noncredit occupational training to support the local manufacturing and healthcare industries. There was very little Latinx representation at the college. Alma’s in class clinical experience that she completed at a local nursing home proved to be a highly beneficial experience. Not only did the CNA 1 program help her acquire the necessary skills needed to pass her CNA 1 certification exam, but it also connected her to a future employer. “I did that and then I was working as a nurse.” Alma was able to secure employment at the nursing home where she had completed her class clinical once she passed her CNA 1 exam.

Alma's educational pursuits did not stop there. "I think the CNA opened up the doors for me to look into other areas." While working at a pain clinic she began researching new educational opportunities to obtain a new job that paid better. Alma decided to enroll in a medical coding boot camp offered online by a private education company that would prepare her for a national medical coding certification. The class was a few weeks long and packed month's worth of educational material into the online program. Alma completed hours of independent studying to best prepare for her national certification exam. Alma successfully passed the exam on her third attempt, receiving this certification. She then secured a job, however, felt as though the program did not fully prepare her adequately for the workforce. She would continue to rely heavily on the training received on the job.

Alma, being the lifelong learner, continued to enroll in programs that enriched her life both professionally and personally to "further my education." A few extra trainings Alma completed included a patient navigator certificate through the healthcare system she worked for and a Notary Public certification through a noncredit occupational training program at a community college located 30 minutes from her home. She completed the Notary Public program in one day. The program was short and focused. The program focused on key laws and practices she needed to know in order to successful pass the Notary Public exam and become a certified Notary Public in North Carolina. Alma used her new credential to bolster her tax preparation business.

Employment

Through hard work and perseverance Alma was able to complete her CNA 1 program at her local community college and secured a job at a nursing home. After working at this facility for a couple years Alma sought out new career opportunities to better provide for her family.

"Gosh, this is not even enough to raise a child." Through a family member Alma was referred to a job opportunity at a pain clinic as a CNA 1. The position entailed duties that went beyond the scope of a CNA 1 and closely mirrored a medical assistant position. The new position provided higher compensation. The position required her to have completed a CNA 1 program and be certified. Alma met this criterion by successfully completing the CNA 1 program and passing the statewide examination.

Alma continued to ascend in her healthcare career by leveraging her earned medical credentials. Alma went on to become a medical coder at two very reputable hospital systems. Alma struggled at her first job as a medical coder and thought she needed extra training. “I want to go somewhere, where I'm going to get trained, and I'm going to be trained correctly.” Alma went on to apply at a different hospital and quickly found her footing through a strong on the job training program. “Now, I'm actually comfortable, and I know I'm doing things correctly.” Alma works from home as a medical coder for one of those reputable hospital systems. This flexibility has allowed her to care for her growing family at home while weathering the pandemic and making a livable wage.

Alma’s career is not exclusive to the healthcare industry. When Alma was younger she, worked at a tax office processing taxes and translating for the customers to help ends meet because her job at the nursing home only paid minimum wage. She had been doing taxes for family and friends for about 10 years now and had big plans for the future. “So now I'm looking into opening up a tax business.” Her mentor out of Georgia gave her advice on how to prepare for owning her own tax office. She received this training and mentorship through virtual meetings and classes to be best prepare for her next career endeavor.

DACA

When the DACA program was announced in 2012 by President Obama, Alma was in disbelief. She did not think she would ever have an opportunity to move beyond her undocumented status unless she married a U.S. citizen. She immediately began collecting the necessary documents to apply for the program and paid a tax preparer to assist her with the process. Alma wanted to make sure she did not make any mistakes that would cause her application to be rejected. Alma was approved, “It's opened up opportunities for me that wouldn't have been there before or maybe even given me a confidence boost that I didn't have before, because I was always fearful of my status.”

Alma continued to file her renewal about three to four months before the expiration date to ensure she did not lose her DACA status. After her initial application Alma began submitting her own application to save money since the DACA renewal fee is around $500. Additionally, Alma’s tax preparation experience gave her the confidence that she could easily complete the forms correctly without any assistance. “When I didn't have DACA, I knew the places that I couldn't apply.” The DACA program opened up primarily employment opportunities by allowing her to apply to larger organizations that utilize E-Verify.

The DACA program allowed Alma to better leverage the noncredit occupational training and credentials she obtained to secure employment. The greatest disappointment with the DACA program was that in North Carolina it did not afford her in-state tuition, access to federal financial aid, and when she graduated from high school the NC Board of Nursing would not allow DACA students to test and obtain licensure. This has since changed and the NC Board of Nursing does allow DACA students to test and obtain licensure.

Conclusion

Higher education and the DACA program opened many doors for Alma, but it was her perseverance and family support system that helped her walk through those doors. “When I would think about what I wanted to be, it was always nursing. So I think the CNA opened up the doors for me to look into other areas.” The navigation of the higher education system proved to be difficult and unwelcoming for her as an undocumented student. “I don't want to be ungrateful, because it's helped, but at the same time.” The noncredit occupational training option at the community college level served as a work around to access higher education. The programs Alma completed that lead to industry recognized credentials connected her to new job opportunities and an increase in pay. The North Carolina Community College System was not the only provider for noncredit occupational training opportunities. Her employer’s in-house training certifications and private for profit educational providers positioned her for workforce opportunities. Personal life situations impacted her journey beyond just her undocumented status and made for an uphill battle to achieve her goals. “I wish that was me that had the opportunity and had the legal status to be able to pursue an education. I'm not rich or anything, but I guess for the odds that were against me, I'm doing pretty good.” Alma summed up her journey best when she said “the extra mile is my normal.” Alma never gave up and hopes her story inspires others to better themselves.

