



Article

“I Need this Chance to . . . Help My Family”: A Qualitative Analysis of the Aspirations of DACA Applicants

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Abstract: This study explores the aspirations of undocumented youth seeking to defer deportation from the United States and obtain temporary employment authorization through Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). The data are twenty-three letters submitted from 2013–2015 to a nonprofit foundation in the US Southwest that provides financial assistance to pay DACA application fees. Conducted within a narrative framework, analysis of emergent themes reveals a *story* of hope and family that counters the dominant political story of fear and threat to public safety. Specifically, from the DACA applicant’s standpoint, family is their most valuable form of social capital and by providing the means for employment and the education needed to launch a sustainable career, DACA status provides the leverage required to maximize family capital. Our analysis reveals a disturbing disjuncture between their *testimonios* and the realities of a policy intended to serve as a safety net. The current political climate makes aspirations like theirs increasingly difficult to achieve and may actually exacerbate legal and social liminality.

Keywords: DACA; Dreamers; education; family; immigration; mixed-status families; work

1. Introduction

For many immigrants in the United States, the family is the essence of belonging and self (Castañeda 2019; Getrich 2019). Many anti-immigrant proponents may assume migrants come to the US solely for individualistic reasons, but their motives are much more complex, often underlined with dreams for their families and communities. This is exemplified in a recent viral photo of a deceased father, Oscar Alberto Martinez Ramirez hugging his lifeless baby daughter Angie Valeria, drowned in the Rio Grande. In an era where immigrant children end up in detention centers separated from their parents, there exists a downtrodden pattern concerning the status of undocumented youth. Over the years various administrations have sought to address the issue. In 2001 President George W. Bush’s administration endorsed The Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act, otherwise known as The DREAM Act (U.S. Congress 2002). It would have provided conditional residential status enabling undocumented minors (now referred to as ‘Dreamers’) to obtain an education. After six years, they could apply for permanent residency. Over the next eleven years the bill was revised and renamed multiple times, but was never passed.

In 2012, President Barack Obama sought to bypass Congressional gridlock by ordering implementation of a new immigration policy called Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) (U.S. Department of Homeland Security 2012). DACA enables undocumented youth to work or attend school in the U.S., but unlike the DREAM Act, it allows only temporary relief from deportation for two years (Cohen 2012). To obtain DACA status, applicants must complete a rigorous application process and pay a \$495.00 nonrefundable application fee.

Unlike his predecessors, President Donald Trump characterized DACA as an illegal migration magnet, attracting large numbers of (unwanted) unaccompanied minors from Central America. As a result, he has made its repeal a high priority (Duke 2017). Shortly after the announced repeal, fifteen states and six Dreamers filed suit (Walters 2017). In August 2018, a district court judge found the repeal had not been sufficiently justified and ordered renewals of DACA to resume (Gamboa 2018). While these DACA cases were moving through the courts, Congress introduced five legislative bills to replace or supplement it (Alcindor and Stolberg 2017). On 28 June 2019, the Supreme Court announced it would hear arguments in a case during its next term that could potentially determine the fate of DACA (Shear and Liptak 2019). The uncertain status of DACA and of its recipients underscores the Trump era on immigration policy. It destabilizes notions of belonging because family separation is at the heart of current immigration policy, and for most Dreamers family provides a sense of belonging.

Since its inception, politicians and pundits have debated the virtues and dangers of DACA at length and their positions and points of view have been intensely reported in the news and social media. But the voices of those whose lives are most impacted by DACA—undocumented youth—have not been center stage. In fact, fear of deportation has caused many to seek anonymity. Particularly problematic is the silence of potential applicants. Yet, the undocumented youth who do not yet have DACA protection are most directly impacted by the political and legal battles over it. What do they hope to achieve with DACA status? How will it improve their lives? What claims do they make to get financial assistance in order to become DACAmended (Gonzales et al. 2014)?

This article addresses these questions by qualitatively analyzing the application essays of twenty-three Dreamers submitted from 2013 to 2015 to a local nonprofit organization in the southwest region of the US that underwrites application fees for DACA. This study is unique in that it captures the claims made about DACA by undocumented youth at the time of application rather than after DACAmendment. The letters are offered as *testimonios* or reflexive narratives, which themselves are part of a larger discourse of liberation and solidarity (Beverley 2004; Reyes and Rodríguez 2012). The following pages situate the research within the relevant scholarly literature, describes the methods used to collect and analyze these twenty-three essays and provides profiles of the Dreamers who penned the letters. The findings present three interrelated themes: family, future, and work/school. They reveal how these applicants viewed DACA as a beacon of hope that enabled the fulfillment of the dreams of multigenerational families. The subsequent discussion compares their aspirations with what is possible within current political, legal and cultural realities of immigration in the US today. This research addresses a gap in the literature by providing a perspective from Dreamers initiating steps to apply for DACA, about how they perceive of its benefits, and how the assistance intersects with their aspirations for themselves and for their families.

