A Modern Form of Segregation: The Impact of Higher Education Bans on Undocumented Students in the South

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Abstract

Higher education access for undocumented immigrants looks vastly different across the United States. In the South, there are three states that actively ban undocumented students from higher education access, including Georgia, Alabama, and South Carolina. While there is a lot of research regarding previous state and federal policies, general experiences of undocumented students in education, and racial exclusion and segregation, there is limited research regarding the impact of bans on undocumented students. This study aims to share the experiences of undocumented students and individuals in the South that have navigated the higher education bans. Research was conducted through seven qualitative interviews with undocumented individuals over eighteen years of age that currently reside or grew up in Georgia, Alabama, or South Carolina. Findings reveal that (1) the bans are a modern form of segregation (2) education is incredibly meaningful for undocumented students and they pursue alternative methods in order to obtain access (3) undocumented students face a lot of uncertainty and hopelessness in their journey leading to thoughts about "self-deportation"/voluntary departure (4) community is incredibly important in their journey, and (5) many hold advocacy and leadership roles that have developed their issue awareness, agency, voice, and power, ultimately leading to transformative community impact. This study concludes by providing policy recommendations to address the barriers and challenges that undocumented students face on their educational journey in the South.

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Introduction

“Lock up your libraries if you like, but there is no gate, no lock, no bolt that you can set upon the freedom of my mind” – Virginia Woolf

Recent public discourse and the media have brought to light and scrutiny a group of individuals that have largely lived in the shadows. There are currently an estimated 11 million undocumented individuals in the United States (American Immigration Council, 2024). Undocumented immigrants are individuals that do not have legal documentation, either because they overstayed their visa, their status was terminated, or they crossed the border unlawfully. Undocumented immigrants typically work in hard labor-intensive jobs for lower wages and live in the shadows due to the risk of deportation. Undocumented immigrants now comprise nearly one in every 20 workers (American Immigration Council, 2024). Although there have been many efforts for a pathway to citizenship both from the public and from Congress, there has not been any immigration reform since 1986 when Ronald Reagan signed the Immigration Reform and Control Act granting amnesty to 2.7 million long-term residents (Library of Congress, 2025).

The current Trump administration has prioritized the deportation of undocumented individuals throughout this presidential term. This has included large efforts and campaigns for the deportation of undocumented people and attacks on the larger immigrant community. Regarding deportations, we have seen an implementation of quotas, the use of Guantanamo Bay and El Salvador for prisons, and detention of mayors and judges for allegedly violating immigration law or trespassing. The White House

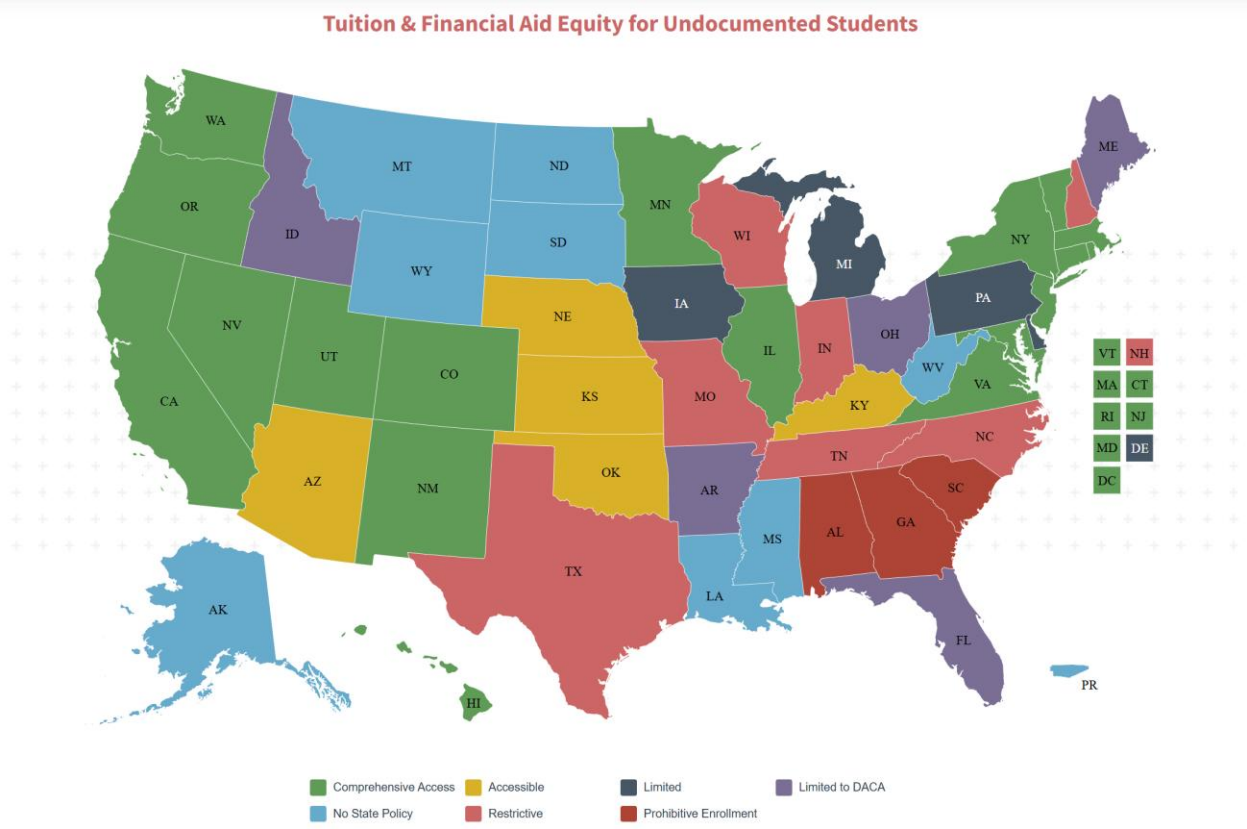
Instagram page even published an ASMR video highlighting the clinking of chains on individuals getting deported (The White House, 2025). We have also seen attacks on birthright citizenship, the removal of visas for international students, and removal of green cards for protestors and dissidents.

While a lot of the media focus regarding undocumented individuals is currently on detention, deportation, and the economy, the undocumented community is present, and it is a large one. They are working, going to school, attending churches, and going to parks like everyone else. According to the Institute on Taxation and Economic Development, "undocumented immigrants paid $96.7 billion in federal, state, and local taxes in 2022. Most of that amount, $59.4 billion, was paid to the federal government while the remaining $37.3 billion was paid to state and local governments" (Davis et al, 2024). While undocumented immigrants pay billions into our tax system, they aren't eligible to receive most benefits. This includes things like FAFSA, food stamps, social security benefits, and healthcare.

In addition, while most of the conversation is at the federal level, states have an incredible amount of discretion and decision-making power when it comes to things like immigration checkpoints and access to resources and programs. Access to things like identification cards, driving licenses, and healthcare vastly differ across the country. One thing that is completely left up to states is higher education including access to apply and attend post-secondary institutions, residency requirements, tuition equity, and financial aid. This is in part due to a monumental Supreme Court case in 1982, Plyler v Doe. The court decided that all students, regardless of their immigration status, deserved access to the free K-12

public education system. While it was a huge milestone, it left higher education up to the states. Since then, several states have addressed this issue by passing policy or not passing any policy at all. Some states such as Montana, Wyoming, and Alaska have no known policy, leaving absolutely every aspect of higher education up to colleges' discretion and individual student navigation. Some states allow you to attend but you must pay as an international student. Several states such as Nebraska and Arizona have passed tuition equity, granting undocumented students the ability to pay tuition as an in-state resident. Other states have gone beyond that and passed financial aid access, usually through their state need grant, allowing undocumented students to receive financial aid to pay for their tuition and expenses. In WA State, there is in-state tuition, financial aid, access to the state College Bound Scholarship, and most recently, HB 1889 was passed, allowing undocumented students to access professional licenses (Mejia, 2024). On the other side of this spectrum, however, there are three states that currently have policies that ban undocumented students in some way, shape, or form, from accessing higher education. These are Georgia, Alabama, and South Carolina (Higher Ed Immigration Portal, 2025). Below is a map taken from the Higher Ed Immigration Portal highlighting in real time the different policies throughout the nation.

Figure 1: Tuition & Financial Aid Equity for Undocumented Students Map (Higher Ed Immigration Portal, 2025)



In this Southern region that includes Georgia, Alabama, and South Carolina, exists a deep history of segregation, discrimination, and racial violence. A place that once banned Black people from attending school, now 50 years since then, bans another marginalized group, undocumented individuals. Since the bans, there has been a rise in coalition building and civil rights advocacy, as well as the creation of alternative forms of education, such as modern-day freedom schools like Freedom University in Georgia. Undocumented students and supporters have even been arrested for visiting college campuses in Georgia. These

bans have impacted and shaped local communities, but how so? This leads us to the question researched through this project - How have higher education bans in the South impacted undocumented students? This project aims to learn about students' thoughts on the bans, their experiences navigating their state policies, how they managed to access an education if at all, and their overall experience as undocumented individuals.

Policy Background

Georgia Ban Overview

One policy that is critical to the landscape of our nation takes place in Georgia. On October 13, 2010, The Board of Regents in Georgia passed Policy 4.1.6 and 4.3.4, effectively banning undocumented students from equal access to public higher education in Georgia. All undocumented students, even those with DACA who have work authorization and deferred action, were barred from the five most prestigious public higher education institutions in the state. This includes The University of Georgia, Georgia College, Georgia Institute of Technology, Georgia State University, and the Medical College of Georgia. Additionally, undocumented students were made ineligible for in-state tuition at any other public Georgia institution.

This leads us to address an important question – what factors led to the passage of the undocumented student ban in Georgia? We will particularly be analyzing the fifty years before the policy passed which includes the 1960s – 2010 to explore what social, historical, and political factors led to the passage of the ban.

In summary, several factors were shown to influence and ultimately lead to the passage of the Board of Regents ban including a history of racism and segregation in Georgia, the Supreme Court case of *Plyler v Doe*, shifting demographics in Georgia, national discourse on immigration, and an undocumented student detention in Georgia making the national headlines.

Georgia's Dark History of Racism and Segregation

"The segregation of races, like the segregation of classes, is a modern, Western innovation, and we should not expect to discover it everywhere, as if it emerged spontaneously out of human nature" (Schultz, 2005)

History of Racism, Exclusion, and Discrimination

The state of Georgia has a dark history when it comes to racial violence, discrimination, and inequity. This history includes slavery, Jim Crow laws, sundown towns, and lynchings. The 1960s was a turning point; it was the decade of civil rights, both in activism and policies. This was due to segregation still existing in many localities and at many levels of the public sphere. In 1960, segregation still existed in Georgia. At this time, "the City of Atlanta had 42 parks for whites and only three for blacks; 12 swimming pools for whites and three for blacks, 16 recreation centers for whites and three for blacks. There were 4,000 hospital beds available for whites and only 780 available for blacks" (Archives Research Center, AUC Robert W, 2025). Black people were not only barred from entering white spaces, but the spaces that existed for them were minimal. This separation was reflected not only in social and physical activities, but it reflected in access, or lack of access, to healthcare and other social services that were crucial to one's well-being. Even though hospitals were ordered to desegregate in the early 1960s, it took several years for that to actually occur. "Grady Hospital was ordered by the Supreme Court to desegregate all of its facilities in 1962; Grady did not desegregate in full until 1965" (Archives Research Center, AUC Robert W, 2025).

This segregation was also evident in a lack access to positions of power and decision making, reflected both in the workforce, in government, and policy. In 1966, “African Americans accounted for approximately 63 percent of the laborers in southern steel mills but less than 1 percent of the white collar employees” (Cobb, 2005). It was hard for Black people to access white collar jobs because they were seen as only laborers and there were a lot of barriers to access an education. Furthermore, although there were “300,000 African American citizens of Atlanta, there were no African Americans serving on the Atlanta Board of Aldermen, Board of Education, nor the boards for Recreation, the Library, and Public Welfare” (Archives Research Center, AUC Robert W, 2025). Without an ability to control and shape laws and policies, it was challenging to improve things for the Black and African American community, and other communities of color.

While all this was ongoing, Mayor William Hartsfield “coined the lasting motto. “Atlanta,” he bragged to anyone in earshot, “is the City Too Busy to Hate’” (Kruse, 2013). This was done in efforts to promote Atlanta as racially progressive and to distinguish it from the racial violence in other Southern cities. Skeptics including Kevin M Kruse argue that the city was actually “The City Too Busy *Moving* to Hate”. This was because of white flight. As Black people began having social mobility, they were able to purchase homes. Consequently, white people began to flee those neighborhoods. In 1960, “the total white population of Atlanta stood at barely more than 300,000. Over the course of that decade, roughly 60,000 whites fled from Atlanta. During the 1970s, another 100,000 would leave as well” (Kruse, 2013). With the passage of integration laws, municipalities had to legally abide, however that did not mean that individuals agreed or wanted to abide, hence white flight. This leads

us to a term known as de facto or de jure segregation. De facto segregation was a term first used during the "1960s racial integration efforts in schools, to describe a situation in which legislation did not overtly segregate students by race, but nevertheless school segregation continued. In Balsbaugh v. Rowland, 447 Pa. 423, the court held that in relation to racial segregation "de facto" means segregation which does in fact exist, as distinguished from segregation which is imposed by law or by public authority" (Legal Information Institute, 2022). Rather than overt Jim Crow laws, some argue that today's society lives through de facto segregation, maintained through housing inequality, district lines, and resource allocation (Luke, 2018).

Segregation within Education and a Space for Activism

Segregation was prevalent within education as well. Even after the Brown v Board of Education decision in 1954, when schools were ordered to be integrated, it took over a decade for it to occur in Georgia. "That inequity didn't end in 1954 with the high court's Brown v. Board of Education ruling, which turned 70 on Friday. Mathis would be a high school junior before he sat in classrooms with white students. That was in 1970 at Dougherty High – 16 years after Brown" (Tagami, 2024). It took 16 years in some places in Georgia to fully be integrated. This was due to the public and government resisting, pushing back, and hoping to delay the implementation. One way they did this was by "amending the state constitution to force the governor to cut off state funding to any school that desegregated" (Tagami, 2024). Schools did not want to lose funding and were stuck

between differing policies and requirements. There was much litigation and federal pressure during that process, however. In 1961, the University of Georgia was ordered by a federal judge to admit two Black students and the "Atlanta Public Schools district admitted nine Black students to four white high schools in the fall of 1961, in a carefully orchestrated plan designed to avoid the riots that had made cities such as Little Rock, Arkansas, an international spectacle. It would take a decade to fully integrate schools in the city." (Tagami, 2024).