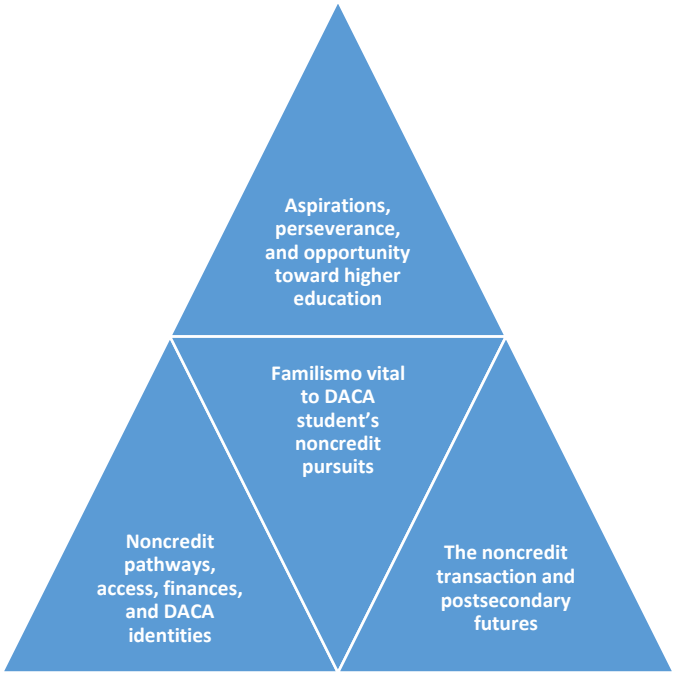
The DACA program served as a catalyst for Alma’s entry to higher education and the workforce, but was not the solution for access to either. “I was brought here as a kid. I couldn't say, No, I don't want to go. I would want to say just be a human and empathize with us.” Only a pathway to full U.S. citizenship for undocumented students will allow others like her equal opportunities in higher education and the workforce.

Thematic Findings

Though their experiences varied, four major themes were identified during the analysis process. Themes generated spoke to the personal, professional, and social experiences that shaped their journey and aspirations. The interconnections of the thematic findings are displayed and summarized below.

Figure 1

Interconnection of Thematic Findings



Familismo Vital to DACA Student's Noncredit Pursuits

Participants continuously spoke about the impact their families had on their life journey. Family played a part in motivating them to further their education and provided emotional and financial support to enter higher education and complete a noncredit occupational training program. Maximo communicated this notion best when he says, "because without my parents, I will not be nothing right now. They worked a lot to provide the best education I could get, or whatever they could afford." The same applies to Andrea's experience when she says, "My mom was always very, very supportive. My mom was like; always do whatever it is you want to do at

school. Aleiram provided the most detailed response that demonstrates how critical family support was for her journey.

> My mom, my biggest supporter, she was the one that would babysit my kids for me so I could go and get my certificate to become a CNA 2. My brother always pushed me to do better. I think that was the more important thing for me, to be a family oriented... to have that kind of environment.

Alma leaned on her mother for her support. As she put it, “My mom was really my go to.” Family members encouraged, supported, and influenced each participant at every step of their journey. This strong support system greatly aided and inspired each participant to accomplish their goals and move forward with new ones. Family proved to be an invaluable resource.

This now translates into their roles as leaders of their respective families. Maximo aspired to be a professional and role model for his children. “Even my kids are happier that I have a professional job. They look up to me. They want to be like me.” The notary program he completed allowed him to maintain his professional position at the financial institution. Maximo’s professional position is important to his family because not only does it allow him to earn more money, but it also serves as a tool to inspire his children’s future endeavors.

Aspirations, Perseverance, and Opportunity toward Higher Education

Each participant faced hardships progressing towards their educational and professional goals. Financial hardship was the common barrier for all participants. However, all seem to overcome this barrier through various avenues and persistence. For example, Maximo took it upon himself to ask for help when no help was offered beyond his parents. Not being afraid to ask for help is one form of perseverance and Maximo demonstrated this emphatically when he

detailed his account of facing financial adversity at his local community college, “The other resources was that I was never afraid to ask for help. I was not scared to tell them my situation and that's pretty much it.” Andrea’s perseverance was showcased more so with her testament of being self-motivated throughout her journey.

> I don't know if I just didn't have a counselor. I just did everything myself. I feel like it is harder to complete or get where we're at, because you have more obstacles than other people. It's just harder in every aspect. You have to pay more tuition. You can't do certain things because there are certain requirements. So, it's definitely harder than a U.S. citizen that has all the doors open.

Other participants received a lack of guidance from counselors and had to seek out educational opportunities themselves. Once they were able to locate the opportunities, they had to balance school, work, and family life. They all displayed strength and persistence in order to accomplish their educational goals. Alma best portrays this when she says; “sometimes I'm used to just having to go the extra mile. That's my normal. The extra mile is my normal."

All participants communicated stories of long work hours and constant pursuit of education to better themselves personally and professionally. Maximo provided a vivid account of his higher education experience

> I was working two shifts. I was working second and third shift. And then I had to go to school in the morning at 9:00 AM. So, I only had three hours of sleep. I remember I had to work 50 hours a week. I had to work first shift, second shift, third shift. Pretty much whatever they gave me, I had to work for it.

Alma provided a compelling account of her work ethic as well.

> So, I had gotten two jobs. I was working at the nursing home, and then I was working at the tax office. I was working from 6:30 to three o'clock at the nursing home, and then I was leaving there, and I was going to the tax office until seven o'clock.

Noncredit Pathways, Access, Finances, and DACA identities

The DACA program motivated each participant to seek higher education options to secure rewarding employment opportunities and a higher quality of life for their family. The DACA program afforded Aleiram the ability to pursue job opportunities that were not available to her previously. The DACA program also motivated her to enroll in a noncredit pathway. She enrolled in a noncredit pathway to secure the educational credential she needed in order to be eligible for advancement in her healthcare career. "And when that happened, I decided to go back for my CNA 2, which that was all I needed because I was going to have a Social Security number. I was going to have a work permit." This was quickest and cheapest higher education option for her to increase her healthcare career advancement opportunities. The DACA program did not afford them easy access to higher education, so they had to seek out alternative higher education options to establish their employment trajectory. The passing of the DACA program inspired Alma to reconsider her educational options. "Even if I wanted to get an education now, even though it'll be pricey, I can do that." However, Alma was very practical and elected to pursue more cost effective educational options that provided her with a quick return on investment. She successfully completed the CNA 1 and Notary Public programs. These two programs gave her the necessary credentials and foundation to advance her healthcare career. Andrea had great career aspirations after completing high school. These dreams were thwarted by her undocumented status. Undocumented students at that time faced numerous barriers to accessing higher education and employment opportunities that required credentials. The DACA

program and noncredit occupational training gave her a glimmer of hope. After a misguided attempt at becoming a Registered Nurse in North Carolina Andrea decided to pursue a noncredit occupational training program. She selected this higher education option because she did not have to pay out-of-state tuition, the program was short in length, and it gave her the credential she needed to secure the job she wanted. “It was just a short program.” Andrea quickly secured employment after completing the program. “I got my CNA 2, I started at the hospital.”

