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Dreamers and the College Dream: A Case Study Analysis Examining the Influences of High Schools and High School Agents

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

DREAMERS AND THE COLLEGE DREAM:
A CASE STUDY ANALYSIS EXAMINING THE INFLUENCES OF HIGH SCHOOLS
AND HIGH SCHOOL AGENTS

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN HIGHER EDUCATION

BY
ALIZA J. GILBERT
CHICAGO, IL
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ABSTRACT

This dissertation study contributes to a nascent field of research on undocumented students and college access. Rooted in a conceptual framework of models of college choice, this study utilizes case study methodology to examine how a high school and its agents influence an undocumented student’s college choice process. The unit of analysis is a suburban public high school located in the Midwest.

Data collection included semi-structured interviews of students, teachers, school counselors, and college counselors, observation of college counseling programs, and document review of college related materials. A constant comparative methodology was the primary system of data analysis. The coding process began with the use of a priori codes, but an open coding process was also implemented.

Findings from this study pertain to undocumented students as well as high school agents. College-bound undocumented students exhibit mixed levels of perseverance and resilience in academic achievement, family and peer support, and paying for college. Undocumented students are largely invisible within the school community and as a result, lack accurate information about admission and financial aid processes, as well as scholarship opportunities and requirements. In addition, undocumented students are largely unaware of federal and state legislation and policies that impact their college options. While undocumented students do not engage in school-wide college counseling programming, they respond favorably to targeted outreach and partake in specialized programmatic efforts. Although high school agents (teachers, school counselors, and
college counselors) express strong support for undocumented students in their pursuit of a college degree, they hold numerous incorrect beliefs and lack pertinent information regarding undocumented students’ postsecondary opportunities.

Select implications for high schools include professional development for all high school staff on the social and emotional needs of undocumented students, as well as their postsecondary options. Offering undocumented students access to a Dreamers and Allies club can foster a community of support, while also helping them develop a public identity that serves to give them a voice within the greater school community. There is also a need for greater systemic support from high schools for college-bound undocumented students, specifically including programming that highlights college options and the college process. In addition, continued research on undocumented students and college access is critical in ensuring that all students are able to achieve their college dreams.
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

I'm thinking [of] one student in particular who was born in Mexico and moved here when he was six months old, so he was, in his eyes, American. He was one of those kinds of kids who didn’t necessarily socialize with other Latinos, but when it came time to apply for college that was probably the most traumatic thing for him because here all of his friends, who he’s grown up with, [are] friends who have been very privileged to have the best of everything. [He’s been] able to participate in sports [even though] his family was very, very, very poor, but his mom was able to reach out and get a lot of support for him to be able to get [and] stay involved in sports and activities and camps and all kinds of stuff, but then when the college piece came, his friends were [going away] and he wanted to go away to a four-year college, but he couldn’t afford it. His mom basically begged him to go to community college, and he just for him it was, ‘I don’t want to go to community college because none of my friends are going to a community college. I want to go away [to a four-year college].’ I don’t even remember where he had applied but they didn’t have any money for him to go to college and at that time they hadn’t applied for Deferred Action. This was before Deferred Action and so for him it’s like, you know, he was smart, he could have gotten probably like a Trustee Scholarship or something at [the community college] but he just didn’t want to have anything to do with that. I gave him that application and he just he did not want to apply. He wasn’t going to go there. In the end he did end up applying and going to [community college] because that was the only thing that he was able to afford, but I sat with him and I gave him that guide that you put through and I talked to him about schools like Dominican who used to do the full ride scholarship. I mean we went through and looked at everything, but you know for some kids like that it’s like they have this in their mind, ‘this is where I want to go, this is what I want to do.’ It’s more the disappointment than the barriers and the obstacles. It’s the emotional piece of it that they really struggle with. (SC1)

Their names are Mandeep, Denis, Tony, Fausto, Raul, and Prerna. Born in India, Brazil, Korea, Honduras, Mexico and Fiji, they are student leaders, community activists, high school graduates and college students. Although they did not grow up together, for most of their lives they shared a secret; they are undocumented immigrants. Faced with daily challenges as a result of their undocumented status, they yearn for acceptance,
protection, education and one day, a college degree. They are DREAMers (http://weareamericastories.org/).

More than 11 million undocumented immigrants currently reside in the United States, and 1.5 million are children under the age of 18 (Passel & Cohn, 2009). Approximately 65,000 undocumented students graduate from U.S. high schools each year (Gonzales, 2009) but only 49% of undocumented students with a high school degree are either enrolled in college or have attended college (Passel & Cohn, 2009). It is unclear how many undocumented students attend college immediately upon graduation from high school, but of those who have lived in the United States for at least five years the figure is estimated to be as low as 5 to 10% (Gonzales, 2007; Gonzales, 2009). Although undocumented immigrants make up only 4% of the U.S. population, 8% of all children born in the United States are born to at least one undocumented parent (Passel & Cohn, 2011), indicating that the lack of a college education affects not only the current generation, but also generations to come.

**Legal Barriers and Supports to College Access**

The legal history of undocumented students in higher education is one of controversy, uncertainty, and flux. The K-12 education guaranteed to undocumented students promotes the American ideal that if students work hard and achieve academically, our society will reward them with the opportunity to enroll in college. Highlighting the importance of a college education, President Obama challenged every American to complete at least one year of college or vocational training by the year 2020 (Obama, 2009). However, the current patchwork of state and federal legislation is more likely to restrict than support undocumented students’ access to postsecondary education.
(Rincón, 2008; Russell, 2011). To fully understand the complexity of the issue, a brief legal overview is necessary. Chapter Two will present a thorough examination of the legal history of undocumented students and higher education.

**Federal and State Contexts**

The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Plyler v. Doe* (1982) that the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment grants undocumented students the same right to a public education from grades K-12 as citizen students (Rincón, 2008). Even though the Court did not extend these benefits to include higher education, no federal law restricts undocumented students from attending public colleges and universities (Badger & Yale-Loehr, 2002; Gonzales, 2009). However, they are prohibited by federal legislation from receiving any form of federal financial aid (Rincón, 2008). Both state and federal courts have a long and conflicting history of rulings regarding the eligibility of undocumented students to enroll in college, and to receive in-state tuition benefits (commonly referred to as tuition equity legislation) and state financial aid (Russell, 2011).

**DREAM Act**

The future for many undocumented students hinges upon the passage of the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act. The DREAM Act creates a path for citizenship for undocumented students who entered the United States at least five years before the passage of the bill, were under 15 when they entered, and are not yet 32 years of age (under the House bill) or 35 years of age (under the Senate bill). Undocumented students meeting these requirements would be eligible to apply for conditional permanent resident status at the time they graduate from high school, are admitted to a college, or obtain a Graduate Equivalency Degree. Students would then
have six years to complete the equivalent of an Associate’s degree, two years toward a Bachelor’s degree or two years of military service, at which point they could apply for permanent resident status. Students would not be eligible for need based federal grant assistance, but they would be eligible for federal loans, work-study and possibly need-based state aid. Individuals with prior felony convictions would not be eligible for consideration under the DREAM Act (National Immigration Law Center, 2011b). The Migration Policy Institute (MPI) estimates that although approximately 2.1 million undocumented individuals could potentially benefit from the DREAM Act, only 825,000 would ultimately be eligible to gain residency, 400,000 of whom are children under the age of 18 (Batalova & McHugh, 2010), indicating that while the DREAM Act is an important piece of legislation, it is not a comprehensive solution.

**State Dream Acts**

Due to the failure of Congress to pass the federal DREAM Act, a growing number of states have begun to propose legislation, referred to as state dream acts, that promotes unauthorized students’ access to higher education by providing in-state tuition benefits, state financial aid and scholarships (National Immigration Law Center, 2013b), and also by requiring high school counselors and college admission officers to receive training regarding postsecondary options for undocumented students (Dream Fund Commission, 2011).

**Institutional Barriers and Supports to College Access**

Although undocumented students are encouraged (and actually required) as children to take part in the U.S. educational system, upon graduation from high school they find their path to college blocked by multiple barriers as result of their
undocumented status. Research on undocumented students’ college choice process supports much of what was previously found to be true for many students underrepresented in higher education. Access to college is often affected by cost, poor academic preparation, familial challenges, and lack of accurate information, but for undocumented students, legal restrictions create additional areas of concern (Abrego, 2006; Menjívar, 2008; Pérez, Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado & Cortés, 2009; Perez Huber & Malagon, 2007). However, a small number of undocumented students will succeed in high school and higher education as a result of internal motivation and resilience (Castro-Salazar & Bagley, 2010; Contreras, 2009; Morales, Herrera, & Murry, 2011; Perez Huber & Malagon, 2007), family and peer support (Abrego, 2006; Castro-Salazar & Bagley, 2010; Gildersleeve, 2010; Morales et al., 2011; Muñoz, 2008; Pérez, P., 2010), and encouragement and guidance from high school and college agents (Abrego & Gonzales, 2010; Castro-Salazar & Bagley, 2010; Pérez, Cortés, Ramos, & Coronado, 2010; Perez Huber & Malagon, 2007). This study examines the potential support offered by high schools and high school agents to the undocumented subset of underrepresented students.

**Barriers to Access**

Undocumented students generally report frustration navigating the college choice process due to lack of knowledge and experience (Castro-Salazar & Bagley, 2010). The role of high school teachers and counselors is critical not only in providing guidance and access to college information and helping undocumented students navigate the college choice process, but also in encouraging them to attend and persist once enrolled (De Leon, 2005; Pérez, Cortés et al., 2010; Perez Huber & Malagon, 2007). However, many undocumented college students report that teachers and counselors were not the primary
source of college information and that interactions with high school staff were both positive and negative (Muñoz, 2008).

Castro-Salazar and Bagley (2010) and Pérez, Cortés et al. (2010) also found that many undocumented students experienced discrimination and prejudice from high school and college faculty and staff, either due to ignorance or personal biases. In addition, Menjívar (2008) found that many high school teachers are unaware of the undocumented students within their classes and the challenges they face as a result of their undocumented status. Students who do not succeed academically are often assumed by teachers to dislike school or simply not care about their education. Not only do these experiences affect a student’s motivation and academic achievement, but they also cause reticence in sharing information about their undocumented status. Undocumented students who do not share their status are less likely to learn about postsecondary opportunities and as a result have a lower likelihood of enrolling in college (Gonzales, 2010b). Many undocumented students possess the same educational aspirations as their citizen classmates, but the reality that their education might end with high school leaves many undocumented students unmotivated to academically achieve (Abrego, 2006; Abrego & Gonzales, 2010; Pérez, Espinoza et al., 2010).

Supports to Access

The literature also highlights a variety of ways in which high school professionals positively affect the college aspirations and academic motivation of undocumented students. Teachers who express belief in undocumented students’ abilities and worthiness have been shown to positively impact the college process (Castro-Salazar & Bagley, 2010). Counselors play an important role in providing access to information,
guiding students through the application process, and helping them find and access financial resources (Godinez & Espejel, 2010). By demonstrating emotional support for undocumented students, teachers, and counselors validate their college dreams and show that it is possible to obtain a college education (Abrego & Gonzales, 2010; Godinez & Espejel, 2010).

Gildersleeve (2010) also identifies the unique way in which schools support undocumented students simply by offering them a sense of security through their legal right to attend. For many students, this safety exists only within school walls. Pérez et al. (2009) identified the positive effects of extra-curricular involvement and volunteering on academic achievement and college aspirations. By creating opportunities for undocumented students to get involved in school and community activities, high schools not only help support students’ academic achievement, but also foster social relationships, which in turn build the social capital necessary for students to move through the college choice process (Gonzales, 2010b). In addition, Gildersleeve (2010) found that high schools with strong college-going cultures provide undocumented students with access to a peer group that serves to build college aspirations and offers guidance and support.

High schools and high school agents can and should play a significant role in an undocumented student’s college choice process, but it is unclear as to how this is best achieved. To understand the ways in which high schools and high school agents influence an undocumented student’s college choice process, this study examines how undocumented high school students access and navigate postsecondary education.
Statement of the Problem

Undocumented immigrant students pose unique challenges to researchers largely due to the difficulty of determining accurate details regarding population size and makeup, including ethnicity, gender, and age (Abrego, 2006; Abrego & Gonzales, 2010). As a result, research on the undocumented student population is still emerging (Abrego & Gonzales, 2010; Gonzales, 2010b). Most of the literature to date has focused on the K-12 context (Abrego, 2006). Only recently has research begun to explore how a student’s undocumented status affects such things as academic resiliency (Pérez, Espinoza et al., 2009), aspiration development (Menjívar, 2008), and postsecondary attainment (Abrego, 2006; Abrego & Gonzales, 2010; Flores, 2010a, Flores, 2010b; Gonzales, 2010b; Kaushal, 2008), with most of the research on undocumented students and college access occurring only within the last ten years (Abrego & Gonzales, 2010; Castro-Salazar & Bagley, 2010; Contreras, 2009; Flores, 2010a; Flores, 2010b; Gildersleeve, 2010; Gonzales, 2010b; Menjívar, 2008; Kaushal, 2008; Pérez, P., 2010; Pérez, W., 2010; Perez Huber & Malagon, 2007).

Much of the research on undocumented students and college access has focused almost exclusively on the Latino population, usually Mexican college students living in California or Texas (Abrego, 2006; Abrego & Gonzales, 2010; Castro-Salazar & Bagley, 2010; Contreras, 2009; Flores, 2010b; Gildersleeve, 2010; Gonzales, 2010b; Menjívar, 2008; Pérez, P., 2010; Pérez et al., 2010; Pérez et al., 2009; Perez Huber & Malagon, 2007), resulting in a considerable gap in the literature. Approximately 60% of the undocumented population in the United States is from Mexico, but significant numbers of students also come from Central and South America and Asia (Passel & Cohn, 2009). A
recent report by the Pew Research Center (2012) indicates that in 2010 the United States welcomed more immigrants from Asia than Mexico, and even though Asian immigrants are more likely to receive permanent resident status, it is estimated that up to 15% are currently undocumented. Although Asian and African students comprise a smaller subset of undocumented students, they have higher educational attainment rates than Latino students, and in California they represent approximately 40% of undocumented students paying in-state tuition through the state’s tuition equity legislation (Gonzales, 2009). In addition, while the undocumented population still remains heavily concentrated in California and Texas, states such as Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, New Jersey, New York, Maryland, North Carolina, Virginia and Washington also host thriving undocumented populations (Passel & Cohn, 2011).

Non-Latino undocumented students face additional challenges largely stemming from their invisibility in society. With the focus of attention on Latino undocumented students, non-Latino undocumented students often hide in the shadows. Unlike many of their Latino classmates who entered the country without authorization, most non-Latino students initially held legal status, entering and living in the United States with legal visas for a number of years before their visas expired, rendering them suddenly out of status (Chan, 2010, Pew Research Center, 2012). While being invisible provides them with a sense of safety, many non-Latino undocumented students feel an immense sense of isolation (Chan, 2010). Non-Latino undocumented students are likely to slip through the cracks as most support systems and outreach programs are designed and geared toward the Latino undocumented population. Discomfort with their change in status coupled with fear inhibits them from discussing their status with anyone outside of their
immediately family, which in turn prevents them from receiving the necessary support and guidance (Chan, 2010; Gonzales, 2010b).

Menjívar (2008) found in her study on undocumented Guatemalan and Salvadoran immigrants that postsecondary attainment was limited by their smaller numbers and tightly knit social circles that not only prevented penetration of information from the outside, but also resulted in limited contact with students who have enrolled in college. Contreras (2009) cites the number of undocumented students and high school counselors in Washington State who are unaware of their state’s tuition equity legislation. As a result, students often forgo a college education due to cost without knowing that they might be eligible to pay the significantly lower in-state tuition rates. Both of these studies offer a glimpse into the experiences of students who are too often left off the “undocumented radar” due to country of origin and/or current place of residence.

The undocumented student population is diverse in racial and ethnic background, but most undocumented students share similar challenges in their pursuit of higher education. A number of factors conspire to keep them out of higher education, including cost of college and limited access to financial aid and scholarships, lack of accurate information, high school counselors and teachers who at most possess rudimentary knowledge regarding college options, federal and state laws and institutional policies that create barriers to enrollment and completion, and gaps and conflicts within the literature.

**Purpose of the Study**

This investigation is the first qualitative study to examine the role that high school agents play in the college choice process for undocumented high school students residing in suburban Illinois. The study utilizes case study methodology with a single high school
as the unit of analysis. The school district has one high school, which is well resourced and offers a strong selection of honors and Advanced Placement courses. The district has been repeatedly ranked among the state’s top 5% of school districts academically, and the high school has significantly higher than average rates of graduation and postsecondary attainment.

The case study took place from September 2013 to June 2014 and employed multiple methods of data collection, including a review of school documents related to college counseling, observations of school facilities and college related evening programs for students and parents, and interviews of two undocumented high school seniors and two recent graduates currently enrolled in college, three school counselors, two college counselors, and six teachers (one from each of the five academic core subject areas and applied arts).

Utilizing a conceptual framework of models of college choice, this study furthers our understanding about how undocumented students access postsecondary education. The study is rooted in the following question:

How do high schools and high school agents influence an undocumented student’s college choice process?

To answer this question, the following four sub-questions were investigated:

1. How does the organizational structure of a high school counseling department impact an undocumented student’s college choice process?

2. What elements of a college counseling program offered by a high school impact an undocumented student’s college search?
(3) How do teachers and counselors transmit the college knowledge necessary for an undocumented student to successfully approach and navigate the college choice process?

(4) How do teachers' and counselors' attitudes toward and expectations of an undocumented student affect the college choice process?