2. Literature Review

This study builds upon and contributes to existing scholarship regarding Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). As part of a larger United States narrative of citizenship and belonging, many DACA-eligible youth and others conflate the DREAM Act and DACA, creating a Dreamer identity. As de la Torre and Germano (2014) argue, the identity challenges and capsizes negative discourses of undocumented immigrants by illuminating their acculturation and contributions to society. Furthermore, Lauby (2016) emphasizes the consequences of DREAM Act and DACA narratives, which advocate policy change by presenting undocumented youth as uniquely assimilated, driven and educated. For Obinna (2017) though, contemporary immigration policy is intertwined with racialized and criminalized narratives of migrants. Examining the consequences of racialized immigrants, Jones and Brown (2017) argue federal, state and local immigration policy creates racial hierarchies.

Indeed, there exist unique experiences of undocumented youth awaiting the passage of the DREAM Act, including uncertainty, but also resilience, identity formation, and empowerment through collective survival (Méndez-Pounds et al. 2018; see also, DeAngelo et al. 2016). As Méndez-Pounds et al. (2018) illustrate, there remains disconnect between undocumented youth and their countries of origin,

which are further complicated by the consequences of being undocumented (see also [Forenza and Mendoca 2017](#)). Being detached from their countries of origin while simultaneously excluded from full participation in the country in which they were reared leaves many Dreamers in limbo. This liminal legality ([Menjívar 2006, 2008](#)) impacts not only their experiences but their goals ([Torres and Wicks-Asbun 2014](#)). Moreover, the rich literature on undocumented youth and their families informs our analyses, emphasizing the ways in which Dreamers are likely from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, whose families face financial instability, and whose goals include improving the lives of their entire families.

Over time and in various ways, a vibrant body of scholarly literature shows how meta-narratives about employment, schooling, family and the American Dream may actually socially isolate rather than assimilate undocumented youth into mainstream American culture. As immigrants who engage in daily routines commonly associated with citizenship, they may feel entitled to it ([Sassen 2003](#); [Meyer and Fine 2017](#)). But the citizenship status of the families of Dreamers is often complicated. For example, laws distinguishing between citizens and non-citizens result in members of the same family being treated differently (i.e., some members of the same family are eligible for Medicaid or Food Stamps while others are not). Regardless of differential treatment, [Enriquez \(2015\)](#) argues that the experience of living in mixed-status families results in similar encounters with multigenerational punishment, particularly in terms of “shared economic instability” (948). In their study of DACA-eligible young people, [Amuedo-Dorantes and Antman \(2016\)](#) note that nearly thirty percent of their sample was living in poor households while almost half lived in households that fell one-and-a-half times below the poverty level. It is clear that many Dreamers shoulder significant financial responsibility for their families. This is evident in their finding that legal authority to work through DACA resulted in significant increases in labor-market participation and simultaneous reductions in schooling investment ([Amuedo-Dorantes and Antman 2017](#)).

While the educational aspirations of undocumented youth mirror those of citizen youth, immigration policy creates significantly different expectations and experiences. In their study, [Torres and Wicks-Asbun \(2014\)](#) found that while a great majority of their participants dreamed of attaining higher education, due to their legal liminality, less than half felt that attending college was a realistic goal. In addition, undocumented parents often lack the means to provide financial support for attending college and as [Gonzales \(2011\)](#) points out, the financial need of their families often forces Dreamers to choose work over education. Accordingly, financial responsibilities remain a key motivating factor for seeking DACA status, especially for Dreamer heads of household.

For Dreamers who have their own citizen children, multigenerational punishment persists in a number of ways. [Enriquez \(2015\)](#) illustrates how citizen children of undocumented parents experience punishment as they engage in risk management strategies involving family members’ deportations and detentions (see also [Rodriguez 2016](#)). [Fix and Zimmerman \(2001\)](#) further argue that mixed-status families “are more likely to be poor than other families” ([Fix and Zimmerman 2001](#), p. 401) and less likely to have health insurance. Likewise, [Rodriguez \(2016\)](#) notes how structural forces have created more mixed-status than immigrant families, a majority of which are composed of individuals with Latino or Mexican-origins. Similarly, a survey of migrant families in Los Angeles found the undocumented status of mothers tends to have a significant effect on children’s educational attainment ([Bean et al. 2011](#)). These consequences may be compounded by mixed-status spouses. For example, undocumented male spouses who are deported often leave their citizen wives behind as single mothers who must provide for and care for the children ([Dreby 2015](#)). These families, who choose to remain intact, run the risk of deportation, as removal of noncitizens has become easier for law enforcement ([Fix and Zimmerman 2001](#)). Risk of deportation limits participation in social life ([Enriquez 2015](#)) and DACA offers the possibility of inclusion and improved lives of entire families.