Maximo’s pursuit of a noncredit occupational training program was out of necessity to retain his job at the financial institution he worked at and assist the Latinx community. “I always wanted to take a notary class to help the Hispanic community, but my job requires too.” Prior to entering the DACA program Maximo was denied access to obtaining the Notary Public credential in North Carolina. “I remember I signed up for that class years ago, but I couldn't finish it.” Maximo’s participation in the DACA program afforded him the legal standing to obtain this credential. Maximo’s Notary Public credential was most applicable and helpful for his career, but served a significant purpose in his community. “Helped tremendously in the Hispanic community.”

Noncredit occupational training programs offered by the community college was their best option for affordable and focused training, and in some cases, it was seen as the only viable option due to cost and legal barriers—thus it served as the pathway into higher education. Participants completed multiple noncredit occupational training programs to secure improved employment options and higher wages. The programs they completed equipped them with the necessary skills and credentials to quickly secure employment and retain a job. The DACA program afforded participants access and opportunity to pursue new employment options. However, noncredit occupational training gave them the ability to secure the jobs they wanted.

The Noncredit Transaction and Postsecondary Futures

Noncredit occupational training proved to be a more affordable higher education option that met an urgent need for the participants. The pursuit and completion of each noncredit occupational training program was very much transactional. All sought short and specific training programs to meet an immediate need related to employment opportunities, higher wages, and job retention though a mechanism that was open to them without the barriers of out-of-state tuition and financial aid. It was through noncredit occupational training that each found a path to higher education and a professional future.

Participants clearly demonstrated this during their interviews. Maximo completed the noncredit occupational training program to retain his job. “My job requires you to have your notary.” Employers recognize the value of credentials that noncredit occupational training programs offer. This higher education option met both Maximo and his employer’s needs at a cost that was more affordable than his two-year degree. Maximo’s noncredit occupational training programs served as a compliment to his existing degree, not an alternative. His two-year degree helped him gain employment. However, his noncredit occupational training program helped him retain his job. Aleiram, on the other hand, used noncredit occupational training as a transactional alternative to increase her employment options. Aleiram chose to enroll in a noncredit occupational training program because she could not afford the out-of-state tuition rate to pursue an Associate’s Degree in Nursing. She also knew at that time she could not become a Registered Nurse in North Carolina because of her legal status. “The closest I got to being a nurse was being a CNA 2.” Andrea made the exact same decision, as Aleiram once she found out she could not become a Registered Nurse in North Carolina. She enrolled in the CNA 2 program just to secure a job at the hospital. “As soon as I got my CNA 2, I started at the hospital.” Alma

completed the CNA 1 program to obtain employment quickly. However, the CNA 1 program also served as a stepping-stone for career advancement. “I think the CNA 1 program opened up the doors for me to look into other areas, not just the nursing part.” Having completed a noncredit occupational training program and obtaining DACA status was a significant confidence booster for participants. This confidence boost gave them hope and motivation to pursue new careers and create a better life for themselves.

Three out of the four participants completed a noncredit occupational training program in the healthcare field, so by nature they aspired to help others. However, their motivation for wanting to help others varied. Alma aspired to be in the medical field because of her personal experience with the healthcare system. She knew that she wanted to help others like her that faced health challenges. Andrea knew at an early age that she wanted to be in the medical field because she always loved caring for babies. “I wanted to be a pediatric nurse as a kid.” Aleriam had the most compelling story why she aspired to be in the healthcare field.

> I wanted to be a nurse. I always wanted to help people. My mom had always been a sick person. I always wanted to be a nurse to help people like her. And the closest I got to being a nurse was being a CNA 2. And I was able to work at a hospital and help people. And I got some of my dream. Not all of it, but at least some of it.

Maximo is the only participant to have completed a noncredit occupational training program that was not exclusive to the healthcare field. However, one reason for completing the notary program was to help his community. “I have always liked to help the Hispanic community, and I know that there's a need for Hispanics notaries.”

Family support, perseverance, and hard work assisted each participant through their journey, but if it were not for hope, they would not be where they are today. Maximo's hope was fueled by faith.

> And I think the other resource that I had was that, I was always hopeful that something could change. I always have faith. I was trusting God so. That was my biggest resource, I think. But then after DACA came, I view it as don't never give up because you never know what's going to happen in the future.

Alma's hope is guided by renewed confidence, her children's future, and the potential for new opportunities. "So now I'm looking into opening up a tax business. That's what my goal is for next year to do that. And so that's where I'm going now…" Aleiram's hope is guided by reassurance that she is essential. This was validated more than ever during her frontline presence to help others during the Covid-19 pandemic.

> But I was like how can people be so cruel if a lot of the front line workers are DACA recipients? We would freeze ourselves outside waiting for people to come and get tested for COVID. And then it started getting hot, and now we burn ourselves in the heat. And I'm like they can't stop this. But whenever they said DACA continues, I was relieved.

Andrea's hope is guided similar to Aleiram's reasoning, but propelled more so by confidence that she is a contributing member of society. Her confidence transcended to hope and allowed her to overcome life obstacles. "I've been having all these obstacles, I feel like it is harder to complete or get where we're at, because you have more difficult, more obstacles than other people."

Conclusion

This chapter presented study findings from participants' lived experiences, which addressed research questions regarding:

1. What experiences led DACA recipients to enroll in noncredit occupational education in the community college setting?
2. What do the stories told by DACA recipients reveal about their educational experiences in higher education?
3. How do DACA recipients plan to use the education they gain through noncredit occupational education?

Experiences that Led to Noncredit Enrollment

As with any life journey, one's experiences guide them through myriad challenges and opportunities. Though participants experienced a unique journey, commonality among their experiences that led to noncredit enrollment was evident. Each participant faced financial hardship experiences when it came to accessing higher education. All participants came from low-income families and had limited resources. Lower cost to enter higher education via noncredit occupational training programs offered by North Carolina community colleges influenced each participant's decision to enroll. Currently, DACA students have to pay out-of-state tuition if they aspire to obtain a credit bearing college program in North Carolina.

Another common experience all participants shared was the urgency to quickly gain a skill and credential to obtain a new professional opportunity. All sought a better life financially for themselves and their family. Each determined that noncredit occupational training programs provided them the quickest entry and ladder to ascend to fulfilling careers and higher pay. Maximo voiced his challenges with accessing higher education and reasons he chose a community college. "I couldn't attend a four-year university because of my legal status. So, my

only option was a community college. It was cheaper. It was closer. That led me to apply to the community college." Since Maximo completed his two-year degree at his local community college, he felt comfortable and knowledgeable about registering for a noncredit occupational training program. When his employer required him to obtain his notary certification, he immediately enrolled in the noncredit occupational training program at his local community college. Aleiram was lured to the healthcare field and multiple noncredit occupational training programs due to her mother's ailing health in conjunction with her personal healthcare experiences. Also, the financial and state regulation barriers Aleiram encountered when looking to pursue a nursing program led her to enroll in a noncredit occupational training program.

