Here to Stay: Understanding the Political Activism and Legal Consciousness of Undocumented Latinx Students

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ABSTRACT

HERE TO STAY: UNDERSTANDING THE POLITICAL ACTIVISM AND LEGAL CONSCIOUSNESS OF UNDOCUMENTED LATINX STUDENTS

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This study seeks to understand why undocumented Latinx students tend to engage or disengage in political activism. The study discusses undocumented legal consciousness development to bring awareness to how policies can impact students’ sense of belonging and agency when entering higher education institutions. Data comes from eleven in-depth interviews with undocumented Latinx students who have or are attending a public or private college or university in Illinois. Results suggest that students will become engaged when the following three factors are present: an academic political opportunity, connection with an activist network, a shift in legal consciousness. A limitation of this study comes from the small sample size. The undocumented student experience is not monolithic; thus, this study’s results may not adequately represent all undocumented students’ experiences. This study should be important to researchers and higher education administrators because it calls for an awareness of how legislative policies and higher education policies create barriers to educational success barriers and degree attainment, which hinder upward social mobility opportunities. Moreover, it reinforces the need for a holistic approach for undocumented student support that addresses their social, psychological, financial, and academic needs.
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To my research participants: I admire your resilient efforts in advocating for the rights of the undocumented immigrant community. Your collective efforts gave me nothing but hope, and I am eager to see how they will transform the college experience for undocumented students. I appreciate the time you all shared with me during the interview process and trusting me with your stories. Finally, I am incredibly thankful to Maria Luisa, who played a key role in helping me establish rapport among potential participants.
Para mi familia. Mi mama, mi papa, mi hermana, y mi tío Joaquin. Ustedes me han mostrado el valor de una educación y por eso les dedico mi proyecto y mi maestría. Estoy eternamente agradecida a sus sacrificios.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In the United States, there are roughly 11 million undocumented people anxiously anticipating the implementation of inclusive immigration policy to relieve them of their legal status implications. In 2001, the original Development, Relief, and Education for Immigrant Minors (DREAM) Act was introduced to Congress, but it has failed to pass each time it has been brought up for debate. The DREAM Act was meant to provide a pathway to citizenship for undocumented people; however, given the anti-immigrant rhetoric that criminalizes undocumented people, there has been constant political pushback. Over the past ten years, activists and their allies have demonstrated their resiliency by continuously advocating for change at federal, state, and local levels (Gonzalez 2008, Terriquez 2014). The political efforts target various injustices faced by this marginalized group and have moved away from solely focusing on implementing a citizenship pathway. Activists transitioned their efforts to make higher education a more inclusive space for undocumented students.

My study will discuss the factors that influence undocumented students to engage or disengage in political activism by expanding McAdam’s (1999) political process model by combining it with Abrego’s (2011) work on undocumented legal consciousness and Reger’s (2018) work on academic political opportunity theory. McAdam’s (1999) political process model takes the following factors into consideration when trying to understand the emergence of a social movement: 1) broad socioeconomic processes, 2) expanding political opportunities, 3) indigenous organizational strength and 4) cognitive liberation. For the purpose of this study, the term of “cognitive liberation” will be referred to as a shared activist consciousness to reflect up-to-date terminology. Moreover, to better understand how a shared activist consciousness may form
I will be referring to Abrego’s (2011) study on undocumented Latinx legal consciousness which explores the various factors that influence the extent to which undocumented Latinos are willing to engage in claims-making behavior. Since my research focuses on undocumented Latinx young adults, I aim to expand on Abrego’s study by specifically focusing on the factor of stigma to understand how the young migrants frame their legal identity. Additionally, I incorporate Reger’s (2018) work on academic opportunity structures to get a better understanding of how the structure of a college campus may influence the type of resources available to its students.

I conducted interviews with undocumented Latinx students in Illinois and compared their higher education experiences. I did this to comprehend how campus structures can present themselves as opportunities for fostering or deterring activism. The research questions my study wants to answer are: What factors from the political process model can help explain why students engage or disengage in activism? How do students frame their understanding of their legal status? Is there a difference between the legal consciousness of undocumented Latinx students who are not engaged compared to those who are?

My study’s data comes from eleven in-depth interviews with undocumented Latinx college students who are or have attended a postsecondary institution in Illinois. Out of the eleven students, eight had participated in political activism regarding immigrant rights. Initially, my interview guide focused on understanding their collegiate experience, but I soon realized that I had to inquire about their transition from high school to higher education to get a better understanding of how their legal identity developed. I found that when students initially become aware of their legal status implications, they experience a lowered sense of agency. Students expressed that the financial aid barriers brought on to them during the college application process
made them feel like college was out of reach or that they did not belong in higher education. Moreover, I found that this lowered sense of agency does not change until students are presented with academic political opportunities that help them reframe their legal identity, thus empowering them to engage in activism. My study helps shed light on the ways discriminatory higher education policies negatively impact the educational attainment of undocumented adults. I will further discuss how students’ political awakening to injustice fosters opportunities for activism.

Background: Legislation History

A lack of research encompasses immigrants’ experiences in the Midwest. Typically, studies tend to focus on the experiences of undocumented immigrants in California, a state that has passed inclusive legislation that extends in-state tuition and institutional financial aid to students. Though there is a consistent trend in the obstacles students face when entering higher education, it is important to understand how the framing of legislation can negatively impact undocumented immigrants’ lives. Undocumented students face several barriers that hinder their academic performance and ability to remain enrolled in higher education. The following section outlines legislation at the federal and state levels that influence the undocumented student experience.

Access to Higher Education


In Plyler v. Doe (1982), the Supreme Court ruled that undocumented students have the constitutional right to enroll and graduate from a secondary institution. The federal policy protects students’ rights to high school education, but it does not extend this level of protection for students who wish to pursue higher education. It is important to note that a high school diploma during the Plyler v. Doe ruling in 1982 would be equivalent to a college degree in 2021.
Thus, policymakers should take into consideration the need for updated legislation that addresses this academic attainment barrier.


The Higher Education Act of 1965 declares that students must be citizens of the United States to qualify for federal financial aid. This piece of legislation disqualifies undocumented students from applying to the Free Application for Federal Student Aid because they cannot provide proof of citizenship. Moreover, it disqualifies undocumented students from receiving Pell Grants, a need-based grant program that would benefit students from low-income or underrepresented backgrounds. The Association of Community College Trustees (ACCT) reported that federal Pell Grants could cover most of the expense of the community college, which is typically where undocumented students begin their collegiate careers (Valenzuela, Perez, Perez, Montiel, and Chaparro, 2015). Thus, the inability to receive federal financial aid adds to the burden of finding alternative options to fund their education.

Section 505 of the 1996 Immigrant Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act.

Section 505 of the 1996 Illegal Immigrant Reform and Immigrant Responsibility (IIRIRA) Act states that an “alien who is not lawfully present in the United States shall not be eligible on the basis of residence within a State (or a political subdivision) for any postsecondary education benefit unless a citizen or national of the United States is eligible for such a benefit (in no less an amount, duration, and scope) without regard to whether the citizen or national is such a resident.” It is important to note that no federal policy bans undocumented students from enrolling in higher education institutions or denies them access to in-state tuition or access to
state or institutional aid. Section 505 implies that undocumented students cannot receive these higher education benefits based on State residency. Instead, it leaves states with the autonomy to implement this type of legislation. Research has shown that financial constraints can hinder undocumented students’ ability to remain enrolled in college (Terriquez 2014). Thus, it should be of importance for legislators and higher education administrators to implement state-level policies that grant students access to affordable tuition rates and equal access to state and institutional financial aid to promote social mobility opportunities.

Dream Act and DACA.

It has been a decade since the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act was proposed. The DREAM Act was intended to grant undocumented immigrants who arrived as children a pathway to citizenship and higher education access. This legislation has failed to pass through Congress every time it has been brought up for debate; however, the efforts of immigrant activists and their allies have not been left unnoticed. In 2012, President Obama passed the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) Act, which grants undocumented young adults temporary protection from deportation and a temporary Social Security number. Consequently, in 2017, President Trump attempted to rescind DACA, which brought on fears, anxiety, and psychological distress to the 800,000 protected recipients and their families.

Illinois RISE Act.

States are left with the autonomy to implement legislation that extends benefits to undocumented students. So far, 18 states have passed legislation that grants them access to instate tuition. Six states have implemented an alternative financial aid application that gives students access to state and institutional financial aid. In June of 2019, Illinois signed into law
the Retention of Illinois Students and Equity (RISE) Act. Students’ benefits do not violate Section 505 of the IIRIRA because state financial aid qualification is based on high school attendance and graduation. So long as students have attended a high school in Illinois and have graduated or received their GED in the state, they qualify to fill out an alternative financial aid application and receive in-state tuition rates.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Latino Group Consciousness and Political Participation

Latinos have become the largest minority group in the United States, and their ability to influence political results has become an increasing area of interest for scholars. According to the Pew Research Center (2017), there will be over 32 million eligible Latino voters in the 2020 election. Among the registered Latino voters, about 87% of them align with the Democratic Party. However, current research on Latino group consciousness has found difficulty in defining group identity lines due to variance in pan-ethnic identification. The Latino population is comprised of various subgroups that vary by legal status and country of origin. Undocumented Latinos are often absent in the literature regarding group consciousness and political behaviors because previous studies have shown that foreign-born individuals are less likely to be politically active (Cassel 2002, DeSipio 1996, Shaw, de la Garza, and Lee 2000). However, this study will argue that scholars should focus on the political efforts of undocumented young Latinos because they are involved in various forms of civic engagement.