[Gonzales et al. 2014](#) suggest the immediate relief DACA provided was some semblance of economic and social incorporation, with those having higher levels of education and greater access to resources benefiting the most. The impact on social standing is clear, illustrating how DACA can produce higher levels of stratification among undocumented immigrants (see also [Amuedo-Dorantes](#)

and Antman 2016). Simeons et al. (2017) found DACA recipients' access to opportunities and feelings of belonging to a peer group were countered by unforeseen challenges, including greater adult responsibilities. As Hsin and Ortega (2018) suggest, the unpredictable and provisional nature of DACA actually creates barriers to educational attainment primarily because DACA only provides a choice between work for attaining income and schooling, which could create a loss of income. Although many policymakers highly stigmatize Latin American immigration as a social problem, Cornejo Torres and Ubeda (2015) examine the cultural diversity that immigration produces. Yet, they find that immigrant families generally presented a low ability to help their children in school. At the same time, school is seen by the parents as necessary for their children's well-being. Nonetheless, the lack of cultural and social capital keeps many DACA-seekers in often discriminatory and low-paying jobs, affecting the family's social location in society (Morgenshtern 2019). Roth (2018) explores how DACA-youth navigate their ambiguous or liminal legal status. He suggests it creates a twofold dilemma for immigrant youth, primarily because DACA legally (and violently) communicates opposing messages: the prospect of social inclusion and the possibility of never fully obtaining it. Finally, Mckee and Stuckler (2017) argue that migration to the United States offers hope in terms of safety and opportunity, but there is also the harsh reality of false promises. Despite this, DACA presents possibilities for its recipients and their families.

While the published scholarship about DACA is quite diverse, when viewed together, it points to questions worthy of deeper investigation. Little is known about the claims Dreamers' make in order to achieve DACA status. Specifically, what are their motivations to seek DACA status? What do they view as the benefits of becoming DACAmented? How do obligations to their families influence their decision to apply for and seek DACA status?

3. Methods

The dataset for this article contains twenty-three letters submitted from 2013 to 2015 to a local nonprofit organization in the US southwest called the Regional State Dreamer Foundation (RSDF, a pseudonym) situated in a small community with a population of less than 70,000. RSDF was established to provide financial support for DACA applications. Due to the fact DACA applicants (hereafter referred to as Dreamers) constitute a hidden population and are at risk of deportation, RSDF outreach efforts are largely informal networking within the local community. Thus, the twenty-three Dreamers who penned these letters learned about the RSDF primarily by word of mouth or by referral by other local advocacy groups. According to the organization's meeting minutes from 2013 through 2015, which the first author recorded as Secretary of the Board, RSDF funded a total of twenty-nine DACA applications during that time. Of those, twenty-seven were first-time applications and two were requests for renewals. Since there is no formal application process and Dreamers simply ask for assistance via a phone call, in-person, or in writing, we have documentation from only twenty-three of those applicants and their *testimonios* provide the basis for our content analysis. We know of no such other community-situated organization and therefore cannot estimate whether the number of inquiries is fitting. In any event, once their DACA applications are finalized, RSDF sends a check to the US Department of Homeland Security.

As RSDF board members, the authors received the twenty-three letters from its president. Beginning in 2016, the requests for support from RSDF were done primarily in-person or by phone. We assume this occurred because of a change in leadership at one local community advocacy group who perhaps did not require written letters from Dreamers interested in seeking assistance from RSDF. Nonetheless, once the applications were funded, the President of the RSDF Board removed any identifying information from the letters, except for first names. To ensure anonymity, we replaced these names with pseudonyms. Because the analysis is secondary and involves the contents of documents, rather than field notes or in-person interviews, we received an Institutional Review Board, Human Subjects exemption.

Given the nature of application processes, these Dreamers most likely put their best foot forward in making these requests for financial support. We accept their needs are genuine and due to no fault of their own. We took their words at face value, understanding their requests for financial support are more complex than what can be revealed in a short letter. Furthermore, consistent with Beverley (2004), we offer these accounts as *testimonios* as they are narrated from young people who experience marginalization and tell a collective story, as our results indicate below.