> I think she was my main inspiration to decide to work in the healthcare field. That's what I always wanted to do, and till this day, sometimes I think I really want to do that, that I still want to be a nurse. But I have three kids and I feel like I'm not too old to still pursue my dreams, but they're growing up and I want to be more a part of their growing up. So, I think being a CNA 2 is where I would stop. And also because if I want to be a nurse and I want to go to college, I have to pay out-of-state, because DACA recipients don't receive in state tuition. And right now at this moment, I don't think I would have that money to go back to school and do that.

Educational Experiences in Higher Education

The educational experiences of each participant was one of mixed emotions and varied between noncredit occupational training program and credit bearing programs. In the classroom each had a very positive experience with both their classmates and instructors. When it came to noncredit occupational training programs, participants did not develop strong personal relationships in the classroom. Noncredit occupational training programs are short and focused,

so it was more of a business transaction than an experience. Accessing and navigating the registration process for credit bearing programs was stressful and embarrassing because they did not have either the finances or proper documentation to enroll seamlessly. Participants that enrolled in credit bearing programs had to stand in lines painstakingly divulging their lack of documentation and inability to complete their registration for class. When it came to locating and registering for noncredit occupational training programs it was more of a seamless business transaction. Participants were able to identify the course they wished to register for either through online research or word of mouth referrals. Participants completed the registration process and payment either in person or online with minimal paper work. Aleiram communicated that her experience was very transactional and focused.

> Well, when I went to… community college, all of it was online. It was modules. I didn't have to go and take a test. All my registration was online. I didn't really go to the college and take any classes, or even go to the college and register for any classes.

Maximo's noncredit occupational training program experience encompassed one Saturday. He was able to register for the class over the phone and attend class that weekend. With his DACA status, he was able to provide the proper documentation to be eligible to attain the Notary Public certification. The class itself was eight hours of intense training to prepare him for the test. It was a professional environment and was a stress free experience for Maximo.

Plan to Use the Education

Each participant leveraged their noncredit occupational training differently. However, the common denominator among the participants was that they pursued this option to grow both professionally and personally. The new skills they acquired enabled them to effectively support both their community and family. Their newfound credential and skills attained through

noncredit occupational training allowed them to be in a legal position to sign official documents, knowledgably care for ailing parents, and open up opportunities to attain a livable wage. Maximo is motivated by his Notary Public certification:

> As a credit union, if you are a member, you give that service for free. So, we have a lot of members that go to the bank to get something notarized, at all the time. Now, outside my job, a lot of our Hispanic community ask me to notarize documents, especially because some of them are in Spanish and I'm fluent, so I can assist them with that.

Alma always had a plan to use her education to secure a job and be more educated at her job. She continued to pursue noncredit occupational training programs to increase her employment options and gain a higher paying job. “After I graduated high school, then that's whenever I pursued the CNA, so I could get a job.”

Aleiram used her noncredit occupational training to secure a job, increase her pay, and help her mother navigate the healthcare system.

> Here I work at now, I'm an interpreter. The one I took at …community college was basically for me, to help me understand more about the medical terminology. And also because I wanted to learn more about medical terminology when it came to taking my mom to the doctor. Because a lot of doctors they explain to you medical terminology, but they don't really tell you what it means. So, I wanted to study more about it and maybe help people out if I needed to.

This study presented a heightened awareness about the opportunities noncredit occupational training afforded DACA recipients in North Carolina. DACA recipients in North Carolina that aspired to pursue higher education via the North Carolina Community College System have had to navigate complex and evolving policies since 2001. This study provided a

North Carolina perspective about the experiences of DACA recipients in higher education that was currently lacking. Historically, research on DACA students' experiences concentrated on postsecondary endeavors in credit bearing programs in the states of California, New York, and Texas. North Carolina was home to a significant DACA recipient population that had postsecondary education ambitions.

The findings presented provided insightful information about the lived experiences of DACA students that pursued this lesser known higher education option. The stories told brought to light the various barriers and facilitators DACA recipients encountered and the opportunities noncredit occupational training programs offered them. This study amplified the voices of DACA students and gave greater insight about their journey that led them to a noncredit occupational training program at a community college in North Carolina. Four major themes emerged that skillfully embodied their lived experiences and ambitions for the future. Chapter 5 further reviews these findings, outline key conclusions and implications, and make recommendations for future research.

Chapter Five: Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The goal of this adapted in-depth qualitative interview study (Seidman, 2019) was to explore and document the lived experiences of DACA recipients, pursuing noncredit occupational training opportunities at a community college in North Carolina. Data collection included three rounds of interviews with four participants. The following research questions guided my study:

1. What experiences led DACA recipients to enroll in noncredit occupational education in the community college setting?
2. What do the stories told by DACA recipients reveal about their educational experiences in higher education?
3. How do DACA recipients plan to use the education they gain through noncredit occupational education?

This chapter provides a summary of my findings, a discussion of the experiences observed as it relates to the literature, implications, and recommendations for future practice and research.

Summary of Findings

The experiences shared by each participant presented an eye-opening account about their life's journey. Participants encountered financial strife, bureaucratic obstacles, misguidance, and personal setbacks. The findings gave great insight about each participant's desperate path to pursue higher education and how noncredit occupational training provided them a "hidden" opportunity.

The noncredit occupational training programs each participant completed opened doors to new and enhanced employment opportunities. Many used their educational experiences as a springboard to a new job. Others used their newly attained credential to maintain their job. This study shed light on the fact that DACA students pursue an array of noncredit occupational

training programs, at different times in their lives, and for purposes relevant to their common and specific challenges. It was evident that education was valued and presented as the key ingredient to greater employment prospects and social and economic mobility.

As previously noted, numerous factors contributed to each participant's academic and employment accomplishments. Family played the greatest role in motivating and supporting participants during their journey to create a better life and encouraging postsecondary education aspirations. The second leading factor that led to their accomplishments was the high level of determination and perseverance each participant displayed. Participants combated obstacle after obstacle to enroll in postsecondary education and successfully leveraged it to embark on their professional career. Participants embodied a lifelong learner mentality and the aspiration for better educational and employment opportunities through higher education--this all under the auspice of hope that a more permanent pathway to citizenship would become available.