Although undocumented immigrants do not possess the right to vote, they can still become involved in the political process by engaging in different forms of political activism, which in turn can influence the voting turnouts of Latinos who can vote. In order to understand the ways in which Latino group consciousness develops, the works of Sanchez (2006a, 2006b),
Masuoka (2006), and Vargas, Sanchez and Valdez (2017) must be discussed. Group consciousness is measured by the following three factors: alignment with pan-ethnic group identification, perceived discrimination and understanding of social positions, and desire to engage in collective action (Garcia 2003). Sanchez (2006a) and Masuoka (2006) found that perceptions of discrimination influence Latino group consciousness. In a separate study, Sanchez (2006b) also found that Latino political behaviors are more likely to be found in political activities outside of voting but that still address salient issues of the Latino community. Moreover, Vargas et al. (2017) were the first to conduct a study on the relationship between Latino “linked fate” and the implementation of punitive immigration policies. The researchers found that the increased implementation of punitive immigration policies influences a heightened sense of solidarity in the Latino community.

Sanchez (2006a) utilizes the 1999 Washington Post Survey of Latinos to investigate the role of the Latino group consciousness’s role on Latino policy preferences. He analyzed group consciousness by comparing sentiments about general policy issues, such as levels of support for the death penalty and legalized abortion, compared to salient issues such as immigration and bilingual education. He found that perceived discrimination is the most important factor of group consciousness that influences policy preferences. Perceived discrimination has a more significant influence on salient issues to the Latino community than on general policy issues. Moreover, Sanchez notes that nativity and length of time in the U.S are the primary causes of variation in public opinion within the Latino community. Unlike new immigrants, undocumented young adults have spent more of their life in the United States than they have in their home countries,
leading to this study’s interest in assessing how undocumented young adults’ group consciousness compares to the results stated above.

Masuoka (2006) explores group consciousness by examining the variance of pan-ethnic consciousness between Latinos and Asian Americans because they are the two fastest growing minority groups in the United States. She builds on the political model of African American collective identity to understand whether a collective identity exists in other minority populations. Like Sanchez (2006a), she utilized the 1999 National Survey on Latinos and the 2000 Pilot National Asian American Political Survey. She finds that racial group unity does not apply itself in the same ways for Asian Americans and Latinos. An interesting finding in her work is that foreign-born Latinos are less likely to perceive pan-ethnic connections than native born Latinos. Additionally, she found that American socialization garners greater support for the formation of pan-ethnic group identities. This study will interview young undocumented Latinos who occupy both foreign-born and American socialized statuses, thus utilizing findings from Sanchez while directing attention to both status positions.

An additional study by Sanchez (2006b) explores how group consciousness influences political participation among Latinos. He continues to use the 1999 National Survey of Latinos to understand the political behavior of multiple Latino subgroups. He found that group consciousness is likely to have more influence in the context of political activities across various subgroups than voting turnouts. Like his previous study (Sanchez 2006a), perceptions of discrimination significantly influence political identity formation. Thus, his findings suggest that
efforts to engage in political mobilization are influenced by how individuals perceive their
group’s status.

An additional form of group identity is that of Latino “linked fate,” which develops from
experiences of discrimination and marginalization that may influence political behaviors. Vargas
et al. (2017) are the first to examine the relationship between immigrant climate and Latino
Linked Fate. To analyze this, they merge the 2012 Collaborative Multiracial Post-Election
Survey with the sum of state-level immigration policies that have been implemented between
2005 and 2012. They found that as the enactment of punitive immigration laws increases, so too
do Latino “linked-fate” sentiments among foreign-born Latinos. Their findings assist in
explaining the shift in Latino policy preference that supports pro-immigration policy.

The current literature is not without limitations. Researchers have failed to address the
group consciousness of undocumented Latinos. Literature focuses on older native-born
individuals’ political ideologies, which are not representative of college-aged Latinos. Second, it
tends to categorize Latinos as foreign-born or native-born and notably does not break down
immigrants’ experiences by legal status. Research has shown that undocumented young adults’
experiences cannot be generalized with foreign-born individuals’ experiences since they have
been socialized in the United States from a very young age (Abrego 2011). Third, most Latino
political participation studies tend to use quantitative methods that outline overall feelings of
perception or patterns. My study will bring further insight into understanding Latino politics by
discussing the findings from interviews with undocumented Latinx young adults. My goal is to
bring further insight into the subjective motives that lead undocumented young adults to become
politically active. I will further discuss how undocumented group consciousness is influenced by perceived discrimination and feelings towards their legal identity.

The Legal Consciousness of Undocumented Latinos

Abrego (2011) examines the legal consciousness of undocumented immigrants by categorizing their experience in the United States by the age of arrival. Her study compares the claims-making behaviors of these two groups by analyzing how they internalize the law. Claims making regards the extent to which individuals are willing to make political claims that stand up for their civil rights. The two groups she compares are undocumented immigrants of the first generation and the 1.5 generation. She categorizes immigrants of the first generation as those who arrived as adults, whereas the 1.5 generation is made up of those who arrived as children. She finds that the institutions in which undocumented immigrants are socialized influence their sentiments of social integration and acceptance by their communities, which then influence their legal consciousness.

Abrego (2011) mentions that age at arrival influences legal consciousness development because it predetermines their social integration experiences. The legal consciousness of the first generation is rooted in fear because they are forced to confront their legal status implications and are not granted a level of legal protection similar to the 1.5 generation. She notes that older immigrants do not hold similar social belonging sentiments because they take blame for their legal status and understand that they must be careful about disclosing their status to avoid deportation and legal penalties. On the contrary, Abrego finds that the legal consciousness of the 1.5 generation is rooted in fear of social exclusion. The Supreme Court ruled in Plyler v. Doe
(1982) that all children, regardless of immigration status, have the constitutional right to obtain a secondary education. Thus, members of the 1.5 generation experience a temporary form of alleviation from their legal status. However, once young migrants begin to transition into early adulthood, their limited legal protection ends, and they are compelled to confront the injustices of the immigration system.

Activism is seen as risky by the first generation because it can potentially expose them to legal penalties that may lead to deportation. Abrego (2011) mentions that undocumented adults reported being wary of their social presence because they are the principal breadwinners of their households and cannot afford to be separated from their families. The 1.5 generation internalizes their legal status as a form of stigma and does not take the blame for their status; instead, they find it a fault of the outdated immigration system. Although undocumented young adults also view activism as risky, they are more likely to engage in political claim making that demands a level of social inclusion.

College Activism

As previously indicated, the political efforts of undocumented young adults tend to focus on making higher education an inclusive space. My study explores how academic institutions foster mobilization opportunities for undocumented young adults. The literature addressing how undocumented immigrants engage in political activities is limited and tends to focus on mobilization efforts of activists who live in California (DeAngelo, Schuster, Stebleton 2016, Enriquez 2014, Gonzales 2008). California and the West Coast are notoriously known for being progressive, a reputation that the Midwest does not hold. My study expands on this issue by exploring how campus political activism fosters itself in the state of Illinois. The following
section will discuss the work of Munson (2010), and Verduzco Reyes (2015) to understand better how academic institutions have become grounds for mobilization.

According to Munson (2010) a college campus becomes grounds for quick political mobilization because students undergo two transition points. In the first point of transition, students experience a change in their everyday routines compared to their time in high school. At the second point, students begin to experience a change in their social networks, which in turn influences the development of their social and political ideologies. Munson states, “To become active in a social movement, people must change their routines to accommodate the demands of activism; they need to incorporate new habits and activities that make them part of a movement” (2010: 774). Munson’s application of transition points aids in explaining why undocumented college students are more likely to engage in political mobilization than undocumented immigrants who are working full-time jobs. Additionally, development of social networks allows for the rapid building of coalitions between undocumented immigrants and their allies.

Verduzco Reyes (2015) expands on inhabited institutional theory to understand how the dimensions of a campus culture influence the various ways Latino politics can take form. She draws on 20 months of ethnographic fieldwork with six Latino-based student organizations and 60 in-depth interviews. Her study’s design specifically focused on comparing two types of student groups: one centered on political expression and one centered on non-political organization. Verduzco Reyes suggests that Latino politics can either be deliberative, divisive, or contentious, depending on how colleges or universities attempt to incorporate Latino students’ needs. She compares the experiences of students who attended a small liberal arts college (LAC), a research university (RU), and a regional public university (RPU).
Verduzco Reyes (2015) found that the following four contextual factors may help understand why Latino campus context can help explain how various forms of Latino politics are expressed. The four factors are (1) the strength of students’ social ties, (2) symbolic boundaries between the campus and the external world, (3) symbolic boundaries between the Latino student organizations, and (4) the role student organizations hold on campus and in the lives of students. Verduzco Reyes first discusses how students’ opportunity to create strong social ties to campus fostered a form of deliberative politics that aimed to be amicable to the faculty and staff. LAC’s small campus size allowed students to engage in mentorship-level relationships with faculty. Students shared that they did not find social support from the student groups; instead, they found social support in classes that allowed them to expand on shared experiences. The students at Latinos Unidos (LU) avoided contentious strategies to prove their adherence to the campus culture, which was one rooted in protecting their professional relationships. The civic engagement style of Latino Links (LL) also aimed to reflect a high level of professionalism. During group meetings, students discussed immigrant rights and justice but avoided engaging in any form of contentious politics.

Verduzco Reyes (2015) next discussed how the campus culture of RU set the stage for divisive politics because it provided differentiating levels of support for the Latinos United for Action (LUA) and the Latino Fellowship (LF). At RU, the Latino students expressed that they experienced moments of culture shock and felt racially isolated by their campus. The role of the student groups on this campus served to find and maintain community. However, membership in both groups was expected to be exclusive, meaning students were expected to show loyalty to only one group. LUA and LF had opposing political perspectives and were understood to be
socially incompatible. Understandably, both groups critiqued the others level of campus involvement, which served as a firm division between the two organizations because it fostered competition for membership loyalty.

Verduzco Reyes (2015) discusses how students who attended RPU were more likely to engage in politics of contention off campus because students viewed the RPU campus as a facility to take classes and not build community. RPU had the reputation of being a commuter school and tended to serve non-traditional students who were older and held jobs, thus limiting their ability to engage with their peers on campus. Moreover, the student groups at RPU noted that faculty and student groups made minimal effort in communicating with one another. Both student groups focused their political efforts off campus to better address the concerns they had about their communities.
CHAPTER 3: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Previous research studies on student activism suggest that a college campus’s political and cultural rhetoric influence mobilization efforts (Reger 2018, Verduzco Reyes 2015). Verduzco Reyes (2015) finds that a college campus’s pedagogical practices influence how Latino politics become inhabited. Her findings can be connected to Reger’s (2018) study on academic opportunity structures, which suggests that a campus that formally recognizes student organizations is grounds for activism because it connects students with resources that help sustain mobilization efforts.