Because RSDF does not provide application guidelines or specify criteria for acceptance, the twenty-three requests for assistance that formed the basis of our dataset were unstructured by application, researcher, or research criteria, consistent with *testimonios* as a form of narrative research (Beverley 2004; Reyes and Rodríguez 2012). Six were handwritten, seventeen were typed, and length ranged from forty to 420 words. To facilitate consistent coding, all letters were typed verbatim into one word-processed document.

It is important to note that even though the authors are RSDF board members, neither of us have ever met, or have a relationship with the Dreamers who wrote the letters used for this analysis. Based on what we could learn from their letters, Table 1 summarizes the social characteristics of the applicants. From the first name they provided, we identified nine males (thirty-nine percent) and fourteen females (sixty-one percent). Many stated their age while others' ages were assessed based on other information provided. For example, Manny said he was in the twelfth grade so his age was estimated as seventeen or eighteen. Ages of the letter-writers ranged from fourteen to twenty-eight. Likewise, quite a few wrote about their educational level, some were deduced, while others were indiscernible. For instance, Rosario wrote she was fifteen and talked about school so her educational level was likely tenth grade. The authors determined thirteen of the young people in this study (fifty-six percent) were in high school and five (twenty-two percent) completed high school at the time they wrote their letters to RSDF. The educational level could not be discerned for five or twenty-two percent of the sample. None of the letters contained information about their families' countries of origin.

Table 1. Dreamers and letter profiles.

Pseudonym	Sex	Date of Letter	Age	Education Level	Word Count
Alex	Male	01.29.15	14–18 *	In HS	165 +
Alfred	Male	07.19.14	14–15 *	In 10th grade	40
Amelia	Female	07.19.14	17–18 *	Completed HS	76
Anthony	Male	-	14–18 *	In HS	105
Damien	Male	09.23.15	18	In 12th grade	101
Elizabeth	Female	10.13.13	27–28	Completed HS	263
Gina	Female	09.18.15	Not stated	Not stated	99 +
Gloria	Female	-	Not stated	Not stated	146 +
Isidro	Male	-	17–18 *	In 12th grade	100 +
James	Male	-	15	In HS (implied)	330
Laura	Female	-	14–18 *	In HS	114 +
Malissa	Female	12.23.14	25	Completed HS	420
Manny	Male	01.29.15	17–18 *	In 12th grade	118 +
Marie	Female	12.23.14	22	Completed HS	277
Mona	Female	-	28	Not stated	86
Natalia	Female	03.23.14	26	Completed HS	345
Rachel	Female	12.01.14	18	In 12th grade	191
Ramon	Male	-	Not stated	Not stated	76
Rita	Female	07.19.14	Not stated	Not stated	51
Rosario	Female	-	15	In 10th grade *	391 +, 111 +, 86 +
Veto	Male	12.01.14	17	In 12th grade	410
Yolanda	Female	09.23.15	15	In 10th grade	173
Yvette	Female	01.15.15	15–17 *	In HS *	115

* estimated + handwritten.

4. Results

A grounded theoretical approach formed the basis of our analysis of the letters (Charmaz 2005; Glaser and Strauss 1967). The search for emergent themes involved an iterative coding process that began open-ended and became increasingly focused (Esterberg 2002). Through this process, the letters to RSDf for financial assistance revealed three interrelated aspirations for initiating steps toward achieving DACA status: (1) the need to provide for their families and honor their sacrifices, (2) the belief that a better future includes improving the lives of not only the applicants, but entire families, and (3) the expectation that obtaining legal employment will uplift the Dreamer's entire family.

4.1. For My Family

The overarching theme present in the letters centered on discussions about seeking DACA mentation so they could help their families. Eighteen of the twenty-three letters included mention of the families in which they were raised while six centered on families they were creating as adults (one person mentioned both). Nearly all of the letter writers said their motivation in applying for DACA was to help their families.

When they discussed the families in which they were raised, most said life was difficult for their parents (two referred to their single mothers). Their parents' troubles revolved around being undocumented, including being unable to find steady employment, having low-wage jobs and experiencing family separation due to deportation. Alex, a high-school student, said his father had a hard time finding a job:

It is also difficult for my dad to find a steady job without being a citizen. Both of my parents try their best to give us a better life than the one they had so getting this support will give me the chance to one day repay them for everything they have done for us.

Several also mentioned how their parents' wages did not cover the cost of living. Rachel, an eighteen-year-old in twelfth grade, said:

My mom works at a hotel and my stepdad works at [company]. They get little income and they have to pay rent, gas, electricity etc. I have 2 younger brothers so, my parents don't have too much extra money. I was asking if I can get help . . . so I will be able to obtain my work permit and help my parents out.