As previously stated, research about undocumented students and college access is scant and significant gaps in the literature persist. The physical and personnel resources of a high school counseling department impact both the types of services offered and the manner in which they are delivered. Examining the organizational structure and college counseling activities along with the agents’ actions and attitudes allows for a clearer picture of their effect on the college search of undocumented students to emerge. With undocumented students continuing to have the lowest postsecondary attainment rates of any underrepresented population (Passel & Cohn, 2009), this study provides an important addition to a nascent body of literature.

Undocumented students think of the United States as home, and it is difficult to distinguish them from their classmates. Yet, the issue of undocumented immigrants living, working and going to school continues to polarize our nation. Often framed as a political issue, the argument in support of undocumented students and college access can and should be reframed as an issue of social justice. The future of our nation lies in our workforce and common sense dictates that both individuals and society benefit when residents are educated. Individuals with higher levels of education have greater earnings and lower rates of unemployment and poverty, both of which positively affect tax revenues (Baum & Ma, 2007). Undocumented immigrants currently make up 5% of the
work force (Passel & Cohn, 2009). Approximately 75% of undocumented immigrants currently pay payroll taxes (Porter, 2005) and more than 50% will file individual income taxes each year through the use of a tax identification number (Congressional Budget Office, 2007). In 2012, approximately eight million out of eleven million working undocumented immigrants paid almost 12 billion dollars in state and local taxes (Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy, 2015). In addition to the economic implications, numerous individual and societal benefits also exist. Educated individuals are more likely to live healthy lifestyles, have higher levels of civic engagement, possess a greater willingness to listen to the opinions of others, and perhaps most importantly, children of college graduates are more likely to attend college (Baum & Ma, 2007).

President Obama’s 2012 Executive Memo, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), offered undocumented students a much needed beacon of hope by not only temporarily protecting them from deportation, but also by providing them with a social security number that permits them to work legally in the United States (Department of Homeland Security, 2012). Gonzales (2011a) highlighted the harsh reality facing the few undocumented students who have obtained a college degree. Many, especially those without DACA, are unable to enter their chosen careers as a result of their undocumented status and are relegated to low-wage jobs. Licensing and certification laws in many states still continue to exclude undocumented students from such professions as nursing, law, and education. As a result, it is more important than ever that we understand how students approach and navigate the college choice process, and what can be done to support DREAMers as they pursue the college dream. Utilizing models of college choice to examine the effects of high school agents’ attitudes and
actions offers new and critical insight into the ways in which they impact an undocumented student’s college search. No models of college choice have ever purposefully explored the college choice process for undocumented students. Even newer models designed with the nontraditional student in mind do not address the unique challenges faced by undocumented students, and as a result, their relevance and applicability for the undocumented student is unclear. Shifts in student population have often served as the impetus for further research into college choice and with the undocumented student population in higher education projected to grow (Johnson & Janosik, 2008), their path to college must be examined to ensure that more undocumented students participate in the U.S. system of higher education.

The renewed call for immigration reform in 2013 caused many to think that undocumented students would soon be on a path toward citizenship and therefore should no longer be a cause for concern. However, just three years later, the pendulum has once again swung and current rhetoric by many presidential candidates has enflamed the controversy that surrounds undocumented immigrants, causing significant uncertainty regarding their future. However, as evident from the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA) and the more than ten million undocumented immigrants currently living within our borders, it is unlikely that the flow of undocumented immigrants will ever be fully curtailed. This notion is supported by a recent study from the Pew Hispanic Center (2013), which revealed that of the 38% of Mexican residents surveyed, who indicated that they would move to the U.S. if they had an opportunity to do so, almost 20% would come without authorization. Furthermore, in the summer of 2014 almost 70,000 youth, many unaccompanied, poured across our borders while fleeing violence in
Central American countries (Park, 2014). Believing in a future without undocumented students who need our support is naïve and foolish.

**Conceptual Framework**

Researchers have long studied actions taken by students throughout the college choice process in order to understand, explain, and even predict student behavior (Litten, 1982). These studies have resulted in what are now commonly referred to as models of college choice. While many early studies of college choice were undertaken in response to projections of declining student enrollment and a desire by colleges to aid recruitment by predicting enrollment patterns and affecting student decisions (Chapman, 1981; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Litten, 1982; Paulsen, 1990), research on college choice is no longer viewed solely as a means of aiding recruitment. As a result of their attempts to explain what affects students’ inclination to attend college, as well as their institutional choice set (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987), college choice models have become recognized as valuable tools for promoting college access (Hossler, Schmit & Vesper, 1999; McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2006).

**Theoretical Approaches**

McDonough (1997) identified three strands of research on college choice. Social psychological studies explore the effects of institutional characteristics and peer and adult influences on college choice, while also considering students’ perceptions regarding their own individual fit within an institution. Economic studies assume that students view college as an investment and, when choosing whether to invest, students have access to perfect information and make rational decisions. Sociological status attainment studies look at the effects of social status on the development of college aspirations, and how
social status affects college access. Hossler et al. (1999) describe additional approaches, which they refer to as models. In addition to the economic and sociological models described by McDonough (1997), they also identify information-processing models, which blend decision making theory and sociology, and combined models that link economic and sociological theory, incorporating the gathering and processing of information with decision-making.

**Three Stage Model of College Choice**

The college choice process has largely become synonymous with the multi-stage model created by Hossler and Gallagher (1987) that describes three distinct and sequential stages through which students move during the college choice process: predisposition, search, and choice. In the predisposition stage students explore options for life after high school. Plans may include going directly to work, enlisting in the military, traveling or attending college. During the search stage, students with college goals develop a potential college list by exploring institutions that match their interests and passions. Students narrow the list in the choice phase as they submit applications and ultimately select a college to attend (Hossler et al., 1999). The predisposition stage takes place in elementary school and middle school with most students having developed aspirations by the ninth grade. For traditional college age students, the search and choice stages typically occur during the high school years, as the majority of students move through the search stages in grades 10-12, and the choice stage in grades 11-12 (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Hossler et al., 1999; Perna, 2006). While most prior models were designed to either aid college administrators or affect policy making (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987), this model was among the first to offer insight to high school
counselors in their work with students (Hossler et al., 1999). As a result, the Hossler and
Gallagher model has become a widely used conceptual framework for research on college
choice (Desjardins, Ahlburg, & McCall, 2006) and it serves as the overarching
framework for this study.

Relevance of College Choice Research

As previously indicated, models of college choice are useful in providing insight
into some student college choice processes and decisions, but no single model may be
used to understand the paths followed by all students. For many students the college
choice process can be best understood when examined through the lens of multiple
theories, and by applying different models at different stages. Traditional models are
most useful when examining the college choice process of white, high income students
with college-educated parents. For some students, including those who are low income,
first-generation college, African American, and Latino, many of the more traditional
models appear less useful. Recent theories developed with diverse populations in mind
(Nora, 2004; Pérez & McDonough, 2008; Perna, 2006; Person & Rosenbaum, 2006) offer
greater insight into the decisions made by underrepresented and non-traditional students.
This study also examines the relevance and applicability of models of college choice that
are rooted both inside and outside the high school context.

Models Rooted in the High School Context

Four models of college choice that rooted in the high school context were
examined. The first model was McDonough’s (1997) theory positing that a habitus can
also exist within an organization, such as a school, and this ‘organizational habitus’ can
impact students’ behavior in the college choice process. The second model, from Pérez
and McDonough (2008), uses the idea of chain migration and its effect on social capital to explain how students search for and choose a college. Their research found that Latino students with a limited social network had fewer college options. The third model, by Hill (2008), describes the three ‘college-linking’ strategies (traditional, clearinghouse, and brokering) high school counselors utilize to guide students in college exploration and selection. In the fourth model, Engberg and Gilbert (2014) suggest a typology of divergent, emergent, and convergent to illustrate the norms and resources of a guidance department and their effects on college enrollment. Further explanations of these models can be found in Chapter Two.

Models Rooted Outside the High School Context

To investigate the possibility of alternate explanations, I also analyzed data collected in the study utilizing models of college choice rooted in contexts outside the high school. Perna’s (2006) multilevel model asserts that human capital investment in education, which she places at the core of the college choice process, is impacted by four distinct contexts: student habitus, school and community, higher education context, and policy. The second model, from Paulsen and St. John (2002), draws from a construct of student-choice, which suggests that students make decisions based on their ‘situated-context’ and a financial nexus model, which focuses on how the college decision can influence persistence. Further explanations of these models can be found in Chapter Two.
Definitions of Key Terms

This section defines a number of terms that are central to the study.

*College choice process* – Sequential three stage model of college choice: predisposition, search, and choice (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). A more detailed explanation of the model can be found in Chapter Two.

*College counselor* – Specialized counselor, usually thought of as an expert on the college choice process, responsible for developing and implementing a high school’s college counseling program that is designed to guide students and their families through the college search and application process.

*Counselor* – A collective term used to describe a high school agent with counseling responsibilities, including school counselors and college counselors.

*DREAMers* – Commonly used to describe undocumented students who came to the United States at a young age and would be eligible for conditional permanent resident status under the DREAM Act.

*High school agent* – An individual who represents the high school and acts on its behalf, including but not limited to teachers, school counselors, college counselors, and administrators.

*Prairie State Assessment Exam (PSAE)* – State mandated testing in the state of Illinois that measures the achievement of grade 11 students in reading, mathematics, science, and writing.

*School counselor* – Counselor responsible for student registration and course scheduling, implementing response to intervention (RTI) strategies, and responding to the
social and emotional needs of students. At times, also referred to as a generalist counselor.

_Undocumented student_ – Although some researchers distinguish between unauthorized and undocumented individuals (Johnson & Janosik, 2008), many use the terms interchangeably to describe all individuals who entered the United States either without documentation or with false documents, as well as those who entered with legal standing that has expired (Flores, 2010a; Passel & Cohn, 2009). For consistency and ease of understanding, this dissertation will use the term undocumented to refer to both types of individuals.

_1.5 generation_ – Undocumented children are often referred to in research as the 1.5 generation because, as children brought to the U.S., they are not part of the first generation that chose to migrate to the United States, nor are they part of the second generation born in the United States (Gonzales, 2009). Rumbaut (2004) adds the additional categories of 1.25 and 1.75, using the age of the child at the time of immigration to assign generation identity. Some studies describe Latinos who entered the United States without documentation as first generation, children who were born in the United States to at least one undocumented parent as second generation, and children of parents who are both U.S. born are third generation (Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, 2012). However, as these definitions are not consistent with the widely accepted understanding of first, second and third generation immigrants, they will not be used in this study.
Contributions of the Study

High school agents have the potential to counteract many of the challenges that undocumented students face in the college search process, but to do so they must first create a safe environment that allows students to feel comfortable sharing their status. Only when this has been accomplished can agents begin the task of guiding and supporting students in the college search. Unfortunately, too many high school counselors and teachers are unaware of the undocumented students in their midst and therefore do little to reach out to them. Even agents who are cognizant are often uninformed as to the college opportunities available.

Giving voice to undocumented students encourages agents to learn from their experiences rather than make assumptions about student wants and needs. By identifying the challenges undocumented students encounter and highlighting the various ways in which they can and should be supported, the study draws attention to the issue while offering practical advice to high school agents. Counselors and teachers are more likely to commit to change they conceive than to programs or policies imposed upon them. The results from this study are intended to inform district and school policies and practices that will improve postsecondary access by undocumented students.

Organization of the Study

The next chapter examines the three areas of literature that have informed this study: the legal history of undocumented students in higher education and its impact on college access, the evolution of models of college choice, and the individual and organizational factors that uniquely influence an undocumented student’s college choice process. The third chapter details the methodology used to conduct the study and
describes how the data was analyzed. The fourth chapter describes the study’s contextual findings and the fifth chapter presents the study’s thematic findings. The final chapter discusses the study’s findings, makes recommendations for high schools and school districts, and identifies areas for further research.
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

For most undocumented students the path to college is filled with detours and roadblocks. Nationwide, fewer than 10% of undocumented high school graduates pursue any form of postsecondary education immediately upon graduation (Gonzales, 2009). To understand how undocumented students approach and navigate the college choice process, the literature review that follows offers an in-depth analysis regarding the challenges undocumented students face in their pursuit of the college dream.

In 2009, President Obama challenged every American to complete at least one year of college or vocational training by the year 2020 (Obama, 2009). However, the current patchwork of state and federal statutes is as likely to restrict as it is to support undocumented students’ access to postsecondary education (Rincón, 2008; Russell, 2011). In order to contextualize the study of the undocumented student’s pursuit of higher education, this chapter will begin by examining how federal and state law, as well as institutional policies, impacts an undocumented student’s college access.

Researchers have long studied student behavior throughout the college search, application, and selection process, resulting in the development of models of college choice. Usually rooted in economic or sociological theory (Hossler et al., 1999), models help promote and support college access. To understand the relevance of such models when viewed through the lens of undocumented students, this literature review explores the evolution of college choice models and examines their characteristics.
A multitude of factors influence students’ predisposition to attend college, in addition to impacting their college search. However, for students underrepresented in higher education, not only do the effects of these factors vary, but in some cases, the factors themselves also differ. Therefore, the final part of this chapter will identify the individual and organizational factors that uniquely affect an undocumented student’s college access.

Undocumented Students’ Legal Access to Higher Education

Moments after the reelection of Barack Obama as President of the United States, various immigration groups across the nation called for comprehensive immigration reform (“ICIRR joins national,” 2012). The issue of undocumented immigrants living, working, and going to school in the United States continues to polarize the nation. Regardless of one’s personal views on immigration, under present law, undocumented students enjoy the right to an education through grade 12. As a result, they are a part of the educational system and do not want to be ignored at the postsecondary level. Unfortunately, for undocumented students many obstacles lie in the path to higher education. To comprehend how undocumented students approach and navigate the postsecondary process, one must understand the legal and policy context in which this process is embedded. The section that follows examines the federal and state laws and institutional policies that restrict or promote undocumented students’ access to postsecondary education. The federal and state legislative information contained within this chapter is current through April 2013.
Federal and State Contexts

The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Plyler v. Doe* (1982) that the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment grants undocumented students the right to a public education from grades K-12 (Rincón, 2008). Even though the Court did not extend these benefits to include higher education, no federal law restricts undocumented students from attending public colleges and universities (Badger & Yale-Loehr, 2002; Gonzales, 2009), although federal law prohibits their receipt of any form of federal financial aid (Rincón, 2008). In recent years, a growing number of states have proposed, and sometimes enacted, legislation that both supported and restricted undocumented students’ access to postsecondary education (Olivas, 2009; NILC, 2011c). In 2012, state lawmakers proposed 36 bills that promoted access and 23 that restricted access, with many states proposing conflicting legislation (National Immigration Law Center, 2012b). In the first half of 2013, state legislators proposed over 50 bills related to undocumented students’ access to higher education (National Immigration Law Center, 2013b).

State and federal courts have a long history of rulings regarding the eligibility of undocumented students to enroll in college, and to receive in-state tuition benefits and state financial aid (Russell, 2011). The polarizing nature of this issue is reflected in the literature, which usually supports access to postsecondary education (Flores; 2010a; Flores, 2010b; Frum, 2007; Kaushal, 2008; Olivas, 2009; Robinson, 2007; Ruge & Iza, 2005; Russell, 2011) or opposes it (Kobach, 2007; Maki, 2005). Although there is a vast amount of state legislation (Olivas, 2009; Russell, 2011) and literature about the legislation (Contreras, 2009; Flores, 2010a; Oseguera, Flores, & Burciaga, 2010), empirical research regarding implementation of various laws and their economic
implications is negligible (Frum, 2007; Oseguera et al., 2010). Research regarding the effects of in-state tuition policies on postsecondary attainment is nascent (Flores, 2010a; Kaushal, 2008; Olivas, 2009).

**Tuition equity legislation.** Shortly after its decision in *Plyler v. Doe*, the U.S. Supreme Court in *Toll v. Moreno* (1982) struck down a Maryland law that denied in-state tuition benefits at the University of Maryland to noncitizens with legal alien status, ruling that states did not have the right to deny the benefits of residency to legal residents (Feder, 2008; Rincón, 2008). The Supreme Court held that the federal government holds the power over matters related to immigration (Johnson & Janosik, 2008; Rincón, 2008), which is a principle that surfaced repeatedly in the decades that followed. In 1983, California amended its Education Code (CEC) and allowed non-citizens to receive in-state tuition benefits. However, the California Attorney General ruled in 1984 that, as non-residents, undocumented students were not eligible for state financial aid. Shortly after, in *Leticia A. v. Board of Regents* (1985), a group of undocumented students argued that the Attorney General’s interpretation of the CEC violated the equal protection clause of the California constitution. The California Superior Court ruled in favor of the students, determining that California public universities could not consider resident undocumented students as non-residents, thereby permitting them to receive both in-state tuition benefits and state financial aid (Rincón, 2008).

In 1990, an employee of the University of California at Los Angeles, filed suit against the Board of Regents claiming that the decision in *Leticia A.* violated federal law as only the federal government could make laws regarding residency, and the Los Angeles County Superior Court agreed. Appeals by the University of California (UC)
were unsuccessful, and although the UC permitted undocumented students enrolled at the
time of the ruling to keep their residency status, the law required undocumented students
new to the UC system to register as non-residents. California community colleges
adopted a similar policy in 1991 and the California State University followed suit in
1995. At that point, all California public colleges and universities denied state aid to
undocumented students (Rincón, 2008).