Moreover, this study will expand on Abrego’s (2011) work on undocumented legal consciousness development to understand how undocumented students develop a sense of identity that is related to their legal status and understand the extent to which they are willing to engage in claims-making behaviors. The concept of legal consciousness refers to individuals’ understanding of their legal rights and awareness of rights violations. Claims-making behavior regards the extent to which individuals are willing to make political demands and engage in collective efforts. Abrego’s work suggests that students who arrived in the United States as children are more likely to engage in political claims making than immigrants who arrived as adults because they internalize their legal status in different manners.
The Political Process Model and Undocumented Student Activism

The purpose of my study is to comprehend what factors can explain why undocumented Latinx students engage or disengage in political activism. The first part of my theoretical framework combines the political process model and the concept of academic opportunity structures to better understand how a college campus can foster or deter mobilization efforts (McAdam 1999, Reger 2018). Reger (2018) indicates that a campus with a favorable political and cultural environment will facilitate activism because it provides students with the necessary resources to sustain mobilization. The model employed for this study explores the role of the following factors: the presence of academic political opportunities, the role of an activist student network, and the development of undocumented Latinx legal consciousness (previously referred to as cognitive liberation).

According to Chua and Engel (2019), the way laws are invoked impacts the identities of those who claim them. I am incorporating Abrego’s (2011) concept of undocumented legal consciousness into my theoretical framework because her work serves as a guide to understanding how undocumented Latinos frame their legal status implications, which influence the extent they are willing to engage in political claims making. As previously mentioned, Latino group consciousness tends to be influenced by alignment with group identification, perceptions of group status, and perceptions of discrimination. Thus, I initially inferred that the legal consciousness of the 1.5 generation would be similar among the participants in my study because they share similar biographical backgrounds. However, I have found that although students internalize their legal status in similar ways at the initial period of awareness, the way they frame
their legal identities becomes subject to change when presented with different academic political opportunities.

**Academic Political Opportunities: Immigrant - “Friendly” Campus**

The first factor in the political process model that fosters mobilization is political opportunities that offer forms of political leverage to activists. McAdam (1999) implies that taking advantage of political leverage presents members with increased bargaining position, thus, making it harder for activists’ demands to be dismissed by those in power. Notably, Reger (2018) discusses the role of academic opportunity structures in fostering and sustaining campus activism. She implies that the political and cultural rhetoric of campus becomes grounds for fostering or deterring mobilization. Additionally, she mentions that a campus that is open to student activism is one that allows activist groups to be recognized as formal organizations. Thus, political opportunities present themselves to students once they have established themselves within the university and can connect with campus resources.

Reger’s (2018) work on academic opportunity structures implies that student organizations must establish credibility at the university level before they can foster and sustain any form of student mobilization. From a cultural perspective, undocumented Latino students face several unique barriers that hamper their ability to integrate and establish credibility. For one, Latino students are usually expected to contribute financially to their families or take on extra-familial responsibilities, which may altogether hinder their ability to dedicate themselves to their academics. As previously discussed, the lack of progressive immigration legislation creates educational barriers for students because it does not create equal access to higher education. Notably, Terriquez (2014) states that lack of financial aid opportunities lowers students’ ability
to continuously remain enrolled in college because not having access to financial aid brings on the burden of finding alternative ways to finance their education.

For undocumented students, political opportunities will arise if they are presented with an “immigrant-friendly” environment. An immigrant-friendly environment is one that provides holistic support and makes an active effort to alleviate institutional barriers that hinder academic attainment. In my findings section, I will discuss how academic political opportunities may vary across college campuses for the students I interviewed.

Indigenous Organizational Strength: An Activist Network

McAdam (1999) asserts that lack of organizational strength will deter mobilization efforts because it shows lack of structural potential. If members cannot collectively organize, they will have difficulties in successfully taking advantage of the political opportunities that arise. McAdam (1999) suggests that indigenous organizational strength includes members and leaders, structures of solidary incentives, and communication networks. Moreover, the organizational strength of an activist group is associated with their ability to recruit and continue to motivate members to participate in mobilization efforts.

My study analyzes the indigenous organization strength of a pre-existing activist network centered on advocating for immigrant rights. I will discuss the role an activist network plays in providing various forms of social support to undocumented students once they get to college. In my findings I will expand on how an activist network is central in helping students reframe their legal identities, learn about their legal rights, and most important, find others with whom they can relate and create community and become politically active. I will also discuss how activist
networks are essential in establishing and maintaining the collective identity of the national movement at the campus level.

Legal Consciousness and Collective Identity

In McAdam’s (1999) political process model, cognitive liberation refers to the transitionary period when activists gain a new sense of efficacy. The concept of collective identity refers to member sense of solidarity and commitment to mobilization efforts. Social movement scholars have substituted the terms for activist consciousness to reflect contemporary language (Polletta and Jasper 2001). My study substitutes both terms for legal consciousness since I am specifically interested in how students learn to frame their legal status.

McAdam (1999) suggests that members of a social movement must believe they can shift their social and political conditions before understanding how to take advantage of political opportunities. However, I have found that a shift in legal consciousness comes after students are presented with academic political opportunities that connect them with holistic support and an activist network. I will outline how students’ lowered sense of agency stays with them throughout college until they meet other undocumented students who help them understand their status in a new light. Finally, I will discuss how experiencing a shift in legal consciousness may motivate students to engage in political activism because it helps students reframe their identities.
CHAPTER 4: METHODS

Study Design

This is a qualitative study that uses in-depth interviews to understand undocumented students’ experience in college. In-depth interviews are the best method for this project because it allows participants to provide a detailed description of events and experiences that led them to engage in activism which may have been overlooked or not directly implied by conducting a field observation of campus activism (Weiss 1994). Allowing students to expand on personal experiences allows me to understand the issues that students may not openly discuss with higher education professionals because they are highly complex or personal. Moreover, allowing students to discuss how they got engaged in activism helped me identify where legal consciousness shifts and how collective identity develops.

Recruitment Procedures

This study uses purposive sampling because it is specifically interested in understanding a vulnerable student populations political activism that is considered hard to reach (Weiss 1994). Participants were included if they identified as undocumented, Latinx, and attended a public or private college or university in Illinois. Additionally, interviews were conducted with students regardless of whether they had been engaged in political activism. I used this tactic to compare any similarities or differences in college experiences that may explain the extent of political involvement. Additionally, I used a snowball recruitment technique to ask for referrals to build a sample of undocumented Latinx undergraduates.
The recruitment process began by identifying gatekeepers to an undocumented activist network at Public Research University (PRU). The researcher contacted the Undocumented Student Support Network (USSN) executive board, a student group focused on undocumented immigrant activism. Additional contact was made with the Undocumented Resource Office (URO) coordinator, who also served as the faculty supervisor to USSN. Once contact was made with the initial gatekeepers, I asked if I could present at one of their weekly meetings. I shared the study’s purpose and my contact information so students who chose to participate could reach out to me and set up a time for an interview.

The initial interview was done with the USSN’s co-president, and it took place via Zoom to ensure safety from potential exposure to the COVID-19 virus. From there, the co-president connected me with additional members of USSN who were willing to be interviewed. Additional recruitment was done through social media. I created a recruitment flyer and shared it on my personal social media and the Illinois Latinx Scholars Facebook group. Through this method, I was able to connect with students from Private University (PU), Private Liberal Arts College (PLCA), and Public Community College (PCC).

**Participants**

Eleven in-depth interviews were conducted with undocumented Latinx students. Students attended a college or university in Northern Illinois. Seven interviews were conducted with students who attended or are attending Public Research University (PRU). Two interviews were collected with students who attended Public Community College (PCC). One interview was collected from a student who attends Private Liberal Arts College (PLAC). Finally, one
interview conducted with a student who attends Private University (PU). All of the students who attended PRU were connected to the Undocumented Student Support Network (USSN) and reported being politically active. The student who attended PLAC mentioned that she engaged in political activism in high school and her first two years of college, but as she entered her junior year, her activism stopped. Additionally, the participants who attended PU and PCC reported not engaging in political activism regarding immigrant rights. Notably, one of the PCC students mentioned that she was involved in additional civic engagement types centered on women in politics and environmentalism.

Data Collection

To maintain confidentiality, all participants were given aliases, and any identifying information was omitted, including the name of family members or the town where lived. Before the interviews could begin, I read a verbal consent form that outlined the study’s purpose, benefits, and risks. I created a personal research email dedicated to communication with all participants and initial gatekeepers. All participants were asked to use personal emails or phone numbers to contact me, and communication through any university email was not allowed. Emails were not allowed to be forwarded and were encrypted before they were sent to participants. Before the interview began, students were notified that they had the right to opt-out of the interview at any time.

Interviews were conducted in May and June of 2020, a period when Illinois discouraged in-person contact due to the rise of COVID-19 cases. They lasted anywhere from 40 minutes to an hour and a half. Before the interviews began, participants were asked to confirm they were
over 18 and agreed to be recorded. Recording continued through the question guide’s entirety and only continued if students gave consent.

Data Analysis

Once interviews were completed the files were uploaded to my personal Dropbox account. Transcriptions were done verbatim, and once they were complete, all of the files were destroyed from my personal computer to ensure the fullest extent of confidentiality. After interviews were transcribed, they were coded for common themes and patterns in students’ experiences with becoming aware of their status, transitioning to higher education, and factors that may promote engagement in political activism. I took into consideration the political process model for undocumented Latinx political activism when condensing the codes and formatting my findings section.
CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS

I started the interviews by asking students to tell me about themselves. I was interested in getting to know their stories of arrival to the United States so I could lead into questions about their undocumented status. All the students in my study shared that they immigrated from Mexico before the age of 15. Notably, they all shared that they knew they were undocumented from a young age but did not understand their legal status implications until they got older, which prompted me to ask how they felt when they found out about their status.