Since wages were insufficient, having money to pay the DACA application fee (\$495) was impossible. Alfred's letter exemplifies this:

I am currently in the 10th grade . . . [and] requested this scholarship because I don't have a job now and the wages of my parents is not covering of this procedure.

Likewise, Yolanda, a fifteen-year-old, said:

I am one of the five siblings in my family including my mother and father. The help being offered would be of much help to me and my family, the reason being that my family is at a poor level of finances.

Hard times bestowed the lives of the letter writers' parents and siblings. And it was their well-being motivating them to apply for DACA.

Difficulties were compounded for those who were being raised by single mothers. James, a fifteen-year-old, explained his mother experienced single motherhood twice, once due to divorce and deportation of his father and the last because his step-dad ended up in jail:

After that I lost my dad, my mom and dad got divorced when I was seven and left my mom and me alone. I haven't seen my dad because he has gotten deported three times. My mom and I lived with her friend for a while till my mom found a house. My mom met my

step dad [name] and he found a house for us. Then we moved ... and lived there for a while. We moved back in [name] Neighborhood because my step dad found a better house. My younger sister [name] was born, and then my sister [name]. My stepdad had a problem and now he's in jail for a while. My sisters, my mom and I are alone at home.

Similarly, Veto, a twelfth-grader, describes the tough time his single mom has maintaining steady employment:

I live with my mother, who is a single mom; ever since I was young I've seen my mom struggle with keeping jobs because of her being undocumented. I used to promise myself that I would do everything I can to help us get through our struggles, but when you are not considered a U.S. citizen by the United States, then it can get tough.

The young people who wrote letters to RSDF were worried about their parents and their challenging circumstances. This theme was also present in the letters written by those who created their own families as adults.

Six of the applicants wrote about their children and in some cases, their spouses/partners. They, too, were concerned and wanted to help them. Rita, of unknown age or education, communicates this:

... I am a single mother of three children. I'm struggling with money right now and I need a work permit to give me and my children a better life. I will appreciate the help.

Elizabeth, a 27- to 28-year-old, wants her son to have a better future:

I wanted to continue with my education so that once I was done with school I could pursue a better job, so that I could provide for my son. Now that this opportunity of DACA has come up I would love to continue with my education so that I can give my son a better life, a better future and so that he can see that it doesn't matter how long it takes dreams do come true.

Two Dreamers describe having children with special needs. Mona, a twenty-eight-year-old, wrote:

... I do not work and I am a mother of 5 kids. My only supporter is my husband he only works one job and he pays rent and bills and I have two kids with special needs. That sometime I have to pay for things that they need and I don't get extra money.

Malissa, a twenty-five-year-old, has a daughter and a husband both with medical conditions and she believes DACA will provide access to education thereby allowing her to help them:

When I was five months pregnant in 2008, my husband and I found out we were having a daughter, but we also learned that there was something wrong with her heart. She has a hypoplastic double outlet right ventricle. Which means the left side of her heart didn't develop normally and her right ventricle was on the left side. Her aorta was also narrow. In between the surgeries she needed to have to repair her heart; she had a stroke. ... During the time our daughter was having her last surgery in 2011, my husband was diagnosed with kidney failure. He tries to work a full time job but he can't since he has to go to his dialysis treatment ... My husband tried to save the money for me to apply for the work permit, because he knew and knows I want to continue my education and work because it will help our family tremendously ... This is why I am asking for your help financially to apply for the work permit, so I can be able to have a better education to help my family financially.

Life is difficult for the applicants and nearly all of them believe DACA is vital to their financial autonomy. Amelia, a seventeen- to eighteen-year-old, who just completed high school said:

I do not have work that allows me to pay the expenses ... my mother has breast cancer with many medical expenses. I need to give financial help to my parents.

Likewise, Damien, an eighteen-year-old twelfth grader, wrote he wanted to reciprocate what his parents had done for him and his siblings:

I belong to such an amazing family. I have four siblings including my mother and father. Unfortunately in a low level of economy. I would gladly appreciate the help that is being offered, due to the fact that my dream is to keep studying after high school and work to help my parents out now that they have done so much for my siblings and I.

Manny, a twelfth grader, sees DACA as pivotal to providing for his family:

I need this chance to get a job and help my family financially. I would also like to get further in life by going and studying so I can apply for higher paying jobs. This financial support [DACA] could help me achieve my life goal of becoming someone great in life. I need a high paying job to help my parents and my two younger brothers financially.

Similarly, Natalia, a twenty-six-year-old, believes a work permit would ensure her children go to college:

After high school I also met my husband and we married. We now have 3 beautiful children. I hope to be able to finally deal with my immigration issues so that I can continue to provide for my family and ensure a bright future for my children. I'd love to see them attend college and be able to support them in whatever they may decide to do.