One unfortunate consequence of the integration of schools was the loss of Black teachers. When schools started getting integrated, the students were moved to the all-white schools, the Black schools were closed down, and a lot of Black teachers were fired. "The town's segregated Black school eventually closed, and she learned that the students there started moving to the previously all-white LaGrange High in the late 1960s, ahead of Black teachers … checked the yearbook and saw only nine Black teachers that year. Yet there had probably been a hundred at the Black school (Tagami, 2024). The loss of Black teachers resulted in a loss of jobs for Black folks, and these positions were important; "Back then, teaching was one of the few paths to the middle class for Black people" (Tagami, 2024). In 1971 there was a US Senate hearing where there was testimony from "100,000 Black teachers and principals losing their jobs across the country due to desegregation (Tagami, 2024).

Throughout the years, universities have also been the place for student advocacy, especially demands for more access to education and human rights. In 1960, students of Atlanta University Center, comprised of six campuses, wrote *An Appeal for Human Rights* protesting the "inequalities and injustices in Atlanta and in Georgia" addressing the

following issues: education, jobs, housing, voting, hospitals, law enforcement, and social activities and venues such as movies, concerts, and restaurants (Atlanta Student Movement Collection, 1960). This was directed to the public and people in positions of power, especially elected members, to address and eradicate the injustices. Not only did they name and address the issues, but they committed to doing their part – "we must say in all candor that we plan to use every legal and non-violent means at our disposal to secure full citizenship rights as members of this great Democracy of ours" (Atlanta Student Movement Collection, 1960). A second appeal was made 40 years later, with the original advocates and new college students in 2000, addressing the issues of education, economics and housing, transportation, political empowerment, criminal justice and public safety, and affirmative action (Atlanta Student Movement Collection, 2000). A third appeal was made on the 50th anniversary of the first appeal, in 2010, addressing the issues of education, jobs, housing, voting, hospitals, and law enforcement (Atlanta Student Movement Collection, 2010). Even after all these years and all the changes in federal policies, education remains an important issue for the Black community and it continues to be an area that perpetuates barriers to access. Not only is it important, but in the fifty years of three Appeals for Human Rights, it was the number one issue. This is due in part because even in present day, students of color have lower percentages of access into higher education. In Georgia, "African-American enrollment still remains below ten percent of the student body, disproportionately lower than the share of state or local population" (Luke, 2018).

Plyler v Doe

"For the larger polity, Plyler has become an important case for key themes, such as how we treat children fairly, how we guard our borders, how we constitute ourselves, and who gets to make these crucial decisions. To a large extent, Plyler may also be the apex of the Court's treatment of the undocumented, a concept that never truly existed until the 20th century" (Olivas, 2012)

One specific policy that tremendously shaped and set the ground for the ban in Georgia was the Plyler v Doe decision in 1982. Although in the 1950s-1980s there had been several integration and civil rights policies, there was no policy to address immigration status. This court case took place in Texas. In 1975, the "State of Texas enacted section 21.031 of the Texas Education Code" indicating that education was free for citizens only, "allowing its public school districts (called Independent School Districts, or ISDs, in Texas) to charge tuition to undocumented children. The legislature held no hearings on the matter, and no published record explains the origin of this revision to the school code" (Olivas, 2012). Prior to this, the state relied on head counts and average daily attendance to calculate the amount of state funds that the public schools could receive. In order to save money, they decided to pass this statute, prohibiting schools from receiving those funds for undocumented students. School districts were given the ability to "bar undocumented pupils altogether or to charge them annual tuition of $1,000.114" (Moran, 2023). School districts reacted vastly different across the state. "Six of the ISDs polled with more than ten thousand students reported that their districts would admit undocumented students without charge, six would charge tuition, eleven would exclude them entirely, and the rest

did not respond or did not know how they would respond to such an occurrence" (Olivas, 2012).

As a response to the statute and school districts deciding to charge undocumented youth, two lawsuits were filed on "behalf of undocumented school-aged youth that challenged the measure as unconstitutional because it violated the Supremacy Clause and the Equal Protection Clause (Moran, 2023). MALDEF (Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund) led this litigation and decided to focus on the Tyler ISD and the 21.031 statute. While one side of the lawsuit asserted that the children should be able to attend their neighborhood school based on their residency, the other side argued that the children lacked citizenship and thus were ineligible. These competing claims were "complicated by the allocation of authority to define each status" (Moran, 2023). The lawsuit was challenging because of the different stakeholders at play and the differing levels of power, authority, and decision-making. The case gained momentum and was extremely significant for those involved. MALDEF and the community was determined to win because the weight of this case was monumental; most undocumented students would lose their education access if they lost. Soon, people saw "Plyler as the Mexican American Brown v. Board of Education: as a vehicle for consolidating attention to the various strands of social exclusions that kept Mexican-origin persons in subordinate status" (Olivas, 2012). Further arguments included highlighting that undocumented families paid taxes and that these children were undocumented at no fault of their own.

In June 1982, the Supreme Court made their decision. The Court declared that "Texas violated the Equal Protection Clause when it allowed public schools to bar undocumented

students or charge them tuition" (Moran, 2023). Some of the arguments employed by the justices included childhood innocence, residency, and the "social harms in terms of 'unemployment, welfare, and crime' that would result from having 'a subclass of illiterates' in the community" and that public education "has a fundamental role in maintaining the fabric of our society" (Moran, 2023). The Court did not declare education a fundamental right but did strike a monumental decision that would have ripple effects across the entire country. While this case guarantees a free K-12 education for undocumented youth everywhere in the United States, it did not address higher education nor access to public services, cue the vast differences in higher education access for undocumented students across the nation.

Changing Demographics in Georgia

"It is time to admit an uncomfortable truth. Economic concerns do not drive fear of immigration. The changing face of America's demographics drive that fear" - Ana Contreras (George W. Bush Presidential Center, 2018)

In the past thirty years, Georgia has seen significant changes in the population, specifically due to an influx of immigrants. This has been especially evident in Dalton, Georgia, known internationally as the "Carpet Capital of the World" which has been the "subject of numerous documentaries, national news stories, and several scholarly books, including a history of Shaw Industries, the largest carpet manufacturer in the United States" (Davis, 2009). Word spread in various communities in Mexico and in Texas about the carpet capital of the world and people started arriving in the carpet mills during the 1990s. By the late 1990s, "mill owners were publicly praising Latinos for their 'strong and enviable work ethic" and were even offering English classes for their Latino employees. By 2000, some individual Dalton carpet mills could boast a labor force that was more than 35 percent Latino. In fact, Shaw Industries' overall Whitfield County work force of nearly nine thousand went from 0 percent Latino in 1990 to 12 percent in the year 2000" (Davis, 2009). Work opportunities is a huge pull factor for immigrants, and the carpet capital seemed to pull a lot of folks into Dalton. In 2006, "manufacturers produced more than $14.2 billion dollars of wholesale carpet, making the industry vital to Dalton's existence" (Davis, 2009). As immigrants settled there, and the work opportunities remained, the population only kept getting bigger. For nearly three decades new folks have arrived to Dalton. In recent years, the city has become well known for its large Latino population, which has been estimated

to reach “forty-five thousand, or more than 50 percent of the local population. True, the Dalton–Whitfield County area has one of the largest concentrations of Latino residents in the southeastern United States” (Davis, 2009).

This Latino influx has not gone without critique or public attention. During the mid-1990s, a vocal anti-immigrant organization called “Citizens Against Illegal Aliens formed locally, bringing increased public scrutiny on the problem of undocumented workers in the area work force. Soon afterward, a federal immigration office was opened jointly with the Dalton Police Department to help solve the problem, but the office remained understaffed and ultimately played a more reactive than proactive role in apprehending undocumented workers” (Davis, 2009). Then, in 2006, “Dale Russakoff of the Washington Post” referred to Dalton as a ‘U.S. Border Town,’ even though the city is more than twelve hundred miles from the Mexican border” (Davis, 2009). Regardless of the public opinion or view, Dalton and its demographics were changing. The influx of Latino immigrants was evident in changes in local businesses, such as the creation of panaderias, social activities such as soccer teams, and in the public school system. Roan Street Elementary, “in the center of town, has a student population that is more than 96 percent Latino” (Davis, 2009). Due to the influx of immigrant children, bilingual teachers had to be hired and non-English language learning programs implemented. Dalton was certainly changing and it continues to do so, just like other regions in Georgia.

In the rest of Georgia, there is a similar trend, albeit not as fast as in Dalton, but still very significant. The Latino population in the state jumped from 8.8% in the 2000 census to 16.3% in the 2010 census (García Peña, 2012). This means that the Latino population

doubled in 10 years. That is a fast shift. Moreover, a lot of the population is young. The biggest chunk of the Latino population in Georgia is under 25 years old. While white people make up 71% of the age group 75 ages and over, they only constitute 43% of the age group under 25 years old; “Younger Georgians are more racially and ethnically diverse than older age groups. This indicates that the state’s population is likely to become even more diverse in the future” (University of Georgia, 2023). Having more diverse young generations can have big implications for the state politically. These young people already do or will soon have the power to vote. Changing demographics can yield reactions from those that have historically wielded power by being the majority.

With the changes in demographics, education access for these communities remain a concern. Georgia, “whose Latino population tripled in the last decade, has the largest Latino dropout rate in the nation. Two thirds of Georgia’s Latinos leave high school before graduation. Similar trends are also evident in other southern states, especially Alabama, Tennessee, and North Carolina” (Davis, 2009). It is evident there are many barriers to education for Latinos in Georgia. There is hope, however. “At Dalton State College, 11 percent of the student body is now Latino, a fact that gives great hope and promise for the northwest Georgia area” (Davis, 2009).

National Discourse

"Scapegoating foreigners has a long and inglorious history in the United States, a national and paradoxical trait that competes regularly with the country's more benign self-pride as welcoming all the huddled masses" (Olivas, 2012)

Something else that was occurring during the time leading up to the ban was a heightened national discourse around immigration and consequential restrictive immigration policies around the country. In the 1990s and 2000s, there were a few key significant policies that occurred in other states but shaped national discourse. This included CA Proposition 187 in 1994, two federal policies, South Carolina banning undocumented students in 2008, and the Arizona Show Me Your Papers SB 1070 law in 2010. Furthermore, throughout the 2000s there were efforts to pass the DREAM Act, short for Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors. Although not successful, the DREAM Act became significant in shaping the public's perception of undocumented youth in the country.

In November 1994, California citizens voted on Proposition 187, a ballot initiative designed to eliminate virtually all state benefits to undocumented immigrants. This proposition would have "stripped undocumented aliens of all but the most essential health and emergency medical services, would have overruled Plyler and denied educational benefits to these children, and would have required public officials to report undocumented aliens' suspected status to police and security authorities" (Olivas, 2020). This measure was created to vehemently ostracize undocumented individuals and limit all access to social and health resources. People on both sides were very passionate, and it was widely

observed and debated. It garnered so much public attention that it was more popular than other regular election news and votes. Leading up to the election, “in September, 313 letters to the editor in the Los Angeles Times were about Proposition 187, while only 191 were about all November election candidates combined” (Jacobson, 2008). Ultimately, it passed. More than “59 percent of voters favored this initiative”, however, the day after the proposition passed, “lawsuits were filed, and the court placed an injunction on the measure. U.S. District Court Judge Pfaezler ruled it unconstitutional, calling it an attempt by the state to regulate immigration, a federal responsibility” and the central aspects of the measures, specifically those denying access to government services, were never implemented” (Jacobson, 2008). Although provisions were struck down and the proposition was never fully implemented, it shaped discourse not only in California, but across the country. As one historian puts it, Proposition was incredibly influential “in racial politics, not only in California but in the country as a whole” (Jacobson, 2008).

During the 1990s, there were two federal policies that also shaped public discourse and maintained immigration as a highly contested issue. The Republican-controlled Congress in 1995 enacted two major laws in 1996 including the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) and the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 (IIRIRA). Both were signed into law by President Bill Clinton and the laws “dramatically changed the landscape, affecting federal benefits in many areas of health and welfare, including the requirement that, if a state wished to accord resident tuition status and eligibility to the undocumented, it must do so only through the enactment of a State law after August 22, 1996, which affirmatively provides

for such eligibility" (Olivas, 2020). The federal policies were passed to curtail and discourage immigration. Regarding IIRIRA, the actual bill is an amendment to the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1986, passed to "improve deterrence of illegal immigration to the United States by increasing border patrol and investigative personnel, by increasing penalties for alien smuggling and for document fraud, by reforming exclusion and deportation law and procedures, by improving the verification system for the eligibility for employment, and through other measures, to reform the legal immigration system" (ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION REFORM AND IMMIGRANT RESPONSIBILITY ACT, 1996). Both policies further limited access to social benefits and had the intention of limiting immigration. It also made higher education a little more challenging. Beforehand many universities and college institutions has discretion but now states had to pass a policy that allowed for undocumented students to gain resident tuition status. Overall, immigration has been a top issue at the local and federal level.

In 2008, South Carolina made history as the first state in the country to pass a higher education ban on undocumented students. In June 2008, South Carolina passed "House Bill 4400 which bans undocumented immigrants from enrolling in all public postsecondary education institutions, including community colleges" (Kovacs, 2018). The reasoning for this policy included criminalization of status, economic reasons, and nativity or nationalism. One legislator, "Representative Thad Viers, assigned to the Immigration Bill Conference Committee, stated that the South Carolina ban was meant to fill a void in federal immigration law. He argued that if the federal government will not secure the borders, states should create an "unfriendly climate" for undocumented immigrants to

encourage "self deportation" out of South Carolina" (Yablon-Zug and Holley-Walker, 2009). Unable to force this community to leave, they pass policies to make life more challenging and encourage them to leave on their own will. One of the main reasonings, highly messaged by some South Carolina politicians was "that the state should be focusing on native South Carolinians" (Kovacs, 2018). This policy set the ground and gave an example to Georgia and Alabama for their future bans. Even a decade later, "South Carolina has made it impossible for DACA students to gain resident tuition eligibility" (Olivas, 2020). Even though DACA recipients have a valid social security and deferred action, they are still barred, making South Carolina the state with the most restrictive ban.

One other policy at the state level that was widely publicized and talked about was "show me your papers" laws. One state that become recognized at the national level for this was Arizona who was "the first state to enact a law that mandates law enforcement personnel to inquire about the immigration status of individuals suspected to be illegal aliens, and detain those who fail to show proper documentation ("show me your papers" provision). It also made it a crime for an unauthorized individual to apply for or hold a job in Arizona" (Sanchez, 2017). Through this policy, a police officer could ask anyone for their immigration status at any time, leading to concerns about racial profiling. Just one week after it was signed "it was modified by the Arizona House Bill 2162 (HB 2162). The changes were a response to critics stating that the law encouraged "racial profiling". The main modification indicates that prosecutors would not investigate immigration status based on race, color or national origin. Another adjustment says that law enforcement personnel may only inquire immigration status of those they stop, detain or arrest" (Sanchez, 2017). Regardless of the

legal code and specifics, this law increased the risk of being undocumented in Arizona and it encouraged people to leave, sharing similar sentiments with previously stated policies. Two years after its passage, the Supreme Court struck down provisions of the law including the "show me your papers" aspect. One study found that the law produced a "statistically significant short-term decline in the share of noncitizen Hispanics in Arizona between 10 and 15 per cent. However, this impact disappeared around one year after the implementation" (Sanchez 2017). Another article discusses the ripple effects of this law including "significant mental health repercussions on Hispanic adolescents, including Hispanic adolescents who are legal residents" (Reznick, 2020). These kinds of policies have real life consequences and shape narratives at the national level.