Discussion

Familismo Vital to DACA Student's Noncredit Pursuits

Family played a critical role in each participant's journey. The family unit is an important factor in the academic success of undocumented students, which was consistent with some of the prior literature presented by Abrego and Gonzales (2010). All participants' families placed a premium on education and aided in their pursuits. Support participants received from family members came in the form of emotional and financial support. My findings substantiated the claims presented by Abrego and Gonzales (2010) and Diaz-Strong and Meiners (2007) that families accept the financial burden as they strive to provide financial resources as they can.

Participants all displayed a drive to pursue noncredit education to secure employment, improve their family's livelihood, and establish future opportunities. This discovery supported

Ruge and Iza's (2005) finding that undocumented students make decisions based on the betterment of the family. Examples of this notion were observed in each interview. Maximo wanted to set an example for his children and secure a professional position. The Notary Public program in combination with his two-year degree made this possible. Aleiram desperately entered a noncredit occupational training program to secure a job and provide for her family. Andrea sought out noncredit occupational training programs to validate her parents' sacrifices by successfully securing a career in healthcare. Alma, much like Aleiram, pursued noncredit occupational training to access a career that would enable her to provide for her family. The drive to better their family was evident. Enriquez (2011) claimed that the achievement of undocumented students is credited to cultural survival practices rooted within strong family support, a conviction that one needs to thrive for the betterment of the family, and an aspiration to contribute to one's community was validated.

Aspirations, Perseverance, and Opportunity toward Higher Education

Maximo, Aleiram, Andrea, and Alma were like many peers and were unaware of their undocumented status until they encountered various milestones. This experience aligned with Gonzales (2016) and Jacobo and Ochoa (2011) findings that many students are uninformed of their undocumented status up until they encounter various adulthood milestones such as obtaining a driver's license, getting a job, or applying to college. Each was met with the harsh reality of the limitations of their undocumented status. Maximo, Aleiram, Andrea, and Alma experienced this harsh phenomenon when finding out they had to pay out-of-state tuition if they were to pursue a two-year or four-year degree in North Carolina. They were devastated to learn of their limited affordable higher education options. Andrea communicated her frustration and embarrassment when attempting to register for the Associate Degree in Nursing. The

psychological impact they encountered was immense and weighed heavily on their mind during their postsecondary pursuits. This concept aligned with Bjorklund (2018) findings that undocumented status is usually met with mental and social burdens that negatively affect their psyche, especially those with ambitions to pursue postsecondary education. Research found that students expressed feelings of fear, stigma, anguish, anxiety, humiliation, embarrassment, and frustration on learning about their status (Bjorklund, 2018; Buenavista, 2016). This view was presented when Aleiram voiced her feelings of shock and frustration when learning about the limitations of her undocumented status. She was frustrated that she could not pursue a two-year or four-year degree without having to pay out-of-state tuition. Aleiram's confidence was deflated until she was able to find a more affordable higher education alternative, noncredit occupational training. Acceptance into the DACA program and attainment of a credential through noncredit occupational training gave them greater confidence.

Participants in this study elected to work and pursue education. This observed trend mirrored prior research that highlighted the fact that undocumented students have to make a sacrifice to pursue postsecondary education. Specifically, prior research found that upon graduation from high school, undocumented students are subjected to the difficult chose of selecting postsecondary education or working to provide for their families, many elect to enter the workforce (Gonzales, 2016). The flexible and lower cost of noncredit occupational training programs afforded them the option to work and pursue their education. Andrea worked at the pharmacy full time during the day and completed the Certified Nursing Assistant 2 class in the evening. Noncredit occupational training programs offer flexible course schedules and locations, and may serve as the primary pathway for accessing postsecondary education to increase their employment opportunities (Milam, 2005).

Guidance counselors did not guide participants effectively when it came to determining postsecondary options and proved to be a barrier. For example, Alma was told she did not have any postsecondary options unless she paid out-of-state tuition. This was not the truth because noncredit occupational training was a postsecondary option that did not charge out-of-state tuition. Another example of gross misguidance occurred when Andrea was not advised that she was ineligible to become a Registered Nurse in North Carolina. This misguidance cost Andrea tens of thousands of dollars. Counselor's misguidance was noted in previous research observing that counselors did not provide adequate guidance and only positive experiences with others helped undocumented students more effectively navigate the school and its bureaucracies (Contreras, 2009; Nienhusser, 2014; Pérez & Rodríguez, 2012). Beyond general guidance on enrolling in higher education, participants were either not aware of their options or afforded financial assistance. Gonzales (2016) noted that applying for scholarships, as an undocumented student, is complicated and difficult to complete. Many had to work multiple jobs and get financial aid from parents to pursue higher education. Bjorklund (2018) review found that many undocumented students do not pursue higher education because of financial challenges, and most undocumented students cannot progress without additional financial support (Cebulko & Silver, 2016).

Participants showed strength and determination when it came to overcoming their barriers. This observation mirrored Contreras (2009), Jauregui and Slate (2009), Pérez (2015), Pérez and Malagon's (2007) findings that to overcome barriers undocumented students must display a remarkable amount of motivation and perseverance to achieve their goals. Maximo worked long hours, never gave up on his dream job, and sought additional credentials offered through noncredit programming to ensure his success. Aleiram overcame not only her citizenship

status, but also the challenges of being a single mother. Andrea overcame a major setback when attempting to pursue an Associate Degree in Nursing. After learning she could not become a Registered Nurse in North Carolina at that time, she stayed motivated and quickly pivoted to a noncredit occupational training program (CNA 2). Completion of the CNA 2 program gave her the credential she needed to secure the hospital job she desired. Alma managed the financial and caretaking demands of a single mother while she successfully completed her noncredit occupational training program (CNA 1). The challenges and hardships undocumented students have encountered in their higher education journey have transformed them into resilient and accomplished individuals who are better equipped to achieve their goals (Ellis & Chen, 2013). This proved to be the case when all participants pursued and obtained employment opportunities after completing their respective educational program.

Noncredit Pathways, Access, Finances, and DACA identities

Participants expressed interest in attending four-year universities, but with the financial burdens and logistics of attending, all elected to attend a community college. Alma knew paying out-of-state tuition and not having access to federal financial aid eliminated her chances of pursuing a two-year or four-year degree. She chose noncredit occupational training at her local community college because it was the most affordable higher education option. Community colleges provide critical support and access to undocumented immigrants seeking postsecondary education opportunities (Erisman & Looney, 2007). Financial burdens adversely affected DACA students' higher education opportunities. Bjorklund (2018) substantiated this noting that overwhelmingly, financial concerns are the primary obstacle undocumented students face. Participants repetitiously discussed their financial challenges they encountered in regard to the immense role in their higher education journey. Participants routinely labored long hours with

the decision between selecting work or school looming in the back of their minds. Many sought out noncredit occupational training because of the low cost and the opportunity for a quick return on investment.