The young people in this study applied to RSDF because they and their families struggled to make ends meet and could not afford the application fee for DACA. Securing DACA held the potential to change their lives: to secure legal employment and a higher education. This, eventually, would allow them to assist their families and for this they were grateful.

The letters analyzed for this article contained stories of difficult lives, but they also included words of appreciation for the financial assistance of RSDF and for the opportunity DACA afforded. Marie's (a twenty-two-year-old high school graduate) sentiments exemplify this:

I try my best to support them [parents] and myself. Some days are very tough because I wanna do what I can to help my family. I feel like they need me to help them, they always supported me, push me to do my best at school, so I wanna return all the sacrifice they have done for me. I give you thanks for taking the time and reading my letter and I hope that you find it in your heart to help me, so I can get my work permit. Thank you!

Without citizenship, they cannot vote, serve their country or access entitlements like social security or federal loans and scholarships. Without government authorized residency, attending school, finding work and securing housing are problematic. Unable to assimilate into their country of origin, but unable to put down roots in their country of residence, they hang in a legal and cultural limbo that undermines their ability to plan their futures (Gonzales 2011; Torres and Wicks-Asbun 2014). For the Dreamers in this study, the prospect of having legal status through DACA meant the possibility of a better future.

4.2. *Dreaming of a Better Future*

A major theme that emerged from the data related to the letter-writers' perceptions DACA was key to a better future for themselves and their families. Fifteen letters (sixty-five percent) contain descriptions of their dreams and how DACA offered them hope. In fact, seven specifically mentioned dreams. For example, Marie wrote:

It's been difficult for me to go to school, and have a good job due to the fact that I wasn't born here. When I heard about the dream act, I felt like there was hope, that I can make my dreams come true but yet I didn't have the money to pay for it . . . My goal is to succeed in life, and have a better life than my parents did. I wanna be someone in life, someone that people see and say if she did so can I.

Similarly, Rosario, a fifteen-year-old high school student, envisions a bright future:

I really can't miss this chance to be able to work and study here. I grew-up here never ever went to my hometown [where born]. I just hope you can help. Working will help my family with payments and also for school. I also want to have a future where I make my Dream of becoming something big.

Veto believes DACA is tangential to achieving his dreams:

I would like the scholarship to apply for my deferred action so I can attend college and advance my education to what I know I can accomplish . . . I thank them [parents] for bringing my family and I to the United States to pursue our dreams and goals. I am very thankful for the opportunity that I have here to achieve and succeed to my dreams and expectations.

Without specifically mentioning dreams, others also expressed their aspirations for a higher education. Alex said, "It [DACA] will also help me pursue my goals of going to college to major in business and minor in photography." Similarly, James wrote DACA would give him access to employment and allow him to save money for college:

I would love to have my working papers to help out my mom at the house by paying the rent. Sometimes I want stuff that my mom can't buy. I would want to save up for college and have a better life and a great job when I'm older I want to become a lot of things in life.

Like James, Malissa never wavered from her commitment to pursuing an education:

I also got married and had a baby in 2008. My goal even though I got married and pregnant was to continue my education, but I couldn't due to my immigration status. When I heard about the deferred action for students, I was very excited because it meant I could continue my education and work.

Yolanda also has educational goals beyond high school:

Being approved for this help would mean so much to me, now that I have goals set up for myself. My plans for after high school is to study dentist. Having the chance to apply for scholarships would also be a great opportunity, due to the fact that I have been working hard throughout my school years to be able to have a good future and to help my parents out economically.

Not only did the Dreamers in this study want to pursue an education, most of them said they wanted to secure legal employment so they could help their families.

4.3. Legal Employment as a Pathway to Future

While the larger dream for the letter writers concerned making a better future for entire families, the primary means for achieving it was obtaining and maintaining employment that pays a living wage. They want to work legally, but their undocumented status prevents them from doing so. Elizabeth explains how she relies on the underground economy for subsistence, "Due to my financial situation I am not able to send my application at this time, I do house cleaning for a living but this just helps me pay for my rent and for me and my sons personal needs ..." Like Elizabeth, many of the applicants believe DACA will help them get better paying jobs. Marie says her current job is insufficient, "I try saving but the job I have now doesn't pay much and I don't work many days either." Rosario's aspiration to play a string instrument and perform well in school is rooted in her ability to work:

I want to be able to keep my music playing. Without this ID I can't work. If I can't work then I can't pay for new strings every year or a bow. I get graded for having these things. My school also gives us projects and sometimes I can't buy a poster or do some things because I don't have the money to buy them.