In 1994, with the passage of Proposition 187, California became the first state to
prohibit undocumented students from enrolling in public colleges and universities.
Proposition 187 required colleges and universities to verify the immigration status of
enrolled students and report students in violation of federal immigration laws to
Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). However, Proposition 187 also included a
provision that prohibited undocumented children from attending public elementary and
secondary schools. As a result, in the League of United Latin American Citizens v.
Wilson (1995) public interest groups and individual citizens filed suit against Governor
Wilson in the U.S. District Court, attempting to block implementation of Proposition 187
on the grounds that it was unconstitutional. The District Court agreed, and Proposition
187 was struck down (Badger & Yale-Loehr, 2002).

Watching from the sidelines, Congress took notice of the debates taking place in
California, but remained silent on this issue until 1996 when it passed the Illegal
Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA; Rincón, 2008) and the
Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PWORA; Frum,
2007). Section 505 of the IIRIRA prohibited states from offering a higher education
benefit to an undocumented student on the basis of state residence unless it offered the
benefit to all U.S. citizens or legal permanent residents (Badger & Yale-Loehr, 2002; Rincón, 2008). PWORA restricted undocumented individuals from receiving a number of federal public benefits (Frum, 2007). Considering in-state tuition rates to be such a benefit, the statute forced undocumented students to pay out-of-state tuition rates (Olivas, 2009), which was often as high as three times the rate of in-state tuition (Mehta & Ali, 2003; Robinson, 2007). While the intent of Congress was to settle the issue of undocumented students in higher education, the literature indicates that this legislation actually served to make the situation more confusing due to varying legal interpretations of ‘residence’ and ‘postsecondary benefit’ (Frum, 2007; Russell, 2011).

IIRIRA largely kept undocumented students out of higher education until 2001, when Texas became the first state to enact a law that used high school attendance and graduation to determine eligibility for in-state tuition (Rincón, 2008). Undocumented students were eligible to receive in-state tuition benefits if they met three criteria: (1) graduated from a Texas high school; (2) lived in Texas for at least three years, and (3) filed an affidavit with the university or college stating that they would apply for legal permanent residency when eligible (Flores, 2010a; Kaushal, 2008; Rincón, 2008).

By April 2013, an additional 14 states (California, Connecticut, Illinois, Kansas, Maryland, Minnesota, Nebraska, New Mexico, New York, Oklahoma, Oregon, Rhode Island, Utah, and Washington) had enacted similar legislation or implemented policy with the same result (National Immigration Law Center, 2013a). Commonly referred to as in-state tuition or tuition equity legislation, many states copied the Texas criteria, but eligibility varied by state. In Maryland, for example, eligibility for in-state tuition is contingent upon students and parents payment of income taxes for a minimum of three
years. In addition, undocumented students are required to begin at a community college, and when applying to transfer to a four-year university they are considered as non-residents during the application review process and held to more rigorous admission standards (Mogilyanskaya, 2012, October 29). In Rhode Island, the Board of Governors for Higher Education, rather than state lawmakers, enacted in-state tuition for undocumented students effective fall semester 2012 (National Immigration Law Center, 2012c). Also as of April 2013, California, New Mexico, and Texas have also passed legislation allowing undocumented students eligibility for state financial aid (National Immigration Law Center, 2013a). Legal challenges to in-state tuition laws have been unsuccessful, which has resulted in a surge of similar legislation (National Immigration Law Center, 2012c). Although opponents of Maryland’s in-state tuition bill collected enough votes to force a November 2012 referendum (Hill, 2011), 59% of voters approved the bill (Mogilyanskaya, 2012, November 6). In November 2012, the governor of Massachusetts ordered community colleges and state universities to award in-state tuition rates to any current and future students who qualify for a work permit under Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA; Sacchetti, 2012). DACA is explained in greater detail in a later section.

**Controversy regarding tuition equity legislation.** The literature critical of in-state tuition bills argues that not only do in-state tuition bills violate federal law and ignore U.S. citizens (Kobach, 2007; Maki, 2005), but that obtaining a college education does not allow undocumented students to overcome other obstacles such as difficulty obtaining employment (Maki, 2005). Literature reflecting opposition also asserts that not only do taxpayers subsidize the cost of undocumented students’ education when they are afforded
the benefit of in-state tuition, but undocumented students also take opportunities and resources from students who are citizens or legal permanent residents (Mangan, 2011).

Literature supporting in-state tuition bills argues that the high cost of college tuition, coupled with an inability to access federal aid, means that few undocumented students actually take advantage of the in-state tuition benefit. Thus, proponents argue, undocumented students’ postsecondary opportunities would not limit those of citizens or legal permanent residents (Frum, 2007; National Immigration Law Center, 2011a; Ruge & Iza, 2005). Supportive literature also points to the financial benefits of such legislation, arguing that in-state tuition statutes actually benefit the state with revenue generated through tuition (Frum, 2007; Mangan, 2011; Robinson, 2007; Russell, 2011). In addition, tuition equity legislation provides an incentive to stay in school, and educated students consume more goods and pay more taxes, thereby offering greater contributions in the long term to the economy and society. As states have already invested in students during their K-12 education, this investment is wasted if their education is not allowed to continue (National Immigration Law Center, 2009; National Immigration Law Center, 2010a; National Immigration Law Center, 2010b). From a moral perspective, proponents also assert that educating undocumented students is the right thing to do as these students did not do anything wrong. They did not choose to come to the United States (Mangan, 2011). Lastly, Ruge and Iza (2005) provide a history of decisions by federal and state courts upholding such legislation.

Research on the effects of tuition equity legislation. The claim that tuition equity legislation encourages undocumented students to continue with their educational goals by providing access to higher education at an affordable price is difficult to prove. A
number of researchers (Abrego, 2006; Flores, 2010a; Flores, 2010b; Kaushal, 2008)
highlight the challenges faced in conducting research on undocumented students.
Research is impeded by the fact that, as a vulnerable population, they are hard to reach
(Abrego, 2006). National education databases do not address issues of citizenship. U.S.
government databases allow researchers to identify foreign-born noncitizens but they do
not differentiate undocumented individuals from other foreign-born noncitizens. U.S.
government databases also do not address factors that affect college enrollment, such as
academic achievement and family socioeconomic status (Flores, 2010b). Recent research
conducted to address the actual effects of such legislation (Flores, 2010a; Flores, 2010b;
Kaushal, 2008) has repeatedly highlighted the poor implementation of in-state tuition
statutes by many state universities, resulting in restricting rather than supporting student
access (Contreras, 2009; Oseguera et al., 2010; Perez Huber & Malagon, 2007).

Flores (2010b) was one of the first to study the quantitative effects of tuition
equity bills on Latino students, who are likely undocumented, in the state of Texas.
Results of the study indicated that as a result of eligibility for in-state tuition,
undocumented Latino students in Texas were more likely to enroll in college than similar
students residing in Southwestern states without corresponding legislation. Results also
indicated that the effect was greatest for older students, indicating that the traditional age
population was not matriculating directly into college as intended. However, as Texas is
one of the few states that also awards state financial assistance to undocumented students
in addition to in-state tuition, the true effect of tuition equity is unclear. Flores (2010a)
conducted an additional study on the effects of in-state tuition resident policies,
expanding the study sample to include Latino students in eight additional states. Results
again indicated that undocumented Latino students residing in a state with an in-state tuition resident policy are more likely to enroll in college than similar students residing elsewhere in the United States. Results also confirmed the previous study’s findings that the effects were greatest amongst students ages 21-24. Kaushal’s (2008) study on the effects of in-state tuition resident policies on both undocumented Mexican students and legal U.S. residents also indicated that in-state tuition bills were associated with an increase in college enrollment, and the effect was positively correlated to the length of time a student was covered under the legislation. Perhaps even more significant was the lack of evidence that in-state tuition bills negatively affected the educational outcomes of legal residents, a claim cited often by opponents of such legislation.

Abrego (2008) highlights the psychosocial benefits of such legislation. Referring to themselves as AB 540 students (AB 540 is the California statute that allows undocumented students to pay in-state tuition) provides undocumented students in California with a public identity that does not highlight their undocumented status. The term AB 540 students also provides undocumented students with the confidence to share their status more freely, resulting in an enhanced ability to unite in order to speak out and work, which often results in a gain of other rights beyond the purview of AB 540. For still other undocumented students, the legislation offers a much needed affirmation that they matter and are worthy of an education (Abrego, 2008). However, Contreras (2009) did not find the psychosocial benefits as experienced by students in California to hold true for undocumented students in Washington State, which has similar tuition equity legislation.
State legislation restricting access to higher education. In contrast to the large number of states trying to create postsecondary opportunities for students, a small number of states pursued legislation that either restricts or prevents access to higher education, although some of these states, such as Colorado, have recently experienced a shift back toward providing access. In 2006, Colorado began requiring all residents receiving federal and state benefits (such as in-state tuition rates) to prove they were lawfully present in the United States. College students unable to submit proof of legal residency were charged out-of-state tuition. However, Colorado successfully passed tuition equity legislation for undocumented students in the spring of 2013, which currently awaits the signature of the governor (National Immigration Law Center, 2013b). Oklahoma, in 2008, became the first state to successfully repeal its in-state tuition bill, after which legislation prohibiting undocumented students from receiving in-state tuition was immediately passed (Russell, 2011). Yet, the law permitted the Board of Regents to make the final determination, and currently undocumented students who meet the original requirements continue to receive in-state tuition (National Immigration Law Center, 2012b). Wisconsin approved tuition equity legislation in its 2009-2011 biennial budget, but this was reversed two years later (National Immigration Law Center 2012c). Although Arizona, Georgia, and Indiana followed Colorado with similar restrictive laws (National Immigration Law Center, 2011c; Rincón, 2008), all three states proposed bills in 2012 that supported access through some form of tuition equity. However, none were passed (National Immigration Law Center, 2012b).

State legislation preventing access to higher education. Some states have taken things a step further by barring undocumented students from enrolling in public
universities. In 2008, South Carolina became the first state to ban admission of undocumented students at any public college or university (Russell, 2011). Also in 2008, Alabama and North Carolina implemented policies banning undocumented students from enrolling in community colleges, claiming their admission violated federal law because admission was a public benefit for which undocumented immigrants were not eligible (Gonzales, 2009). In July 2008, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) issued a statement that college admission is not a public benefit regulated by federal immigration and that it was up to individual states to pass legislation to permit or prohibit undocumented students from enrolling in public colleges or universities (Bernstein, 2008). After 16 months, during which time undocumented students were not permitted to enroll at any North Carolina community college, the North Carolina State Community College Board determined that excluding undocumented students from higher education resulted in an economic loss to the state (Ortiz, 2009). Undocumented students were once again permitted to enroll, but were required to pay out-of-state tuition, a rate five times greater than in-state tuition (Moltz, 2009). Unlike North Carolina, Alabama maintained their policy prohibiting undocumented students from enrolling in community college, and in 2011, a comprehensive statewide immigration bill was passed prohibiting undocumented students from enrolling in any public university (National Immigration Law Center, 2011c). Also in 2011, Georgia banned undocumented students from enrolling at any state institution of higher education with selective admission (Hebel, 2010). In November 2012, voters in Montana approved a referendum that denied state benefits, including public higher education and state financial aid, to undocumented
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students (“Legislative Referendum No. 121,” 2012). The legal landscape for undocumented students is ever-changing.

A detailed map from the National Immigration Law Center (2013a), illustrates the situation as of April 2013 (see Figure 1). In the absence of action by the federal government to clarify its intent regarding undocumented students’ access to higher education, states will persist in their efforts to enact legislation.

Figure 1. Current State Laws and Policies (National Immigration Law Center, 2013a)

**DREAM Act.** As previously shown, the history of undocumented students in higher education is one of controversy, uncertainty, and flux. The frustration of states, postsecondary institutions, and students alike is understandable in light of the extensive history of two well-known pieces of federal legislation, the Student Adjustment Act and the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act. The Student
Adjustment Act, initially introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives in 2001, attempted to do three things: (1) return to states the authority to determine residency for higher education purposes; (2) permit undocumented students to participate in federal aid programs, and (3) allow for the adjustment of citizenship status of certain undocumented college-bound students who were long-term U.S. residents (Rincón, 2008).

Unfortunately, the events of September 11, 2001 brought myriad fears and concerns regarding individuals illegally residing in this country (Castro-Salazar & Bagley, 2010). Although the Student Adjustment Act had a bi-partisan list of sponsors, support for the bill faded (Rincón, 2008).

**History of the DREAM Act.** The Student Adjustment Act underwent many changes from 2001-2011 both in name and content. Reintroduced in the Senate in 2002 and 2003 as the DREAM Act, it passed the Senate Judiciary Committee both years. In 2006, the DREAM Act was included as part of the unsuccessful Comprehensive Immigration Reform Act, and when introduced in 2007 as an amendment to the Department of Defense Authorization Bill, it was significantly altered with an added option of military service in lieu of college as a path toward legalization. However, this change was not enough to propel the bill forward, and this attempt also failed. The version introduced in 2007, which also failed, eliminated the provision that restored states’ rights to determine residency for higher education purposes (Rincón, 2008). No further action was taken on the DREAM Act until 2009, when it was reintroduced in the Senate while a similar version, the American Dream Act, was simultaneously introduced in the House. The DREAM Act once again reached the Senate Judiciary Committee, but again no action was taken (Eckstein, 2009). The DREAM Act had its greatest success in
2010, when it passed the House, but it was never taken up for a vote in the Senate. The DREAM Act was reintroduced in both the House and Senate in May 2011 and in June the Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration, Refugees and Border Security held its first ever hearing on the DREAM Act and its impact on eligible students (Maic-Duc, 2011). No action on the DREAM Act has occurred since 2011.

**Current provisions of the DREAM Act.** The most recent version of the DREAM Act (DREAM Act of 2010) eliminates the aspect of the IIRIRA that penalizes states for allowing undocumented residents to pay in-state tuition, while creating a path for citizenship for undocumented students who entered the U.S. at least five years before the passage of the bill, were under 15 when they entered, and are not yet 32 years of age (under the House bill) or 35 years of age (under the Senate bill). Undocumented students meeting these requirements would be eligible to apply for conditional permanent resident status at the time they graduate from high school, are admitted to a college, or obtain a GED. Students would have six years to complete the equivalent of an Associate’s degree, two years toward a Bachelor’s degree or two years of military service at which point they could apply for permanent resident status. Students would not be eligible for need-based federal grants, but they would be eligible for federal loans, work-study and possibly need-based state aid. Individuals with felony convictions would not be eligible for consideration under the DREAM Act (National Immigration Law Center, 2011b).

**Implications of the DREAM Act.** The Migration Policy Institute (MPI) estimates that approximately 1.9 million undocumented individuals could potentially benefit from the DREAM Act, but only 755,000 would ultimately be eligible to gain residency (Mittelstadt, 2010), 400,000 of whom are children under the age of 18 (Batalova &
McHugh, 2010). Similar to the in-state tuition bills, the literature critical of the DREAM Act claims that it places the financial burden for educating undocumented students on taxpayers, takes away opportunities from legal U.S. residents, and is an amnesty for all undocumented immigrants (National Immigration Law Center, 2010b). The literature in support of the bill asserts that the DREAM Act not only helps high achieving students obtain an education but also rewards them for their hard work. With fewer than 10% of undocumented high school graduates immediately enrolling in college (Gonzales, 2009) and most of those enrolling at a community college (Abgreo, 2006; Castro-Salazar & Bagley, 2010; Gildersleeve, 2010; Perez Huber & Malagon, 2007), the DREAM Act provides a necessary incentive for students to stay in high school. As with the in-state tuition bills, the DREAM Act allows taxpayers to capitalize on an investment they have already made. Educated individuals pay more in taxes, and providing an education and a path to citizenship encourages academically capable, and typically bicultural and bilingual, individuals to become productive members of society, contributing both economically and socially. Forcing them to remain uneducated and undocumented relegates them to a life of poverty, thereby increasing the likelihood that they will become a burden on the U.S. economy (Frum, 2007; Gonzales, 2007; National Immigration Law Center, 2009; National Immigration Law Center, 2010a; National Immigration Law Center 2010b; Ortiz, 2009). Belfield, Levin and Rosen (2012) in their study on what they refer to as “opportunity youth” (students ages 16-24 who are neither working or enrolled in school) concluded that, as compared to others the same age, each imposes a yearly taxpayer burden of $13,900 and a social burden of $37,450, which results in a total lifetime taxpayer burden of $235,680 and social burden of $704,020.
Additional “Dream” type legislation. With the federal DREAM Act stalled and bipartisan support fading, the 2012 congressional year resulted in multiple alternatives, highlighting the lack of consensus among members of Congress. Representative Rivera (R-FL) proposed two alternatives to the federal DREAM Act, both of which would create a path for citizenship. The ARMS Act requires undocumented students to complete military service, and the STARS Act requires completion of a four-year degree, but would only be open to undocumented students who were younger than 19 years of age at the time of application (American Immigration Council, 2012). Senator Rubio (R-FL) promised to bring forth another version of legislation but provided few details, except that it would only allow undocumented students the opportunity to gain temporary legal status (American Immigration Council, 2012). At the close of the second session of the 112th Congress, no such legislation had been proposed. However, in December 2012, shortly after the reelection of President Obama, two lame-duck senators, Kyl (R-AZ) and Hutchison (R-TX), introduced the Assisting Children and Helping Them Improve Their Educational Value for Employment (ACHIEVE) Act, intended to assist DREAMers by creating a new nonimmigrant W visa, which would provide undocumented individuals who entered before the age of 14 and are younger than 29 opportunities to work and serve in the military. However, unlike the DREAM Act it does not return to states the right to determine residency for purposes of higher education and it does not offer a true path toward citizenship (National Immigration Law Center, 2012a). No action was ever taken on the legislation.