Participants selected a noncredit occupational training program due to limited higher education options and the employment prospects it afforded them. Noncredit occupational training provides entry-level training to prepare students gain occupational skills, with the prospect to progress to credit programs (Van Noy & Jacobs, 2009). Noncredit occupational training programs that lead to a credential allow students to enter the workforce quickly at a relatively lower cost in the case of the participants. They leveraged their newly acquired credentials to quickly secure jobs. Noncredit occupational training is tailored toward individuals seeking to gain or improve job skills leading to initial or better employment opportunities, programs are believed to more effectively serve the needs of non-traditional students for a variety of reasons (D'Amico, 2017). The participants of this study were non-traditional students and all recognized the advantages noncredit programs offered them. Maximo knew that by enrolling and completing the Notary Public program he would be able to maintain his job. Noncredit education's flexibility in scheduling and delivery format allows adult learners to access postsecondary education, increase their job prospects, and elevate their abilities to shift to a new skill demand (Milam, 2005). Excluding Maximo, noncredit occupational training was the primary option for the participants to enter postsecondary education and secure a job in the healthcare field. Maximo's noncredit occupational training program (Notary Public) increased his marketability in the banking industry and allowed him to maintain his job.

The flexibility, combined with their lower cost, means that noncredit courses are believed to primarily enroll many of the lowest performing and economically disadvantaged students

(Grubb et al., 2003). All study participants were categorized as economically disadvantaged prior to entering higher education. Noncredit occupational training was the most financially accessible pathway to higher education that would provide rewarding employment opportunities. Noncredit training programs have the ability to provide a passageway to a viable and sustainable economic future for these populations (Xu & Ran, 2015). Completion of the noncredit occupational training programs allowed participants to be employed, and the completion of multiple noncredit occupational training programs allowed participants to have access to higher paying positions. Once participants were granted DACA status, they were inspired and motivated to pursue new careers and subsequently used education as a means. These discoveries aligned with Cervantes et al. (2015), Gonzales and Bautista-Chavez (2014), and Teranishi et al.'s (2015) findings that DACA afforded undocumented students comfort, opportunity, and a positive outlook.

Participants encountered challenges when considering what career and educational options would be available to them in North Carolina. Cebulko and Silver (2016) documented that North Carolina's laws hindered the opportunities of DACA recipients that wanted to attend college. Participants that aspired to be a Registered Nurse in North Carolina were not afforded in-state-tuition even with DACA status. Additionally, no participants were offered in-state tuition in North Carolina to pursue higher education even if they graduated from a high school in North Carolina. Though the DACA program afforded participants these new opportunities, many still remained in a state of limbo (Gonzales, 2016). Beyond the two-year renewal process, repel of DACA, and anti-immigration rhetoric between 2016 and 2020, participants felt more unsettled than ever. Each participant voiced their dismay for the political climate during the interviews. They viewed themselves as essential and were admittedly opposed to the thought that they could be deported, but hated the fact that it was out of their control.

The Noncredit Transaction and Postsecondary Futures

Participants pursued noncredit occupational training programs in a transactional manner. This type of pursuit mirrored Ozmun's (2012) findings that noncredit students complete learning in a transactional manner and are concentrated on learning objectives that will aid them in the workforce. Participants had a narrow focus when pursuing this higher education option. Aleiram pursued and completed the Certified Nursing Assistant 1 program for the sole purpose of securing a job in healthcare. She successfully completed her transaction and obtained a job in healthcare immediately after completing the program. Andrea had a similar experience when she successfully completed her Certified Nursing Assistant 2 program. She was immediately hired by a reputable hospital. The flexibility of participant programs allowed them to maintain their jobs while pursuing additional education to improve their employment and wage prospects.

The study also complemented Ozmun's (2012) findings that students that complete a noncredit education program, viewed education as a source of pride. Participants expressed great pride in completing their program and hoped it inspired their family to follow their example. Maximo repetitiously touted how accomplished he felt once he secured his position at a local financial institution. The acquisition of his Notary Public credential via noncredit education afforded him this employment opportunity. Much emphasis was placed on education and how it played a major role in securing them a better quality of life. As mentioned previously, participants continued to enroll in multiple noncredit occupational training programs. Andrea pursued and completed both a Certified Nursing Assistant 1 and 2 to increase her employment prospects. The achievement and attainment of credentials proved to be an inspiration to continuously pursue education. The value of stackable credentials and greater employment opportunities was evident and validated D'Amico (2017) claim that stackable credentials is a key

element across noncredit programs that make them highly sought opportunities for economic mobility and value add to the community.

Voorhees and Milliam (2005) refer to noncredit occupational training as the "hidden college" and in many ways, it was for DACA recipients. High school counselors did not provide information to participants about this pathway. They simply advised participants that their higher education options were limited and they must pay out-of-state tuition. Thankfully, each participant was resourceful enough to seek out this "hidden" and affordable option. Aleiram and Alma both took it upon themselves to research online for other educational opportunities to secure employment in the healthcare industry. Their research paid off and led them to noncredit occupational training programs that would quickly prepare them for a career in healthcare. Noncredit occupational training programs in North Carolina at that time did not charge out-of-state tuition rates, but rather a flat fee based on class hours and set institutional fees. For DACA recipients in North Carolina, it was not only hidden, but a desperate pathway to pursue higher education. It proved to be the cheapest and quickest way to obtain the necessary education and skills to enter the workforce and increase opportunities for social and economic mobility.

Implications and Conclusions

The experiences shared by the participants of this study offered insight about the various barriers and facilitators DACA recipients encountered when they pursued postsecondary education in North Carolina. Financial hardship and limiting employment prospects propelled participants to enroll into noncredit occupational training programs. Participants had limited financial means and no access to federal financial aid. Additionally, if they wanted to pursue a two-year or four-year degree in North Carolina, they were required to pay out-of-state tuition.

Crisp et al. (2015) echoed that financial hardships have a negative impact on DACA students' higher education pursuits and limits initial access.

The final challenge was the fact that many of the careers participants aspired to enter, did not allow them to legally obtain the required licensure due to their immigration status (i.e. Registered Nurse or Notary Public). Noncredit education served as a facilitator to combat these barriers. Noncredit education offered participants an affordable education that led to a credential and increased their likelihood of securing and retaining a job. Noncredit occupational training programs provided significant opportunities to circumnavigate the obstacles DACA students encountered when pursuing higher education, especially when it came to pursuing higher education in North Carolina.