In addition to states hoping to limit and punish undocumented immigrants, there have also been efforts to legalize and improve things for undocumented immigrants. One significant federal policy that shaped the narrative around undocumented immigrants, specifically undocumented youth, is The DREAM Act. The DREAM Act was "introduced in the United States Senate in 2001. The original and subsequent bills never passed Congress, yet the effects on undocumented college students have been prominent in the news media and on federal and state legislative agendas to this day" (Olivas, 2020). Although the policy itself wasn't successful, it increased national recognition and human stories across the nation and created a highly used terminology; "they are often referred to as DREAMers, a reference to proposed federal legislation called the DREAM Act" (Roth, 2017). For a span of about ten years, The DREAM Act was introduced into Congress, and never passed, however, it highlighted undocumented students, their stories, and their experiences.

“Several news stories were written about successful college students whose parents had brought them to the United States as children, who either entered without inspection or entered legally and then overstayed a visa, or did one of the many things that can render a family out of status” (Olivas, 2020). This policy shaped national perspectives and discourse, and can be argued that ultimately led to Obama signing the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) executive action in 2012.

State and federal policies influence public narratives and vice versa. Moreover, these narratives impact and influence our communities in real ways, reflected in portrayals in the media, in representation, in daily human interactions, and also in violence and hate crimes. At the core, there is a “sense of fear among conservative and anti-immigrant segments over the potential imagined threat of “losing jobs, and opportunities” to the immigrant population (García Peña, 2012). However, that fear spreads through social and public media and popular discourse - “I also have seen a coarsening of the public discourse, especially the rise of nativist hate speech and organized racial violence, enabled and spread by restrictionist demagoguery, the Internet, cable television, and other media” (Olivas, 2012). Furthermore, it exemplifies through action, action that can be violent and deadly. “This situation has real consequences. Recent episodes of racial thuggery, such as ‘beaner hunting’ or roving gangs that attack Latinos as outlaw ‘others’ or as ‘illegals,’ have shown the degree to which the discourse truly matters, as it devolves into justifications for Anglos to ‘take back’ their rightful land and domain. Luis Ramirez, a Mexican immigrant and father of two, was beaten to death in Shenandoah, Pennsylvania, in a 2008 hate crime. Ecuadorian legal resident Marcelo Lucero was stabbed to death by Patchogue, New York,

high school students who racially taunted him as an illegal “beaner,” mistaking him both for being undocumented and for being an undocumented Mexican. In March 2004, a group of Mexican American citizens were violently assaulted, detained, and threatened with death by Arizona ranchers acting as vigilantes” (Olivas, 2012). This hate shows up in real and unfortunate ways. It also demonstrates the relationship between immigration status and race. In reality, those that commit violence don’t necessarily know or check whether someone actually is undocumented or not; it’s usually based on assumptions. Furthermore, it shows us the value we put on someone’s papers and the level of dehumanization we’ve arrived to when we see these acts committed frequently. In addition, while there are undocumented immigrants from all over the world, the undocumented identity is largely tied to Mexican and Latino individuals.

One Undocumented Student Gains National Attention

"Her life never completely went back to normal. Colotl had become infamous in Georgia. To anti-immigrant state lawmakers, she was the face of a problem that they insisted was out of control" (Blitzer, 2017).

One case that came to light right before the ban, creating a window of opportunity and perhaps urgency for Georgia, was the story of a college student that was detained by immigration officials. On March 29, 2010, Jessica Colotl, a student at Kennesaw State University in Georgia, "waited for a parking space and temporarily blocked the entrance of a campus parking lot. The campus police approached the vehicle and ordered her to present a driver's license. Because she was a student without legal status, Jessica did not have a driver's license and was promptly arrested", however, "when jail officials discovered that Colotl was an undocumented immigrant, they turned her over to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents, who transferred her to the Etowah County Detention Center in Gadsden, Alabama, to await deportation" (Shahshahani and Washington, 2013). In several states, a relationship between police and immigration enforcement is common. The relationship is a reflection of the "Federal 287(g) program" overseen by the Department of Homeland Security "which allows local and state authorities to act as immigration enforcement" (Torres, 2010).

Jessica was a senior studying political science at Kennesaw. Because there was no state policy addressing undocumented students at the time, she was paying in-state tuition. After the news of her detention, Georgia Republicans wanted to make an example out of her. One "member of the Georgia Board of Regents told the Atlanta Journal-Constitution

that failing to act would have been 'bad politics'" (Blitzer, 2017). Simultaneously, her community sprang into action to fight against her deportation. Fellow college students, community members, and even the president of KSU urged and pleaded with immigration to release her. After a month in detention, Jessica was "released from Etowah, and ICE announced that she would be allowed to remain in the country until she completed her senior year at KSU" (Shahshahani and Washington, 2013). Jessica's experience quickly gained national attention. What was first deemed as a minor traffic violation led to a "statewide immigration controversy and an arduous deportation process for one student without legal status. Jessica Colotl's arrest prompted discussions about whether students without legal status deserved to access public higher education" (Muñoz and Espino, 2017). At this point Georgia had no policy regarding higher education access for undocumented individuals, and Jessica's story became a turning point. Georgia policymakers and elected officials had to address this topic.

Policy Implementation

"This bill is reminiscent of Jim Crow laws" - Georgia House Representative Ralph Long (Shahshahani and Washington, 2013)

With no state policy addressing higher education access for undocumented individuals, The Georgia Board of Regents took it upon itself to write one. The Georgia Board of Regents is a 19-member board that sets policies and has jurisdiction over the university system of Georgia. Their decision was to create a Residency Verification Committee to "determine the impact of undocumented students on Georgia's public colleges and universities", then, on 14 October 2010, voted 14–2 "under the guise of strengthening the ability of University System of Georgia institutions to properly classify students for tuition purposes" to enact four new policies "which bans undocumented students from Georgia's most competitive universities" (Shahshahani and Washington, 2013). Their argument was that undocumented students were taking up spaces from academically qualified participants that were not accepted into these institutions. Their policy was written into the Board of Regents' Policy Manual Section 4.1.6 stating that a "person who is not lawfully present in the United States shall not be eligible for admission to any University System institution" (Shahshahani and Washington, 2013). They also added Policy 4.3.4 requiring that students verify their "lawful presence" and acknowledge any attempts to falsify information to obtain in-state resident tuition rates (University System of Georgia, 2025).

The ban was implemented in October 2011 and directly affected the five most prestigious and popular public schools including The University of Georgia, Georgia College, Georgia

Institute of Technology, Georgia State University, and the Medical College of Georgia. Although the policy only addressed these schools, several other higher education institutions in the state updated their admissions materials to reflect similar language. An "ACLU of Georgia investigation revealed that, six months after the policy was announced, several schools not covered by the Board of Regents' policy announced in their publicly available admissions materials that acceptance or registration for the fall 2011 semester was conditioned on verification of students' lawful presence in the U.S" (Shahshahani and Washington, 2013). This policy had ramifications across the entire state and would impact undocumented students at every education level past high school.

Although the argument and belief was that undocumented students were taking seats of US citizens within the public university system, data showed undocumented students were a very small percentage. At the time the ban was passed, "only twenty-nine students at the five affected campuses were undocumented and only 501 of the approximately 310,000 students attending Georgia's colleges and universities were undocumented. The number of slots that the Board of Regents' ban will open up, twenty-nine, is insignificant. Moreover, all the undocumented students were paying non-resident tuition, which covers more than the annual cost of university education. As a result, the twentynine students imposed no cost burden on Georgia taxpayers. (Shahshahani and Washington, 2013). Even one study from the actual Board of Regents showed similar findings. A study "conducted by the very Board of Regents enacting this policy found that undocumented students comprise less than 2/10th of a per cent of all public university students; most of these students are enrolled in technical and community colleges" (García Peña, 2012). In reality, undocumented students

weren't taking many spots from US citizens. In a financial perspective they were actually benefitting the system because they were paying out of state tuition rates, which is usually three times that of an in-state resident. Public institutions are "increasingly reliant on higher tuition rates from higher proportions of nonresident students to compensate for diminished state funds" (Walsh, 2021).

After the Board of Regents ban, some Georgia legislators explored additional state policies. One proposition was House Bill 59, which would "extend the ban to all the higher education institutions in the Georgia University System, cutting off access to public higher education for undocumented immigrants altogether. The bill passed successfully out of a House committee during the past legislative session, but failed to make it to the floor for a vote" (Shahshahani and Washington, 2013). Parallel to the ban, the state of Georgia introduced "House Bill 87 in April 2011, which required law enforcement officers to inquire about immigration status during routine stops for minor traffic violations and to hand over any undocumented suspects to federal authorities" (García Peña, 2012). Although these two policies weren't successful, they went hand in hand with the narrative about keeping undocumented immigrants out and making life even harder for them, with the end goal of encouraging them to leave.

The Georgia Board of Regents decision has not gone without criticism. One of the main critiques is the actual makeup of the board. While the Board of Regents consists of 19 members, only one has any qualifications in educational policy. The board members fall within several different fields of expertise including six members in real estate, six members in banking, two in construction, two in healthcare, one in paper shredding, one in

corrugated packaging, and one in education (Freedom University, 2020). With the magnitude of impact that their decisions have, it seems important that the members have some background or knowledge within the educational field or public policy. Without that foundational knowledge and expertise, it is hard to know what they base their decision on. Furthermore, folks question the reasoning why it was the Board of regents passing such a decision versus the state legislature. Some "activists say the Board was forced into the policy by the legislature" (Grady Newsource, 2015). Regardless of why or how it happened, the Georgia ban shows us that policies are shaped not only by state or federal laws but also by other entities that hold power, such as boards of regents, and that they are enforced by street-level bureaucrats.

Two years after the passage of the ban, and one year after its implementation, DACA was created in June of 2012. DACA allowed many undocumented youth to access a social security, work authorization, and deferred action. In some states this changed their higher education access. In Georgia, however, DACA had no impact on their higher education access. The board "released a memo stating that deferred action does not mean that an individual is lawfully present". (Shahshahani and Washington, 2013). This created a unique position for DACA recipients where they could now do a lot of things but go to college. A "talented young person in Georgia with DACA can now legally drive to a top-five Georgia institution of higher education to find work in its kitchens or gardens—but cannot legally sit in its classroom and learn" (National Association of Social Workers, 2025). Until now, nothing has altered the Board of Regents' policy decision, not even DACA did.

Conclusion

"The positioning of undocumented immigrants as undeserving and unqualified to reap higher education benefits was in stark contrast to the 50th anniversary of desegregation that celebrated purportedly equal educational opportunities while simultaneously denying access for students without legal status and reflecting a new form of de jure segregation" (Muñoz and Espino, 2017)

Many factors led up to the Georgia Board of Regents passing codes 4.1.6 and 4.3.4 effectively barring undocumented students from higher education equity. First and foremost, Georgia has a dark history of racism and segregation. Within the social and political sphere there is a long history of racism and exclusion, limiting opportunities for people of color and keeping them separate from things that only belonged to white people. Within the education system, there is a history of segregation, and even after years of integration laws, Georgia resisted. Years of advocacy and resistance have also taken place, fighting back against these policies, especially from students and community organizations. Furthermore, *Plyler v Doe* resulted in a Supreme Court decision in 1982 prohibiting the denial of a K-12 education based on immigration status, therefore guaranteeing undocumented student access to a public education, bringing this group to light through federal policy, and setting the stage for future policies. In addition, Georgia has faced a few decades of changing demographics. With an influx of Latino immigrants, and the reality that the younger generations are becoming more ethnically and racially diverse, the state is seeing changes. Additionally, national discourse around immigration has been impactful. Several state and federal policies including Proposition 187 in

California, Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996, South Carolina's, Arizona's SB 1070 Show Me Your Papers Law, and the DREAM Act, have all shaped national discourse and vice versa. Moreover, the story of Jessica who was detained and made national headlines, created a window of opportunity and urgency for the State of Georgia to address the issue. Altogether, these factors led to the Georgia Board of Regents deciding to pass policy regarding higher education access for undocumented students and they shaped the result which was a ban. One can argue that this ban is a modern form of segregation because "the same Georgia public universities that ban undocumented students today also banned Black students in 1960" (Freedom University, 2020). In conclusion, Georgia's ban shows us that policies are not just those that happen at the legislature or on the ballot. Furthermore, states learn from one another, and policies influence each other.

Additional Policies After Georgia Board of Regents Decision

Two additional policies have passed that are foundational and important for the narrative of this paper including the undocumented student higher education ban in Alabama, and the REAL ID Act.

Similar to Georgia, Alabama had a shift in demographics and an increase in foreign-born residents. From 1990 to 2011, the "foreign-born share of the state's population increased by 273 percent. Between 2000 and 2011, Latino population growth in Alabama proceeded at a rate (145per cent) faster than all but South Carolina. This growth was largely driven by Latinos who settled in the greater Birmingham and coastal areas. New Latino arrivals joined a more established community of immigrants from Asia and Europe" (Jones and Brown, 2019). Several states in the South had similar shifts in demographics and an influx of Latinos. As a result, and with the foundation of other existing policies, Alabama passed HB 56 in 2011, one year after the Georgia Board of Regents policy. HB 56 "curtailed the rights of undocumented immigrants, gave state law enforcement authorities unprecedented powers to identify suspected undocumented immigrants and criminalized anyone suspected of aiding them (Jones and Brown, 2019). HB 56 was a broad policy addressing a lot of aspects of the undocumented identity such as work, law enforcement, criminalization of the undocumented identity, healthcare, and education access. There were two sections though that "garnered the most outcries. One is that police, whether during an arrest or routine traffic stop, can check the immigration status of anyone 'where reasonable suspicion exists that the person is an alien who is unlawfully present in the

United States. The second is that public school officials are now required to check the immigration status of new students and compile the data annually for the state school board to send to the Legislature" (McLaughlin, 2011). HB had immediate effects; with community members afraid to go out, they were not attending schools and businesses were floundering. There were also xenophobic and racist behaviors and attitudes towards Latinos, regardless of their status. One community member reported that "after returning from an errand, she noticed a piece of paper in the floorboard of her vehicle. 'Go back to Mexico,' the note read (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2021). Additionally, there was another section in HB 56 that was equally impactful. "Section 8 within HB 56 bans undocumented aliens from attending public colleges in Alabama" (Lopez et al, 2011). While most people focused on the K-12 education aspects and law enforcement aspects, some of which were later struck down, Section 8 has remained, barring undocumented students from access to higher education in public institutions. Moreover, one thing that is unclear is whether DACA changes access for undocumented students in Alabama. There was never an update or change to the policy, so this remains uncertain. It might be at the school's discretion or more prevalent at private institutions, ultimately leaving it up to individual students to figure out and navigate. The Higher Ed Immigration Portal states that "DACA recipients might be eligible to enroll in certain Alabama public colleges and universities and access in-state tuition" and lists a few colleges where it seems that a few DACA recipients have been able to get access (Higher Ed Immigration Portal, 2025). Overall, HB 56 was a very comprehensive bill, putting together California's Proposition 187, Arizona's SB 1070, and higher education ban like Georgia and South Carolina did, all in one.