Deferred action for childhood arrivals. In June 2012, President Obama issued an Executive Memo, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) that provided a
small subset of the undocumented population, typically DREAMers, with a two year reprieve from the threat of deportation while granting them the ability to work legally. Eligibility for DACA is similar to eligibility for the DREAM Act, but does not include the two or four-year college degree requirement and individuals must reapply every two years. To be eligible, individuals must be no older than 30 years old, have arrived in the U.S. before the age of 16, have lived in the U.S. continuously since June 15, 2007, have been present in the U.S. on June 15, 2012, and be enrolled in school or possess a high school diploma or honorable discharge from the U.S. Armed Forces or Coast Guard. Individuals with a felony conviction or those considered a threat to the public are ineligible to apply for DACA ("Obama announces new," 2012).

The Pew Hispanic Center estimates that 1.7 million undocumented youth could ultimately benefit from DACA (Passel & Lopez, 2012). Critics are quick to point out that not only does DACA fail to create a path for citizenship (Love, 2012), but it also does not address the issue of education (Lohr, 2012). However, allowing students to obtain work permits, offers another reason for students to stay in school and obtain their high school degree. By authorizing students to work legally, students pursuing a college degree will be able to put their education to use, and build careers rooted in their education, something that undocumented college graduates were previously unable to achieve (Cushman, 2012; Gonzales, 2011; Love, 2012). In addition, on a political level, DACA provides support for states considering tuition equity legislation by responding to one of the main criticisms of such legislation: students’ inability to work upon receipt of their degree.
State dream acts. As a result of the inability of Congress to pass the DREAM Act, a small number of states have developed legislation, referred to as state dream acts, which continue to promote undocumented students’ access to higher education. Although the in-state tuition bills in Maryland and Texas have also been referred to as state dream acts (Flores, 2011; Hill, 2011), more recent state dream acts extend benefits to undocumented students beyond eligibility for in-state tuition. California passed legislation in 2011 allowing undocumented California students to receive state aid, but set restrictions on the Competitive Cal Grant (National Immigration Law Center, 2011c). The Illinois Dream Act, also signed into law in 2011, does not grant undocumented students eligibility for state aid, but it does permit undocumented families to invest in the state’s tuition savings plans. In addition, it calls for the creation of privately funded scholarships for which undocumented students would be eligible, and also mandates that high school counselors and college admission officers receive information about postsecondary options for undocumented students (Wilson, 2011). The Illinois Dream Fund Scholarship awarded its initial set of scholarships in the spring of 2013 (http://illinoisdreamfund.org).

Institutional Contexts

While the battle raged on in the courts over what was meant by ‘residence’ and ‘higher education benefit’ (Russell, 2011), a number of colleges began to implement institutional policies that either supported or restricted undocumented students’ access to higher education. In recent years, the University of Arkansas, the University of Connecticut and multiple colleges in Virginia have attempted to restrict enrollment of undocumented students (Gonzales, 2009). The American Association of Collegiate
Registrars and Admission Officers (AACRAO) in 2009 surveyed its members, finding that fewer than half of all colleges and universities knowingly admit undocumented students (Redden, 2008). While 70% of public two-year colleges knowingly admit undocumented students, only 40% of private colleges responded positively to the question. However, only two-thirds of schools completing the survey answered the question, indicating an absence of a clearly established policy either due to resistance or uncertainty (Redden, 2008).

Recently, public universities in states with legislation that restricts access have taken bold steps to counteract such laws. In 2012, Maricopa Community College in Arizona announced that students who obtain work permits through DACA would be permitted to enroll as in-state residents, stating that work permits are currently an approved form of identification. In addition, the Arizona Board of Regents announced they were working to determine whether work permits could be used to award in-state tuition rates for all of the state’s public universities (DeSantis, 2012). Prior to the passage of the state’s tuition equity legislation in 2013, Metropolitan State University in Denver, Colorado in 2012 took the bold move of announcing that all undocumented students who resided in Colorado would be eligible to pay a reduced rate, one that was greater than in-state tuition, but substantially lower than out of state tuition (Froesch, 2012).

Although the issue of undocumented students in higher education has largely played out in the public eye regarding their enrollment in public universities, private colleges have begun to play a pivotal role, which is likely to increase in the coming years (Redden, 2008). Law binds public universities in states with legislation that restricts or
promotes access, but such restrictions do not bind private colleges or public universities in states without such legislation (Gonzales, 2009; Russell, 2011). Though their receipt of federal funds requires that they comply with all federal laws, no federal law bars undocumented students from enrolling in college, so private colleges have greater flexibility to setting policy. Many schools, such as Elon University in North Carolina, do not have a formal policy on the issue, but for many years chose not to admit students for fear of violating federal law, which was believed to affect the college’s ability to administer financial aid (Redden, 2008). Private colleges that deny access most often cite the Student Exchange and Visa Information System (SEVIS) as a reason why they cannot admit undocumented students. Developed in response to the events of September 11, 2001 SEVIS requires colleges to track and report the enrollment status of students who receive student visas. Colleges and universities that do not report such students to SEVIS risk losing federal funding. However, undocumented students are not issued student visas and therefore the SEVIS requirements do not apply (Ruge & Iza, 2005).

In contrast to Elon University, Vassar College was one of the first colleges to make clear its support of undocumented students when it began to post on its college website the admission and financial aid policy for undocumented students. The institution claimed that its goal was to be open about its policies and that funding undocumented students was in keeping with the inclusive spirit of the college (Redden, 2009). Recently, Dominican University in Illinois, also citing its mission, publicly came out in support of undocumented students, going so far as to disclose the total dollars awarded to undocumented students through institutional aid and merit scholarships (Nelson, 2012). Also in 2012, seven private colleges in North Carolina (including the
previously mentioned Elon University) publicly declared their support of undocumented students by partnering with Golden Door Scholars (a non-profit organization founded by CEO Ric Elias) to offer scholarships that cover tuition and room and board and renewable for four years (http://www.goldendoorscholars.org/).

Due to the polarizing nature of the issue, most private colleges are not open with regard to their admission and funding policies. Colleges such as Pitzer College in California and Benedictine College in Kansas, do not advertise formal funding policies, but offer institutional aid and scholarships to eligible undocumented students (Ortiz, 2009; Rodriguez, 2010). Colleges that are undocumented friendly often do not want to be known as such for fear of political backlash (Redden, 2008), which, while understandable, poses challenges to undocumented students and counselors when exploring college options.

Recognizing the restrictions to higher education that exist in Georgia, a group of professors from the University of Georgia began Freedom University, a volunteer based, free university, which “provides rigorous, college-level instruction to all academically qualified students regardless of their immigration status.” Although the course offerings are limited (currently only one course is offered each semester) and the classes taken will not count towards a degree, the founders hope that the classes will ensure that students are better prepared for college when they ultimately enroll (http://www.freedomuniversitygeorgia.com/).

The National Dream University, a joint venture between the University of California at Los Angeles and the National Labor College is a one-year, online, program that began in January 2013. Although citizens are not prevented from enrolling, the
accredited program, which awards a certificate in labor studies, is designed to give undocumented students access to higher education. Recognizing the financial constraints of many undocumented students, organizers hope to subsidize the $2500/per student tuition fee with donations (Young, 2012).

Faculty who have developed and supported such efforts are to be commended, but a semester class or one year program cannot replace a four-year degree. The intent of tuition equity legislation and state dream acts is to make a college education affordable for undocumented students. However, for many the costs are still out of reach and most will begin at a community college (Abrego, 2006; Castro-Salazar & Bagley, 2010; Gildersleeve, 2010; Perez Huber & Malagon, 2007). Undocumented students grow up believing that if they work hard in school, they will be rewarded. However, most eventually learn that the American dream is not for them (Abrego, 2006; Morales et al., 2011).

**College Choice Theory**

Researchers have long studied actions taken by students throughout the college choice process in order to understand, explain, and even predict student behavior (Litten, 1982). The fundamental supposition of college choice theory seems straightforward: students match their characteristics with those of a college (Chapman, 1981). As evident in the legal overview of undocumented students in higher education, it is rarely that simple. To understand how undocumented students both aspire to and choose a college, the following section examines the evolutionary history of what are now commonly referred to as models of college choice.
Theoretical Approaches

Initial studies on college choice were conducted by sociologists, who based their research on the idea that status attainment and a desire to improve one’s social position motivated students’ actions in the college choice process, and economists, who believed that students engaged in a cost-benefit analysis when making college decisions (Hossler et al., 1999; Jackson, 1978; Litten, 1982; Perna, 2006). Paulsen (1990) highlighted the additional contributions made by psychologists, who pointed to the importance of an institution's environment and the role of student-institution fit.

McDonough (1997) utilized these theoretical perspectives to identify three strands of research on college choice. The first, social psychological studies, explores the effects of institutional characteristics and peer and adult influences on college choice. Additionally, it considers students’ perceptions regarding individual fit within an institution, and the thought processes, or “cognitive stages of college choice” (p. 3) that takes place while making the choice. The second strand, economic studies, assumes that students view college as an investment and when choosing to invest, or not to invest, they have access to perfect information and make a rational decision. The third strand, sociological status attainment studies, looks at the effects of social status on the development of college aspirations, and how social status affects college access. Hossler et al. (1999) took McDonough’s (1997) work a step further and described four approaches, which they referred to as models. In addition to the economic and status-attainment (sociological) models described by McDonough, they also identified information-processing models, which blend decision making theory and sociology, and combined models that link economic and sociological theory and incorporate the
gathering and processing of information with decision making. The combined theories, such as the one proposed by Perna (2006) that incorporated both economic and sociological constructs, are more relevant to today’s students than ones rooted in a single perspective. The college choice process for many non-traditional students and students underrepresented in higher education does not necessarily support models rooted in solely in psychological, economic or sociological theory, instead revealing a process that is far more complex, and one that is affected by various factors not addressed in many models of college choice.


Most early studies of college choice were undertaken in response to projections of declining student enrollment, and a desire by colleges to aid recruitment by predicting enrollment patterns and affecting student decisions (Chapman, 1981; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Litten, 1982; Paulsen, 1990). As seen in the literature, the research attempted to explain both what affected students’ inclination to attend college as well as their institutional choice set (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987).

**Economic models.** Economic models of college choice are based on the notion that students undertake a cost-benefit analysis when deciding whether or not to attend college, and if the decision is to attend, when deciding where to enroll. Factors often considered include not only direct and indirect costs of an education, but also the opportunity costs, both financial and personal, of attending college (Hossler et al., 1999). The seven stage model proposed by Kotler and Fox (1985) is representative of college choice models rooted in economic theory.
Beginning with the notion that students want to maximize benefits while reducing risks, Kotler and Fox (1985) suggested that students begin the process by considering post high school alternatives, such as work, college or military (stage one). Next, they explore the options within those alternatives (stage two) such as army, navy, or air force for students who choose the military, and two-year, four-year, public or private universities for students who are college-bound. Students who choose college begin their search with a set of all colleges (stage three). This set is then narrowed into an awareness set (stage four) where students identify colleges which are familiar to them, after which they develop a consideration set (stage five) and highlight colleges they want to investigate. The last two stages are the choice set (stage six), where the final options are explored, and the decision (stage seven) leads students to the college in which they will ultimately enroll (Hossler et al., 1999; Kotler & Fox, 1985; Paulsen, 1990). Economic models emphasize the ways in which students value certain attributes and assume that students have accurate information upon which they act rationally throughout the process. However, as the latter two cannot be assumed, pure economic models are now viewed as inadequate models of college choice (Hossler et al., 1999).

**Combined models.** Jackson (1978) was among the first to describe the college choice process in three stages: preference, exclusion, and evaluation, each of which is influenced by a multitude of factors. During the preference stage, a student’s predisposition to attend or not attend college is affected by such things as the environment where the student was raised, socioeconomic status (SES) of the family, quality of education, academic attributes of the student, peer influences, and both short- and long-term goals (Jackson, 1978). The second and third stages are influenced by the
institutional characteristics of the colleges and the job outlook for their graduates (Hossler et al., 1999). In the second stage students eliminate options that are deemed inappropriate or unworthy (Hossler et al., 1999; Jackson, 1978), and in the final stage, students evaluate the remaining choices and make a final decision. At any of the three stages, a student may choose to opt out of the college process and pursue other alternatives (Hossler et al., 1999).

As with many of the models that arose during the seventies and eighties, the influences of economics and sociology are evident in the description of the effects of the factors on each stage. Jackson’s model does not, however, explicitly describe how students create their initial choice set of institutions (Hossler et al., 1999). In addition, although Jackson believed his model to be fully comprehensive, stating, “other studies have for the most part simplified the model, but none have found any significant factors beyond those I have listed” (Jackson, 1978, p. 551), his model unfortunately only included Black and Latino when examining race and did not consider gender or parent education, both of which are now known to strongly influence the college choice process (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Engberg & Allen, 2011; Freeman, 1997; McDonough, 1997; Nora, 2004; Perna, 2006).

Much of the early research on college choice focused heavily on aspirations and the factors that affected a student’s desire and decision to attend college (Chapman, 1981; Paulsen, 1990; Hossler et al., 1999). Chapman’s (1981) model of college choice instead focused on the student’s final choice through a study of the influences affecting a student’s decision to attend a certain college. Often referred to as a causal model (Paulsen, 1990), Chapman’s (1981) model described the relationship between student
characteristics, external influences, and institutional characteristics, and their interactive
effect on a student’s final choice. Chapman identified student characteristics as SES,
scholastic aptitude, educational aspirations, and academic performance. External
influences included significant others, including friends, parents, and high school staff,
while institutional characteristics included such factors as cost, availability of financial
aid, location, and major, as well as the college marketing efforts of written
communication, campus visits, and recruitment activities (Hossler et al., 1999).
Chapman determined that these characteristics both influence, and are influenced by, a
student’s expectation of college life, which in turn lead to a final choice (Chapman,
1981). Chapman’s model is quite general in its description of influences and places the
sole focus on outcomes. As such, he neglects to address the importance of process
(Litten, 1982). Like Jackson, Chapman (1981) does not highlight the student
characteristics of race and gender, but unlike Jackson he at least recognized the potential
for other factors to influence the decision when he stated, “[t]he model does not exhaust
the possibilities of influence, but it does identify the major factors to be considered” (p.
499).

Litten (1982) criticized Chapman for not addressing the role of process, so not
surprisingly his model addressed the college choice process and the phenomena that
affect how the search is undertaken. Believing that different types of students vary in
how they engage in the process, Litten studied students grouped by race, gender,
academic ability, parent education and geographic location with the goal of helping
colleges market to different types of students. He viewed the process as a series of five
stages that students moved through sequentially: developing college aspirations, deciding
to start the process, gathering information, applying, and finally enrolling in a school (Hossler et al., 1999; Litten, 1982). Attempting to understand how students moved through these stages, Litten studied six aspects of the college selection process: (1) timing of the process, (2) number of potential schools considered throughout the search, (3) types of information wanted, (4) college characteristics investigated, (5) desired method of information communication, and (6) social influences. The multiple theoretical bases of Litten’s model make it more useful than single theory models (Hossler et al., 1999; Perna, 2006). In addition, Litten (1982) brought to light the effects of race and gender on how a student executes the college search. However, to be fully useful to colleges in their recruitment efforts, a model of college choice must address not just process, but also inputs and outcomes.

The model created by Hossler and Gallagher (1987) is also a combined model, much the same as models of Jackson, Chapman, and Litten (Hossler et al., 1999). It is also multi-stage, and akin to Jackson’s model; it has three stages. However, unlike Jackson, who places the emphasis in stages two and three on the institution, Hossler et al. (1999) focus on the student, positing that students move through three distinct and sequential stages in the college choice process: predisposition, search, and choice. In the predisposition stage, students explore options for life after high school. These plans may include going straight to work, enlisting in the military, traveling or attending college. During the search stage, students with college goals develop a potential college list by exploring institutions that match their interests and passions. Students narrow the list in the choice phase as they submit applications and ultimately select a college to attend (Hossler et al., 1999). The predisposition stage takes place in elementary school and
middle school, with most students having developed aspirations by the ninth grade. The search and choice stages typically occur during the high school years as the majority of students move through the search stages in grades 10-12, and the choice stage in grades 11-12 (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Hossler et al., 1999; Perna, 2006).

Evidenced by the many recent studies that focus on the stages identified by the Hossler and Gallagher model (Nora, 2004; Paulsen & St. John, 2002; Person & Rosenbaum, 2006; Wolniak & Engberg, 2007), their model has become a well-known conceptual framework for most current research on college choice (Desjardins, Ahlburg, & McCall, 2006) and serves as the overarching framework for this case study. While most prior models were designed to either aid college administrators or affect policy making (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987), their usefulness to high school counselors in their work with students became readily apparent (Hossler et al., 1999). No longer viewed solely as a means of aiding recruitment, college choice models became recognized as valuable tools for promoting college access (Hossler et al., 1999; McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2006).

**Recent Models of College Choice (1990-present)**

Early models of college choice were designed based on students of a traditional age (19-24), race (white), and background (middle and upper class). However, as college students became increasingly diverse in regard to age, ethnicity, and SES, a need for newer theories arose. Due to their theoretical orientation as recruitment tools for colleges, older models assumed both mobility and opportunity, neither of which is possessed by many current students (Paulsen & St. John, 2002). The focus of early models was to assist universities in attracting mobile students with opportunities to
choose. Later models began to focus on student choice, given the limits under which many students choose. As a result, more recent models not only address the multiple paths to college taken by students of different racial, ethnic and economic backgrounds, but also the myriad influences that help them achieve postsecondary education (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Engberg & Allen, 2011; Paulsen & St. John, 2002; Pérez & McDonough, 2008; Perna, 2006; Person & Rosenbaum, 2006). With this change, college choice models became increasingly useful in not only helping colleges meet enrollment goals, but also assisting them to diversify their student bodies (Wolniak & Engberg, 2007).