Participants experienced a range of emotions brought on by the various experiences they encountered when pursuing higher education. When attempting to navigate and pursue credit-bearing programs, participants felt rejected and as if, they did not belong. This finding mirrors Crisp et al., findings that these type of negative experiences lead to a lack of sense of belonging.

Through determination and perseverance, participants overcame these barriers and continued to pursue higher education. Participants sought alternative educational options to enhance their social and economic mobility. They found this option through noncredit occupational training. Participants were hyper focused on their educational goals and pursued them in a transactional manner. Their higher education experience was not a "traditional college experience," but rather a transactional one that saw a means to an end. Strong interpersonal relationships were not forged in the classroom when they completed a noncredit occupational training program. Noncredit occupational training programs are short and focused, so they met their primary goal of, going to school to secure a job.

It is evident that the DACA program has afforded many undocumented students several new opportunities, but has not closed the opportunity gap. Gonzales and Bautista-Chavez's (2014) research also notes that DACA has improved access and perseverance in higher education, but was not a long-term solution. Maximo, Aleiram, Andrea, and Alma all benefited from the DACA program when it came to greater educational and employment access, but the program still fell short. The DACA program did not provide them with access to in-state tuition, financial aid, and all-encompassing employment opportunities. One may say they were still second-class citizens. Gonzales and Bautista-Chavez, (2014) asserted that the DACA program designates recipient's at best second-class citizenship status.

The limitations of the DACA program, North Carolina Community College System policies, and North Carolina State policies/statutes have greatly impacted the higher education pathway for DACA recipients. The DACA program as a whole provided opportunities to access higher education and new employment opportunities, but did not deliver a permanent answer to undocumented students' predicament. DACA recipients arrived to the United States as young children and have actively pursued the "American dream" only to find out it is complicated. They were forced to navigate a consulted and broken higher education system. The North Community Colleges' open door policy provided partial refuge. Noncredit occupational training proved to be their primary higher education lifeline. Noncredit occupational training gave them confidence, skills, and credentials to improve the trajectory of their life. It met their need and continued to guide them forward in their educational and professional endeavors. In short, it met Dallas Herring's vision that, "We must take people where they are and carry them as far as they can go" (Spolar, 2019, para. 1).

Conclusion #1: State Policies Influence DACA Students

State policies influence DACA students' decision to enter specific noncredit occupational training programs. In 2008, the North Carolina Community College System issued a memorandum titled "Unrestricted Admission of Undocumented or Illegal Immigrants" that stated most undocumented individuals are ineligible for federal and state assistance (Cebulko & Silver, 2016). Postsecondary education is one of those benefits. This substantially limited the higher education options for DACA students because they were not eligible for financial aid and were required to pay out-of-state tuition. Their only option to receive an in-state-tuition rate was to be sponsored by a qualifying employer. This was challenge because they needed the education before they could be employed. Furthermore, North Carolina's Board of Nursing's rule that denied DACA students eligibility to test and obtain their nursing license substantially derailed DACA students' options to become a Registered Nurse in North Carolina.

Conclusion #2: DACA Students Receive a Lack of Guidance

Fluctuating federal and state policies make it difficult for DACA students to receive proper guidance on educational and professional options. Due to lack of professional development, many high school and college counselors are not quipped to best advise DACA students on their higher education options. Additionally, many high school counselors are not knowledgeable about the nontraditional higher education option of noncredit education.

Conclusion #3: DACA Students Leverage Credentials

DACA students seek short-term and flexible program options to quickly enter the workforce and leverage new credentials for better wages and job security. Since DACA students pursue noncredit education to circumnavigate the challenges credit-bearing programs present (e.g., out-of-state tuition rates, no access to federal financial aid) they need multiple credentials. Having multiple credentials increases the employment opportunities, pay prospects of DACA

students at a much lower cost, and is a more expedited higher education path than pursuing two-year of four-year degrees.

Recommendations for Future Policy and Practice

Training for high school guidance counselors and higher education admission staff on policies affecting DACA students is imperative. In the cases of the participants in this study, these undocumented students were not regarded as college bound by educational staff and, as a result, were not provided vital college and financial aid information (Nienhusser et al., 2016). High school counselors and college admission staff were not able to effectively advise DACA recipients on their professional and educational options and limitations. For example, Andrea's high school counselor did not advise her that becoming a Registered Nurse was not an option in North Carolina at that time. Andrea was only advised that she would have to pay out-of-state tuition to pursue a two-year degree. It was not until she was a year into the program that a community college admission staff member advised her of this limitation. Furthermore, she was not informed of alternative healthcare career options she could pursue. To ensure DACA students are well informed of all their college and career options, educational staff members need to be abreast of local, state, and federal policies. If the counselors had been aware of this limitation, they could have advised Andrea to pursue a career as a Medical Assistant because it does not require one to be a United States citizen or permanent resident. Additionally, educational staff members could have directed Andrea to pursue this postsecondary educational option through noncredit education and avoid paying an out-of-state tuition rate. Knowledge of these policies allows staff members to coach DACA students through the limitations of their status and understand their higher education and employment options.

Beyond policy, high school and college staff must embrace best practices on marketing and communicating with DACA students. Family emerged as a major facilitator when it came to DACA students pursuing and succeeding in postsecondary education. Outreach must influence and inform family members of the opportunities postsecondary education can offer DACA students, as well as the resources available to them. Trust within the Latinx DACA community is a major factor educators must consider when conducting outreach efforts. In order to have impactful outreach efforts assigned community navigators, must be trusted members within the Latinx DACA community, including small business owners, leaders within the faith based community, and Latinx DACA students that have successfully completed a postsecondary education program. Additionally, the continuum of education from P-12 to higher education, especially the community colleges maintaining open access missions, should coordinate outreach efforts. One potential idea for outreach includes the establishment of a Diversity and Inclusion committee that is facilitated by the county school system and in partnership with regional higher education. Through coherent collaboration, the community college and county school system will be able to establish specific and measureable goals to commence outreach efforts and offer regular professional development training for both K12 and community college employees.