I asked students how they felt when finding out they were undocumented to get an understanding of how legal identity develops over time. The goal of this question was to help me better understand if their status influenced their identity or the way they maneuvered themselves in their social worlds. Moreover, I wanted to understand their feelings towards their status to also get a better sense of their legal consciousness. In Abrego’s (2011) study she mentions that the legal consciousness of undocumented young adults is primarily encompassed by feelings of stigma and fear of social exclusion. Interestingly, I found that legal identity varies among children and feelings are not shared in a uniform manner.
Legal Identity Framing

Being Open About Their Status

During the interviews I was surprised to find out that many of my participants knew they were undocumented from a young age. Before conducting the interviews, I assumed students would find out they were undocumented once they got to transitional periods closer to their teenage years. Moreover, I expected responses to resonate with Abrego’s (2011) findings that suggest students would view their status through a stigmatized lens, but answers varied among participants. For some students, their families framed their legal status in an open manner which alleviated the sense of stigma associated with being undocumented. I asked students how they felt about being undocumented and they shared that they did not view it as a form of social exclusion but rather as an obstacle for pursuing their academic goals. In this first example, Esperanza, a PRU alumna, discusses how her family framed their undocumented status:

Within my family, it has always been an open conversation. We didn’t really live in fear of being undocumented, or we didn’t let our identities be guided by not having residency or a social security number.

Similar to Esperanza’s answer, Nixy, Public Community College (PCC) student, stated:

I think it was just something that was given as a conversation, like in the dinner table. Or something that was talked about because we did see the news, and then I would ask my mom things. ‘Hey, I want to do this,’ but it was kind of like ‘ay you’re not allowed too because you can’t leave the country.’ Or I don’t think there was ever like a time where ‘oh I found out I was undocumented.’ It was kind of like, my mom talked about it, but she made it seem like it wasn’t like a bad thing.

For Esperanza and Nixy, being undocumented was not a reason to live in fear or feel socially stigmatized. I wanted to better understand if their status brought on any additional feelings. I
asked them if their status brought on any challenges while in high school, and that is where they discussed feeling moments of frustration.

Although Esperanza and Nixy did not view their status as something to be ashamed of they both shared that they understood their status differently once they were denied academic opportunities. For both students these sentiments appeared during the college application process. To me, this suggests that they began to experience an interruption to their social integration process. In this following example, Esperanza shares how having to deal with the implications of her legal status turned into feelings of anger:

…When it came to the college thing that was a little bit more different and that was probably when it like hit me harder. My parents have always been optimistic, so they always said no you’re going to college. But when I actually started looking into it I got a call from the instructor of a certified nursing assistance program…the instructor pretty much said you can take the course but we’re not going to give you the certification because we need the social security number. And I thought that definitely wasn’t fair to me…So that was very eye opening, and I remember like crying and being mad at my parents.

Nixy also shares similar feelings of frustration:

I guess the only time it really took a toll was when I was trying to apply for scholarships, and when I was trying to go to university. That was when it really hurt because I just felt, it was just so unfair that these kids who I’ve grown up with, you know like, I have the same GPA, I have the same extra-curricular activities, and then perhaps, even excelled more than others…I just didn’t think it was fair at that time.

For Esperanza and Nixy, being undocumented is seen as a structural barrier that presents problems during the college application process. Their responses also show how influential family can be during initial stages of awareness. Additionally, their answers suggest that legal consciousness development is not always encompassed by feelings of stigma but rather feelings of frustration.
Keeping Their Status a Secret

Another question I asked students was if they kept their status a secret from others. For those who had open conversations with their parents, they shared that they were open about their status and did not feel the need to hide it. However, that was not the case for all students. For students like Rafael, a junior at PRU, and Izzy, a PRU alumna, they felt the need to keep their status a secret to protect their families. In this example, Rojo describes why he felt the need to engage in precautionary behavior at such a young age:

I got an idea of it in [legal status] in elementary school. Cause at that point we had moved to like a small town in the country. We were one of the few minorities in that town. My parents were always telling me about how you should be careful about like what you talk about with other people. Me being young at the time, I misinterpreted what they said to mean that I shouldn’t make friends.

Similar to Rafael, Izzy discussed why she chose to distance herself from her peers:

…I always felt like I self-excluded myself. If that makes sense? I already excluded myself from I guess certain friend groups just because I did not want, to you know, engage in risky behavior that could lead to my deportation. I didn’t want to explain why I was worried about certain things. So in order to protect myself from explaining my situation and potentially exposing myself to you.

Research suggests that undocumented adults engage in system avoidance or social isolation to decrease their chances of interacting with the criminal justice system (Abrego 2011). I noticed that students who shared they engaged in social isolation felt a sense of alienation from their peers from a young age, which may suggest that their legal consciousness is encompassed by feelings of stigma, secrecy, or even anxiety.
Feeling Discouraged During the College Process

One finding that was in line with Abrego’s (2011) study was that students felt discouraged when they encountered an interruption to their social integration. For many students, this happened when they confronted the structural barriers during the college application process.

Rojo, a senior at PRU, shared how his legal status took a toll on his mental health;

Initially, I did kind of go into a depression just cause I started to put mental blocks in my head, like roadblocks. Because if I can’t get this license, then I can’t go to college, and going to college is something that I remember my fifth-grade teacher telling my parents that I would talk about. So I just started thinking if I can’t do this, get a stupid piece of plastic, then I can’t get a degree. So then I went into a bit of a depression that swerved all my plans.

Maria Luisa, a senior at PRU, echoed Rojo’s response:

I felt really discouraged and a little angry too. Discouraged because the goal, it’s always been, we came to this country so you could have a better life, and with a better life comes you getting an education. And I was like well this isn’t going to happen. And then I felt angry at my parents cause I was like why would you bring me here if it was impossible basically, I guess. It’s not impossible, but at that point I was really at a low I guess, and I saw it as impossible, like going to college. Like why would you guys bring me here if you knew that going to college was going to be like this for me.

High school marks a stage of liminal legality for many undocumented students because that is when students may be required to provide proof of citizenship during the college application process. Rojo and Maria Luisa’s responses verbalize how being denied academic opportunities may lead to students feeling a lowered sense of agency.

Concept of Citizenship

A common theme was that my participants understood they were undocumented from a young age but did not fully comprehend their status's structural barriers. I was expecting students to share that they became aware of their undocumented status once they started to transition into
early adulthood and were asked to show proof of citizenship. However, I was surprised to see that the initial age of awareness presented itself as early as elementary school. My questions regarding legal consciousness were centered on understanding their high school and college experiences, and thus I became curious about how students framed their legal identity as children. In this following example, I asked Izzy how she felt about being undocumented from a young age and how she made sense of her status. She shared:

…well when you’re a critter, you don’t really understand the consequences of being in the United States without legal status. I think in sixth grade, that’s when I really understood that because of the lack of social security number. That I would be excluded just based off of that from opportunities or in this case an after-school program that would have benefited me. Before being a sixth grader though and figuring out and finding out that I would be excluded from opportunities because of the lack of the social, before then it was just something I didn’t know I wasn’t an American Citizen. I had no concept of citizenship. I didn’t understand that. I knew that I was foreign-born, but I didn’t know what the consequences of that would be until later, starting sixth grade and then going into high school. I guess when I really figured out the consequences of the lack legal status would have been when you know I turned 18. When I was now an adult legally.

The *Plyler v. Doe* (1982) ruling suggests that undocumented children are guaranteed the right to public education. However, as we can see in Izzy’s response, undocumented children can still face structural barriers like undocumented adults. Notably, future research should aim to understand how undocumented children develop their legal consciousness. Although Izzy’s response shows that undocumented children are not fully aware of their rights, that does not suggest they are not interested in learning about them.

Facing Frustration During the College Application Process

All of the participants I interviewed were transitioning to college before Illinois had passed the RISE Act into law. A common theme that appeared was that students felt like their
high schools did not provide them with the proper resources to transition to higher education. I will outline the frustrations students shared with me to give further insight into why advocating for college equity became a motive for political activism.

Due to the lack of policy at the higher education level, undocumented students are left to find alternative ways to navigate the system. Toña, a PRU alumna, shared how her high school guidance counselor misinformed her about her options for college:

This is in 2008. At that time, Illinois was one of the States who were accepting undocumented students into their public universities. I know I found out later on, so that's the way they were not prepared. They were not prepared about legislation. They were not prepared of how to approach undocumented students in a non-intimidating way.

I asked Toña if she had confronted any additional negative experiences during the college application process. Her answer reflects the need for administrators to be properly trained on undocumented student issues:

I was speaking with a woman who I was referred to because she was maybe going to be able to help me with some funding due to my status. So, when I went to speak with her, she was asking me these questions. And then I told her my situation. I told her how my status. And she's like, okay, well, don't go in detail because if you do, I may have to report you to the university. And my heart just sank. And I was like, hold on. And I called my sister right there in the office, I'm speaking Spanish. And I was like, what do I do? And she's like, you need to get out, like, just tell her, you know, what, like this stays between you and me and just leave.

The obstacles students face cause various levels of emotional distress. Other than feeling a sense of fear, students also shared that they became frustrated with the lack of guidance they received when asking about financial aid options. At the time of the interview, Nixy was finishing up her last semester at PCC and disclosed the hassles of going through the transfer process:
That [lack of information on financial aid resources for undocumented students] made me upset because I remember asking the person you know who has the representative there and just asking them if they had any support for undocumented students and stuff. And they’re like you can go on the website, and look at that or you can go on La Cultura Latina. I remember going to the website, sitting there on their financial aid office, and going on the website and computer and seeing I could be having all these scholarships but the fact that I don’t have papers, that I won’t have these. It just felt so unfair.