Most early models of college choice were developed from research that used quantitative methods (Chapman, 1981; Jackson, 1978; Litten, 1982). However, McDonough (1997) citing the need to explore the ‘why’ rather than just the ‘what,’ added to the college choice literature with a model of college choice that was developed out of a qualitative study, a trend that was soon followed by others (Freeman, 2007; Pérez & McDonough, 2008; Person & Rosenbaum, 2006). McDonough’s (1997) theory is rooted in the notions of cultural capital, habitus and bounded rationality. Embodied cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) is the set of intangible non-monetary assets that middle and upper class families transfer to their children in order to preserve their social class standing, and its benefit comes not from the assets themselves, but rather in how they are utilized (McDonough, 1997). McDonough’s defines Bourdieu’s theory of habitus as perceptions and assumptions about the world that is influenced by one’s surrounding environment. In her study, McDonough applies Bourdieu’s concept of habitus to the college search process by suggesting a sense of entitlement in which “students believe
that they are entitled to a particular kind of collegiate education based on their family’s habitus or class status” (p. 9). Bounded rationality is used by McDonough to describe the actions taken by a student during the college process, which even when thoughtful, analytical and intentional are constrained by the information possessed by the student at the time of the decision. McDonough focused on the effect of the interaction between social class and the high school context in college choice process, positing that habitus did not just exist within a family or a community but also had the potential to exist with an organization, such as a school, resulting in what she referred to as the organizational habitus (Engberg & Wolniak, 2010; Hossler et al., 1999; McDonough, 1997; Wolniak & Engberg, 2007; Enberg & Wolniak, 2010).

McDonough’s information-processing model (Hossler et al., 1999) explored not just students’ thoughts and behaviors, but also the influences on these thoughts and behaviors during the two stages of search and choice. This model is useful in understanding the least studied aspect of the college choice process, the search stage (Chapman, 1981; Hossler et al., 1999), which can be the most crucial for colleges as this is when students identify colleges that are a potential fit (Paulsen, 1990). Although this model provided valuable insight into the search and choice stages, as a qualitative study, the results cannot be generalized, and only a low number of white females were used in the study. As a result, the model has significant limitations, but yet it is widely accepted and highly referenced.

**Models of college choice and the less traditional student.** Nora (2004) was concerned with the latter effects of college choice, exploring college choice and satisfaction. Recognizing the importance of habitus and cultural capital on students’
college choice process, Nora studied the psychological, emotional, and social dimensions of both factors as experienced by various student populations prior to college to determine their influence both during the college choice process and once enrolled.

Nora’s model disputes the rationality of the college choice process (Chapman, 1981; Hossler et al., 1999; Jackson, 1978; Kotler & Fox, 1985) and instead posits that, although students make choices throughout the college process that are both cognitive and intuitive (using both their head and their hearts), their final choice was affected largely by psychosocial factors. Nora’s model of college choice not only allows for differences between student groups, but also allows for differences within student groups suggesting for the first time that no one model of college choice can be used to explain the behaviors of a collective group of students.

Incorporating both economic and sociological theory into her model of college choice, Perna (2006) developed a comprehensive, integrated, and multilevel model of college choice that draws on the economic aspects of human capital theory and the sociological constructs of habitus and social and cultural capital. Perna’s model is grounded in the assumption that the college choice process varies across racial and ethnic groups as well as SES, and the notion that there are multiple paths to college (Freeman, 1997; McDonough, 1997, Nora, 2004; Paulsen & St. John, 2002). At the core of the model is the economic model of human capital investment and the idea that the college choice is affected by what the student perceives are expected costs and benefits of attending college. These costs and benefits are influenced by supply (a student’s financial resources to pay for college) and demand (the academic preparation and achievement of the student). However, unlike previous research that solely emphasizes
the role of human capital investment (Hoxby, 2004; Ellwood & Kane, 2000; Manski & Wise, 1983), Perna takes it further by adding four contextual layers that impact the cost-benefit analysis. The innermost layers, the student’s habitus, include such factors as gender, race and ethnicity, and the social and cultural capital possessed by the student.

Layer two, the school and community context, is akin to McDonough’s (1997) concept of organizational habitus, which includes both resources that facilitate that support the process, as well as barriers that impede the process. The third layer, the higher education context, includes the ways that institutions of higher education support the process in regard to recruitment and the characteristics of the institutions themselves. The outer layer, the social, economic and policy context, highlights the role of policy on a student’s college choice (Perna, 2006). The strength of Perna’s model is that it incorporates both human capital and sociological constructs, it is useful in providing insight into the college choice process for a variety of student groups, and, unlike previous models, it can also be used to explain “intermediate outcomes” (p. 119) such as academic achievement and preparation.

Models of college choice and the role of the high school. Wolniak and Engberg (2007) explored the relationships between high schools and colleges, and the influences of these relationships on students’ final choice. Like previous models, theirs highlighted the influence of a student’s social network on college choice (McDonough, 1999; Pérez & McDonough, 2008; Person & Rosenbaum, 2006), but similar to McDonough (1999), they focused more on the role of the high school, in particular the interconnectedness between what they called high school feeder networks and college choice. A high school feeder is defined as a school that consistently supplies a college with qualified applicants,
and also has a history with applicants from the school that assures the likelihood that if admitted, some will enroll. Wolniak and Engberg (2007) explored the effects of high school feeders based on student groups of race, gender, academic profile, and high school attended, and their model indicated that for some groups of students, their college list and sometimes the final choice were heavily influenced by a feeder network. This model reinforced the notion that the college choice process is not one-size-fits-all, but rather different or multiple models may exist for different groups of students.

Hill (2008) examined how high schools assist students in navigating what she refers to as the ‘college-linking’ process (commonly referred to as the college choice process), which includes preparing for, applying to, and selecting a college. Hill suggested that students’ enrollment in college is affected by a three tiered ‘college-linking’ typography of traditional, clearinghouse, and brokering that describes the ways in which high schools assist students in the college choice process. The most basic of the strategies, traditional, involves disseminating basic and limited information en mass with the absence of any follow up. Clearinghouse, the second strategy, involves greater involvement from the high schools with attempts to funnel the information to the appropriate recipients, but is largely dependent on the resourcefulness of students and parents. The third and most successful strategy, brokering, involves a strong commitment from the high schools as not only do they offer students and parents’ access to greater resources, but they also work to ensure that students and parents utilize the information that is disseminated. Hill predicted that schools implementing a brokering strategy would expect to have higher rates of postsecondary attainment, but found that the effectiveness of the strategies varied for students from different racial/ethnic backgrounds. Hill’s
results support the findings of Nora (2004) and Wolniak and Engberg (2007) that emphasize the need to move away from the one-size-fits-all mentality.

Incorporating influences of both McDonough (1999) and Perna (2006), Engberg and Wolniak (2010) utilized quantitative measures to examine the role of the high school context on college enrollment. Incorporating economic theory of human capital, which suggests that a student’s college choice process compares the resources expended versus the resources gained (Becker, 1993) with sociological theory of social and cultural capital, Engberg and Wolniak (2010) examined the ways in which school-level characteristics affected postsecondary enrollment. In investigating the school-level effects, they explored institutional characteristics (type, location, SES and diversity of student body), learning environment (morale, emphasis on learning, student-to-counselor ratio, opportunities for experiential based learning and environmental disruptions due to violence and drugs), and the availability of human capital (achievement), cultural capital (aspirations, cultural involvement, and language skills) and social capital (parent, peer and college networks). Their results identified the significant role of the high school in facilitating college enrollment especially in the areas of capital, with an emphasis on academic preparation, peer and parent networks, and parent-to-school contact. This study adds to the literature by suggesting that although student and family characteristics are critical to college enrollment, the high school also plays a meaningful role.

Situating the counseling department within the organizational habitus of the high school, Engberg and Gilbert (2014) examined the norms and resources of a counseling department (described as the counseling opportunity structure), and their effects on four-year college enrollment. The counseling norms examined were average counselor
caseload, percentage of hours spent on college counseling, and whether or not college counseling was viewed as the primary goal of the department. The counseling resources examined were opportunities for students to take courses at a four-year college while in high school, organized college fairs and college visits, college meetings for students and parents, counselor consultations with college representatives, and financial aid assistance. Engberg and Gilbert’s findings suggest a three-level typology, grounded in a divergent, emergent and convergent classification system as related to the counseling opportunity structure.

Divergent schools had relatively small caseloads but spent very limited time on college counseling and were unlikely to focus on college counseling as the primary department goal. They also had the lowest propensity to offer courses at a college, hold a college fair, or provide financial aid assistance. Schools in the divergent cluster offered few resources to assist with the college choice process, and the department norms are not college focused. Emergent schools had the largest caseloads of the three, but counselors spent a larger percentage of hours on college counseling than counselors in divergent schools and a greater number emphasized college counseling as the primary goal of the counseling department. Schools in the emergent cluster had a higher propensity to offer courses at a four-year college and most offered a college fair and assistance with financial aid. Overall, these schools offer greater resources to students in the college choice process than do divergent schools, but the norms of the department are not yet fully college-going. Convergent schools have lower caseloads than schools in the emergent cluster, and counselors spend the greatest percentage of hours on college counseling. They have the highest propensity to have college counseling as the primary goal of the
department, and they also have a greater likelihood of offering a college fair, courses at a
college, and assistance with financial aid. Schools in this cluster indicate strong college-
going norms and offer multiple resources for students and parents in the college choice
process.

 Models of college choice and the low income student. The research of Cabrera
and La Nasa (2000) highlighted the unique needs of economically disadvantaged
students, defined as students who come from a family income in the bottom SES quartile.
Using the conceptual model of Hossler and Gallagher (1987) as a foundation, they not
only addressed the individual and organizational factors that influence students at each of
the three stages, but also addressed the potential outcomes related to each stage (Cabrera
& La Nasa, 2000). However, unlike Hossler and Gallagher, who viewed the stages as
distinct (Hossler et al., 1999), Cabrera and La Nasa (2000) posit that the three stages are
integrated, and the various stages both affect and are affected by the others. In the
predisposition stage, individual factors such as SES, parent support, education and
familiarity with college, coupled with high school resources and access to college
information affect outcomes of post-graduate aspirations, academic skills and enrollment
in a college preparatory curriculum. In stage two, the search phase, the influence of
parent background, SES, ability and high school resources continue to play a role, along
with the awareness of college options. These factors work together to affect the initial
college list and the procuring of information regarding the potential colleges, and they
continue to play a role during the subsequent narrowing of the college list. In the final
stage, the choice phase, parental support and SES continue to have influence, as do
students’ education and career aspirations, as well as the academic skills developed in
stage one. Coupled with a student’s perception regarding an institution’s attributes and affordability, these factors affect a variety of outcomes, including awareness of financial aid, institutional attributes and support, completion of admission and financial aid applications, and finally, enrollment and attendance. Cabrera and La Nasa’s model is unique in that it is one of few that address all three stages of the college search.

Like Cabrera and La Nasa (2000), Paulsen and St. John (2002) addressed how students from varying income levels behave in the college choice process. Recognizing that, for many students, changes in federal and state funding had the potential to impact affordability, they examined how financial factors affect students from different income levels in both the college choice process and persistence to graduation. Their theory draws from a construct of student-choice, which suggests that students make decisions based on their habitus or situated-context, and a financial nexus model, which focuses on how the decision of where to attend college can influence persistence. Among the financial variables included in the study were the impact of financial aid opportunities, low tuition costs, or both aid and costs, in the college choice process. Believed to help researchers better understand and promote diversity within higher education, the student-choice construct is based on three assumptions. The first assumption is that choices made in the college choice process are sequential and are linked to policy decisions. In describing the college choice process, Paulsen and St. John expanded on the three stage model of Hossler and Gallagher (1987) and included choices of major, graduation, and post-graduation plans, all of which are influenced by individual and organizational factors, including policies related to financial aid. The second assumption is that students from different ethnic and SES backgrounds, as well as men and women, make decisions
differently, and should be studied as different groups rather than as a whole. The last assumption is that students make choices in what they refer to as situated contexts, meaning that their environments influence students’ decisions. As previously stated, Paulsen and St. John (2002) argued that prior models rooted in theories of economics and sociology assumed economic and social mobility, which many students do not possess. Integrating the student-choice construct with their financial nexus model showed connections between college choice and persistence, and highlighted the effects of financial factors on choices made by different groups of students throughout the college choice process, as well as later in persistence decisions.

Models of college choice and African American students. While McDonough (1997) explored the effects of cultural capital and organizational habitus on a student’s college choice process, Freeman (1997) was among the first to take aim at prior sociological and econometric models, criticizing them as inadequate for many student populations (Perna, 2006). With a goal of giving students a voice, which was not often done previously, Freeman’s (1997) research examined African-American students’ perceptions regarding the barriers to higher education. Expanding on previous research regarding the effects of social capital, specifically the actual or potential resources that exist as a result of social relationships involving both direct and indirect ties (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Lin, 1999), and cultural capital on the college choice process by assessing their influence on various student groups, Freeman highlighted the danger of trying to instill values that are based solely on the majority culture. Freeman’s (1997) model emphasized the central role that culture and heritage play in both increasing motivation among African-American students to attend college and in the college choice
process. Although Freeman recognized the contributions of econometric models of college choice, the differences among student groups as to the perceived financial costs and benefits of a college education (a concept which was largely ignored in previous research) is a critical aspect of the proposed model. In addition, Freeman’s model introduced the role of channeling, defined as, “the environmental forces (whether individuals, institutions, or circumstances) that influence the directions of students’ choice” (p. 529). These forces, both within and outside the home, can reconcile differences in social and cultural capital, and can also impact the perceived costs and benefits of an education, all of which affect a student’s college choice. Freeman’s model, although limited due to its focus solely on African American students, brings to light not only the importance of looking at the unique factors that affect various student groups, but also the importance of inviting the student voice into the research process. In the spirit of Freeman, this study intends to give voice to undocumented students, who until just recently have largely gone unheard and unnoticed in higher education.

Models of college choice and Latino students. Burgeoning research exploring the behaviors of Latino students in the college choice process is a result of both the growing number of Latino students enrolled in postsecondary education, as well as a response to the fact that they continued to remain underrepresented in higher education (Nuñez & Kim, 2012; Perna, 2006). Person and Rosenbaum’s (2006) model was unique not only because it was the result of a mixed methods study (Perna, 2006), but it also because it was the first to use the framework of immigration theory, specifically chain migration, to explain college choice. Chain migration theory posits ‘prospective migrants learn of opportunities, are provided with transportation and have initial
accommodation and employment arranged by means of primary social relationships with previous migrants” (MacDonald & MacDonald, 1964, p. 82). Highlighting the influence of social capital in chain migration theory, Person and Rosenbaum (2006) asserted that Latino students were more likely to choose a college where a contact from their social network was already enrolled or attend a college with an individual from the network. Then, once enrolled, they are likely to turn to individuals from the network who is already attending the college, for any needed assistance (Pérez & McDonough, 2008; Person & Rosenbaum, 2006). While these social networks provide necessary information and support, students who rely heavily on these social networks often are often less knowledgeable about college options and less integrated into the campus community (Perna, 2006; Person & Rosenbaum, 2006; Wolniak & Engberg, 2007).

Pérez and McDonough (2008) followed shortly after Person and Rosenbaum (2006) with a qualitative study that also utilized chain migration theory, blended with a social capital framework. Their model described a college choice process for Latino students that, unlike their White peers, utilized a strong social network of friends, family and high school counselors for both college planning and college choice, resulting in students with a weak or small social network having limited options. Their model also emphasized that for Latino students, the college process is “not a linear one, nor is it always predictable” (Pérez & McDonough, 2008, p. 260). Their results also contradicted earlier economic and sociological models that assumed a cost-benefit analysis or status-attainment. This notion, coupled with the clear role social capital plays in the model indicates significant value of this model for first-generation students as well as Latino students.
Nuñez and Kim (2012), influenced by the work of Perna (2006), examined Latino college attainment through a model that explored the effects of student-level characteristics (student demographics, family SES, parent education and academic achievement and preparation), school-level characteristics (student body, size and qualification of faculty, school norms as related to a college going culture) and state-level characteristics (demographics of state and laws and policies related to college access). Supporting the findings of other studies (Engberg & Wolniak, 2010), their results indicated that while school-level factors play a role in where students go to college, the most significant predictors of college enrollment were found at the student level. Unlike most previous studies, they also looked at ethnic subgroups and determined that Latino students from Central and South American enrolled in college at a higher rate than Latino students from Mexico, thereby supporting the work of Nora who emphasized the importance of looking at differences within student populations, rather than only between student populations. This idea is particularly important for colleges as they develop their marketing messages and for high schools when working to create college counseling programs targeted to specific populations.

The Future of Models of College Choice

Although many models of college choice are useful in providing insight into some student college choice processes and decisions, it is unrealistic and incorrect to assume that one model can be used to understand the paths followed by all students. For many students, the college choice process can be best understood when examined through the lens of multiple theories, and perhaps by applying different models at different stages. The traditional models are most useful when examining the college choice process of
White, high income students with college-educated parents. For many students, including those who are low income, first-generation college, African American, and Latino, relevancy of the traditional models is questionable. As seen in the review of the literature, shifts in student population often served as the impetus for the further research into college choice. Newer theories, which were developed to gain insight into the actions taken by diverse populations, are likely to offer greater insight to the decisions made by the less traditional student. However, even these newer models were not developed with the undocumented student in mind and do not necessarily address the unique challenges they face. As a result, when viewed in the context of undocumented students their utility must be evaluated.