Some lawmakers proudly proclaimed they had passed the “nation’s toughest anti-immigrant law, one that ‘attacks every aspect’ of an undocumented immigrant’s life” (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2021).

Furthermore, The REAL ID Act which passed in 2005, after 9/11, “set standards for the issuance of sources of identification, such as driver's licenses and identification cards. The Act and implementing regulations establish minimum security standards for license issuance and production and prohibit federal agencies from accepting for certain official purposes noncompliant driver’s licenses and identification cards” (U.S. Department of Homeland Security Transportation Security Administration, 2025). Across the country, states previously had a very different approach to identification cards, and this policy seemed to want to make one same system for all. States had many years to cooperate and implement REAL ID satisfactory identifications. Although it passed in 2005, it wasn’t until May 7th of this year 2025, that it was enforced. In addition, folks are technically able to use a foreign passport or a work authorization document such as the one provided through DACA, but it has become an extra barrier for travel which is already “an anxiety-provoking experience for many undocumented individuals” (Immigrants Rising, 2025). There has already been one DACA recipient who was detained at the airport in El Paso, Texas, even though she has deferred action which grants her protection from deportation (American Immigration Council, 2025). Additional research is needed to analyze the impact on immigrant communities and undocumented students.

Literature Review

Introduction

Although immigration as an issue is constantly in the news and media, there is typically a big focus on detention and deportation. Within the educational context, there is significant research on the undocumented identity, student resilience, and general lack of access to education, but limited research on educational bans and the impact that those have on the students and community at large. Generally, this is a hard community to reach on an individual or personal level due to fears of repercussions, detention, or deportation.

Education Access for Students of Color and Segregation

While there are undocumented individuals of all races, immigration seems to be a highly racialized issue. Immigration discussions are highly bound with racial conversations. Policies regarding segregation and desegregation, educational access for students of color, the creation of tuition residency as a concept, and other policies such as affirmative action, certainly impact undocumented students.

In *Courtrooms and Classrooms: A Legal History of College Access 1860-1960*, Scott M. Gelber explores how US courts influenced higher education access, long before the 1960s. He argues that contrary to belief, the courts were a lot more involved than the public realizes, and that judicial decisions were shaped by broader social and political forces (Gelber, 2016).

In *The NAACP's Legal Strategy Against Segregated Education, 1925-1950*, Mark V Tushnet explores the legal efforts of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People to dismantle segregation in public education. He argues that the NAACP conducted the first public interest litigation campaign in the US and that it laid the foundation for future strategies and legal cases (Tushnet, 2014). Tushnet touches on how the general public and community-based organizations can leverage existing legal systems and that they are integral to achieve social justice.

Angela Onwuachi-Willig explores the topic of segregation and critiques the Brown v Board decision that ended racial segregation in the public education system in *Reconceptualizing the Harms of Discrimination: How Brown v. Board of Education Helped to Further White Supremacy*. She argues that although the Brown v Board decision was a victory against racial segregation, it ultimately upheld white supremacy (Onwuachi-Willig, 2019). The court viewed discrimination and segregation as individual harm, not systemic action(s), allowing institutions to appear neutral or benevolent, rather than complicit in maintaining racial hierarchies. Furthermore, the decision opened the door for colorblind legal doctrines which claim that intentional racism must be shown in order to be true discrimination.

In *The Right to Residency: Mobility, Tuition, and Public Higher Education Access*, Dr. Camille Walsh explores and traces residency requirements in public higher education. Walsh argues that residency-based tuition has evolved into a form of legal and policy "exceptionalism", separating it from other benefits such as voting or social welfare, and that it contradicts the constitutional right to interstate mobility (Walsh, 2021). This disproportionality impacts individuals that are already marginalized or underrepresented.

Nikki Luke explores modern forms of school segregation and activism in the US. In *"Up, Up With Education, Down, Down With Segregation": Youth Activism and the Geography of School Segregation in the U.S. South*, Nikki argues that school segregation persists in the South through urban planning, gentrification, and school zoning policies (Luke, 2018). Rather than overt Jim Crow laws, today's segregation is de facto, maintained through housing inequality, district lines, and resource allocation. He argues that while many adults and policymakers treat current segregation as natural or avoidable, students are refusing to accept unequal school as normal. Black and Latinx students, especially in Georgia, are organizing protests, walkouts, and campaigns to demand change, reclaiming public education and challenging structural racism.

Plyler v Doe

Plyler V Doe was a defining policy for undocumented individuals regarding education. Michael A Olivas, through his writings, especially in *No Undocumented Child Left Behind: Plyler v Doe and the Education of Undocumented Schoolchildren*, explores the Supreme Court decision, the historical context, legal process, and impact. Olivas highlights the complexities in implementing the policy and the resistance that ensued from different states and localities. Olivas argues that while this policy was monumental in securing educational access in the K-12 system, it did not address higher education access nor access to public services (Olivas, 2012).

Rachel F Moran in *Personhood, Property, and Public Education: The Case of Plyler v. Doe* explores the role of public education in a democratic society. She argues that the case was monumental not only in providing access to education for undocumented children, but in shifting the idea that citizenship is the basis for entitlement to benefits (Moran, 2023). In expanding education to undocumented children who are non-citizens, the Court recognized education as central to personhood. Furthermore, education becomes framed as essential to individual development and participation in society.

Sara Radoff examines the legacy of the decision and the current implications for undocumented students in *Crossing the Borders of Plyler v. Doe: Students without Documentation and their Right to Rights*. Sara argues that Plyler v Doe both empowered and limited the rights of undocumented children, by placing undocumented students in a state of partial personhood or "liminal legality" (Radoff, 2011). The ruling created a paradox where undocumented individuals are legally entitled to education yet are excluded from other rights and opportunities, therefore not having full legal or social belonging.

Education Access for Undocumented Students Post Plyler v Doe

Michael A. Olivas explores how the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA), a policy passed in 1996, has also shaped the national landscape for undocumented students in *IIRIRA, the Dream Act, and Undocumented College Student Residency*. Section 505 of IIRIRA prohibits states from offering in-state tuition to undocumented immigrants on the basis of residence unless they offer the same

benefit to all U.S. citizens, regardless of residency. Olivas argues that this provision has been used to intimidate states into denying in-state tuition (Olivas, 2004). IIRIRA, however, does not prohibit in-state tuition or assistance, it only places conditions on how it can be done. It also has not been enforced by the federal government in any formal or consistent way. States can legally offer in-state tuition if they base it on criteria that is not residency, such as graduation from a state high school, which several states have already done successfully. Furthermore, Michael argues that denying in-state tuition is unfair and defeating, and that education sound be inclusive, grounded in equity, and built upon respect for states' rights.

Thomas R. Ruge and Angela D. Iza advocate for equitable access to higher education for undocumented students, particularly emphasizing open admission policies and in-state tuition rates in *Higher Education for Undocumented Students: The Case for Open Admission and In-State Tuition Rates for Students without Lawful Immigration Status*. Thomas and Angela argue that education is not a privilege of citizenship but rather a human right and is fundamental to the betterment of a society. They argue that denying higher education based on immigration status violates principles of equal protection, and that the the logic behind *Plyler v Doe* should be extended to higher education (Ruge and Iza, 2005). They also emphasize that most undocumented students have lived in the US for most of their lives, and their families pay taxes, therefore residency-based in-state tuition is fair and rational.

Sociologist Roberto G. Gonzales conducted a 12-year longitudinal study of more than 150 undocumented immigrant youth in the Los Angeles region and discussed his research and

findings in *In Lives in Limbo: Undocumented and Coming of Age in America*. He explores how legal status becomes a defining feature of identity and adulthood. He argues that there is a two-tiered system for undocumented youth; the "college-goers" who persist in school and try to navigate the educational system despite barriers, and the "early exiters" who drop out of school, typically in high school, due to discouragement, economic pressures, and lack of support (Gonzales, 2015). Both face dead ends due to their legal status. Furthermore, he argues that schools and institutions can either support or alienate undocumented students. Roberto also underscores the emotional burden and impact that exclusion has on undocumented youth.

Impact of Immigration Policies on Education

Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), an executive action by then President Obama in 2012, has been very impactful in undocumented students' identities and higher education access. DACA provides eligible youth with work authorization and deferred action, a 2-year renewable protection from deportation and ability to work with a valid social security. Although temporary, with a valid social security number and a US government assigned work permit, DACA changed tuition access for recipients in states like Alabama and South Carolina. Then only non-DACA students were banned. Fast forward a few years, upon Trump's arrival into office in 2016, he terminated the program, ensuing years of litigation from federal courts all the way up to the Supreme Court. While DACA

remains open for renewals, no new applications are being processed, leaving out many youth that are eligible, including most of this study's participants.

In *Transition into Liminal Legality: DACA's Mixed Impacts on Education and Employment among Young Adult Immigrants in California*, Erin R. Hamilton, Caitlin Patler, and Robin Savinar analyze the benefits of DACA. The authors emphasize the concept of "liminal legality", a state between legality and illegality, marked by uncertainty and limited rights and protections (Hamilton et al, 2021). DACA does not offer permanent legal status or a path to citizenship, rather it grants temporary, revocable protection. The authors argue that DACA improves employment outcomes, but there is a mixed outcome on educational attainment. Although DACA improves short-term educational motivation, this is hindered by a lack of access to financial aid and the continued fear of deportation for family members.

Luis Fernando Macías explores how DACA recipients navigate higher education in *Hall Pass: DACA Recipients' Experiences 'Passing' in Higher Education*. Luis coins the term "Hall Pass" as a metaphor for conditional access to higher education (Macías, 2022). It reflects how DACA provides limited and supervised permission to move through spaces that are otherwise not accessible. It implies temporary permission, a fragile and contingent status, and constant surveillance and revocability, and students know their "pass" can be revoked (Macías, 2022). DACA students often hide or downplay their immigration status in order to access resources and avoid discrimination, all with the purpose of navigating exclusion. This, however, comes at a cost as students experience emotional exhaustion, a fear of "being found out", and a loss of authenticity or self.

Ayana Allen-Handy explores how undocumented Latinx students navigate the instability of immigration policy, particularly DACA, and still manage to pursue educational success in *Gleaning hope in a vacillating DACA sociopolitical context: undocumented Latinx students' systems of support and success in K-16 education*. She argues that undocumented students live in a "vacillating" sociopolitical landscape, due to the temporary nature of DACA and immigration policy changes, that contribute to a continuous sense of vulnerability (Allen-Handy and Farinde-Wu, 2018). Furthermore, the K-16 educational system from kindergarten to college is both a barrier and a bridge. While some schools lack awareness, resources, and inclusive policies, ostracizing undocumented youth, others create "undocu-friendly" environments, providing resources, scholarships, safe spaces, and community. She also highlights that students rely on systems of support to succeed and that intersectionality matters; Latinx undocumented students face additional barriers due to racial profiling and anti-immigrant sentiment (Allen-Handy and Farinde-Wu, 2018). Ultimately, she argues that short-term fixes like DACA are not enough.

Education Bans & Alternative forms of education

With the bans in place in the South, undocumented students are faced with seeking non-traditional or alternative pathways to obtain higher education.

Lorgia García Peña explores how undocumented students and allies respond to the ban in Georgia by creating Freedom University in *New Freedom Fights: The Creation of Freedom University Georgia*. She argues that the bans in Georgia are a modern form of segregation,

resembling Jim Crow-era segregation, and that the bans are framed as administrative neutrality but in reality, target and punish immigrants (García Peña, 2012). Freedom University in Georgia was founded in 2011 as a direct response to these policies and exemplifies a radical act of resistance. Inspired and modeled after Freedom Schools in the 1960s, Freedom U offers undocumented students college-level instruction, resources, a safe space, and community. Lorgia argues that education is deeply political, that it is both a weapon and liberation, and that denying it is a tool of oppression. Furthermore, she argues that undocumented students are agents of change and should not be portrayed as victims nor helpless (García Peña, 2012). The students involved with Freedom U are leaders, brave organizers, and are shaping the future of this country.

Susana M. Muñoz and Michelle M. Espino also explore the experiences of undocumented students in Georgia in *The Freedom to Learn: Experiences of Students without Legal Status Attending Freedom University*. They argue that the state policies that ban undocumented students from higher education are modern tools of racialized exclusion that reinforce educational exclusion (Muñoz and Espino, 2017). While the states use narratives about legality and scarcity, they reinforce nativism and xenophobia. Based on qualitative research and interviews with students attending Freedom University, they highlight how the program functions as a liberatory space for resistance, community, and empowerment, where they heal from the trauma of exclusion and discrimination and strategize for change. Furthermore, they argue that higher education must be reimagined through a social lens and must be redefined by dismantling policies that marginalize undocumented students (Muñoz and Espino, 2017).

Conclusion

There is limited research on the educational bans and the impact that they have on the students and community at large in the South, especially outside of Freedom University. My paper seeks to explore and address this gap by reaching the community that is directly impacted, undocumented students that are banned in some way from accessing higher education in Georgia, Alabama, and/or South Carolina.

Methodology

Design Overview

This study uses a non-experimental case study design. The purpose of this study is to do a deep-dive into undocumented students that are being impacted by bans on higher education access. A case study is well positioned to better understand the experiences of undocumented students and address the research question.

Sources of Data

In order to access the target sample population, a flyer was posted in two national Facebook groups for undocumented individuals and DACA recipients within the US. The groups generally talk about policies, job opportunities, legal forms, education, traveling, and many other things relevant to their status. An invitation was made to participate in the research. The requirements were that the participants are over 18 years old, are from Georgia, South Carolina, or Alabama, and have had some engagement with the educational systems in those states. Individuals then reached out to me through email, text, or messenger if they were interested in participating. The source of data was qualitative, specifically through the use of interviews. The interviews lasted about thirty minutes. The participants were compensated for their time with a $15 giftcard.

The interview addressed questions regarding their undocumented identity, their thoughts about education and policy, the impact of the bans, their higher education journey, their

advocacy, and thoughts about their future. A full copy of the interview questions is provided in the appendix.

There were seven students that reached out to me and they were all able to participate in the interviews. All interviews were recorded and then transcribed. Participants were given the opportunity to choose a pseudonym. Some chose one and others allowed me to choose.