Toña’s and Nixy’s responses provide examples of how there is a lack of understanding at the administrative level to help undocumented students. It seems that students were expected to navigate this process on their own, which is not fair to them. Nixy went on to state that she felt offended that they directed her to the Center for Latino Students if she wanted to find funding opportunities:

It’s not that you’re only looking for that [financial aid] as an undocumented student, right? For schools to give you money and stuff. It just, you feel like for example I went to Transfer University (TU) to ask for you know help from the financial aid office. It was just kind of like they give you weird looks and be like oh you should go to the center for Latinos or whatever and you probably will find resources there. And it’s like you should be doing that. You’re the financial aid office. You should have them here. You shouldn’t be directing me just because you’re trying to put a label on me. You know? Like of course I’m Latino but you should have these things here too.

A common theme that emerged was that students faced microaggressions from college administration. The advice they were given does not reflect a sense of cultural awareness.

Students continuously expressed that their guidance counselors lacked knowledge about the options undocumented students had when applying to college. Although students expressed frustration, it seems that they did not blame their counselors for not knowing how to help them. Surprisingly, it seems that students were complacent with the type of help they were offered. Rafael shared how he felt about handling the process on his own:

I did talk with counselors before in high school about my status and how that was going to affect my ability to go to college. I think it was a disconnect between me and the
advisors because I only went there once and after that I basically did everything myself. Learned how to apply to college and all that. Learning the transfer process rather than trying to seek out another advisor just because I definitely did not want to waste time in someone’s office.

Izzy resonated similar feelings:

I think they helped me as best as they could with their limited knowledge about how undocumented students could access college or university education in 2009 and 2010 there wasn’t, before then there wasn’t a lot of resources for staff and teachers to know how to help undocumented students meet potential obstacles or restrictions to get to college. So no I didn’t have anyone around who had the tools to help me get to college.

Their answers suggest that a lack of social support may explain why students feel like they do not belong in college. Overall, students were confronted with microaggressions during the college application process. The experiences students faced left them to navigate the process on their own, which is not fair to them, and it should be unacceptable for high school and college administrators to not know how to provide proper guidance.

**Academic Political Opportunities**

**Transition to High School**

The first factor of the political process model that I will discuss is the presence of academic political opportunities. When college counselors were unable to connect students with the proper resources, students reported that their teachers served as an alternative form of social support. Esperanza shared how her high school English teacher helped her connect with college resources:

My teacher asked the class what’s your high and low of the day? I ended up telling her that I was really upset about finding out that I couldn’t achieve what I wanted to do, which was nursing. That’s when I had heard about not being able to get certified. And so she kept me after class and she said why can’t you achieve what you want to do? And then I told her, and I opened up. She was white, and I was comfortable opening up because like I said my family was never in fear of our status. I felt comfortable telling her. She’s the one that connected me to the Director
of the Latino Center [LC] at PU... Additionally, some students reported that college readiness programs helped them find social support. I asked Maria Luisa what helped her overcome feelings of anger towards her parents and she shared:

I had been in this [TRIO] program where it was for people of color who were going to be first in their families to go to college. And this was during high school. And they really helped me with the process. I talked to them about these feelings of anger towards my parents and they were like well you know they were blindsided too cause they don’t know what this is like. You’re the first one that’s going through it. I think that’s what, just talking to people, and even talking to other students like me. It was like okay we’re going through the same thing.

The TRIO program Maria Luisa attended served as an opportunity to reframe her understanding of her legal status. Similarly, Rojo discussed how an after-school program put on by PRU helped him find hope in being able to pursue a college education:

And I got lucky that I met someone from PRU. At the time they were running the GOAL program that we had in Local High. It was started by the PRU’s Latino Center. They started an after school club for Latinos, or intended to help Latinos navigate through like the initial process, like getting ready to go to college or like life after school. And one of the advisors at the time his name was Phil, he pretty much sat me down and he told me like you might have to jump through extra hoops, but you can definitely go to college and graduate and then you can you know continue working even with your status. However, these opportunities did not foster motives for activism. They served as a way for students to find encouragement to overcome the obstacles presented to them by their legal status.

Notably, not all students were presented with this level of guidance when applying to college. Thus, it left me wondering, what type of academic political opportunities helped foster activism?

**College: An Immigrant Friendly Campus**

Out of the students who engaged in political activism, six had gone to are attending PRU. Nixy (who attended PCC) and Carmen (who attended Private Liberal Arts College [PLAC]) mentioned they had been politically active, but their activism was not sustained to the same extent as those who attended PRU. A difference that I noticed was that PRU reflected an
immigrant-friendly campus that attempted to give students a holistic level of support. Nixy and Gabriel mentioned that PCC connected undocumented students with academic resources to remain enrolled in college, but they both noted that they had no connections with an activist network centered on immigrant rights. Moreover, Carmen shared that PLAC is located in a politically conservative part of Illinois. In the interview she stated that her faculty discouraged campus activism because it could negatively impact her career after graduation. Additionally, she noted that the activist network on campus did not sustain itself after its leaders graduated her sophomore year of college.

All but two of the students who attended PRU mentioned that their activism started once they got to campus. For Rojo, his activism began in high school when he connected with PRU’s Latino Center, and for Izzy, her activism began online and while she was at community college. I was able to connect with two students who became members of USSN around the time it was initially founded. The students included Toña and Esperanza, two PRU alumna and current graduate students. They explained that PRU was not as immigrant friendly as it is now for current USSN members. At the time of their undergraduate experience, the Office of Undocumented Student Resources (OUSR) had yet to be established, and USSN was yet to be a formally recognized student group.

The Latino Centre (LC) served as an academic political opportunity for students before OUSR and USSN were established. At LC, students were able to find support in two way: through social networking and through academic learning. I asked Esperanza how she became involved with political activism. This was her response:
I think it was my first year. I was trying to get involved in everything because I know I had to stand out for when I was applying to scholarships. So it was different because like I said in my high school I didn’t feel like I fit in with the people so that’s why I wasn’t involved. When I came to college and I saw people like I felt like I fit in and learning others had the same experience. So I liked jumped in and got really involved and you know I was happy to be in those safe spaces, hearing other people, how they felt too because then I could express myself with them. Where I wasn’t able to do that at home with my family.

Esperanza’s response outlines the role LC played in making undocumented students feel welcomed. There, students were able to foster community and build rapport with faculty, staff, and students with whom they could share their status. LC also housed the Latino and Latin American Studies academic office, which educated students on the injustices towards Latinos.

Immigrant-friendly campuses provide social and academic support to students. During the interviews, students at PRU shared how helpful it was to have had the opportunity to connect with Leia, the director of the Office for Undocumented Student Support. However, it is important to note that PRU has not always been considered an immigrant-friendly campus. Izzy went over PRU’s process of getting to its current level of support:

In the past 10 years, PRU has been doing a combination of different things to make themselves more immigrant friendly. Whether its creating private scholarships, having the foundation aggressively or just in general getting funds for that scholarship fund. Changing policies on campus such as being able to get a student ID now, which undocumented students couldn’t before. Helping the university itself, writing letters of support to legislators in Springfield to pass state acts or state laws you know to increase access to higher education for undocumented students. And creating the office of Undocumented Student Support, it’s all been a progression, it’s been different areas I guess so the university has been working on to increase support for undocumented students, but it’s all been gradual like you know progression like nothing happened over night it happened in bits and pieces here and there, but with the end goal being, making higher education accessible for everyone.

As we can see in Izzy’s response, PRU’s administration has responded to students’ demands.

Undocumented students face several structural barriers once they get to college, which is why
colleges should make an active effort to understand their students’ experiences. USSN’s efforts have played a significant role in getting PRU to where it is now. I will now discuss the initial moments of activism for students who are current undergraduates at PRU.

Indigenous Organizational Strength: Connection to an Activist Network

The second factor of the political process model that I will outline is the role of the indigenous organization presented to students at PRU. Most of my students at PRU shared that they did not become politically active until they got to PRU’s campus. Initial moments of activism came after students were able to connect with the Undocumented Student Support Network, which offered mobilization opportunities. The Undocumented Student Support Network (USSN) has existed since 2009 and has served as a group for students to find community and a sense of belonging. Like many undocumented immigrant rights groups at that time, the debate of the DREAM Act in Congress served as a political motive to mobilize. Over time, USSN has shifted its efforts from lobbying for the passing of state legislation to making demands that PRU become a more inclusive campus.

USSN has sustained its activism for 10 years and they have established credibility with the administration, the campus, and their peers. Reger (2018) states that a student organization must be formally recognized on campus to maintain its mobilization efforts. Toña shared that when USSN was first founded they were not a recognized student group and had to find alternative means to get funding. She shared that they partnered with Greek organizations on campus for fundraising opportunities:

So when I was a coordinator, we were nothing, we were just a student group floating. We didn't have any financial [resources], no one gave us any money. Everything we did was
literally out of our pockets and all the students who were willing. So the fact that they're able to be part of the university and all these other things that they deserve to me, like, that's the biggest thing.

Since they have become a formally recognized group, USSN has put on events that have garnered various levels of support. I asked Izzy if she thought the network’s efforts have made a difference on campus. She stated:

I definitely think so. I know it’s made a difference because we talked to previous members who were there before us and they can personally attest to the change that there is now, going to PRU versus before. We get that from alumni who are still offering their support whether it’s you know, you’re helping out USSN by you know donating money for a DACA fundraiser. Or offering their own expertise cause now they’re professionals and they might have a degree in social work or counseling that now they’re able to give back. But yeah there’s definitely been a change and very strongly resulting from the involvement of the students in USSN.

I then asked students why they thought their events have been successful. A common answer was that they felt their events were providing help and resources for undocumented students and their allies. Maria Luisa reflected on the network’s success:

So many people come out, and some of those people aren’t even undocumented you know but they’re looking for the information for their family members or friends. So I would say it is successful, and you know we’ve accomplished so much since 2009, which is when the organization first started.

The network’s constant efforts to help the undocumented community has garnered growing levels of support since it was first established. Their annual events have served as opportunities to keep students actively involved.