**Factors Influencing Undocumented Students’ College Access**

Colleges have long recognized the value of diversifying their student bodies (Gándara, 2002; Hurtado, 2007; Wolniak & Engberg, 2007). Students who interact with classmates of varied backgrounds have “higher scores on measures of more complex thinking about people and their behavior, cultural and social awareness, and perspective taking-skills,” (Hurtado, 2007, p. 191). However, Latino and African American students, students who are first-generation college or low-income and undocumented students continue to remain underrepresented in higher education (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Gándara, 2002; Gonzales, 2009; McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2006). Latino students are more likely to begin at a community college, even when factors such as socioeconomic status and prior academic achievement are held constant (Kurlaender, 2006). As the research in college choice theory has shown, the college choice process is as varied as the students who embark upon the process. College aspirations are affected by the
socioeconomic level of the family, academic ability and preparation of the student, as well as a student’s social network, including parents, peers and school agents (Hossler et al., 1999; Hossler & Stage, 1992; McDonough, 1997; Paulsen, 1990; Perna, 2000). Family socioeconomic status (SES), students’ academic achievement in high school (Paulsen, 1990), and parental and peer support, coupled with institutional characteristics and financial aid, play a strong role throughout the college search and choice processes (Hearn, 1991; Manski & Wise, 1983; Nora, 2004). However, recent scholarship suggests that for students underrepresented in higher education, additional factors both support and restrict postsecondary access (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; Gándara, 2002; Freeman, 1997; Gonzales, 2009; McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2000; Perna & Titus, 2005). Factors affecting college attendance rates for students underrepresented in higher education include lack of adequate and accurate knowledge about college opportunities and financial aid (Bell, Rowan-Kenyon, & Perna, 2009; Perna & Titus, 2005), poor academic preparation (Perna, Rowan-Kenyon, Thomas & Bell, 2008), limited support, and separation issues (McWhirter, Torres, Salgado, & Valdez, 2007). However, the literature also points to the high school counselor (McDonough, 1997; McDonough, 2005; Perna et al., 2008; Stanton-Salazar, 1997) and college preparation programs (Perna & Titus, 2005; Swail & Perna, 2002) as increasingly essential for developing aspirations, ensuring that students are academically prepared, and also providing students and parents with support and guidance regarding college options and financial aid. High school agents can also support undocumented students and parents by engaging in culturally relevant pedagogy, and developing awareness and understanding of undocumented student issues (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Yet, even when institutional agents, such as teachers and counselors,
provide important support, institutional structures can also simultaneously restrict access (Stanton-Salazar, 1997).

Yosso (2005) in her research on cultural wealth highlights the alternate forms of capital that marginalized students exhibit, some of which are likely to play a role in the college choice process of many underrepresented students who succeed in achieving higher education. Among the forms of capital discussed by Yosso are aspirational capital, which is the ability to develop and maintain future goals in spite of real and perceived roadblocks, and navigational capital, which is the ability to move through social institutions, such as schools, that were not designed with students of color in mind.

Research on undocumented students’ college choice process supports much of what was previously found to be true for students underrepresented in higher education. However, for undocumented students, legal restrictions create additional areas of concern (Abrego, 2006; Pérez et al., 2009; Menjívar, 2008; Perez Huber & Malagon, 2007). In addition to the federal and state policies regarding undocumented students’ access to college, the literature identifies a number of economic, familial, institutional, and psychosocial factors that serve to both impede and support college access. To gain insight into how undocumented students navigate the college choice process, one must first examine the individual and organizational factors that influence their access to postsecondary education.

**Overview of Research on Undocumented Students and College Access**

Abrego and Gonzales (2010) posit that much of the research on undocumented students and the college choice process have focused either on the effects of in-state tuition bills or the postsecondary success stories of high academic achievers. However,
as only 15 states currently have in-state tuition legislation or policies (National Immigration Law Center, 2013a) and fewer than half of all undocumented immigrants ages 18-24 have a high school degree (Passel & Cohn, 2009), it is apparent that a majority of undocumented students will not graduate high school, let alone make it to college. The experiences of lower achieving students and those who are unable to achieve a postsecondary education are largely absent in the literature (Abrego & Gonzales, 2010; Gonzales, 2010b), as are the voices of the students themselves (Castro-Salazar & Bagley, 2010; Morales et al., 2011). Just as Freeman (1997) identified the need for research to reflect the voices of African American students, the research must hear from undocumented students’ about their lived experiences.

The literature and research on undocumented students and college access have focused almost exclusively on the Latino population, usually Mexican students living in California or Texas (Abrego, 2006; Abrego & Gonzales, 2010; Castro-Salazar & Bagley, 2010; Contreras, 2009; Flores, 2010b; Gildersleeve, 2010; Gonzales, 2010b; Menjívar, 2008; Pérez, P., 2010; Pérez et al., 2010; Pérez et al., 2009; Perez Huber & Malagon, 2007), resulting in a significant gap in the literature. Although 60% of the undocumented population in the U.S. is from Mexico, significant numbers come from Central and South America and Asia (Passel & Cohn, 2009). In addition, while the undocumented population remains heavily concentrated in California and Texas, recent trends indicate that Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, New Jersey, New York, Maryland, North Carolina, Virginia and Washington also host vibrant undocumented populations (Passel & Cohn, 2011), while states such as Louisiana and Oklahoma have experienced recent growth (Passel & Cohn, 2009).
Barriers to Higher Education

Previous research on undocumented students has highlighted numerous economic, familial, social, and institutional barriers that undocumented students encounter during their pursuit of higher education.

Economic barriers. Undocumented students do not have access to federal and state financial aid, and most have limited scholarship opportunities due to their undocumented immigrant status (Contreras, 2009; Ortiz, 2009; Pérez, Cortés et al., 2010). Undocumented students who are fortunate enough to receive scholarships often lose them once their undocumented status is revealed (Pérez, Cortés et al., 2010). As a result, the lack of financial resources is one of the biggest barriers to postsecondary enrollment (Contreras, 2009; Pérez, Cortés et al., 2010; Perez Huber & Malagon, 2007). For undocumented students who are fortunate enough to have some ability to pay, the literature details multiple ways in which their college choice process is affected by their economic constraints.

Olivérez (2006) and Abrego (2006) describe the academic challenges faced by undocumented high school students as a result of crowded home environments, with many students having limited or no access to a quiet space for studying, often sharing bedrooms with siblings and other family members. Most undocumented parents do not have the ability to contribute financially to their child’s college education, due to limited financial resources. At times, the college aspirations of children are in direct conflict with parents’ expectations that they contribute financially to the family (Gonzales, 2010a). To pay for school, most students work long hours before and after class, some working as many as 16-40 hours per week (Castro-Salazar & Bagley, 2010; Contreras,
Tuition increases affect undocumented students more significantly than their citizen peers due to an inability to access federal or state aid (Abrego & Gonzales, 2010; Ortiz, 2009), and most undocumented students who pursue higher education will enroll in a community college due to cost (Abrego, 2006; Castro-Salazar & Bagley, 2010; Perez Huber & Malagon, 2007). Often, to avoid paying extra application fees, undocumented students will not even apply to a university unless they are sure they will be accepted (Pérez, P., 2010). High achieving students who apply to and are accepted at highly selective universities usually cannot afford tuition and, therefore, rarely attend (Abrego & Gonzales, 2010). Due to an inability to obtain a driver’s license, many students will only consider colleges that are close to home and work, in order to save travel time and money (Pérez, P., 2010). Although most undocumented students struggle to meet college costs, including many receiving in-state tuition (Perez Huber & Malagon, 2007), some undocumented students will succeed with financial support from parents, relatives and community members (Ortiz, 2009), emphasizing the critical (and sometimes conflicting) roles of family and community.

**Familial and peer barriers.** Recent literature indicates that similar to other populations underrepresented in higher education, undocumented students’ access to higher education is often impeded by parents’ low levels of education coupled with students’ and parents’ lack of familiarity with the U.S. system of education (Castro-Salazar & Bagley, 2010). Undocumented students are not only among the poorest (Passel & Cohn, 2009), but they also have the lowest rates of postsecondary attainment (Abrego & Gonzales, 2010; Castro-Salazar & Bagley, 2010; Passel & Cohn, 2009), so
barriers are greater for undocumented students than for their peers. Most immigrant parents have high academic hopes for their children, often citing a better education as the impetus for immigration (Castro-Salazar & Bagley, 2010; Contreras, 2009; Menjívar, 2008). Undocumented parents tend to support their children’s goal of higher education, but since many have less than a high school education, they usually lack the means to do so (Abrego, 2006; Olivérez, 2006; Pérez et al., 2009).

Perez Huber and Malagon (2007), in their study on undocumented Latino college students in California, also found that for some undocumented students, a loss of academic motivation is an outcome of the guilt experienced when thinking about the money spent on their college education and knowing that their education takes away needed financial resources from the family. In addition, some academically capable students either underperformed or suddenly stopped performing in order to eliminate any postsecondary options so that parents would not have to make financial sacrifices for their education (Perez Huber & Malagon, 2007). However, a small number of undocumented students are resentful of their parents for bringing them to the U.S. illegally, thereby relegating them to a living their life in fear of deportation (Pérez, Cortés et al., 2010).

Abrego (2006) and Pérez et al. (2009) found it common for undocumented students to become academically disenchanted and lose motivation after watching academically capable siblings and relatives unable to engage in the college process due to their undocumented status, and ultimately end up in menial forms of employment. Undocumented students’ postsecondary aspirations are often diminished by an awareness of the barriers they must overcome and the limitations they will face in achieving their
college dreams (Abrego, 2006). Undocumented students are likely to receive information about college from other adults within their social network (Muñoz, 2008), and many will also turn to peers, especially other undocumented students, for guidance (Pérez, Cortés et al., 2010; Pérez, P., 2010). Some will not even consider college unless encouraged by friends (Pérez, P., 2010). Person and Rosenbaum (2006) and Pérez and McDonough (2008) in their studies on Latino students and college choice highlight the significant role of siblings and peers in developing aspirations, guiding students through the college process, and often providing continued support during the transition. Similarly, many undocumented students will enroll in the same schools where siblings and peers attend (Pérez, P., 2010). However, considering only colleges of which they have knowledge due to the experiences of peers and siblings not only restricts their college choice sets, but often results in a final choice that is a poor fit (Pérez & McDonough, 2008).

**Institutional barriers.** Undocumented students generally report frustration navigating the college choice process system due to lack of knowledge and experience (Castro-Salazar & Bagley, 2010). Menjívar (2008) in her study on undocumented Guatemalan and Salvadoran immigrants found that due to limited experiences with students who have enrolled in college and a tight knit social circle which information from the outside does not easily penetrate, the need for counselor and teacher input is crucial. However, Muñoz (2008) reported that teachers and counselors were not the primary source of college information and that interactions with high school staff were both positive and negative. Castro-Salazar and Bagley (2010) and Pérez, Cortés et al. (2010) also found that many undocumented students experienced discrimination and prejudice from high school and college faculty and staff, either due to ignorance or
personal biases. In addition, Menjívar (2008) found that many teachers were unaware of the undocumented students within their classes and the challenges they face as a result of their status. Students who do not succeed academically are too often assumed to dislike school or simply not care about their education. Not only do these experiences affect a student’s motivation and academic achievement, but they also cause reticence in sharing information about their undocumented status. Students who do not share their status are less likely to learn about postsecondary opportunities and as a result have a lower likelihood of enrolling in college (Gonzales, 2010b).

Unfortunately, Perez Huber and Malagon (2007) and Contreras (2009) cited the number of undocumented students in California and Washington, respectively, who are unaware of their state’s in-state tuition legislation, which would likely permit them to pay more affordable in-state tuition rates at public colleges and universities. They emphasized the need for counselors to be aware of undocumented students’ opportunities in order to ensure that they provide students access to accurate information. Pérez, P. (2010) highlighted the number of undocumented students in California who are directed by counselors toward a community college rather than four-year universities due to challenges of cost, without considering options created by the state’s in-state tuition bill. Unfortunately, many high schools counselors lack the necessary training to help students navigate the college counseling process (Bridgeland & Bruce, 2011; Clinedinst, Hurley, & Hawkins, 2011; McDonough, 2005) let alone the specialized knowledge of undocumented related issues. In addition, in states with large undocumented student populations such as California, Texas, Arizona, Illinois, Florida and New York, the average public high school student-to-counselor-ratio varies from 400:1 to more than
800:1 (NACAC, 2010). Large caseloads make it difficult for counselors to know their students on a personal level, a prerequisite for developing the type of relationship necessary for undocumented students to feel comfortable disclosing their status.

**Psychosocial factors.** The literature identifies a number of psychosocial factors that affect the daily lives of undocumented students, including feelings of shame, rejection, embarrassment, and anxiety as a result of their undocumented status (Abrego, 2006; Contreras, 2009; Pérez et al., 2009; Pérez, Cortés et al., 2010; Pérez, Espinoza et al., 2010). “Undocumented Latino and Latina college students presumably have to deal with having a ‘triple minority status’: ethnic origin, lack of documentation, and economic disadvantages” (Pérez, Cortés et al., 2010, p. 39). Dozier (1993), in her qualitative study of undocumented college students, highlighted three emotional concerns of students as a result of their status: fear, loneliness, and depression. For some students, fear of deportation is such an overriding concern that it affects their every decision and action (Abrego & Gonzales, 2010; Dozier, 1993). In addition, leaving family and friends behind in their home country, coupled with their fear of developing new relationships that might expose their undocumented status, leaves them feeling isolated and alone (Dozier, 1993; Castro-Salazar & Bagley, 2010). As a result of the fear, loneliness, and helplessness regarding their inability to change their current situation, many students experience high levels of depression (Dozier, 1993). Castro-Salazar and Bagley (2010), in their qualitative study of undocumented Mexican students, found that in addition to feelings of loneliness and depression, many felt self-conscious and vulnerable, as if they wore a sign that proclaimed their undocumented status to the world.
Non-Latino undocumented students face additional challenges largely stemming from their invisibility in society. With the focus of attention on Latino undocumented students, non-Latino undocumented students have been able to hide in the shadows. Unlike their Latino peers, most of whom crossed the border illegally; most non-Latino students had legal status at one point, with many living in the U.S. for years before becoming out of status. While being invisible provides them with a sense of safety, non-Latino undocumented students often slip through the cracks with support systems and outreach programs designed and geared toward the Latino undocumented population. Due to their limited numbers, some students feel their sense of isolation magnified as many will share their status with no one outside of their immediately family. Motivated by fear, their invisibility prevents them from receiving the necessary support and guidance (Chan, 2010).

**Supports for Higher Education**

Although the path to college is filled with roadblocks and speed bumps, undocumented students who enroll and succeed in college identify crucial supports in helping them achieve their college dreams. These include family and peer support and institutional support (both high school and college). In addition a number of psychosocial factors positively impact their college attainment.

**Familial and peer support.** Not surprisingly, support from peers and parents often mitigate the multitude of barriers undocumented students encounter. The literature consistently identifies the critical role parents play for all students as one of the most influential forces in the college choice process (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Hossler et al., 1999; McDonough, 1997; Nuñez & Kim, 2012). Research indicates that the same holds
true for undocumented students. In addition to highlighting the importance of family support as a whole (Castro-Salazar & Bagley, 2010; Morales et al., 2011), the research identifies the mother as the strongest provider (Castro-Salazar & Bagley, 2010; Muñoz, 2008). Many undocumented students identify the sacrifices and struggles of parents as a strong motivator to succeed academically, rooting their aspirations in their parents’ lack of education (Abrego, 2006; Gildersleeve, 2010; Morales et al., 2011). Glidersleeve (2010) found that familial influences are greater for undocumented students than for first generation immigrant students. As a direct result of migration experiences shared by students and their parents, family not only motivates, but it also fuels desire.

**Institutional supports.** The literature on the influences of high school teachers and counselors is conflicting. Contrary to previously identified research, De Leon (2005) highlighted the critical role of high school teachers and counselors in postsecondary attainment by providing guidance and access to college information. Pérez, Cortés et al. (2010) and Perez Huber and Malagon (2007) also identified the key role of high school and college staff in not only helping undocumented students navigate the college choice process, but also encouraging them to attend and persist once enrolled. Castro-Salazar and Bagley (2010) highlighted the positive impact of teachers who exhibit belief in undocumented students’ abilities and worthiness. Godinez and Espejel (2010) identified the unique role of counselors in not only providing access to information and guiding students through the application process, but also demonstrating emotional support for students by validating their college dreams and by showing students that it is possible for them to obtain a college education. Lastly, Abrego and Gonzales (2010) highlighted the
vital help provided by high school counselors in finding financial resources to help support their education.

Gonzales (2010b) found that undocumented students who matriculated to college largely pursued honors and advanced placement classes in high school, the benefits of which extend beyond academic preparation. The smaller class sizes typical in accelerated courses afford students the opportunity to develop relationships with teachers, thereby creating a foundation of trust necessary for undocumented students to ultimately disclose their status. Although there is always hesitancy, by sharing their status with high school teachers and counselors, undocumented students are more likely to not only to receive pertinent information, but also emotional and occasionally financial support. In addition, interactions with a strong and motivated peer network serve not only to support academic achievement, but also provide valuable resources for information. Lastly, undocumented students labeled as high achievers develop the confidence to pursue their dreams in spite of the legal challenges that lay ahead.