Name	**State**	**Age**	**Gender**	**Country of Origin**	**DACA status**	**Age of arrival into US**
Eduardo	Georgia	30	Male	Mexico	No DACA – didn't qualify based on arrival date	10
Flor	Georgia	20	Female	Mexico	No DACA – qualifies but no new applications being accepted	4
Alexa	Georgia	21	Female	Mexico	No DACA – applied and had fingerprints but program was halted and no new applications being processed	1
Odette	Georgia	26	Female	Mexico	Yes DACA	5
Ari	Georgia	20	Female	Mexico	No DACA – qualifies but no new applications being accepted	1
Nat	Georgia	23	Female	Indonesia	No DACA – applied but program was halted and no new applications being processed	3
Maite	Alabama	22	Female	Mexico	No DACA – applied and had fingerprints but program was halted and no new applications being processed	2

Six out of the seven students were from Georgia and only one student was from Alabama. No participants were from South Carolina. Regarding demographics, the individuals ranged in ages, countries of origin, gender, and DACA status. Only one participant identified as

male, six identified as female. Participants ranged from 20-30 years old; the majority are in the 20-23 age range, with one participant being 26, and the other 30. The majority of the group was born in Mexico, while one participant was born in Indonesia. The majority of age of arrival in the US was 1-5 years old with one participant having arrived at ten years old. Furthermore, only one out of the seven participants had DACA, although several of them meet the requirements and would qualify but are not able to apply because of the current block on new applications. Some expressed that they did send in their applications and even had their biometrics done before new applications were stopped.

Estimation/Analysis

All interviews were recorded and then transcribed. The interview data was not validated and was instead analyzed for themes. The most prominent themes were segregation and exclusion, uncertainty and hopelessness, the power and meaningfulness of education, community, and advocacy. I included only themes that came up for at least five participants, ensuring it was the most prominent ones.

Positionality & Limitations

As an undocumented individual myself, I bring something unique to this research study which is relatability to students. This allowed me to access participants through the Facebook groups which you have to be undocumented in order to join. I believe it also

made individuals feel more comfortable to participate and willing to open up. Although I'm an individual from another state, and can be seen as an outsider, having that shared identity allowed students to know that I cared about them and what they had to say because I myself live through what they are experiencing. On the other hand, that can also be a limitation; feeling this work on such a personal level can opaque my lens. As a researcher, however, I did my best to take myself out of the research and focus only on students and their experiences.

One key limitation is being out of state. I had to conduct the interviews through video call. While we chose to stay off camera, I think being recorded added to non-response bias as students are already in a vulnerable position and this added concerns for their safety. Overall, I did my best to assure them of my procedures and safety precautions.

Furthermore, another limitation of my study is the underrepresentation of individuals from Alabama and South Carolina. Only one participant was from Alabama and no participants were from South Carolina. Although the experiences from students in Georgia are extremely insightful, their stories are not necessarily transferrable to South Carolina.

Findings

When participants were asked about their identities, they expressed that being undocumented was the most impactful, ever-present, and/or challenging identity they had to navigate. Several reported economic status, gender, and race or country of origin were also impactful, but being undocumented surpassed those. One participant expressed how being undocumented has impacted everything in her life.

> "the label of [being undocumented] and its physical restraint has dictated every little thing that I have ever been able to do, and mostly as a non DACA recipient. It's honestly limited me to so, so, so many things, and I think it's truly the hardest and the most difficult label that I carry" – Maite

> [Being undocumented shaped life] "in a lot of different ways, I think overall everything. I think when it comes to looking at who I am, just as a person, how I identify, who I am at my core values, personal values, religious values. It's impacted a lot. And I don't think it should, but it just has" – Odette

Immigration status has significantly shaped the experience of undocumented students in the South. We explored this further with participants.

As a result of the interviews, there were five key themes found. This includes Segregation and Exclusion, Uncertainty and Hopelessness, the Power and Meaningfulness of Education, Community, and Advocacy. Below we explore participants' quotes and feelings navigating the bans in the South.

Theme 1: Segregation and Exclusion

The first theme, segregation and exclusion, was prominent in all participants. This theme was evident in the link between their undocumented status and policies, systemic exclusion at different stages of their life and education, discrimination based on status but bound by race, limitations on opportunities, feelings of unreciprocated love, and the internal impact leading to questions of ability and belongingness.

Isolation and Lack of Knowledge/Understanding

Participants shared many feelings of isolation and clear examples where there was a lack of knowledge and understanding regarding their experiences and identities. These experiences were present in K-12 public education, private education, and higher education.

During their K-12 journey, students shared experiences, especially in high school, trying to apply for private school or in college access opportunities. One participant, Alexa, recounted how in attempting to apply for private school she was denied access because of where she was from.

> "I was going to apply to a private school for my high school education. And I applied ... to a Catholic private school. I went through the process, through the interview, whatever they asked me, but when it got to the point where they were like, are you from here? And I told them no, and they were like, oh, we're so sorry, we can't accept you. And I feel like in that moment, it hit me. I'm undocumented" - Alexa

At that young age, Alexa also came to the realization of her status and the impact being undocumented would have on her life. Another participant, Maite, shared how she was

unable to participate in the required designated time for college applications because she couldn't make an account due to her lack of a social security number.

> "in Alabama we have a free college tuition week where for that whole week, if you're on school free and reduced school lunches, you can apply to as many schools as you want in Alabama for free … this is something that I was actually required to be in school, physically there for. For the whole class period, we were just supposed to be applying to schools and … I couldn't even make an account to enroll into these free college admission websites because I didn't even have a social security number" - Maite

In high school, many students had questions about their ability to access higher education. Some of these questions and uncertainty stemmed from a lack of knowledge and understanding from educators and school districts within the K-12 system. If educators didn't even know, how were students supposed to know? Most were unsure about their options, and some did research, while others were informed by people around them. Some participants didn't think higher education was an option or that it could be a reality because people around them had no idea how to help them and some actively discouraged them, thinking that it wasn't a possibility.

> "In high school I thought that I wouldn't be able to go to college … I felt that I would not, I could not go to college at all, period, just because when I had researched into it in Alabama you're not allowed to attend school if you're undocumented" - Maite

> "when I would try to find mentors or other people in my schools, none of them have ever been in this situation. Even my counselor was at a loss for words. Yeah. She would be like, I don't know what to tell you, I'm so sorry. And we would try to search for scholarships. She couldn't find any scholarships that didn't require my parents social security number, my social security number, or any of those things" - Maite

> "At first, it was really hard because when I was a senior I was very discouraged because people would tell me, oh you can't go to school. Or I would look into it and then I would found out since I'm undocumented, I would have to pay out of pocket and I would have to pay the international [rate]. So for me, college is not really in my head. It was more like, once I graduate, I guess I'll just have to go to work" - Flor

This lack of knowledge and discouragement left the system entirely up to undocumented students to navigate and figure out. Others expressed similar experiences during and after high school, even sharing how that made them feel.

> "also going into college, I feel like it was very difficult to look for a college that allows undocumented [individuals]" - Alexa

> "[the ban] has been affecting the people around me at least. And that's very heartbreaking to see because all these people are really wanting to strive for higher education and it's so limited to them that it's almost impossible for them to reach it" - Ari

Systemic Exclusion

All participants, although at different times and in different ways, ultimately came to find out about the bans in the South. These bans exclude them and segregate them from other students. Participants shared this realization and their knowledge of the policies.

> "we can't attend the top five research institutions in Georgia and we can't get any sort of financial aid unless it's from a private school so that's when I became aware and I had to find alternatives" - Nat

> "not even in my community college could I pay in-state tuition. And the payment plans I couldn't even do because I couldn't take out a loan. So I think that's when, senior year, I truly realized, okay, this ban not only affects me as a person, but also anybody in the future, anybody else who is in the next wave of initial DACA recipients [that can't be processed and approved]" - Maite

> "That's when they did the school ban here in Georgia, and in order for me to progress into a technology career, which was the thing I was pursuing at the time, I couldn't because the only colleges that offered it, are the top schools, so I couldn't join. I couldn't apply to any at the time. I didn't know but my mentality back then was like, I can't with social security number. I missed out on so many opportunities to keep going with higher education" - Eduardo

> "I thought that I maybe could do community college in Alabama, but unfortunately when I tried to pursue that route, it wasn't, I wasn't able to, and I only thought that because all of my sisters have daca … they were still able to get some type of aid, whether it was like scholarships that were just for students who had SSNs but

unfortunately that wasn't even an option for me. So I could not do school in Alabama at all. Period" - Maite

Several participants expressed that they felt these state policies are unfair.

"it's not fair to pay out of state tuition if you've been in one state your whole life" - Ari

Discrimination - based on status but bound by race

Several students voiced that what they are facing is discrimination and segregation. For some it felt targeted, others expressed how it is inhumane, and some went further, calling the policies an intentional erasure of communities.

"I feel like [the bans are] discrimination. It's just targeted towards our communities" - Flor

"I think that ban is definitely segregation because they're essentially separating education just for a piece of paper essentially. Really. And I think it's just very hurtful because you don't see that happening to other people, except for people who are specifically undocumented" - Ari

"it's a form of segregation. I think it's basically them saying that immigrants, like undocumented people don't deserve to be in places of higher education" - Nat

"they kind of erase us as part of a population that can be in these schools. And I think this also kind of discriminates us in a way of like, they're not even really human, they're not even really people because when they hear these things in the news and they hear these things in social media, problems, immigration reform and immigration policies, they can't put a face to any of these situations in any of these people because they don't have to see them in their day-to-day life. So in a way, for me, I most definitely think that that's discrimination. If there's a way to kind of have a scapegoat to not see these people and see their problems, I would consider that discrimination." - Maite

"The physical barrier where I, where I could not legally or physically enter my name and a password because I didn't have the first requirements to make the FAFSA account. I think that's exactly what segregating is - putting barriers for people to continue doing something that will help improve them and their community. I think segregation can look and feel in so many different ways, and to me it's not just that I can't apply to this school ... It's also in the admissions process. People are like but

> you're gonna have to provide your social security number … I could still kind of feel people's prejudice and their feelings towards a Hispanic girl from little Alabama just trying to apply to college.” - Maite

While the segregation and expulsion reported by students was primarily based on their undocumented status, race was also very impactful. It was hard to separate race from immigration. For Latino participants, exclusion based on immigration status went hand in hand with lack of representation, encouragement, and opportunities in the educational system rooted in racial inequity and marginalization. Students also reported heightened behavioral punishment/consequences. On the other hand, for the Asian participant, race was impactful in this discussion because they didn’t feel represented in the immigrant rights movement, narrative, and as a result in resources. Media discourse highly focuses on Latino/a/x undocumented immigrants, even though there are undocumented immigrants from all over the world. There are also more Latino/a/x focused community organizations and resources.

> “Where I live, it's called Dalton, Georgia. It has the biggest Hispanic population in Georgia … I remember growing up, going to school and always hearing, and also being told by my teachers, don't speak Spanish. This is America. We don't do that. We don't speak that” - Odette

> “I feel like they don't want the Hispanic community to get higher paying jobs … it limits what we can do and what we can make our kids aspire to be, you know?” - Eduardo

> “Compared to my white friends, they taught them more about college and access to financial aid. Obviously, I'm DACA so I wouldn't have received it, but still, you know I don't remember any of my friends, Hispanic friends, that were born here being told about financial aid … We had a big class graduating with us, and so to me it was like we have a pretty big Hispanic population, but you still don't have access. Right. We refuse to give access” - Odette

> “Growing up I didn't really see a lot of undocumented Asian Americans represented when it came to immigration advocacy. It made me feel really invisible and I didn't

> really see anyone like me. I never met anyone like me, being Asian and undocumented. So I felt I was just like the only one until like I got to college and made relationships with certain organizations that connected me with other undocumented Asian people. It is the second [largest] group within the undocumented community so I wish there was more visibility" - Nat

Overall, their experience was based both on their race and immigration status, and the exclusion is purposeful.

> "Segregation was essentially separating one specific race just for what they look like. I feel like it's really no different than this. We do look different, but it's also just how different we are in terms of citizenship" -Ari

> "They want to keep the lower class and people of color away from pursuing an education" - Alexa

Limited in Opportunities

Students expressed how the exclusion, discrimination, and rejection resulted in a limitation of opportunities. Some students identified this limitation as barriers, walls, or confinement.

> "now that I'm like older and in college, I feel like now I'm kind of seeing that we don't have as many opportunities" - Flor

> "It's been such a wall when it comes to certain things … especially right now, [with] the current administration" - Odette

> "It's discouraging, to have all these different bans and these different things that limit people from, I think ultimately growing and becoming better humans, and realizing that the best thing we can do is uplift each other" - Odette

In order to overcome the limitations of opportunities, participants expressed that they had to compensate by working extremely hard. This was a very prominent feeling with participants. This was evident in both their schooling and in their employment.

> "I feel like I have to work 10 times harder than an average person that is born here. Whether it's education or even for jobs" - Alexa

> “it's hard, being undocumented, that just means I need to work harder. I need to hustle harder to get where everyone else is” - Nat

> “you just have to put in double the work to obtain those opportunities so I think it is kind of discouraging ” - Flor

> “I always thought to myself after high school, I think I'm gonna go work. You know, just like, pretty much Hispanics, we go to work” - Alexa

> “I was in high school and I worked so hard … Right after high school I started working as a dishwasher. And I already ran two restaurants” - Eduardo

> “I always tell [other undocumented students], hey, I know we have to work 10 times harder, but I promise there’s a reward after you graduate and seeing all the hard work you put in” - Alexa

Students also shared that not only were they limited in general opportunities, but small things that for others are easy and may even be taken for granted, are very difficult. One of these things includes travel. Travel is challenging for participants in all methods including driving, flying, and taking any form of transportation.

For some it showed up in their inability to do class trips when all their peers were able to participate.

> “Since a very young age growing up I would hear about all these trips; people going to Spain, Brazil, Mexico, all abroad. And I would ask when could I go? But then I found out that I couldn't go at all and that really like changed the way I viewed a lot of things and people” - Ari

> “When students are about to graduate, they take a class trip. And I couldn't participate in that, because, you know, I'm undocumented” - Alexa

For the participant with DACA, who has the ability to get an ID and Drivers’ license, it showed up in the responsibility to drive her family as soon as she could legally get her permit.

> “my parents, obviously they don't have papers either, so driving was a big issue. Obviously when I was like 15, I immediately applied. Or I think you have to be 14. I applied and I got accepted and I got my driver's license, immediately right away. [My

> parents said] we're not wasting anything. You know, 'cause at least we have you" - Odette

For others, the challenge with travel means fear of flying, having to resort to alternative methods, especially given the REAL ID Act implementation and the current political context.