In the interviews, students shared that USSN has existed on campus since 2009. To better understand how USSN sustained itself, I asked students to elaborate on how they came to know about the activist network and what started their engagement. A common response that I
received was that USSN created a network of activists that garnered long-term friendships. Izzy, a transfer student, discussed how having friends at PRU linked her with the network:

I got involved because there was a student that I had already known of. Well actually a couple of students. Yeah, two students in particular who I knew were involved in USSN and I followed their page and connected with them via social media, but there were also students here at PRU. So those two people I trusted because I saw them involved in the community in other ways outside of PRU. So that’s why I felt comfortable being part of that student organization.

Not only did USSN help foster friendships, but it also served as a place for students to find a sense of belonging. When asked how getting involved with the activist network has shaped his college experience, Rafael shared:

Well since getting into the USSN, like the student organization here at PRU, I’ve definitely interacted more cause before my thing was all through high school and community college was just go to classes, do my homework, and then go home. So never really had much drive to create like deep relationships or something like that.

Additionally, students shared that Leia, the coordinator for the Office for Undocumented Student Resources (OUSR), motivated students to get involved with the network. Notably the OUSR was established in 2018, almost ten years after the group was initially founded.

Leia has played a major role in empowering students to become politically active. Rojo shared how connecting with Leia and other members of the activist network helped him get involved on campus. Rojo reflected on his high school experience:

I think sophomore year I got introduced to the GOAL program and junior year is when I would go to the USSN meetings at PRU…At the time, I think it was definitely the advisor that we had. I had a lot of respect for her and I just see her as somebody that was very knowledgeable and I just you know kind of followed along. But then after being in PRU I saw that there was a lot of people that were like that. The leaders of the program at the time.
Leia has become one of the initial contact persons for undocumented students who transfer to PRU. Maria Luisa, a transfer student from community college, shared how she initially got involved with USSN:

I think it was when I met Leia, the coordinator for OUSR. And then meeting other people, members, from the USSN, just being open about their status you know. And it wasn’t even like, it was just freeing to see other people be like I’m undocumented, you know and not be fearful of anything or be worried about who’s listening. And then I think what the coordinator taught me was how important is it to tell our stories and how my story is important not just to people like myself, in history even.

Rafael, another transfer student, shared a similar response:

So through Leia’s help and saving me a little bit of money at PRU, thanks to the medical insurance waiver for undocumented students. Definitely felt like I wanted to repay her a little bit for that. Okay, so that’s how I got started. Doing a bunch of things for USSN and then it sort of went up in scale.

At PRU, the activist network played a major role in fostering opportunities for activism. Interestingly, academic political opportunities presented themselves to the network in various ways. Over the years, members of the network have been able to jump through administrative hoops to become a recognized student group, which in turn has allowed them to sustain their presence on campus. USSN has allowed students to socially integrate and connect with campus resources, but most importantly, it has served as a place for students to learn about their status. I will now discuss how connecting with USSN has helped students shift their legal consciousness and adopt a collective identity in paying it forward.
Shift in Legal Consciousness

Reframing Legal Identity

The third factor of the political process model for undocumented student activism that I will discuss is legal consciousness, which considers how students frame their legal identity and understand their legal rights. I aimed to understand the legal consciousness of my participants to see if there is a difference in how students frame their undocumented status from when they first found out they were undocumented to the time they transitioned into college. Further, I wanted to understand if students experience a shift in framing their legal identity and whether that fosters or deters students from becoming civically engaged. I found that politically active students do experience a shift in how they frame their legal identity. However, legal consciousness in itself is not the driving factor that gets students involved on campus. Instead, I found that students are more likely to get engaged on campus once they learn about their legal rights, connect with academic political opportunities, and connect with an existing activist network.

When trying to understand how students framed their legal identity, I asked them to elaborate when they first found out they were undocumented. I expected students to say they found out they were undocumented in high school or when transitioning into young adulthood, but I was surprised to find out many of them knew they were undocumented from a young age. Moreover, many of them shared that they did not understand what it meant to be undocumented, which could be due to them not having other undocumented friends with whom they could relate or discuss the hardships of their status. I found that many of my participants gained a new sense of understanding of what it meant to be undocumented once they got to college, specifically to PRU’s campus. It was here where they were able to find support from campus resources, connect
with undocumented peers, and take classes that discussed the intersection between history and migration.

I had the opportunity to interview students who were a part of USSN at different periods. I will discuss Toña’s experience, who was a part of USSN before it became a formally recognized student organization. In Toña’s interview, I noticed that her classes served as academic opportunities to learn about her status. In the following example, she discusses how taking classes through the Latinx Studies Department helped her understand her various identities and how that influenced her involvement with campus activism:

When I talk about the different levels of activism, the, my first one was what it meant to be an Ecuatoriana [Ecuadorian], immigrante [immigrant], undocumented woman. So when I would get in social gatherings with other women or even men, they would bring out these, like, for me, it's very conscious radical thoughts. And I was like, I needed to share this with my mom because she comes from the whole different side of the spectrum… So when I found that out in class and because I was doing the minor in Latin American studies, I was like, what is happening right now? Like, Oh my God, it makes so much sense, this like machismo and like violence against families. So it stemmed from that, from those classes, from that content.

PRU’s campus gave students various safe spaces where they could learn about their undocumented status. These academic political opportunities presented themselves through the Latino Student Center and Center for Latinx Studies. Many students shared that taking classes through the Latinx Studies Department helped them gain a new perspective on what it meant to be Latino and undocumented.

Learning About Their Legal Rights

For many of my participants, a shift in legal framing came once they got to a four-year institution because that is when they learned about their rights. However, this was not the case
for all students. For Rojo and Carmen, this shift happened when they were in high school, and for Izzy, this shift happened when she was in community college. I will first discuss Rojo’s experience since his circumstances are unique compared to the other students who attended PRU. Rojo had the opportunity to get involved on PRU’s campus at the high school level because he attended Local High.

At the time, PRU’s Latino Student Center had a mentorship program for students who lived in Hometown. It was through this connection that Rojo was able to connect with USSN and Leia. Like many, he shared that he experienced lower levels of agency when finding out about his status. I asked him if he understood his legal rights before connecting with USSN, and this is what he said:

No, well one cause I feel like I was in high school, so I didn’t really know I had rights to begin with as student or as a kid. Yeah, I definitely didn’t know about the rights I’ve had as an undocumented immigrant until I joined it [USSN].

Rojo’s answer outlines two important parts of how students may experience a shift in legal consciousness. The first is that understanding one’s legal rights does not happen at a young age for undocumented immigrants, especially as children. The second is that connecting with an activist network like USSN allows undocumented young adults to learn about their legal rights and see their status in a new light. Like Rojo, Carmen, a Private Liberal Arts College (PLAC) student, shared that she became aware of her legal rights in high school. However, a difference between Rojo’s and Carmen’s experiences is that Carmen and her peers established the activist network on their campus that did the Know Your Rights Training. Carmen also shared that they had help from the community and were not directly working with a college center like the Latino Student Center at PRU.
The Influence of Social Media

Another finding that I came across is that shift in legal consciousness can also occur with the help of social media. For example, Izzy, an PRU alumna, began to get into activism due to online networking. Izzy started her collegiate career at a community college in Illinois and then transferred to PRU. I asked if her initial engagement of activism took place at her college campus, and she shared that her social media connections primarily influenced it:

I was mostly connected with activists or organizers via the internet. So I started kind of tapping into that world electronically like in 2010... There was a big push to call your legislature, call your congress person, because the Dream Act was going to come up for votes. So I remember being part of like encouraging your friends on Facebook or whatever friends you have on social media, encouraging them to call their congress person and telling them to tell their congress person to vote yes on Dream Act. So that’s where that started and then I started following a certain page or following people on twitter or even like Tumblr accounts of organizers because this activism online was happening all over the internet, all over social media and websites. So that’s how I started connecting to people, when I actually stopped doing it online and moved to in-person was when there was an opportunity to go to Washington DC and in the summer of 2012.

Izzy brings up an interesting point by outlining the ways social media helps individuals connect with the social movement and adopt its collective identity at the national level. Although she was not primarily connected with an activist network via her college campus, we can still see that her activism efforts focused on salient issues prevalent in the immigrant rights movement.

I was interested in understanding how Izzy learned about her legal rights, since she was initially connected to the movement via the internet. For most of my participants, a shift in legal consciousness came once they took a Know Your Rights Training at PRU. I asked her how she learned about her status, and this was her response:
I think it’s been a gradual learning experience. It has never been because I just want to know everything about immigration law it’s more like I have to understand this because it’s impacting me and people that I care about around me so I’m forced to learn about it. Or if we’re going to lobby a certain state representative we have to know our facts and we have to know our laws so we can inform them correctly because they don’t even know what’s going on with immigration law or things related to immigration. So I have always done it just to make sure that I’m more aware and so I’m not in the situation where I don’t know my legal rights or I don’t know that I have certain protections.

In Izzy’s response, we can see the sense of resiliency undocumented students developed once they began to understand the injustices of the immigration system. Izzy brought up a good point by stating that she did not learn about her legal rights because she wanted to, but rather it was an obligation to protect herself and her loved ones against any possible legal rights violations.

**Collective Identity: Paying It Forward and Moving Away from the Dreamer Narrative**

When asking students why they wanted to get involved in activism, several of them shared that they felt a sense of obligation to help others overcome the hardships they had experienced. My participants shared that being undocumented has presented them with several adversities their entire lives and not just during the college application and transfer process. In this following example, Izzy explains why she finds it important to “pay it forward”

> I think that the reasons why I engage in any kind of political activism is because I grew up with this experience, I grew up with this experience with my siblings and my mother, I’ve seen first-hand how it impacts us in every way not just immigration, but you know employment or having access to resources or even having access to things like healthcare. I see other families who have those obstacles or additional barriers to resources or just in general to be treated better with dignity and respect and I wanted to change not just my family circumstances but also those of friends or their families or just the community in general.

Izzy’s response also shows a sense of obligation activist may feel to the undocumented community and immigrants’ rights movement. Other participants also echoed her response and they all expressed a level of sympathy.
Academic political opportunities are only one part of the political process model that can aid in understanding how students experience a shift in legal consciousness and adopt the collective identity of the immigrant rights movement. For students at PRU, the Undocumented Student Support Network served as a form of social support since students could connect with other undocumented students who shared similar hardships. The following example shows how connecting with an activist network can motivate students to get involved with campus activism.