The K-12 education guaranteed to undocumented students by the U.S. Constitution promotes the American value of merit and the notion that if students work hard and achieve academically, they will be rewarded with the opportunity to enroll in college. Believing the U.S. is the land of opportunity, undocumented students possess the same educational aspirations as their citizen classmates until they begin the college choice process (Abrego, 2006). The reality that their education might end with high school leaves many undocumented students without the motivation to academically achieve (Abrego, 2006; Abrego & Gonzales, 2010; Pérez, Espinoza et al., 2010). However, the literature highlights a variety of institutional factors that positively affect
the aspirations and academic motivation of undocumented students. Gildersleeve (2010) identified the simple way in which schools support undocumented students by offering them a sense of security through their legal right to attend. For many students, this safety exists only within school walls. Pérez et al. (2009) in a qualitative study on academic resilience among undocumented Latino students identified the positive effects of extracurricular involvement and volunteering on academic achievement. High schools help support students’ academic achievement by creating opportunities for undocumented students to get involved in both school and community activities. In addition, the social relationships developed through these activities build the social capital necessary for students to move through the college choice process (Gonzales, 2010b). Gildersleeve (2010) found that schools with strong college-going cultures provide undocumented students with access to a peer group that serves to build college aspirations as well as offers guidance and support. Gildersleeve challenges high school and college agents to view their roles as teachers of “college-going literacy” (p. 4), which requires high school agents to learn about the social and cultural experiences that have shaped undocumented students’ educational paths.

Lastly, Swail and Perna (2002) posited that pre-college outreach programs promote college access and success among underrepresented students, and Castro-Salazar and Bagley (2010) found this to be true for many undocumented students as well. However, not only is the academic preparation embedded in these programs of value, but the emotional and social support offered, in addition to the occasional financial support, also plays a crucial role in helping undocumented students access and succeed in college.
Psychosocial factors. For some undocumented students, feelings of helplessness are mitigated by the belief that academic achievement is the one aspect of their lives that they can control, which is a notion that serves as a motivator to excel (Dozier, 1993). In spite of the many obstacles, Pérez et al. (2009) highlighted the high levels of optimism and perseverance reported by academically resilient undocumented students. Pérez, Cortés et al. (2010) cited the role of counselors in helping students both develop and maintain this optimism. In addition, involvement in high school activities provides students with the sense that they belong, helping them to overcome feelings of rejection (Pérez et al., 2009).

Abrego (2008) in her qualitative study of undocumented students in California found that legislation such as in-state tuition statutes serves to give students a legitimized identity, which in turn builds aspirations and motivation. However, Contreras (2009) in her study on undocumented students in Washington did not find the in-state tuition bill to have the same effect. Contreras cited the lower numbers of undocumented students as a possible reason, underlining the importance of social networks in helping undocumented students find safety and support, which in turn leads to greater academic success. Castro-Salazar and Bagley (2010) found that many undocumented students feel that they belong neither in the U.S., nor in their birth country. Many feel unaccepted by both their Mexican and Mexican-American peers. However, students who were able to navigate the different worlds in which they live and the different social groups to which they strive to belong experienced greater academic success than many of their peers (Castro-Salazar & Bagley, 2010; Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995).
Most undocumented students live in a constant state of uncertainty in regard to the future, and they are aware of the barriers they will face in their pursuit of postsecondary education. Not only do fears of deportation invade their daily thoughts, but worries about future employment also diminish aspirations and motivation (Contreras, 2009; Morales et al., 2011; Perez Huber & Malagon, 2007). However, this uncertainty inspires some students to persist (Morales et al., 2011). The undocumented students who succeed in obtaining a college degree are few in number, but they share many traits. They are academically high achieving, motivated, resilient, determined, driven, and possess a strong desire for education (Castro-Salazar & Bagley, 2010; Contreras, 2009; Morales et al., 2011; Perez Huber & Malagon, 2007).

**Conclusion**

For undocumented students, a college education is one of few available paths out of a life of poverty. Although undocumented students are encouraged as children to take part in the U.S. educational system, upon graduation from high school they find their path to college blocked by a multitude of barriers as a result of their undocumented status. However, in spite of limited structural routes, some students will overcome these barriers and succeed in attaining a college education, although most within this college bound group will attend a community college due to cost. Continued research is necessary to further investigate the undocumented student’s college choice process, to assist more undocumented students in participating in the U.S. system of higher education, and to ensure that they attend institutions for which they are academically matched.

This chapter began with an extensive review of federal and state legislation and policies that affect an undocumented student’s access to college. Next, I provided an
evolutionary history of models of choice, and finally, I described the individual and organizational factors that uniquely impact an undocumented student’s college choice process. In the next chapter, I will detail the methodology used to conduct the study and describe the process for data analysis.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

This chapter begins with a brief review of the phenomenon and the research questions that I used to guide the study. Next, I provide complete details on the design of the study, including a description of the case and context, the types of data collected, and the process for data collection and data analysis. I also highlight ethical considerations, including my positionality as a researcher. I conclude by addressing the study’s limitations.

Research on undocumented students in higher education is scant (Abrego & Gonzales, 2010; Gonzales, 2010b), but recent studies suggest that even though the path to college exists, countless barriers lie in the way. Although undocumented students are encouraged as children to take part in the U.S. educational system, upon graduation from high school they often find their path to college blocked by their undocumented status. Federal and state legislation is more likely to restrict than support access (National Immigration Law Center, 2012b; Rincón, 2008). Discrimination by high school and college professionals often serves to discourage students and diminish motivation (Castro-Salazar & Bagley, 2010; Contreras, 2009; Menjívar, 2008; Muñoz, 2008; Pérez, Cortés et al., 2010), and lack of awareness regarding college options coupled with misinformation prevents many from even beginning a college search (Contreras, 2009; Menjívar, 2008; Pérez, W., 2010). For those who are able to persevere in spite of these barriers, meager financial resources significantly limit college options, and most within
this college bound group will attend a community college due to cost (Contreras, 2009; Pérez et al., 2010; Perez Huber & Malagon, 2007). The small number of undocumented students who succeed in higher education do so as a result of internal motivation and resilience (Castro-Salazar & Bagley, 2010; Contreras, 2009; Morales et al., 2011; Perez Huber & Malagon, 2007), family and peer support (Abrego, 2006; Castro-Salazar & Bagley, 2010; Gildersleeve, 2010; Morales et al., 2011; Muñoz, 2008; Pérez, P., 2010), and encouragement and guidance from high school and college agents (Abrego & Gonzales, 2010; Castro-Salazar & Bagley, 2010; Pérez et al., 2010; Perez Huber & Malagon, 2007).

Gildersleeve (2010) and Gildersleeve and Ranero (2010) address the opportunity by high schools, as well as colleges, to promote undocumented students’ participation in higher education by building students’ “college-going literacy” (Gildersleeve, 2010, p. 4), which is developed “when [students are] afforded the opportunity to recognize, critique and re-imagine their own participation in the process” (p. 4). Unfortunately, most undocumented students do not see their place in the college process, causing them to disengage. For the few undocumented students who do enroll in college, achieving a postsecondary education is often a matter of luck or exceptional circumstances. Gildersleeve’s research challenges high school and college agents to view their roles as teachers of college-going literacy. However, to do so they must understand the unique social and cultural experiences that have shaped undocumented students’ educational paths, including immigration experiences, varying citizenship statuses of family members, constraints in daily living as result of their undocumented status, and language challenges.
The literature on the influences of high school teachers and counselors is conflicting, and it is clear that there is more to learn. Studying the influences and factors that impede and support college access creates the potential for ensuring that more undocumented students participate in the U.S. system of higher education. This study adds to the growing body of literature by utilizing case study methodology to further explore how high schools and high school agents influence an undocumented student’s college search process.

**Research Questions**

To further understand how undocumented students access postsecondary education, the study is rooted in the following question:

How do high schools and high school agents influence an undocumented student’s college choice process?

To answer this question, the following four sub-questions were investigated:

1. How does the organizational structure of a high school counseling department impact an undocumented student’s college choice process?

2. What elements of a college counseling program offered by a high school impact an undocumented student’s college search?

3. How do teachers and counselors transmit the college knowledge necessary for an undocumented student to successfully approach and navigate the college choice process?

4. How do teachers' and counselors' attitudes toward and expectations of an undocumented student affect the college choice process?
As identified in the review of literature, cost, limited financial resources, and restricted information and misinformation are some of the many challenges that face undocumented students during the college choice process. These challenges are similar to those encountered by many students underrepresented in higher education. However, they are magnified as a result of their undocumented status due to the additional challenges that result from the significant legal and policy based barriers. In addition, the literature has also shown that high school agents can both support and restrict access. Examining the college counseling inputs and outputs through the lens of an undocumented student will shed light on the direct influence of a high school and its agents as undocumented students respond to and attempt to overcome these challenges. Further, exploration of agents’ personally held beliefs and attitudes regarding undocumented students and their place in higher education might reveal that these indirect influences pose significant challenges not well examined in the literature.

**Research Design**

A qualitative approach was used to examine how undocumented students access postsecondary education. As qualitative research attempts to “achieve an understanding of how people make sense out of their lives, delineate the process of meaning-making, and describe how people interpret what they experience” (Merriam, 2009, p. 14), this study attempts to offer insight into the lived experiences of undocumented students during the college choice process. The chosen methodology is an explanatory, interpretive single case study. Thomas (2011) states that the case study method is a kind of research that concentrates on one thing, looking at it in detail, not seeking to generalize from it. When you do a case study, you are interested in that thing in itself, as a whole. (p. 3)
Although the study examines the phenomenon of undocumented students pursuing higher education, it is the unit of analysis, the high school, which is the core of the case study rather than the phenomenon (Merriam, 2009).

The case study is explanatory in that it attempts to describe how undocumented students navigate the college search process, rather than who pursues college or why they pursue college. Thomas (2011) describes an exploratory case study as one that is undertaken because “you are faced with a problem or an issue that perplexes you” (p. 104). The focus on ‘how’ lends further credence to the use of case-study methodology, in which “a ‘how’ or ‘why’ question is being asked about a contemporary set of events, over which the investigator has little or no control” (Yin, 2009, p. 13).

The case study is also interpretive. Rather than solely providing thick, rich description, the heart of the study lies in “understanding the intricacies of a particular situation… [and] that local understanding may be related to prevailing theories or models” (Willis, 2007, p. 243). In qualitative research the intent is to “build toward theory from observations and intuitive understandings gleaned from being in the field” (Merriam, 2009, p. 15), and single case study is appropriate when the case is being used to test theory (Yin, 2009).

Qualitative research does not require the researcher to develop hypotheses prior to conducting the study (Willis, 2007). Therefore, the study poses no direct hypothesis regarding which models of college choice are more relevant than others. However, as the study is designed to explore how a high school and its agents influence undocumented students’ college search, the underlying proposition is that college choice theory rooted in the high school context will be present in the study’s findings.
I initially intended to conduct what Merriam (2009) would describe as a basic qualitative case study, which includes the following components: “focus on meaning, understanding and process, purposeful sample, data collection via interviews, observations and documents, data analysis is inductive and comparative, findings are richly descriptive and presented as themes/categories” (p. 38). However, Thomas (2011) noted that often researchers “use other design frames within the umbrella of the case study” (p. 37). As described later in this chapter and in greater detail in Chapter Six, throughout the process of data collection and data analysis I found myself comparing the programs and activities of my high school, and our college counseling program, to those of the high school in the study. Through the constant reflection of my own practice as a college counselor, and as a result of the changes I implemented at my own high school as a result of this study, the study also reflects the utilization of action research and comparative research.

Finally, I also engaged in critical inquiry with a desire to “critique and challenge, to transform and empower” (p. 34). Critical qualitative research attempts to “raise consciousness and empower people to bring about change” (p. 23), and through the process of data collection, specifically the interviews of the high school agents, aspects of critical research emerged, which I have detailed in Chapter Six.

Case and Context

Merriam (2009) states, “The unit of analysis, not the topic of investigation characterizes a case study” (p. 41) and the unit of analysis in this case study, which is a high school and its “bounded system” (Smith as cited in Merriam, 2009, p. 40), provides additional support for the chosen methodology. The unit of analysis for the case study is
a public high school located in a suburban community northwest of Chicago. Due to the sensitive nature of the subject matter, the high school will receive anonymity throughout the study. The high school is part of a unit district and receives students from two middle schools. The student body of the high school is predominately white with a majority-minority Hispanic population. The exact student population breakdown is as follows: 70.5% White, 15.7% Hispanic, 9.2% Asian, .2% American Indian, 1.5% Black, 3.0% identifying as two or more races, and there are no Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander students. In addition, 17.1% are low income and 1.5% are Limited English Proficiency. The school is well resourced with yearly student expenditures exceeding $22,000, teacher salaries averaging $70,000, and a course curriculum that offers a multitude of honors classes and 30 Advanced Placement courses. Although the high school is one of many schools in Illinois that is not meeting the federal benchmark of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), the high school is labeled as high achieving, with more than 70% of students meeting or exceeding Prairie State Achievement Examination (PSAE) standards compared to the Illinois average of approximately 50%. In addition, 95% of students graduate within four years, the average ACT composite score is 24.2 (the Illinois average is 20.3), and more than 90% of students pursue some form of postsecondary education immediately upon graduation. The high school does not break down college enrollment by race or ethnicity.

The case was chosen in part for its convenience as the researcher has a professional relationship with the district superintendent, who was willing to help facilitate entry into the high school, but it was also selected because it represents a unique case. Most undocumented students attend poorly resourced, underperforming, urban high
schools with low college going rates (Abrego, 2006; Perez Huber & Malagon, 2007), and as highlighted in the previous paragraph, the unit of analysis for the study presents very different characteristics. In addition, the Midwest location of the high school also contributes to its uniqueness. The literature and research on undocumented students and college access has focused almost exclusively on the Latino population, usually Mexican students, living in California or Texas (Abrego, 2006; Abrego & Gonzales, 2010; Castro-Salazar & Bagley, 2010; Contreras, 2009; Flores, 2010b; Gildersleeve, 2010; Gonzales, 2010b; Menjivar, 2008; Pérez, P., 2010; Pérez, Espinoza et al., 2010; Pérez et al., 2009; Perez Huber & Malagon, 2007). Although the undocumented population remains heavily concentrated in California and Texas, recent trends indicate that Illinois is one of a number of states that host vibrant undocumented populations (Passel & Cohn, 2011). In addition, Illinois is currently at the forefront of a growing number of states that promote rather than restrict postsecondary access. The state’s tuition equity legislation uses high school attendance and graduation to determine eligibility for in-state tuition (Rincón, 2008). Moreover, the Illinois Dream Act not only called for the creation of a privately funded scholarship for undocumented students, but also mandated that high school counselors and college admission officers receive training on postsecondary options for undocumented students (Dream Fund Commission, 2011). Consideration of all these factors makes the state and high school context a critical aspect of its selection.

Sample Selection and Data Collection

Case studies look at a phenomenon in depth from multiple perspectives (Thomas, 2011). The study employed multiple methods of data collection, including document review, observation, and interviews, all of which were chosen because they offer
comprehensive insight into the unit of analysis, the high school. In addition, by including interviews with students, teachers, school counselors, and college counselors, the study also utilized data triangulation as a means of collecting various perspectives on the same phenomenon (Merriam, 2009). Although qualitative research cannot, “capture an objective ‘truth’ or ‘reality’” (p. 215), the use of multiple methods and data sources enhances the internal validity and the credibility of study results (Merriam, 2009).

I gathered data for this study over a ten month period, commencing in September 2013 and ending in June 2014. I began observation and document review in September 2013 at the start of the academic school year, and I began interviews in January 2014 after I received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Although formal data collection ended in June 2014, I collected follow up information through January 2016.

**Document Review**

Data collection began with a review of all printed college counseling materials that counselors’ either distributed at college counseling programs or generally made available to students and parents in grades 9-12. These materials included the high school profile, college planning handbook, student athlete handbook, and handouts about the college choice process and financial aid. The handouts addressed the following topics: utilizing Naviance, timeline for juniors, opportunities in the military, college application procedures, student and parent questionnaire for the school counselor recommendation, developing an activities resume, understanding the financial aid process, tips for FAFSA completion, and types of financial aid. I also examined the postcards used to advertise the evening programs for students and parents. Finally, I reviewed the presentations from all
counselor advisory meetings with students, as well as the presentation and corresponding handouts for a freshman registration meeting for students and parents.

I used a document analysis protocol (see Appendix E) to guide each analysis. The protocol identified the intended audience, which stage of the college choice process (predisposition, search, and choice) the document addressed, the college knowledge presented, and whether or not the material contained any information that was particularly relevant to an undocumented student.

Observations

All of the observations took place at the high school and were naturalistic in nature. I commenced the observations by examining the high school’s overall physical space, with special attention paid to the guidance resource center and counseling office. Through these observations, I intended to gain additional contextual information about the high school and the physical aspects that support a college-going culture. I paid particular attention to what resources might speak to an undocumented student. I utilized an observation protocol to guide the observations (see Appendix F), and I also recorded field notes.

The remainder of my observations focused on the five evening college counseling programs presented to students and parents at various times throughout the academic year. The topics of these programs were as follows: college application process for seniors, financial aid for all grade levels, overview of the college search process for juniors, a question and answer with a panel of college representatives for all grade levels, and preparing for the college process for sophomores. In addition, I attended the high school’s college fair for sophomores and juniors hosted in the spring, which is attended
by over 200 colleges and universities. The observation protocol that I utilized to guide the observations (see Appendix F) examined the college knowledge shared with students and parents during evening programs, and also looked for the presence of specific information relevant to an undocumented student. As evening programs were open to the community, I assumed the role of complete observer (Merriam, 2009) during the evening program observations.