> "methods of transportation to return back from school because people are scared to fly right now. They're having to take two to three days on a Greyhound bus, on an Amtrak, which is so unsafe … I couldn't help but think of these friends who are in the same exact boat. They don't have DACA. We've been stuck in the process. I worry for them because they tell me the stories where they're like, as women and as like 20, 21-year-old girls we're put at risk just for wanting to go visit our families after a whole semester of schooling … I don't think people talk about that enough. The risks and extremity that we [face] while living in America in order just to see our own families and, you know, receive an education even though we're supposed to be the best country in the world" - Maite

> "I travel at least once a month with them. People [and] my undocumented friends will be like, how are you okay with traveling? I'm like, don't let them scare you. They want you to be scared to travel" - Nat

One student shared that being limited on travel means missing out on family time and sharing important events such as graduations.

> "Before Trump came into office I would just fly back normally, but right now that's starting to look a little different. Scarier to fly. And unfortunately my parents couldn't attend my graduation, so I have not been able to see them because, I mean, they're scared to fly. I'm scared to fly. So it's hurting a lot more of my mental and social being but I would rather protect them and protect myself in any little way we can" - Maite

Unreciprocated Love

Several participants expressed love for their community and the place where they grew up. They consider those places as home and where they belong, even though that love feels unrequited.

> “I genuinely love the south and I have hope for the south. I know that right now it's a love hate relationship, but I just feel like I'm from here. This is my home. You know, to me this will always be my home. Just 'cause I love the south, I genuinely do, but it's kind of heartbreaking that they don't love me back, you know? Unfortunately and obviously I maybe would be in a better situation if I lived in another state that is a little more supportive of me, but like I said, it's always gonna be my home. I've always planned to have kids here and grow up here. It's just a place I loved my whole life” - Odette

> “I wish undocumented students were seen as domestic students because we are from America. We did go to a US school. I wish that a lot of other schools could adopt that. I wish that we didn’t have to pay out of [state] fees” - Maite

> “it's a essentially a whole other world out over there. This is all I've known really since I was so young when I came here … everyone that I've been able to make friendship with, make connections with, [are] here” - Ari

> “I've always told my parents this is my home. To me, I belong here. Whether people agree or not, to me, I feel like I belong” - Odette

Questioning Ability and Belongingness

Several participants discussed the impact these policies have on their mental health and everyday living. For some, it resulted in imposter syndrome. Other participants began to question their ability, their intelligence, worth, and belongingness.

> “It really deterred me and also kind of in a way tore my confidence down a bit. It brought in more of the imposter syndrome, as a first generation student too, [I thought] am I even capable to do college level work?” - Maite

> “It really affected me a lot thinking not only am I capable of college level education but also it made me feel really, I don't know, inferior to everybody else. In a way, I truly did feel discriminated against … it felt very, very isolating” - Maite

> “It really changed my perspective on life because I found out that all these people had all these benefits and the freedom and stuff that I didn't really have. I think that held a lot of weight in me and my life, all throughout my childhood and still today” - Ari

In conclusion, the first theme called Segregation and Exclusion was reflected in participants, through systemic exclusion at different stages of their life and education, discrimination based on status but bound by race, limitations on opportunities, feelings of unreciprocated love, and the internal impact of questioning their ability and belongingness.

In this theme, we see a few frameworks and existing data presenting itself. First, Nikki Luke's writings come into play, with their argument that school segregation still exists in the south. Second, we see Muñoz and Espino's argument that the state policies that ban undocumented students from higher education are modern tools of racialized exclusion that reinforce educational exclusion are also reflected in the participants experiences (Muñoz and Espino, 2017). Participants share the sentiment that segregation still exists in the South, and this is agreed upon by existing research and expert opinions. Finally, we see Rachel Moran's argument that education is central to personhood, individual development, and participation in society (Moran, 2023).

Theme 2: The Profoundness and Power of Education

The second theme, the profoundness and power of education, was relevant for all participants. It showed up in the meaningfulness and significance of obtaining an education while being undocumented, and it was expressed through stories of personal growth, the generational impact by uplifting communities, and as something that no one can take away from them. In addition, due to the bans, participants resort to seeking alternative and non-traditional pathways in order to obtain access either through paying out-of-state tuition at a community college, dropping out, moving out of state, or attending a private university. One private university in Georgia created a partnership with a national organization and together they created an opportunity that was the most prominent pathway for participants. This program was extremely significant for participants. However, even though most participants were able to gain access they shared their mixed feelings about the situation and wishful desire for more.

Meaningfulness of Education

Even with limited access and active policies to bar them from obtaining higher education, education as a whole was seen as very significant and meaningful within participants. Some shared that education is a conduit for personal growth, development, and social mobility. Others shared that education uplifts communities and has a generational impact. Others expressed that education is something that no one can take away from them. Education was seen as something profound and special. Some participants also

emphasized that education is a human right and that everyone should have access, regardless of their immigration status.

> “At the end of the day, we all wanna go to college. We all wanna pursue that higher education” - Alexa
>
> "Education is so important to everyone regardless of immigration status” - Nat
>
> “I believe that regardless of what immigration status you have, you should have access to education” - Odette

Regarding the personal impact of education, participants expressed that access to higher education leads to access to knowledge and critical thinking skills. It allows you to be less susceptible to manipulation. It also opens doors professionally and economically.

> “I think with higher education you grow as a human, and I think higher education makes you wanna question. It makes you wanna question everything and get those answers. And even with those answers, ask more questions. And that's always something I've been taught from the moment I got to college. They're like ask questions and seek higher than what you're given” - Odette
>
> “The more I just realize that I love learning, the more I see the impact that it can have. You grow so much and you learn so much about you as a person, but also about yourself, the place you live at, the country you live in. And I think without higher education, you're able to be manipulated more easily ... I think it just helps you grow as a human. So I love it” - Odette
>
> “I believe it's really important, especially for us. Through education, all these other doors will open. So I do believe it's really important, especially for our community” - Flor

Participants expressed that education was bigger than them. Most participants reported being the first in their family to access higher education, therefore, it wasn’t only for themselves. They see the impact it has on their families and the impact on their future kids. Education uplifts communities and has a generational impact.

> “we're here, you know, to also better ourselves and help our community and be a representative of your community. So I really like [education] and I really think it's very beneficial for everyone” - Alexa

> “I think that my experiences being undocumented and wanting to be an immigration lawyer and a labor rights attorney give me that perspective that will help people” - Nat

> “I plan on having kids. I wanna be just a better role model for them. I think also growing up and always seeing like, I don't know if you ever had to fill those papers out, like what race are you, and did your mom and dad ever graduate high school … I want my kids to fill out Yes, my mom got her master's, and also teach them, and also for my parents to be proud of me that I went and tried to achieve something greater than they, they unfortunately couldn't do” - Odette

Furthermore, given the challenge regarding higher education access and the uncertainty around being undocumented, higher education was seen as something that no one can take away from participants. Education access and degree completion provided empowerment and some form of certainty. One participant’s mentor referred to it as a passport and that really stuck with them.

> “they can never take away my education. They can take away my rights, but not my education” - Nat

> “I went on this convention one time and one of the guys, his name was Chris. He was like, your education is your passport” - Flor

> “My mentor has always told me that there's a lot to be scared about right now and it feels like there's a lot of things that can be taken from you, but they could never take away your education or the skills and the determination that you built during college” - Nat

Seeking Alternative Pathways to Gain Access

Due to the significance and meaningfulness of education, undocumented students have put in effort to obtain a higher education, even with the challenge of the state bans. In order to gain access, however, undocumented individuals in the South have resorted to seeking non-traditional pathways.

One pathway undocumented students have followed is to pay out of state tuition at a college that they do have access to, typically community colleges. This was specifically shared by residents of Georgia.

> “[Education] is really important to be honest, and I'm trying to go back to school again. The problem again is just entering. I have to save six months to be able to go one semester. And it's always that constant having to save” - Eduardo

> “I decided to take a few classes at a tech school, which was still kind of expensive, and I didn't really feel like I was really going anywhere because with how much I could afford, I was only taking like a class or two a semester” - Flor

Students choose this pathway because they feel it’s the only way to obtain an education. This method, however, is particularly challenging because of the cost. Students pay about three times what an in-state resident pays. Even when students start this path, they are not always able to complete their education. One student talked about how he had to drop out because it was too expensive and was not sustainable.

> “I went to community college for a while. It was so expensive too because I had [to pay] like three or four times out of pocket what it was … at the end of the day, I ended up dropping out mostly because of the cost. During that time, getting fresh outta high school, I couldn't afford it. I was getting minimum wage and my parents were also struggling, so I had to drop out” - Eduardo

Another pathway undocumented students in the South have decided to pursue in order to obtain access is moving out of state. This one is particularly accurate for the Alabama student, where the ban is more restrictive than in Georgia. Other students in Georgia considered this option as well before they found a better option.

> “we literally have no way out but to leave our home in order to pursue our dreams. So I would say that's the truth for me and for a lot of other friends that are also from North Carolina and Georgia and other states that are in the same boat. So I feel they validate me when I think that this is discrimination” - Maite

> “If I didn't have the Dream US I don't know what I would do. I got accepted to a few out-of-state private schools and they gave me some scholarships. I might have just ended up there, I would think. Yeah. I would have to relocate” - Nat

> “My thought was actually to move states" - Alexa

The student from Alabama, Maite, shared a little more about why she chose the out-of-state school. Financial support, resources, and being openly supportive of undocumented students, led her to choose Tufts University in Massachusetts.

> “I went to college on a private family grant from my school that's specifically for undocumented students ... I did an early decision to the school because of the resources that are known for DACA and undocumented students” - Maite

> “Even though I wanted to go to an Ivy league and I had the interviews, I had the capacity, and I could have gone to Ivy Leagues, they wouldn’t have given me nearly as much support as Tufts, which is where I go” - Maite

The most prominent pathway for undocumented students, at least those in Georgia, was to attend a private university; not just any private university though, it was specifically Oglethorpe University. Oglethorpe has a partnership with a national scholarship and program called The Dream US. Together they provide funds and significant resources for undocumented students.

The Dream US scholarship provides funds for undocumented students across the country that struggle to gain access to higher education. The program itself and the funds provided to students had a monumental impact on participants. Some crediting their education to them.

> “I wouldn't be in school if it wasn't for it [the Dream US]” - Flor

> “I am a part of a scholarship that's an independent scholarship, so they raise funds and stuff like that for us ... [not having the scholarship] would affect me tremendously to the point where I think I would've like, I don't know, probably took a break from college” - Alexa

> “I was very grateful to have found the Dream Us Scholarship that allowed me to be able to go to school and continue my education.” - Ari

> “then I found out about the Dream US and was finally like, okay, I can do it” - Flor

> “I applied and I think weeks later, I got the email that I got the scholarship. So I was like, okay, I am actually gonna go to college.” - Alexa

The unique partnership that the Dream US has with Oglethorpe University allowed for students to find out about the other program once they were connected to one of them. For example, some students shared that they found out about Oglethorpe because of the Dream US and vice versa. This partnership and the funding was the deciding factor in applying, subsequently accepting admission, and then attending.

> “luckily I was connected. I only applied to Oglethorpe because of the Dream US. I only knew that school because of the Dream US” - Nat

> “Oglethorpe itself gave me like half of the tuition covered. And I was like, okay, how am I gonna pay the other half? Then, one of the ladies, financial aid, she was like, Hey, I know your situation and I just wanna tell you that there's a scholarship for students like you. And so I actually, fun fact, I applied [to the Dream US scholarship] like the day before it was like the deadline” - Alexa

Even if students didn’t know about Oglethorpe University beforehand, upon attendance students found themselves in an environment that doesn’t exist anywhere else in Georgia. Together, the Dream US and Oglethorpe created a space for undocumented students. This space included financial support, resources, and belongingness.

> “I'm very thankful for Oglethorpe opening its doors to undocumented [students] and giving [us] the opportunity” - Alexa

> “I go to that specific university because that's the only one in my state where I'm able to keep that scholarship under” - Ari

> "They cover tuition and textbooks. The only thing they don't cover is housing” - Flor

> “constant emails from schools as well being like, Hey, we know that you're going through something, or we know that you have fear, but just know that if anything crosses here into university, we will protect you. Just essentially, assuring my safety” - Ari

Mixed Feelings

Several participants expressed feeling grateful and appreciative of the opportunity they were able to access with the Dream US and Oglethorpe University. For some, however, this went hand in hand with feelings of missing out on the traditional experience that they see in the media or that their citizen peers have.

> “I'm very thankful for, Oglethorpe opening its doors to undocumented [students] and giving them the opportunity but I feel like I would've loved to get that big college experience. OG is a very small community, college and the class size is not that big, and I feel like I would love to experience that big university life that we see on TVs and stuff like that” - Alexa

Ultimately, even though several participants within this study were able to obtain access, this process was not at all easy for them. Participants had to do a bit of everything and seek all possible alternatives in order to gain access. Participants referred to the many more undocumented individuals in the South that were not able to obtain access.

> “I know a lot of undocumented people that wanna go to college and they just do everything on their own and they end up having to take private loans or they don't go to law school at all because they just kind of give up on that dream. But I think more of us should become lawyers if we wanna become lawyers and not have to give up that dream just because we're undocumented” - Nat

> “I know that there's people that are in the same situation that I'm in who are like, oh, then I'm most definitely not going to go to school. So it's very discouraging” - Flor

In conclusion, this second theme called The Profoundness and Power of Education, was demonstrated through the significance of obtaining an education while being undocumented, and it was expressed through stories of personal growth, the generational impact by uplifting communities, and as something that no one can take away from them. In addition, due to the bans, participants resort to seeking alternative and non-traditional pathways in order to obtain access either through paying out-of-state tuition at a community college, dropping out, moving out of state, or attending a private university. One private university in Georgia created a partnership with a national organization and together they created an opportunity that was the most prominent pathway for participants. This program was extremely significant for participants. However, even though most participants were able to gain access they shared their mixed feelings about the situation and wishful desire for more.

In this theme we see Ricardo G Gonzales' framework represented, especially how undocumented students live their lives in limbo and that legal status becomes a defining feature of their identity and in their educational access. All the barriers the participants spoke about might be a reason for the "early exiting" that is part of his framework (Gonzales, 2015). While most of the participants in this research were "college-goers", one student wasn't able to complete his higher education for financial reasons. Even when undocumented youth do their best to attend college, it isn't always able to fructify or culminate all the way through. Yet all persisted and did their best to navigate the educational system despite the barriers (Gonzales, 2015).

Theme 3: Uncertainty & Hopelessness

The third theme, uncertainty and hopelessness, was prominent in all participants. The theme was expressed through uncertainty about the future, an exacerbation of the current political climate and state of affairs within the US leading to hopelessness, and consequential thoughts about "self-deportation"/voluntary departure or home-returning.

Uncertainty about Future

While most participants were able to obtain access to higher education, uncertainty remains for the future, specifically regarding graduate studies. Several reported having more educational goals but are unsure whether they can get their master's or law degree.