The proposed Dream Act of 2001 may have provided a defined pathway for citizenship and offer greater access to pursue postsecondary education, but it never came to fruition. States passed their own Dream Acts to provide enhanced financial options for undocumented students to pursue postsecondary education. For example, the California Dream Act gave state financial aid to undocumented students (Rincón, 2008). Moving forward, policy must be interjected to permit greater financial aid access to DACA recipients, so that they can pursue higher education. Flores and Horn (2009) discovered that Latinx undocumented students that live in states with in-

state tuition policies are as likely to continue in higher education as their legal Latinx citizen peers. Maximo, Aleiram, Andrea, and Alma all expressed the financial challenges they faced when entering postsecondary education. Aleiram and Alma both had to work while going to school and provide for their children. Having this responsibility made it a challenge to fully focus on their postsecondary pursuits. However, they persevered and successfully completed their noncredit occupational training programs. This is not only applicable to DACA students, but also to those that pursue noncredit occupational training. Having greater access to financial aid resources will allow students to enroll in more programs to develop their skill set at an accelerated rate.

It is critically important to recognize the financial struggles of undocumented and DACA-eligible students in an environment that requires out-of-state tuition and limits full access to financial aid. Financial challenges DACA students encounter can be combated by through a combination of creative local solutions and policy change. Efforts could include leveraging the financial resources of nonprofit organizations that assist DACA students and the community college's foundation. Community college's financial aid departments must create a referral process that seamlessly connects DACA students with a multitude of financial resources (e.g. nonprofits, foundation, etc). Financial aid staff must attend ongoing professional development that informs them of financial resources that are available to DACA students. This can be an established goal set by the county school system's Diversity and Inclusion committee. Furthermore, the community college's foundation should provide local business and industry leaders with information about the financial obstacles their future workforce, DACA students, encounter when pursuing higher education.

Additionally, implementation of a federal or state-level DREAM Act (see, e.g. California AB 130 and New York SB 7784) , would pave the way for greater access to affordable higher education, and the community college can play a role through targeted advocacy, making the case business and industry, and ensure that public-facing organizations area aware of the potential of this population to obtain an education, contribute to the economy, and accelerate social and economic prosperity, especially in economic distressed regions.

Establishing strong articulation agreements between noncredit education and credit-bearing programs will increase access and completion. All the participants expressed interest in pursuing two-year and four-year degree options in the future. By having a strong articulation agreement in place, DACA students will be able to transfer in prior noncredit education coursework. To mitigate any duplicity and expedite their progress towards completion, strong articulation agreements are a necessary facilitator. Xu and Ran's (2015) study showed that 7.2% of noncredit students transitioned to credit bearing programs within six years. The percentage is not overwhelming, but it clearly demonstrates that noncredit students have an appetite to progress into credit bearing programs. It is critical that higher education provide the platform to make the transition a seamless and efficient process.

Recommendations for Future Research

The American Association of Community Colleges (2018) reported that there are approximately five million noncredit students enrolled in United States community colleges, representing approximately 40% of all enrollment. Limited knowledge about students' experiences pursuing noncredit occupational training at a community college is evident. This study provided detailed accounts about the experiences of this significant higher education subgroup that is understudied.

Xu and Ran (2015) provided evidence that there hasn't been any organized consideration of possible factors that influenced the progression of students that pursued and completed a noncredit program. The findings of this study showed that state policies influenced DACA students' entry and persistence in higher education. The essence of this study raises awareness about ways to increase postsecondary access and success for DACA recipients' via noncredit education.

This study leads into D'Amico et.al. (2017) suggestion that noncredit-to-credit opportunities might be evaluated further as an option for growing access to community colleges. Maximo, Aleiram, Andrea, and Alma were presented with bleak postsecondary prospects, but persevered through noncredit occupational training to gain postsecondary access. Participants aspired to complete additional postsecondary degrees, so their noncredit education experiences and credentials must be recognized. Recognition through strong noncredit to credit articulation agreements increases the chances of students completing a credit bearing program. Strong articulation agreements may influence future students to pursue this lesser-known higher education option to begin their higher education journey. Understanding the correlation of strong articulation agreements between credit and noncredit programs must be further explored. Further exploration will detail whether or not it positively impacts noncredit student progression into credit bearing programs.

Lastly, this study focused exclusively on DACA students in North Carolina. To gain a greater perspective about the experiences and motivations of DACA students that pursue noncredit occupational training programs, a study encompassing another state should be considered. The context of other states would provide greater insight about the ways DACA

students navigate the higher education system as a whole. The study will also provide greater insight on how other states manage and deliver noncredit occupational training programs.

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APPENDIX A: IN-DEPTH QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview 1

Following Seidman's (2019) guidelines for the in-depth interview process, in the first 90 minute interview, the participant will be asked to put his/her experience in context and communicate their life story. The researcher will ask the participant to narrate in detail the life journey he/she took that led them to enroll in the DACA program, pursue higher education, and complete a noncredit occupational training program.

The initial prompt will begin as such:

1. In this first interview please tell me about yourself/your life story from your birth to this moment in time. I would like you to focus on your educational and professional experiences.
2. What was your neighborhood like growing up?
3. Tell me about what you wanted to be when you "grew up"?
4. What experiences led you to this moment in your professional life?
5. What memories stand out to you on your journey?

Additional prompts might include:

"Tell me about a time when x.; Can you clarify y.; Please tell me more about z.; What else shaped you and your educational and professional journey?"

Interview 2

Following Seidman's (2019) guidelines for the in-depth interview process, the second interview is to concentrate on the concrete details of the participants' lived experience. Participants are asked to reconstruct details, the details of the experience of being a DACA recipient that has completed a noncredit occupational training program, sharing details, stories, and perceptions.

Although the interview includes specific questions, ideally, the participant will narrate an uninterrupted story with relatively little intervention on the part of the researcher.

The initial prompt will include "In your last interview you mentioned x incident. Could you now try to reconstruct it in detail?; You also mentioned y incident. Please reconstruct it as well; You also mentioned z incident. Please elaborate in detail." The following questions will take place following the initial prompt:

1. What benefits has the DACA program afforded you?
2. What resources were you able to use during your journey?
3. What or who motivated you during the various stages in your journey?

Interview 3

Following Seidman's (2019) guidelines for the in-depth interview process, in the third interview participants are asked to make meaning of the lived experiences and critical incidents that they described in the first two interviews. The initial prompt will include the following short statement followed by five questions:

"In the previous interviews you told the story of your journey and elaborated certain critical incidents along the way. In this interview I'd like you to try to make meaning of them.

1. What does your life story and these incidents mean to you personally?
2. Please explain how you believe your story will impact other DACA recipients considering higher education options?
3. How has this experience impacted you?
4. Would you have done anything differently? Please explain why.
5. What's next for you and your journey?