

Chapter 2

DACA–Mexico Origin Students in the United States– Mexican Borderlands: Persistence, Belonging, and College Climate

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ABSTRACT

The Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) Program enabled more than 700,000 undocumented youth and young adults since 2012 the chance to have a lawful presence in the United States for a 2-year renewable period. With DACA status, college students could have access to financial aid and possibly in-state tuition, as well as opportunities to work legally. A correlational study was conducted in 2016-2017 with 30 DACA college students of Mexican Origin who were residing in California, Texas, Arizona, and New Mexico. They completed an anonymous online survey about their intent to persist to degree completion, their views on the college climate for diversity, and their sense of belonging on campus. The results of the study confirm the need for higher education faculty and staff to provide services and resources and to build trust with this vulnerable student population.

INTRODUCTION

Undocumented immigrants in the United States have been consistently brought into the ongoing anti-immigration debates at all levels of government, in the courts, media, and society, and on college campuses for the past few decades. The high points included the United States Supreme Court decisions in favor of undocumented immigrants receiving a public school education, California and Texas providing in-state tuition benefits for colleges and universities to undocumented students, and the implementation of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. The low points came when the media portrayed them as “illegal” and therefore unworthy of government or societal support and the DACA program was halted. In between these events, the voices of young adults started to be heard as undocumented and DACA individuals told their stories, while advocating for the ability to follow the American dream of continuing to be a contributing member of society.

Anti-immigrant sentiment in the United States heightened in 2017 when President Donald Trump decided to rescind the DACA program that President Barak Obama introduced as executive order in 2012 (Beckwith, 2017; Muñoz, 2019). This decision continues to have a profound influence on the undocumented and DACA college student population on campuses nationwide. Luna and Ireland (2019) state, “The Trump era is marked by fear, uncertainty, and perpetual limbo as the topic of immigration reform is battled between the executive office, Congress, and judicial rulings, no closer to a clear direction” (p.196). This current political climate with anti-immigrant rhetoric has jeopardized the mental health and safety of undocumented students with DACA status (Muñoz, Vigil, Jach, & Rodriguez-Gutierrez, 2018). At the same time, this vulnerable population has begun to find advocates and support networks in the form of faculty, staff, and student organizations aimed at counteracting the negativity that undocumented and DACA students encounter.

Historical and current problems that undocumented students face in the United States are access to higher education, difficulty persisting to degree completion, and the misfortune of dealing with social stigmas and social exclusion (Gildersleeve & Ranero, 2010; Lopez & Lopez, 2010; Muñoz et al., 2018; Pérez, 2012; Pérez & Cortés, 2011). This population includes young adults and college students who continue to have a temporary status that prevents them from being deported through the DACA program, even though the program has been halted and debated at all levels of government, as well as by the media and in court. More than 90 college and university presidents signed a petition in 2016 to continue and expand the DACA program in an effort to increase their support for their DACA students (Muñoz, 2019; Redden, 2016). This public support gave others in higher education the courage to find ways to be proactive in providing a safe and welcoming environment for this vulnerable student population.

In the authors’ 2016-2017 study, DACA college students of Mexican origin (D-MO) who live in the Borderland States of California, Texas, Arizona, and New Mexico anonymously completed an online study that provided an opportunity to create a demographic profile of this emerging student population and to explore more about their intent to persist to degree completion. Studying persistence allowed for concentration on the behavior and attributes of students who are already successfully overcoming existing barriers (Rigali-Oiler & Kurpius, 2013; Wintre & Bowers, 2007). With an understanding of the barriers that DACA-Mexico Origin (D-MO) students face and how these students can overcome those barriers, higher education administrators and faculty may be able to propose and implement appropriate and effective solutions to increase persistence rates and make a college education accessible to this marginalized group.

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