> "I have thought about getting my master's just because I really enjoy school and I kind of want to avoid the real life also. Like, I don't know, once I'm done with school, will I even be able to get a job? That's kind of scary. So I would like to go for my master's, I don't know in what or where, but that's kind of the plan" - Flor

> "I want to be a lawyer and I know this path is gonna be really difficult, especially as an undocumented person. How am I gonna get funding for law school? How am I gonna pay for law school period? Which law schools are gonna accept me? Which states can I even practice law in? Will I have to relocate? I think the only two states I can actually practice law in, especially without daca, is New York and California. So relocating is gonna be, a hurdle as well." - Nat

Concerns about their career and future ability to work add a significant additional amount of uncertainty as well. Even with additional education, without DACA and without a social security, it is unclear whether they could obtain a job in their career.

> "there's a lot of UNC uncertainty about being able to use your degree afterwards, being undocumented" - Nat

> "I do see [my future] a little challenging, especially with companies hiring and stuff like that. Even on its own already, the hiring process is very hard" - Alexa
> "I would love to, you know, actually get a job in the United States and be able to practice what I studied, which is engineering. For me, that's not gonna be possible

> at all in the next, I think five years. It would be impossible given the fact that I don't even have a work permit, a social security number, and for a lot of engineering companies, you need to have security clearance. So even if I did have daca, a lot of things just would have to fall into place" - Maite

> "personally I've looked into contracting too, but I've gotten a lot of advice where like, nobody's really gonna hire a 21 or 22-year-old for advice in engineering consulting when I've never had any professional experience" - Maite

For some, even though the future is uncertain, they have found refuge in their current work to distract themselves and not be overwhelmed by the future.

> "With the current situation [my future] is not looking so bright. But I'm focusing a lot on work" - Eduardo

Exacerbation of Political Climate and Current Affairs

Uncertainty for undocumented individuals seems to be ongoing and always present, however, the current political climate in the United States has created a specific mental state of despair and internal turmoil that have only exacerbated the feelings of uncertainty. Participants reported feeling fear and sadness.

> "all these new laws that are going into play, like all this new stuff. It's scary" - Flor

> "I really try to like avoid it. I don't know. It's just so sad, uh, currently with administration. So I just try not to see it" - Alexa

> "Right now in the times that we're living in, I feel like my future is so blurry, I guess. Like I can't look too ahead anymore." - Ari

One pressing aspect of the current political climate is the stereotypes and misinformation that the government and society perpetuate. One student shared how they are incorrect and misconstrued.

> "People say that immigrants don't pay taxes, which we do. And it's often a lot higher than most people would think" - Ari

One of the reasons for the mental and emotional exacerbation for undocumented individuals is the constant changes with federal and state policies, especially regarding immigration. One example of these constantly changing policies includes DACA. Only one of the participants has DACA, however, five more are eligible but are not able to apply because of the freeze on initial applications. Several students shared the process of trying to apply and even getting their fingerprints taken, albeit not being able to complete the process. Other shared the impact it had on them and their feelings of it being unfair.

> "Right when I was applying [for DACA] it got canceled. I only needed one more paperwork to turn in and just when we found it, they had closed it down" - Ari

> "I feel like it's just really unfair because some of, most of the people, that came here were super young and it's not like they had a choice whether they wanted to be here or not" - Ari

> "I was too young, but then … I applied when it opened back up, and my case is one of the ones that are in holding" - Nat

> "I did apply [for DACA] but since Trump paused the program, I'm still in the freeze of first time applicants. So I was almost there. I had gotten my biometrics done and everything, but unfortunately, like many others, we are stuck in the waiting process" - Maite

Several participants were part of mixed-status families. Some shared how DACA created a huge difference in opportunities between siblings. Maite shared how she had a completely different experience from her sister because her older sister has DACA and she does not. In Alabama, her sister was able to access an education with DACA, but without DACA she was further marginalized and chose to go out of state.

> "my sister was going to school at that point. She is the only one, so it's four of us and she has daca. And I'm like, wait, but if she can go, and she was going for free … everything paid for. So I was like, wait, I wanna do that. And she would tell me about all the things that she did in college. And so I kind of started looking up and I realized that not even in my community college could I pay in-state tuition" - Maite

Hopelessness & Heartbreak

The constant uncertainty, exclusionary policies, and ever-changing updates to immigration affairs in the country resulted in participants feeling hopeless and heartbroken. Several participants reported these feelings of discouragement, heartbreak, disgust, and hopelessness.

> “my senior year of high school, it broke my heart every day” - Maite
>
> “I feel like I've kind of lost all hopes in America and staying here” - Flor
>
> “I think it's disgusting that, in my opinion, you try to purposely villainize a group of individuals, especially a group of individuals that didn't choose to be here. To me, it's so discouraging. It's so discouraging because a lot of these parents come to seek a better life for their kids, and the fact you're limiting one of those betterments, one resource that could better someone, that could probably better your country, better the state they live in, it's heartbreaking and discouraging. Like, honestly, I feel so discouraged and a part of me is like, should I even try to seek higher education? Which I still am. Like I truly believe in it, but it really is discouraging, I would say. And it's heartbreaking and it's hard” - Odette
>
> “With this current administration, I think it's really hard for me to have hope, overall to want to pursue something better for you and your family. Honestly, I think that's the ultimate goal, for them to discourage you and to make you feel like you're not wanted and not needed. But to me, not just immigrants, but any person of color, have made the United States what it is and what it represents and the beauty of it is the fact we are so mixed and we have so many opinions and so many different avenues of expressing ourselves. I think it's a shame that we want to ban basic rights. To me, even if you don't have papers, you are an American” - Odette

Voluntary Departure/“self-deportation” & Home-returning Lingers

One of the consequences of the hopelessness and heartbreak that exists within participants is the lingering feeling and thoughts of voluntary departure/“self-deportation” or home-returning.

> “I haven't really been thinking about it too much right now because with everything going on, I have been considering other possibilities, like graduating with my degree and then possibly leaving the country after, but that's still like on the rocks” - Ari

> “I want more opportunities because I feel so limited right now on what I can do to secure a job with my status. So I have been considering honestly leaving the country because of how bad things have been getting. Having a degree, at least from the US, I feel like it would really higher my chances of securing a good job in Mexico … being undocumented, because I'm undocumented, it has me forcing that pathway” - Ari

While some participants think about it during tough times, others are set on it occurring for certain and are taking steps to adequately plan and figure it out.

> “Right now, I'm kind of also vouching for self-deportation because that's what I'm personally doing after my master's program” - Maite

> “Being undocumented dictates every single aspect of what I think is in the future, and personally, that's why I'm self-deporting … unfortunately for me that's just because I don't have any financial stability. I don't have any other options … every waking day, I think about it. And for me, that looks like returning back home, which is Mexico, even though I never lived there, don't know a single thing about it. And right now it means for me to explore different options, whether that's like Canada or like any other European countries” - Maite

> I'll keep on fighting the best way I know how, and even if I am not here, I'll still keep on fighting, regardless of how it looks” - Odette

This decision brings forward additional complexities. Participants expressed mixed feelings regarding what home is and whether another country will feel like home. Although there is no answer now, choosing to leave comes with the reward of traveling freely and possible employment, which seems worth it for a better future.

> “But again, a place I've never stepped foot in, so I'm very hesitant. It wouldn't be ideal for me, but that's exactly how I see a potential down route. But I'm not confident in that.” – Ari

> “I feel like it wouldn't feel like home, honestly. Obviously I have family over there and so many people that I care about and care about me, but essentially, I don't know them personally. I'd hate essentially, you know, that it’s something I would settle for, but I feel like at least I would have the freedom to be able to travel freely" - Ari

In conclusion, the third theme called Uncertainty and Hopelessness was evident through participants' reports of feeling uncertainty regarding their future, an exacerbation of the current political climate and state of affairs within the US leading to hopelessness, and consequential thoughts about "self-deportation"/voluntary departure.

In this theme, we see Sara Radoff's framework represented, specifically in the "liminal legality" that undocumented students live in. Undocumented youth in the South exist in a partial personhood, therefore not having full legal or social belonging (Radoff, 2011). This is one of the reasons why undocumented students face so much uncertainty, hopelessness, and even consider "self-deportation"/voluntary departure or home-returning. Furthermore, Allen-Handy and Farinde-Wu's argument that undocumented students live in a "vacillating sociopolitical landscape" is also demonstrated in participants experiences (Allen-Handy and Farinde-Wu, 2018). Due to the constant immigration and policy changes, undocumented students are continuously left feeling vulnerable and unsteady.

Theme 4: Community

The fourth theme that showed up with participants was community. This was exhibited through the community support mentors and local community programs offered participants, the collective effort it took within families to get into and pay through college, and other support that was offered through friends and peers.

Mentors

Several participants expressed the importance that mentors had in their journey. Participants expressed that mentors provided guidance, information about school, and tools or resources. This was crucial for gaining access to higher education.

> "one of my mentors, came up to me, he's like, what are you doing after high school? I was like, to be honest, I don't think I'm gonna do anything. I think I'm gonna go work ... and so then he was like, oh, I know a good school here in Georgia that allows undocumented students to go to college and pursue an education. And so then I applied" - Alexa

> "I studied at a private university called Oglethorp University here in Atlanta. Um, I found it through a family friend. Her father was taking my graduation photos and then she told me what were my next plans after graduating high school. And I told her that wasn't too sure, and then she told me about the scholarship and I was able to qualify for it. So I was very thankful for that" - Ari

> "My mentor has always told me that there's a lot to be scared about right now and it feels like there's a lot of things that can be taken from you, but they could never take away your education or the skills and the determination that you built during college" - Nat

Local Programs

In addition to mentors, several community programs provided guidance, support, and mentorship to participants. Some were region specific, and others were race/ethnicity

focused community-based programs/organizations. These were significant in providing opportunities for academic support including things like homework, technology access, and understanding financial aid, even if the participants weren't actually eligible due to their status.

> "I also like the local nonprofits organizations around me. I'm really close with the Sandy Springs Mission, which helps students in elementary and middle school, specifically Hispanics. It's like an afterschool program that helps to complete their homework" - Alexa

> "we also had like a Hispanic coalition center in Alabama. We only have one. And so I was able to meet with them and they helped me get a computer. And with the computer, I now had access to so many other things. I was able to look into schools, scholarships, and through that in 2021, I was able to apply to schools" - Maite

> "there's this association in Atlanta, it's called the Latin American Association. And they have different resources that you can get … I went there with like my dad and they helped us. They're like, oh, this is what FAFSA is. And like, even though we can't apply for it … they went over all of that and what to expect" - Flor

Collective Efforts

Furthermore, going to college was not an individual effort. Several participants shared that obtaining a higher education was a collective effort, especially within families. This showed up as encouragement or financial support.

> "I live in a small town in the south. I live 30 minutes away from Tennessee and I visit Tennessee quite often. The perception of higher education is always like, you don't need that. You don't need that. They won't teach you anything. You know, like these negative perceptions, but my parents have always said - you need to go to college. That's our number one rule" - Odette

> "my parents and I would just collect money. We would try to do as much savings as possible and would slowly pay off the semester … I think per class it was like a thousand dollars roughly, so I would just budget and be like, okay, I can afford this and I can afford that. And like I said, my parents were very lucky in which they

> helped me, but I think we ended up paying around 50K for me to get my bachelor's. It was out of state tuition" - Odette

Beyond the family, mentors, and community programs, there were other folks that provided support for participants in their journey including friends, the larger community, and peers.

> "People have been show[ing] those little red cards. They would hand them out to students. Those resources have really been helpful" - Ari

> "when elections went out, I feel like I really never cared because I can't vote. So I don't know why I should care, but I felt more interested this election and [my friend] was like, I'll take anyone to go voting. So he took my sister and I went with them" - Alexa

> "Not everything is over for us. Like we might see it's over, because we don't have papers and stuff, but there's great people that support us." - Alexa

Altogether, it was a community and collective effort for participants to attend college and obtain their higher education. Through their journey they built community as well. Community was integral to their motivation and success.

In conclusion, the fourth theme called Community, was exhibited through the community support offered to participants by mentors and local community programs, the collective effort it took within families to get into and pay through college, and other support that was offered through friends and peers.

In this theme we see Ruge and Iza's writings reflected. They argue that education should be a human right because it is fundamental to the betterment of a society (Ruge and Iza, 2005). They also emphasize that undocumented students have lived in the US for most of their lives and that families pay taxes. This was reflected in the collective desire and efforts to get undocumented students into college and pay for their tuition.

Theme 5: Advocacy

The fifth and final theme is advocacy. This theme was very prominent among participants as well. Participants had similar perspectives on activism and advocacy that included fear of protesting but appreciation for those that do partake, a desire to inspire other youth and uplift the community, and a lack of recognition or underestimation of their own personal activism and advocacy. Furthermore, participants sought information, employment opportunities, and resources through national programs and social media entities. This involvement developed professional and personal skills that led to issue awareness, leadership, and further advocacy. Finally, participants exhibited leadership and took on significant leadership roles that were integral to their identity development and agency, were transformational, and created a broad impact.

Perspectives on Activism and Personal Advocacy

One of the things shared frequently by participants was the fear of protesting due to the consequences that could ensue due to their immigration status. Although they didn't feel safe doing so, they expressed appreciation for those that do. Seeing the amount of people participating in activism has made participants feel supported. One student did express that she participated in one protest and another one expressed that she tries to do advocacy online through social media.

> "I'm a little bit scared to go out there, but it's very encouraging to see that other people do stand up. I haven't really seen any educational protests going on, it's been more about the ice raids but, I support it from the sidelines." - Flor

> "I personally haven't been a part of anything [resistance/activism] just because I don't want to risk my safety at all" - Ari

> “I feel like people are definitely speaking up a lot more, and it actually gives me so much more hope with activism right now because I feel like you can't really do change without action, but you need to get your voice heard first … just seeing that people who are from here, going out and showing support, that really has helped a lot” - Ari

> “there's also the hidden fear of like, we can't be too vocal because I'm putting myself at risk” - Maite

> “You can see the protests going on. I did participate in the No Kings here in Georgia, in Atlanta. It was very cool being surrounded with people that have the same beliefs as me, especially also in the educational side” - Alexa

> “Even if it's just posting on Facebook or posting on Instagram or talking or having a debate with someone. To me that's advocacy, and that's me trying to get my message across and at least hope to change someone's mind if they do support the current administration, you know” - Odette

One interesting detail is that when asked about their thoughts on advocacy and their own advocacy, most interpreted advocacy as only protesting. Some participants didn't view their own community work as advocacy, or they undermined/underplayed their own work. Some participants said they didn’t do much after listing a long list of things. Although the reason is uncertain, it could be because the work they do feels like it’s not enough in order to truly solve societal issues or there are some internalized feelings from a lack of recognition.

> I guess that's the only advocacy I've done” - Eduardo

Participants were heavily involved in community work. Although it wasn’t in the form of protesting as they envisioned activism to be, participants were part of and had leadership roles in clubs on campus, local community programs, and national organizations.