Veto explains the consequence of not having work, “Being an undocumented teen is already hard enough, but when you have no job it can make it a little overwhelming.” In addition to his strong work ethic, he is loyal to the US:

I believe that my goals and dreams deserve the right to be heard and taken accounted for just as much as a citizen from the United States; I know the history, the agriculture, the American Dream . . . When I was in the third grade I remember getting asked what I wanted to be when I grew up. A lot of students in my class said; “Doctor, Policeman, Firefighter.” The usual things a 2nd or 3rd grader might say. But I said I wanted to join the military, and ever since then that is what my mind has been set on.

The perceived value of DACA is in terms of access to employment and higher education. Both of these ensure they and their families will have good fortune.

The letters these Dreamers submitted to RSDF to secure financial support to apply for DACA revealed aspirations to improve the situation of not only themselves, but also those of their immediate and extended families. They sought futures that not only would provide for their children and spouses, but also honor the sacrifices of their parents and families who struggled to give them better opportunities. These applicants saw DACA as the key to a better future because it would enable them to find work, pursue careers and obtain the education needed to acquire job security and living wages. And while there is ample evidence that DACAmentation does enhance the employment and educational status of the Dreamers who obtain it, the extent to which their aspirations, especially for their families, can be achieved, much less sustained, is questionable.

5. Discussion

In most respects, the ambitions of undocumented youth are not much different from other American youth and the *testimonios* offered in the letters analyzed for this study clearly indicate similarity in experience with other Dreamers, although our sample size was small. They want to achieve the American Dream. For Dreamers though, their undocumented status hinders, if not disables, them from attaining it. DACA may offer some relief and this study affords a rare opportunity to better understand the claims made by Dreamers who are taking steps to apply for it. This allows insight into how they perceive of its benefits, and, in particular, how it meshes with their aspirations for themselves and for their families. What makes the hopes of these Dreamers different may lie in the role that family plays in their futures. Like the undocumented youth in the [Méndez-Pounds et al. \(2018\)](#) study, the RSDF applicants wanted a DACA status so they could reciprocate the support they received from their parents and families. The letters are limited as the writers do not articulate the full potential of the benefits of DACA for their families. Nonetheless, because DACA provides legal access to bank accounts, credit cards, and other services, it extends the opportunity for an entire family’s participation in the formal economy ([Pérez 2014](#)) and enables access to medical assistance ([Raymond-Flesch et al. 2014](#)). Although DACA does not provide a pathway to U.S. citizenship, through protection from deportation, employment and college enrollment, it stimulates greater civil and political participation associated with full citizenship ([Gonzales et al. 2014](#)). Consequently, DACA provides opportunities for Dreamers to advocate more broadly for the collective needs of their families and the families of other undocumented youth.

Most of the DACA-seekers in this study were in high school. Like many high schoolers in the US, they aspire for post-secondary education. In fact, kindergarten through twelfth grade is often where their experiences with friends and classmates promote a sense of belonging largely because being a student in public elementary and secondary school is a legally protected status ([Gonzales 2011](#)). It is no surprise then that their ambitions mirror those of US-born students. What their immediate futures hold is quite different though. Unlike most high schoolers, they face legal exclusions from higher education and DACA does not guarantee protection in that regard ([Gonzales and Bautista-Chavez 2014](#)).

As our content analysis reveals, the young people seeking financial assistance to apply for DACA, believed DACA would provide a pathway to college. Despite their belief, the reality is because of their low-household income which many of them addressed, getting a job alone would not pave the way to college. What DACA has done, however, is decrease the number of undocumented students who stop out (e.g., leave school with the intent of returning). Obtaining higher-paying jobs may allow some Dreamers to finance their education and having Social Security numbers provides opportunities to apply for financial assistance (Pérez 2014). However, as Hsin and Ortega (2018) argue, DACA tends to incentivize work over educational attainment so remaining in school is largely dependent on whether they can maintain employment simultaneously.

Although many of the letter-writers acknowledged their challenges, the aspirations found in their letters were based upon meritocratic notions that those with legal status should be able to work, go to college and provide for their families. All of them, however, came from poor and struggling families. Many may, in fact, attend college and gain more education than their parents but because DACA incentivizes work over school, they may choose employment over college. This is compounded by the current political climate and anti-immigrant sentiment, the shift to a service-sector economy resulting in lower-paying jobs, and the prohibitive cost of post-secondary education, making generational upward mobility unlikely. However, for DACAmented heads-of-household, evidence suggests their families may be lifted out of poverty (Amuedo-Dorantes and Antman 2016) and this is a potential outcome for the six DACA-seekers in this study who wrote about the families they created as adults. What may be most important, however, is the emotional well-being, sense of security, and belongingness afforded by the continuation of DACA through the legal status it offers, albeit temporary (Nienhusser and Oshio 2019).