I asked Esperanza, a PRU alumna, to elaborate on how USSN helped her break out of her shell:

You know the leaders are teaching the incoming people how they can do the political activism as well because I didn’t just come in knowing “oh I can protest about my rights” You know? That’s something that I had never done until I got to PRU. And hearing other people, yeah this is what we do. This has created change in the past and this is why we do it. Then I followed them, learned from them, and taught the other incoming students. So if I wouldn’t have joined then I wouldn’t have learned what my rights were and what all of these other people know about what our opportunities are and what our rights are.

In Esperanza’s response, we can see how connecting with an activist network is key in helping students become educated on their legal rights and regain a sense of agency. She shared how connecting with a student group like USSN allowed her to connect with campus leaders who exemplified what it means to be resilient and create a change.

So far, I have discussed how a shift in legal consciousness occurs once students have the opportunity to learn about their legal rights. I noticed that politically active students have a regained sense of agency over their undocumented status after connecting to an immigrant friendly campus. In Abrego’s (2011) study, she mentions that feelings of stigma and social exclusion encompass the legal consciousness of undocumented young adults. I was curious to see if the participants in my study held similar feelings. I asked Maria Luisa, a senior at PRU, to further elaborate on the usage of the “i” word:
I just learned two years ago that people shouldn’t use the i-word. And I’m all up for it. Like once I learned why we shouldn’t use the i-word yeah, no human is illegal… I learned it last year when I got involved with USSN, and even on TV I had seen the signs during protest. That would say no human is illegal.

I then proceeded to ask her how she felt about the word:

…I guess I never really got, it never really clicked, but now I don’t like to hear it. I don’t like it when people refer to people as illegal… I mean remember asking like oh why don’t we use the term illegal? You know my parents use it. I’ve heard so many people who are part of the immigrant community use this word to refer to themselves and you know, now it makes sense well no human is illegal. An action is illegal but a human can’t be illegal. So I think it was just that. It was Leia in the Office for Undocumented Student Resources who explained it to me. That’s who I asked why we didn’t use the i-word.

Part of the social stigma around being undocumented is rooted in the concept of illegality, which tends to criminalize migrants and overtly ignore the injustices they face due to an outdated immigration system. As we can see in Maria Luisa’s response, members of the undocumented community may refer to themselves as illegal if they internalize the stigmatized identity. Hence, learning not to use the “i” word may be considered a potential marker for a shift in legal consciousness.

Previously I mentioned that I asked students how they felt when they initially found out they were undocumented, and many of them shared that they had feelings of hopelessness and experienced a lowered sense of agency because their status hindered them from pursuing their collegiate careers. If we take into consideration the type of legislation politicians have been trying to pass regarding the rights of undocumented students, we can see that they tend to favor high-achieving students. The rhetoric around the DREAM Act has created the Dreamer narrative, which latently grants sympathy and social acceptance to young, model migrants and continues to
criminalize and exclude the rest of the undocumented immigrant community. Maria Luisa, describes the Dreamer Narrative in further detail:

They put this image up of the perfect undocumented individual….Like only certain individuals deserve citizenship. Like only people who have been to high school who have a college degree, who don’t have a criminal record, or who don’t have a felony let’s say. But my parents they don’t have a high school diploma from the United States. They don’t have a college degree. You know my dad has been stopped multiple times by the police just because he’s going over the speed limit. Just by those three things that I just mentioned my dad, according the media and politicians, he’s not worthy of citizenship, but that shouldn’t be the case.

I asked students to reflect on how undocumented immigrants are depicted in the media.

Similar to Maria Luisa, Rojo discussed his initial understanding of what the “ideal” immigrant should look like:

It was initially the Dreamer, the perfect student, like I used to buy into that, and then as a college student I realized that yes we might have Dreamers that are your perfect straight A students, extracurricular activities and all that, but I definitely did not match any of that after my second semester. So I figured I’d try to paint another picture as an undocumented student.

Students also shared that reinforcing the dreamer narrative was exclusionary to the undocumented immigrant community. They shared that it caused more harm in the community than it provided benefits because it limited who was deserving of rights. In accordance with Maria Luisa, the Dreamer narrative tended to leave out the first generation of immigrants, who were typically criminalized for being undocumented in comparison to the 1.5 generation. Thus, students’ pushback against the Dreamer narrative showed me that reframing legal identity was not only rooted in understanding their legal rights in a new way, but it was also rooted in demanding inclusion for all undocumented people and not just those deemed worthy by politicians.
CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Discussion

To understand undocumented Latinx political engagement variance, one needs to consider the various factors that influence their legal consciousness and legal identity framing. My study expands on McAdam's (1999) political process model by combining it with Reger's (2018) theory on academic opportunity structures and Abrego's (2011) work on undocumented legal consciousness. I use McAdam's political process model because it considers the following four factors when trying to understand the emergence of a social movement: 1) broad socioeconomic processes, 2) presentation of political opportunities, 3) indigenous organizational strength, and 4) having a shared activist consciousness. I incorporate Reger's (2018) theory on academic opportunity structure because it specifically looks at the role of a college campus in fostering activism opportunities. Additionally, I incorporate Abrego's (2011) work on undocumented Latinx consciousness because it explores the factors that influence the claims-making behavior of undocumented young adults.

Data for this study is drawn from eleven in-depth interviews with undocumented Latinx young adults who attended a community college, private university, or public university in Illinois. Out of the eleven interviews, seven of my participants engaged in activism regarding undocumented immigrant rights. I found that undocumented Latinx students are more likely to
engage in campus activism if they have 1) connected with an immigrant-friendly campus, 2) connected with undocumented peers, 3) connected with an activist network, and 4) experienced a shift in legal consciousness.

Implications

The political process model for undocumented student activism considers the resources students are presented with when transitioning into higher education. I considered the following factors when trying to understand the variance in undocumented students activism: 1) presence of academic political opportunities, 2) connection to an activist network, and 3) shift in legal consciousness. I found that no factor alone was enough to foster activism; instead, it was a combination of the three that helped students reframe their legal identities, regain a sense of agency, and educate themselves on their legal rights. For example, being presented with academic political opportunities allowed students to connect to an undocumented activist peer network, which helped them reframe their legal identities and regain a new sense of legal consciousness that empowered them to engage in claims-making behavior.

I also found that academic political opportunities present themselves to students in various ways. For some students, academic political opportunities appeared at the high school level, whereas for others, they appeared once they got to college. Either way, academic political opportunities served as ways for students to connect with academic resources that helped alleviate the structural barriers of entering higher education. For example, academic political opportunities appeared in college readiness programs, finding support in faculty and staff, or having the ability to take classes in the Latinx Studies Department.
The second factor of the political process model was connecting with an existing activist network. I initially assumed that undocumented students would be drawn to joining an undocumented activist network, but my interviews showed that these activist networks tended to recruit students. Following Reger’s (2018) theory on academic political opportunities, once activist networks were able to establish credibility, they could sustain their efforts over time. For example, the Undocumented Student Support Network (USSN) and Public Research University (PRU) established its credibility by becoming a formally recognized student organization that worked closely with the student body, student government, and college administration. An activist network also proved to be a pivotal factor in helping students reframe their legal identities. Many of my participants shared that they did not have close connections with other undocumented peers while growing up and hence did not have many opportunities to discuss the hardships of their status. However, connecting with an activist network, whether via the internet or on a college campus, allowed students to find social support and connect with others who understood the hardships of living as undocumented immigrants. Moreover, connecting with other undocumented students allowed students to learn about their legal rights while also learning the importance of getting involved in campus activism.

A third factor of the political process model for undocumented student activism is experiencing a shift in legal consciousness. McAdam (1999) suggests that activists must be cognitively liberated before becoming active members of a social movement. However, my study found that students tend not to experience a shift in legal consciousness until they have connected with other undocumented immigrants who can educate them on their legal rights. I found that students will be more likely to engage in campus activism once connected with an
immigrant-friendly campus and an activist network that can help them reframe their legal identities. My findings suggest that students will not be politically active if they still view their undocumented status through a stigmatized frame or are not fully aware of their legal rights.

Overall, the political process model for undocumented student activism places emphasis on understanding how students reframe their legal identities and regain a sense of agency over their legal status. In my study, the political efforts of undocumented students tended to focus on making higher education institutions a more inclusive space. My findings suggest that students may be more willing to engage in campus activism if they have learned about their legal rights and develop a sense of commitment or solidarity with the existing activist networks on campus. Many of my students shared that they experienced various structural barriers when entering higher education and thus felt obligated to alleviate those said barriers for their communities and prospective college students.

Limitations

One limitation of my study is that the rise of the COVID-19 pandemic hindered my recruitment and data collection process. I had initially planned on conducting my interviews in person but quickly had to switch to conducting interviews via Zoom to ensure social distance guidelines. One difficulty in doing my interviews online was that it made it harder to establish rapport and build my sample. Undocumented students are already considered a hard-to-reach population, and it became even harder to recruit students since I was unable to meet with them in person or establish my credibility as the researcher. Towards the end of my interviews, I relied heavily on social media to recruit potential participants. However, I had no way to ensure that
students had received my emails since I could not ensure that they had a reliable internet connection.

Future Research

Future studies should aim to understand how the college experience may vary for undocumented students across the Midwest. As previously mentioned, most work on undocumented immigrant activism tends to focus on students' experiences in the West Coast and the South. Illinois has one of the highest undocumented Latinx immigrant populations, but that does not mean surrounding states do not have undocumented immigrants who reside there.

It would be worth comparing the undocumented college experience by state because higher education policies tend to adhere to the state's political climate. For example, Illinois is one of the few states that has implemented higher education policies that extend in-state tuition and access to state financial aid to undocumented students so long as they have graduated from a high school in the state. Iowa, by comparison many undocumented young adults are often left to find loopholes in the college application process because there are no policies at the state level that guarantee them the right to a college matriculation degree. Therefore, it would be worthwhile to compare experiences to see if there is a difference in what influences students to engage in campus activism or if there is a difference in how activist groups are formed and sustained.