> “I'm a crew lead for their action academy. Last year I was a student in it, and right now I'm leading a group of students. We do a lot of civic engagement. We have zoom meetings like twice a week.” - Flor

> “I'm currently in a club called Ola in my school which is for undocumented students” - Alexa

> “This organization in Atlanta called Asian Americans Advancing Justice. They advocate for a lot of educational policy for undocumented students, and that's who I've been going to the capitol with to go lobby” - Nat

> “We have a nonprofit here in Dalton, called Coalition of Latino Leaders, and I volunteered there and it kind of really just encouraged me to try my best and push myself a little more … it’s an uplifting type of help rather than a financial kind of help” - Odette

> “I'm pretty vocal … and I would say it has helped me with my activism a lot more. I'm part of my school's local, United for Immigrant Justice Club, so I would help a lot out with that club” - Maite

> “here in Georgia we created a community called Los Vecinos de Buford Highway which is in the Atlanta area. I helped start that group with a couple friends. I also help another group called Presencia which helps kids get into college… So every now and then. they do tutoring and they help with people with applications to college as well … And what they focus on is community outreach” – Eduardo

> “I've lobbied at Georgia's capital for in-state tuition for undocumented students” - Nat

One of the reasons expressed by participants for this involvement was the desire to spread opportunities, inspire other youth, and help those in similar situations. This was all with the end goal of uplifting their community.

> “I also want to inspire other students which I'm doing right now. I actually go to my local high school … there's a club called Hope. I was the president before I graduated, but now I go back to the club … So I do a lot of motivational talks, you know. To tell kids like, Hey, your education career doesn't just have to stop here, especially with our background, there's a lot of opportunities and a lot of scholarships out there for us” - Alexa

> “I try to do what I can to help them and tell them about the scholarship that I'm under and hopefully see if they're able to qualify as well.” - Ari

National Programs Filling Information Gaps and Providing Opportunities

Participants expressed their engagement with and the significance of national programs. These national programs ranged from employment opportunities at other colleges, civic engagement internships with a national electoral organization, and social media entities providing relatable content and information.

> “I've been able to work with the UCLA Labor Center. I participated in the Dream Summer fellowship and that connected me with a lot of people, a lot of undocumented people, a lot of immigration rights activists that have mentored me and trained me to be where I am today” - Nat

> “I'm currently doing an internship with a company called CP Futures. They educate you on voting rights, voting, and just overall in giving you that experience with other states” - Alexa

> “Common Power … I actually work for them right now remotely, um, full-time. I told them my status, they've been super supportive. I don't think they've really dealt with this before, like an undocumented person working full-time for them. So they've been really supportive and finding ways to keep me safe while doing political work, and they're also giving me a paid opportunity as an undocumented person being an independent contractor” - Nat

> "UCLA Labor Center, Common Power, and Asian Americans advancing Justice, definitely helped me a lot the last four years while I was in college” - Nat

> “I've also have greatly benefited from undocumented grads, and also undocu professionals. I have been able to get a lot of grad school resources from them which has been very, very helpful … And Immigrants rising” - Maite

The impacts of engagement with these national organizations was education, issue awareness, and advocacy building. Several participants expressed interest in learning more about societal issues, beyond their status and beyond immigration. Some participants talked about the interconnectedness and intersectionality of issues.

> “all these issues in the world started happening and I wanted to educate myself a little bit more on the policies” - Flor

> “I first joined Common Power, well their Program Action Academy last summer, and it was because it was an election year, a presidential election year. And since as an undocumented student, I couldn't vote and I would see so many voting rights posts and I felt very useless, essentially, if I'm being honest. I felt like I couldn't really do anything. Like sure I can speak out about it, but essentially can't vote. So when I heard about the program, I joined it because I did wanna get more informed on my voting rights. Even as an undocumented student, I wanted to further help make change, essentially” - Ari

Internal and External Impact of Leadership

All participants exhibited leadership traits or had leadership roles. The leadership resulted in significant internal changes. One crucial impact was identity development and agency building. Students reported being able to build community, feel empowered, come into their own truth and ideologies, and assert their voice.

> “It also helped me meet a lot of other undocumented Asians. So I felt a little bit more seen” - Nat

> “what's been happening lately, not just with this ban, but with everything, it's changed me I think as a person. Really it has. And every single night I think about how much I'm changing and I'm growing. I've been to a few protests … trying to get my voice out. I've always been the kind of person to be afraid to offend people if that makes sense. I've always been afraid, especially when it comes to social media, I've always been afraid to tell people, like, if you support this man, you're a racist … but at this point I think I am over it” - Odette

> “I'm mad. If I'm being honest, I'm really angry and I'm mad, and I don't care to offend anyone. And if you disagree with me, you're gonna unfollow me because the internet exists and this man has done horrible things and the and administration is doing horrible things and the fact you still support that, I don't wanna be near you. You know? So it's just made me really think about what I believe in and solidify my beliefs and my values … Like I said, I'm really mad and I hope to do more with that anger. And obviously not in a violent way but in a verbal way” - Odette

Odette exemplified courage and bravery, coming into her beliefs and standing her ground. She also shared her desire to funnel her emotions into action.

With all the community engagement and leadership roles they were in, participants expressed feelings of burn out and being drained. One participant recalled being at her bandwidth.

> “I feel also more recently, I feel a little more drained out on helping … practicing a lot more in the current protests and whether it's phone banking, calling, you know, like state representatives and stuff like that. I feel like I'm kind of at my bandwidth” - Maite

Beyond their internal feelings, participants reflected on the external impact of their involvement. Some reported doing local grassroots work, while others were doing federal election work. Participants continue to do things that are making an impact in their communities in many areas and on many levels.

> “Through the program I was able to travel to Nevada and go door knocking and that felt very helpful because I was actively doing something even in my situation where I can't vote, but I'm getting my voice heard and getting my feet on the floor and getting personal with people and having heart to heart conversations. I feel like it was very welcoming and it's the first time I felt like I was able to do some change. A couple months later after I was helping them canvas, it turns out that the person that I was representing did end up winning her race. And so that felt very rewarding” - Ari

Even though undocumented students can’t vote, and they are limited in many areas, partaking in this leadership allowed participants to effect change and come into their agency and power. Ultimately, undocumented students are demonstrating transformational leadership and making a positive impact in our nation.

In conclusion, the fifth theme called Advocacy, was evident through similar perspectives on activism and advocacy that included fear of protesting but appreciation for those that do partake, a desire to inspire other youth and uplift the community, and a lack of recognition or underestimation of their own personal activism and advocacy. Furthermore,

participants sought information, employment opportunities, and resources through national programs and social media entities. This involvement developed professional and personal skills that led to issue awareness, leadership, and further advocacy. Finally, participants exhibited leadership and took on significant leadership roles that were integral to their identity development and agency, were transformational, and created a broad impact.

One relevant and existing framework is that of Nikki Luke who argues that segregation still exists, however, students, especially those that are marginalized, are organizing, demanding change, reclaiming public education, and challenging structural racism (Luke, 2018). Most participants in this research were engaged in their schools, online, or in their community and had some sort of leadership role, ultimately striving to improve things both on a local and systemic level.

Policy Recommendations

1. Remove the Bans in Georgia, Alabama, and South Carolina

First and foremost, the most significant and urgent policy change that should be made is removing the higher education bans in the South. Undocumented students are being targeted, discriminated, and marginalized. Undocumented students are living in a modern form of segregation. Lifting the bans would be a small step in the right direction. This could be done by passing state policy. Participants also voiced this recommendation.

> "Here in Georgia, the main thing I would do is probably get rid of the education ban because it's limiting people, you know … so we just get rid of the ban. I don't think the South is ready for financial help but just taking out the ban would be one of the best things they could do just to level the playing field" - Eduardo

> "the policy I would like to change is probably giving us an opportunity … I would open up more universities for us. I feel like we're very like limited on universities to attend. I would love to go to a public college instead of going to a private [one]" - Alexa

2. Make Education More Accessible and Affordable

The second recommendation is to make education more accessible and affordable for undocumented students in the South. This can be done through education equity and providing financial aid. Passing state policies that allow for undocumented students that meet certain criteria, such as living in the state for 1-3 years, to pay in-state tuition would make education more accessible. Allowing undocumented students to apply for state scholarships, financial aid, and other opportunities would create a viable pathway for students to access higher education. Numerous participants shared this suggestion as well.

“it's not fair to pay out of state tuition if you've been in one state your whole life” - Ari

“for educational policies, just making it more affordable for everyone because I know there's a lot of people who do want to go to school and get a higher education, but they can't just because they don't have the money to do so” - Flor

“People can't afford higher education because it's just too high and people still have lives. They still have bills, they have rent, they have groceries, they have electricity. It's endless needs that they really need to focus on” - Ari

“I would definitely push for policies to grant undocumented students equal access to in-state tuition, financial aid, and even paid internships and opportunities in college” - Nat

“I'm a believer that education should be free. I don't think anyone should pay for education. I think to me that is a basic need. The same way I think healthcare is a basic need that no one should have to pay for. So to me, if I was able to do something free, we should not have to charge anyone. No one, no kid, regardless of who you are, should have to pay to go to school and for basic education” - Odette

“I wish a lot of the undocumented students ... were seen as domestic students because we are from America. We did go to a US school. I wish that a lot of other schools could adopt that. I wish that we didn’t have to pay out of school fees” - Maite

3. Create Initiatives that Build Equity in Education and Invest in Successful Community Programs

The next recommendation is to increase culturally competent and responsive education programs and initiatives in the region and to invest in successful community programs that already exist. Several participants shared experiences that should be addressed. This includes microaggressions from teachers telling students they can’t speak their native language, to students of color not being encouraged to seek higher education in the K-12 system. Programs that increase cultural competency and equity practices, especially in

the education system, should be created. Programs that support students of color and immigrant students in accessing education should also be created or supported. Furthermore, community programs that already exist and are doing this work should be funded. All participants talked about different community programs that they are a part of or that they received support from. These should be provided with government funding so they can expand and support more students.

> "I think a lot of the times, a lot of the people that are left outta the conversation are people with trades. And at least for me, I think there's a lot of hardworking people. America runs on people who have these vocational skills" – Maite

4. Create Employment Opportunities for Undocumented Youth

In addition, another recommendation is to create more employment opportunities for undocumented youth, especially those without work authorization. This can be done by passing a state policy that allows for professional licenses, education on contracting and stipend payment methods, and investment in trades, apprenticeships, and alternative forms of education.

> "I wish that companies would have some type of flexibility where students who are in college, even though they don't have a work permit, and even though they are not citizens, would give us some type of credit or a co-op, something that could be used in a school setting. Because right now we're like, just a liability to them. I wish there was some type of connection between schools and companies in order to do like apprenticeships, internships, co-ops, anything like that" - Maite

5. Update Immigration Programs and Create Pathways to Citizenship

The next and final recommendation is to update current immigration programs such DACA. Most participants were left out of this program, not because they don't qualify or aren't eligible, but because of the constant litigation and changes which have prevented them from applying (no new applications being processed at the moment). Reopening or expanding DACA would allow the participants to gain protection from deportation and work authorization and would allow them to slightly gain access to higher education. Ultimately, however, the solution to most of the experiences of undocumented students is to pass immigration reform at the national level. This would remove a lot of the barriers that participants have shared and would remove the extreme disparities in states across the country.

> "I would reopen daca and make the renewal process a little bit easier for those who already have it. And also a pathway to citizenship because at the end of the day, we were just kids when we were brought here and this is all we know. They're just trying to send us to a different country" - Flor

> "those of us that have college degrees should be at least allowed to apply for DACA, or we should be allowed to get a work permit or something like that … I wish if I could not only just include people who have Associates and Bachelor's degrees … whether it's getting a work permit or getting the same benefits that DACA recipients right now have" – Maite

> "Give dreamers a pathway to citizenship … That's what we all want. That's the first step" - Nat

Conclusion

Over 25 years have passed since the *Plyler v. Doe* decision, guaranteeing a K-12 education for undocumented immigrants, yet "only 53% of students without legal immigration status graduate from high school" (Radoff, 2011). Undocumented immigrants face many barriers in accessing education and in the South those barriers are only amplified. Georgia is one of three states where there is an active ban on higher education for undocumented students. Although undocumented immigrants in Georgia "contribute $352 million annually in state and local taxes", and they therefore help fund public universities, they are legally barred from attending the five top public universities in the state and subsequently other public institutions that followed lead (Freedom University, 2020). In Alabama and South Carolina, they are barred even more.

The purpose of this study and research was to highlight and uplift the stories of undocumented immigrants striving to get access to higher education amidst bans in the South. In summary, findings revealed that (1) the bans are a modern form of segregation (2) education is incredibly meaningful for undocumented students and they pursue alternative methods in order to obtain access (3) undocumented students face a lot of uncertainty and hopelessness in their journey leading to thoughts about "self-deportation"/voluntary departure (4) community is incredibly important in their journey, and (5) many hold advocacy and leadership roles that have developed their issue awareness, agency, voice, and power, ultimately leading to transformative community impact. In order to address the barriers and challenges that undocumented students face on their educational journey in

the South, my policy recommendations are the following (1) remove the bans in Georgia, Alabama, and South Carolina (2) make education more accessible and affordable (3) create initiatives that build equity in education and invest in successful community programs (4) create employment opportunities for undocumented youth, and (5) update immigration programs and create pathways to citizenship.

In a time of political turmoil and continuous debate about human rights, education is especially important. It is imperative that we provide equal access to higher education for all, regardless of socioeconomic status, race, gender, sexual orientation, ability, or immigration status. With that said, we have to address the inequities that remain and that continue to be perpetuated within our systems, and we must adequately teach our history in order to learn from it and do better. Education is a door, and we must open it and walk through together. As George Washington Carver said, “Education is the key to unlock the golden door of freedom” (Kennedy, 2005).

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Appendix 1

Interview Script

1. What do you like to do for fun? (for icebreaking purposes)
2. How has being undocumented shaped your life?
    a. Did you always know you were undocumented?
    b. Do you have DACA?
    c. Do you have a mixed status family?
3. Were there any other identities that significantly shaped your experience as an undocumented individual? (ex: gender, race, sexual orientation, economic status, etc)
4. What are your thoughts about education and higher education?
5. What has your educational journey looked like as an undocumented student?
6. How has the ban on higher education access for undocumented students in your state impacted you?
    a. Are you aware/when did you become aware?
    b. Did you pursue an alternative or non-traditional form of education? What about private universities?
    c. Do you feel that the bans are a form of segregation? Why or why not?
7. What are your educational goals now if any?
    a. What about career goals?
8. How would you change policy? What about educational policy specifically?
9. Have the bans changed your outlook on advocacy or activism?
    a. Have you participated in any form of advocacy or resistance?
10. Are there any community resources, organizations, or programs that have helped you along the way?
11. Looking forward, what does your future look like? How does being undocumented shape this outlook?
12. Is there anything else you would like to share?