The Dreamers in this study had concrete ideas about what DACA could do for their futures, but without legal status, they are often ambiguous and uncertain about their futures (Méndez-Pounds et al. 2018) and a hostile political climate heightens a sense of insecurity and reluctance to make long-term decisions (Nienhusser and Oshio 2019). Nonetheless, they may be inspired when legal opportunities arise, as depicted in the letters written by the young people in this study who wanted financial assistance in order to apply for DACA. Perhaps one of the greatest benefits of DACA is it reduces fear and anxiety as it affirms a legitimate right to be in the United States without fear of deportation for two years (Gonzales et al. 2014; Hsin and Ortega 2018; Martinez 2014; Pérez 2014). It also offers the right to work, but it is important to note employment often brings with it adult-responsibilities and additional stressors (Simeons et al. 2017). Still, access to legal employment not only helps Dreamers, but it provides a boost to the economy as a result of the greater tax base (Gonzales and Bautista-Chavez 2014). Dreamers, however, are more than economic boosters, and immigration policy must consider the implications for their and their families' well-being (Mahatmya and Gring-Pemble 2014).

Furthermore, access to legal status should not be contingent on the ability to pay especially because being undocumented forces many immigrants to exist in poverty. The DACA-seekers in this study reached out to RSDF because they had no other means to pay the application fee. In fact, many eligible young immigrants do not apply for DACA due to lack of financial resources (Gonzales and Bautista-Chavez 2014). Nonetheless, around 800,000 undocumented youth have now achieved DACA status. Of those, seventy-nine percent were born in Mexico and two-thirds were age twenty-five or younger (López and Krogstad 2017). While eighty-six percent of them were employed, sixty percent had obtained a new job and forty-five percent said they increased their earnings (Gonzales and Bautista-Chavez 2014). In 2018, a DACA recipient earned a Rhodes scholarship from Harvard (Gearty 2018). Like the undocumented youth in this study believed, these statistics suggest DACA status can provide a better future for those who achieve it. As Hsin and Ortega (Hsin and Ortega 2018, p. 1504) note, "[D]reamers are better off with DACA than without it."

While the aspirations of these RSDF applicants may be within reach, in this current political climate, their achievement is not easy. Either out of ignorance or prejudice, some businesses do not hire qualified DACA applicants (Campbell 2018). Although many have resided in the US most of their

lives, in some states, DACA students are classified as international, and therefore unable to access the privileges and resources associated with in-state residency (Joffe-Block 2019). In their everyday lives, DACA recipients commonly endure racist slurs and other racist micro-aggressions (Munoz and Vigil 2018). Most notably, when asked to explain why some undocumented youth had not applied for DACA, President Donald Trump's chief of staff, John Kelly, evoked a racist stereotype of Mexicans by claiming they were just "too lazy to get off their asses" and apply (Gamboa 2018). It is important to note the letters in this study were written by Dreamers committed to applying for DACA at a time when overt expressions of anti-immigration were less ubiquitous.

The Trump era has changed the political climate for immigrants. Nienhusser and Oshio (2019) note the pervasiveness of The Trump Effect (e.g., discriminatory encounters and harassment) resulting in a decreased sense of well-being for mixed-status families. But, family remains at the core of the letter writers' identities. It is not surprising the Trump Administration's separation of families is a means to disassemble their sense of belonging. Yet, the aspirations expressed by the young people who wrote the letters that are the subject of this study subscribe to the very values that sustain the American Dream. Immigration policy would do far better to foster their aspirations rather than limit them.

The movement of people across borders is a very natural phenomenon, yet the discrepancy between citizenship and belonging has become more evident, creating cultural exchanges, but also political strife. Even so, organizations such as RSDF are central to DACA's success because, for many undocumented youth, it is the only way they can afford to apply. Additionally, once DACAmented, community organizations are key in helping them connect to and obtain the social resources they require for community engagement, job opportunities, and persistence in school. Future research could contrast perceptions about the value of DACA (such as in this study) with their experiences as DACA recipients through interviews. Other research could critically examine the policy's lack of relief for their families, its limitations for older Dreamers, its inattention to affordable higher education, as well as its focus on the good immigrant narrative.

Indeed, the focus ought to be on those whose lives are most impacted by DACA, and as these *testimonios* reveal, that focus must include not only those who seek its status, but their families as well. This work also entails fighting deportations together with discriminatory and racist policies. With the privileged positions many of us have, we can guide their hopes beyond the current political, legal, and cultural realities of immigration in the US today.

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