Another direction for future studies should be to explore the various types of college campuses undocumented students attend. In my study, my data was limited to interviews from four types of institutions. 1) a public research university with an existing activist network of 10 years, 2) a public community college near the southside of Chicago, 3) a private liberal arts
college in a conservative part of Illinois, and 4) a private university that serves more as an educational facility for the community. Future studies should look at the college campuses that primarily serve the undocumented student population and compare them to colleges and universities that may not be as immigrant friendly. Although Illinois has implemented policies at the state level, it does not mean that every higher education institution has implemented similar practices.

A third direction for future studies should take a closer look at the perspectives of college faculty and staff to understand how they view undocumented immigrant issues. My study specifically focused on understanding the students' points of view; however, I found that the activism of students was also influenced by having faculty and staff allies. It would be worthwhile to understand how college personnel at the administrative, faculty, and staff levels feel about issues salient to their undocumented students. If colleges and universities have missions to serve their student populations, it should be essential to understand how college personnel view the structural barriers undocumented students face.

Policy Recommendations

The passing of the Illinois RISE Act in 2019 established an alternative financial aid application for undocumented students. The RISE Act opened eligibility for institutional financial aid and in-state tuition rates to undocumented and transgender students as long as they have graduated from a high school in Illinois. The RISE Act can be considered a crucial first step in addressing and alleviating the structural barriers undocumented students face when entering higher education. However, there is still an immense amount of work to do.
During the interviews, I asked students what they would like to see implemented in policy at the collegiate level. Many of them stated that they would like increased access to financial aid. There are various merit-based scholarships that undocumented students do not qualify for based on their status, and therefore, they must rely on the funding they get from MAP grants or private scholarships. My participants shared that they would like to see an active effort from their institutions to establish funds for private scholarships for undocumented students. Access to financial aid proved to be the structural barrier that imposed the most strain during these student college experience.

For undocumented students, funding goes beyond covering tuition rates. My participants shared that they would like funding to establish secure housing and transportation to get to and from college. Thus, I strongly recommend that colleges and universities establish funds for undocumented students that are not based on merit but are primarily based on need. If colleges and universities wish to retain and graduate this vulnerable student population, they should make an active effort to alleviate the unique structural barriers this group of students face. By alleviating the strain of finding funding, students will have better opportunities to focus on their academics and fully immerse themselves on their college campus.

A second policy recommendation would be to have active training programs for high-school college counselors. My participants shared that transitioning to higher education felt like an alienating experience because they had minimal help from their guidance counselors. As higher education professionals, it should be essential for guidance counselors and admissions counselors to be educated on the college application process for undocumented immigrants.
Many undocumented students tend to be first-generation college students and thus should not be left alone to navigate this process. Although colleges and universities can have established resources for students once they get to campus, they should also have established resources while entering the transitionary period. It would be ideal for every college and university to have an undocumented student support office, but that may take years to establish. It would be highly beneficial to high schools, colleges, and universities to train their personnel to recruit and guide undocumented students since the number of undocumented students entering higher education continues to rise.

Conclusion

I was surprised to find that many of my participants knew they were undocumented from a very young age. I was not expecting students to have this level of awareness because undocumented children are not required to show proof of citizenship to receive a K-12 education. Moreover, I expected their families to keep it a secret until they started to transition to young adulthood. However, understanding when students became aware of their legal status helped me better understand how legal identity framing may vary by age and experience. In addition, understanding how students framed their legal identities served to compare legal consciousness development, which refers to the extent to which students understand the violation of their legal rights.

In Abrego's (2011) study she mentions that variation in undocumented Latinx legal consciousness can be understood by considering age of arrival and comparing socialization circumstances. Her study suggests that undocumented adults who arrive to the United States after the age of 18 are less likely to engage in political claims making because they have
internalized the repercussions of the criminal justice system. Thus, undocumented adults are less likely to engage in activism as a tactic to avoid any possibilities of getting arrested or potential deportation threats. Additionally, she mentions that feelings of stigma and alienation tend to encompass the legal consciousness of undocumented young adults. However, my study found that the legal consciousness of undocumented young adults also varies by social circumstances, and legal identity framing may not always be uniform among migrants in the same age group.

One thing that emerged from the interviews was that family might play an important role during the initial framing process. I expected students to feel a sense of stigma when finding out they were undocumented. I was surprised to find that some students understood from a young age that being undocumented was nothing to be ashamed of and instead should be seen as a structural barrier. Notably, students mentioned that they learned this mentality from their parents. However, this was not the case for all students. For others, learning about their undocumented status brought on feelings of fear and alienation. This finding was more in line with Abrego’s finding and may suggest that the way parents internalize their legal status may initially influence how students view themselves in society.

One of the aims of this study was to understand legal consciousness development and the factors that may influence the variance in framing or legal rights awareness. I found that students have a limited understanding of what it means to be undocumented even though they are aware of their legal status at a young age. Izzy brought up an interesting point that although children may not be fully aware of their legal rights they may still experience structural barriers that influence how they internalize their status. Additionally, students shared that they did not have peers who could relate to their status obstacles as they were growing up. This may explain
why many students did not experience a shift in legal consciousness until they got to college because that is where they could connect with peers who shared similar hardships. Furthermore, I noticed that students who could connect with other undocumented peers tended to know more about their legal rights and were more likely to be connected to activism opportunities.

When I started to conduct interviews, I was not expecting to ask students about their college application process. Initially, my questions were aimed at understanding their college experience once they got to college. However, allowing students to elaborate on their hardships during the college application process helped me better understand why they felt a sense of obligation to engage in campus activism. For many students, the transition to higher education was constrained by structural barriers that made going to college feel almost impossible. Students shared that they had to turn down academic opportunities because 1) they could not financially afford the cost of attendance and 2) their status disqualified them from being able to accept or enroll.

To conclude, undocumented Latinx student activism variance may be better understood by considering the factors that may influence the development of their legal identity framing and legal consciousness. Students will be more likely to engage in activism if 1) they are presented with an immigrant-friendly campus that provides opportunities for social and academic support, 2) they have the opportunity to connect with undocumented peers they can relate to with on the hardships of their status, 3) they can connect with an activist network that provides opportunities for engagement, and 4) they have re-framed their legal identity and experienced a shift in legal consciousness.
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APPENDIX
INTERVIEW GUIDE
INTERVIEW GUIDE

Consent Statement

I acknowledge that I am at least 18 years of age.

I understand that my participation in this study will ask me about my experiences as an undocumented Latino student. I understand that my consent to participate in this project does not constitute a waiver of any legal rights or redress I might have as a result of my participation.

I agree to be audio recorded with the use of an alias to protect my identity.

VERBAL CONSENT

Questions about Immigration/family background

1) When did you arrive in the United States?

2) What is your current legal status?
   a. [if undocumented]
      i. When did you find out you were undocumented? ii. How did you find out you were undocumented? iii. Tell me how you felt when you found out you were undocumented. iv. How do you feel others treat you because of your legal status?
         1. Can you give me some examples of negative/positive interactions you have had with others because of your legal status?
         2. Do you keep your undocumented status a secret from others?
            i. Any other people specifically?
            ii. Why these individuals?

3) What are the legal statutes of your family members?
   a. Parents/ Guardians
   b. Siblings

4) Do you currently have DACA?
   a. [if applicable]
i. How old were you when you first applied?

ii. Did it have any effects on the ways you experienced high school?
   1. How so?
      a. Can you tell me about a specific instance in which it affected how you experienced high school?
      b. [if negative] how did you deal with that?

iii. Did it have any effects on the ways you have experienced college?
   1. How so?
      a. Can you tell me about a specific instance in which it affected how you have experienced college?
      b. [if negative] how did you deal with that?

5) Thinking back to 2017, When President Trump first started discussing terminating DACA
   a. What was your initial response?

6) Latino Politics:

7) Have you been involved in political activism regarding immigration issues?
   a. [if applicable continue to question 7]
   b. [if not applicable]
      i. Why not?
      ii. What has stopped you from getting involved?
      iii. [go to question 12]

8) When did you start getting involved in political activism?
   a. How did you get involved?
   b. Why did you get involved?
   c. Did the termination of DACA have any influence on your decision to get involved in political activism?

9) Do you think your experiences as an undocumented immigrant have influenced your political activism?
   a. How so?
   b. Why not?

10) Are you/have you been involved with Dream Action NIU?
    a. How did you become involved with Dream Action NIU?
11) How long have you been involved in Dream Action NIU?
   a. Do you hold any roles within the org?
   b. What made you want to apply for the position?
   c. What goals do you have for the organization?
   d. In your opinion, has Dream Action made a difference on campus?
      i. How so?

12) What type of events does Dream Action NIU hold on campus? (public events, host
    speakers, or conduct protests, coming out of the shadows, know your rights)
    a. [if applicable]
       i. How have you been involved in these events?
       ii. Do you feel like these events have been successful?
           1. Why?

13) In your opinion, are there any risks involved with political activism as an undocumented
    immigrant?
    a. [yes]
       i. What are those risks
    b. [no]
       i. In your opinion, what makes it not risky?

14) What are your thoughts about the effect your activism may have on your family? (ex:
    expose to legal troubles, disclose their status, make them vulnerable to deportation)
    a. [yes]
       i. In what ways?

15) Does anyone in your network participate in political activism? (family, friends from
    home, friends in college)
    a. Would you say that influences your involvement?
       i. [yes]
          1. How so?
16) Are you involved in any other types of civic engagement? (supporting political campaigns, attend rallies, expressing political opinions on social media)
   a. What are the differences between [said civic engagement] and political activism?

17) What types of immigration policies would you like to see implemented on the…?
   a. local level? (at NIU, DeKalb)
   b. state level? (Illinois)
   c. national level? (Other than DACA and the DREAM Act)

18) Background Questions:

19) What is your racial identity?
20) What is your ethnic identity?
21) What is your gender identity?
22) What year are you in school?
   a. What do you plan to do once you graduate from college?