**Interviews**

I conducted 15 loosely scripted, semi-structured interviews. The participants included college bound undocumented seniors and recent alumni, as well as a cross section of high school agents. Participants for interviews were purposefully sampled and all had engaged or were involved in the college process. The students were all college bound in that they pursued a college preparatory curriculum and had taken the ACT, and they all had either been accepted to college, or were currently enrolled. The high school agents were teachers of college preparatory courses or academic electives and had written letters of recommendation for college applications, which indicated a deeper level of understanding of the complexities of the college process. The school counselors and college counselors all had college counseling responsibilities as part of their job description, and were regularly engaged in helping students with their postsecondary search.

Kvale and Brinkman (2009) state that the qualitative semi-structured interview uses open ended questions focused on the topic of the research and “attempts to understand the world from the subject’s point of view, to unfold the meaning of their experiences, to uncover their lived world” (p. 1). By encouraging participants to describe
what they experience and feel, as well as how they act, the interviews uncovered fact and
meaning (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009), both of which are critical to understanding how
undocumented students access postsecondary education. The interview questions focused
on the theme of undocumented students and college access, and in an attempt to create a
comfortable environment that allows for discovery, they contained both thematic and
dynamic elements, relating to the “what” and the “how” respectively (Kvale & Brinkman,
2009).

Students. As stated earlier, giving voice to the undocumented student allows
counseling professionals the opportunity to learn firsthand about undocumented students’
wants and needs rather than making assumptions about such wants and needs. The goal
of each student interview was to obtain “descriptions of the life world of the interviewee
with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena” (Kvale &
Brinkman, 2009, p. 327). Therefore, the interview protocol (see Appendix G) used to
guide the student interview was rooted in the three stages of the college choice process:
predisposition, search, and choice. The interviews elicited general background
information about the student, college aspirations, the college search and application
process, financing college, future plans, and policy awareness. I conducted interviews
with four undocumented students. Two students were seniors at the time of the
interviews (class of 2014), one student graduated in 2013, and the fourth graduated in
2012.

High school agents. Gildersleeve (2010) highlighted the need for high school
agents to understand both the social and cultural experiences of undocumented students.
Therefore, the study design included 45-60 minute semi-structured interviews with 11
high school agents. I interviewed six teachers (one from each of the academic disciplines of math, English, social studies, science and world language, as well as one from applied arts, specifically, computer science) and five professional staff members of the counseling department (three school counselors and two college counselors). I rooted the high school agent interviews in thematic questions that attempted to determine each individual’s understanding of the undocumented student experience, as well as the college options that exist (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). The college counselor and school counselor interview protocols were developed two years earlier during a pilot study performed in a case study methodology class. I utilized feedback from the interview participants and results of data analysis in the protocol revisions. The interviews elicited information about the high school agents professional role at the high school, the student body, impressions of the counseling office and the college counseling program, understanding of issues regarding undocumented students and college access, and policy knowledge. The initial case study design included interviewing the school counselor for each of the student participants, which I accomplished for three of the students who shared the same school counselor. Although I was unable to interview the school counselor for the fourth student, the student shared information about his school counselor during the interview.

Data Analysis

Although data collection and data analysis are treated in this chapter as separate processes, they overlapped throughout the study rather than occurring in isolation. Data analysis was ongoing and woven throughout data collection. As highlighted previously in this chapter, I utilized two strategies for analyzing data: relying on theoretical
propositions and examining alternate explanations (Yin, 2009). I utilized research presented in the literature review, with particular attention to models of college choice rooted both within and outside the high school context. I begin this section with an overview of the process of data analysis. Next, I describe the coding process used to develop the thematic findings. Finally, I describe the coding process used to test theory.

**Case Study Database**

The initial phase of data analysis began immediately with the development of a case study database (Yin, 2009). The original database was constructed through NVivo 10; however, as indicated later in this chapter, NVivo 10 was not utilized during the coding process. Therefore, the database was transferred to a password protected jump drive, which I used to store all data throughout the entire study, with the exception of the interview recordings and initial interview transcriptions, which were transferred and stored within Dropbox.

I organized the database by data type with files for each of the following: interviews, observations, documents, and journal entries. Field notes were stored in a file that reflected how they were collected. Each file was then further divided into subfiles. The interview file was divided by type: student, teacher, school counselor, and college counselor, with each subfile containing the interview transcripts and field notes from the interview. Each of the student subfiles also contained a copy of the student’s ACT score and high school transcript. The observation file was divided by type: physical environment and programs. The program file contained an additional subfile for each evening program observed, the field notes collected during the interview, and the completed observation protocol. Also stored within each subfile was a copy of the
presentation from the program and any handouts that were distributed. The document file was divided into three subfiles: website, printed materials, and presentations for evening programs that I was unable to observe. The development of the case study database not only allowed for easier retrieval when coding and analyzing, but also clearly records the actions I took throughout the study.

**Overview of Data Analysis**

This section provides an overview of the analysis process that I implemented for each of category of data collected. A detailed description of the coding process is provided afterward.

**Document review and observation.** As neither document review nor observation of evening programs required IRB approval due to their public access, I began document review and evening program observation in August 2013, at the start of the school year. I did not receive IRB approval for the study until January 2014. Coding of document review and observation guide protocols, along with any field notes, took place immediately in order to allow for protocol changes. Both protocols underwent minor revisions early in the data collection process. I alternated between data collection and coding for both document review and observation throughout the duration of the study. Early analysis of the document review and observation guide protocols resulted in recognition of a pattern in the data, namely the lack of any information that was specifically relevant to an undocumented student, which I noted and returned to once I completed the interviews.

**Interviews.** Immediately after I conducted each interview, I sent the recorded copy of the interview to the transcriber through the use of a password protected Dropbox...
account. She transcribed each interview verbatim and returned a digital copy to me through Dropbox, usually within 48 hours. Upon receipt of each transcript, I compared it against the original recording to check for accuracy and ensure reliability. In a few instances, this resulted in a need to make minor changes to the transcript. After reviewing each transcript, I saved a copy of the transcript to the case study database for later use when coding. I then reviewed each transcript again, utilizing the comments capability of Track Changes in Microsoft Word, to record thoughts and first impressions about the interview. For the interviews with the high school agents, I also wrote a summary of the interview with bulleted points in one or more of the following areas: personal, departmental, college preparation and programming, Latino students and parents, and undocumented students. The bullet point summary and the interview transcript were sent via email to some of the high school agents for review of the transcript and summary and inviting feedback. I was unable to follow up with two of the high school agents who left the high school at the end of the school year. I received few substantive changes from the interview participants regarding the interview summaries. Due to the need to protect confidentiality, I did not conduct member checks with the students.

**Field notes and journal entries.** I reviewed field notes and journal entries throughout the entire period of data collection, jotting thoughts and first impressions. Field notes and journal entries from observations were coded throughout the study. As a result of reviewing field notes taken after the first interview, I realized that I did not include a question regarding Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), which did not exist when I first developed the interview protocols. Therefore, I added a question about
DACA to the high school agent interviews. I did not begin coding the field notes from the interviews until I completed all the interviews.

**Word cloud.** The final step, which I undertook only with the interview transcripts, was to create a word cloud for each set of interviews. Word clouds create an image with the most commonly used words from a selected text, which in this case were the interview transcriptions. I reviewed students and teachers as separate groups, but school counselors and college counselors were reviewed together. The intent was to provide additional insight into the information shared within the interviews. The word clouds from each of the three groups were compared and an entry was made in the researcher’s journal.

Once I felt familiar and comfortable with the data, I began a more systemic process of data analysis, implementing a constant comparative methodology to code the data, which I describe in the next section.

**Coding Process of Data Analysis**

The initial round of coding utilized a priori codes that were developed from the literature review. The a priori codes were as follows: law, cost, relationships, aspirations, and knowledge. These codes were used initially to code the interviews, document review protocols, and observation guides. However, as coding is an iterative process, I also implemented open coding to allow for the emergence of new codes (Merriam, 2009). During the initial coding process, additional codes emerged. These codes were resources, outcomes, environment, academic achievement, and challenges. I noted the additional codes and upon completion of the initial coding using the a priori codes, I coded everything again utilizing the emergent codes.
Although I reviewed each interview and corresponding field notes within approximately one week of the interview, I did not begin coding the interviews until they were all completed, transcribed, reviewed, and had been sent to interviewees for feedback. For consistency, I coded the interviews by participant group, beginning with students. Next I coded the teacher interviews, then school counselors, and finally, the college counselors. I coded the journal entries from the interviews last. In order to analyze the data as objectively as possible, I tried to leave as much time as possible between the journal entry and coding to increase the likelihood that I had moved away from what I felt in the moment.

I utilized Track Changes in Microsoft Word for the coding process. Using a clean copy of each transcript, I highlighted the selected text and input the code into the comments section of Track Changes. I utilized the Search in Document feature to find and organize the sections by codes, and I was also able to view which passages were coded with multiple codes, which was helpful when constructing themes. A similar process was used for field notes and journal entries, which were also recorded through Microsoft Word. I coded observation guide and document review protocols using handwritten codes in the margins of each document. At the end of the coding process, I reviewed the coded interviews by group (student, teacher, school counselor, and college counselor), and similar to the process I implemented with document review and observations, I identified any notable patterns reflected in the data.

**Coding for themes.** After coding the data using both a priori and emergent codes, I reviewed the patterns from the different types of data collected to determine which, if any, patterns were present across one or more data types. This pattern matching led to an
initial development of themes, which then resulted in a thematic coding of all data. I eliminated any theme that did not “hold up” (Merriam, 2009, p. 183) during thematic coding. After eliminating weaker themes, I reviewed the thematically-coded data to determine if any themes could be combined or if any themes needed to be separated out. This process resulted in the themes that are described in Chapter Five.

**Coding for theory.** I also examined the data from a theoretical perspective to search for the relevance of college choice theory rooted in and outside the high school context. Testing the relevance of theory indicates that the study is grounded in the assumption of the existence of an “explanatory framework available for the phenomenon” (Thomas, 2011, p. 115).

The four studies rooted within the high school context were Hill’s (2008) typology of ‘college-linking’ strategies, Pérez and McDonough’s (2008) theory of chain migration and social capital, McDonough’s (1997) theory of organizational habitus, and Engberg and Gilbert’s (2014) study of counseling opportunity structures. Recognizing the unique financial challenges undocumented students face as a result of their lack of legal status, and desiring to test a rival explanation, I examined the data using Paulsen and St. John’s (2002) student-choice and financial nexus model. Finally, I also examined the data using Perna’s (2006) multilevel conceptual model, which is rooted both inside and outside the high school context. To test for the relevance of the theories, I mapped both the a priori and emergent codes onto the models of college choice (see Table 1) and again utilized the Search in Document feature to explore the codes connected to each theory. I conducted this process separately for each of the six theories. The results of this analysis are discussed in Chapter Six.
Table 1. Codes and Models of College Choice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model (Researcher, Year)</th>
<th>Knowledge</th>
<th>Relationships</th>
<th>Resources</th>
<th>Outcomes</th>
<th>Aspirations</th>
<th>Environment</th>
<th>Academic Achievement</th>
<th>Cost</th>
<th>Law</th>
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<tr>
<td>College Linking Strategies (Hill, 2008)</td>
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<td>Chain Migration &amp; Social Networks (Pérez &amp; McDonough, 2008)</td>
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<td>Organizational Habitus (McDonough, 2005)</td>
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<td>Counseling Opportunity Structure (Engberg &amp; Gilbert, 2014)</td>
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<td>Situated-Context &amp; Financial Nexus (Paulesen &amp; St. John, 2002)</td>
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<td>Multilevel Model (Perna, 2006)</td>
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Trustworthiness and Authenticity

Thomas (2011) posits that reliability and validity do not play important roles in case study, and instead researchers should pay attention to quality, triangulation, ethics, and consent, all of which are appropriately addressed in the study design. However, Yin (2009) and Merriam (2009) provide a strong argument in defense of validity and reliability, which Merriam also refers to as trustworthiness. Through methodological and data triangulation, member checking, reflexivity, and development of a case study database (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2009), the study reflects the attention paid to both validity and reliability. Whether examined through the lens of Thomas, Merriam or Yin, the study design (adequately addressing the rationale for the problem), data collection (both methods and quantity), and data analysis (use of theory and alternate explanation, member checking and use of multiple coders) all speak to the trustworthiness of the study.

Ethical Considerations

Recognizing the sensitivity of the topic, extra measures were undertaken to ensure the protection of student participants. Since undocumented individuals are a protected class, I implemented an extra level of security to prevent coercion and preserve confidentiality. The school counselor assigned to all students with a home language of Spanish identified undocumented students in grade 12 who were currently involved in the college counseling process, along with undocumented students enrolled in college who were no more than two years post-high school graduation. The school counselor shared information about the study with each student, either in person or by phone, and students were told to respond to a previously determined college counselor if interested in
participating in the study. This two-person system ensured that the students did not feel pressured or coerced to participate in the study. The college counselor was not aware of all the students who were invited to participate and the school counselor did not learn which students volunteered to take part. Students who agreed to take part in the study received a letter (written in Spanish and English) for their parents that explained the study (see Appendix B). The letter instructed parents to contact the college counselor if they had questions about the study or did not want their child to participate. None of the parents contacted the college counselor regarding concerns about the study.

To protect confidentiality, students chose a pseudonym prior to the interview that I used throughout the study, and I only knew the student by the chosen pseudonym. To protect confidentiality, the Institutional Review Board approved a Waiver of Documentation of Informed Consent for all student interviews, and instead I utilized student Assent/Consent to Participate in Research (see Appendix D). Student interviews were 60-90 minutes in length and took place at the high school after school hours in a private, but familiar and comfortable location in the counseling office arranged by the college counselor. The college counselor who arranged the interviews shared the interview protocol with participants prior to the interview. To situate the student’s academic context, I received a copy of each student’s high school transcript and the score report from the student’s highest ACT composite score. All personal information was redacted and the student was only identified by the chosen pseudonym.

The Department Chair of Counseling assisted in facilitating the interviews of the high school agents by sending an email written by me to the high school faculty and the members of the counseling department (see Appendix A). The email described the study
and instructed interested participants to contact me directly to set up the interviews. Interviews took place at the high school after school hours and Informed Consent forms were used to assure participants of confidentiality (see Appendix C). I used interview protocols to guide the interview (see Appendix G), which were shared with participants prior to the interview. Due to the sensitive nature of the subject, staff members were asked not to disclose identifying information for any students or alumni during the interview.

I recorded all interviews, and after each interview, I transferred the recording into a folder on a password-protected laptop, then downloaded the interview into a password-protected Dropbox account. Once this transfer was complete, I deleted the interview from the recording equipment and the laptop. An individual unconnected to the study, the high school, or any of the participants transcribed all of the interviews verbatim. Transfer of all data took place through a password-protected Dropbox account. The transcriber signed a confidentiality agreement before the transfer of data began (see Appendix H), and she was paid hourly for her services.

I took field notes during each interview and observation. Upon completion of each interview and observation, and at additional times throughout the study, I engaged in self-reflection through the use of a research journal. Electronic versions of document reviews, observation guides, interview and observation field notes, interview transcripts, high school transcripts and ACT score reports were stored on a password protected USB flash drive. Any paper documents were stored in a locked file cabinet. All collected data (paper and electronic) will be destroyed no more than three months after the researcher successfully defends her dissertation.
**Coding Validity**

To ensure validity in the coding process, I engaged in what Kvale and Brinkman (2009) refer to as “reinterview” (p. 196) and what Merriam (2009) calls “member checks” or “respondent validation” (p. 217), which involves inviting the interview participants to provide feedback on my findings. Most of the high school agents interviewed received an electronic copy of the interview transcript with a summary of my findings and were encouraged to share any comments.

Due to the protected class of the undocumented students and the use of pseudonyms throughout the study, I was not able to utilize member checks with the students, nor was I able to use the college counselor to relay information, as that would have breached confidentiality. Therefore, I utilized a second coder to analyze the student interviews. The individual holds a PhD, completed a qualitative dissertation, and has professional experience with undocumented students. She and I met and reviewed the a priori codes as well as the codes that emerged during my process of open coding. After she coded the four interviews, we met again and discussed her coding process. We talked through our coding differences as well as areas of agreement. Although there was significant agreement in coding, she identified the additional codes of identity and resilience, which she felt resonated throughout the interviews. I agreed with her assessment that the codes were warranted and recoded all of the data (interview transcripts, observation guides and document review protocols) utilizing the new codes.

Throughout the analysis process, intra-data and inter-data coding also took place. Specific pieces of data, as well as groups of data (document review, observation guides, and interview transcripts) were compared as I looked for evidence of similarities or
differences. Once I finished coding, I reviewed the data to determine if some codes could be combined into larger categories or themes. The general categories of student invisibility, lack of information, student resilience, and lack of engagement were identified early on.

**Generalization**

As with all qualitative research, concerns could exist regarding external validity, or generalizability, especially in light of its single case methodology (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 2005). However, the ability to generalize is enhanced not only by the design of the study, which utilizes triangulation of data, but also due to the comparative nature of the analysis (Merriam, 2009). Merriam (2009) also states that the benefits of case study come from what is learned about the case rather than just the ability to apply its results to other cases. In addition, Flyvberg (2006) addresses the notion that it is not possible to generalize from a single case with the supposition that formal generalization is overvalued, while maintaining vigorously that one case holds value. Stake (2005) posits that, “people can learn much that is general from single cases...because they are familiar with other cases and they add this one in, thus making a slightly new group from which to generalize” (Stake, 2005, p. 85). Stake also claims that people not only learn by receiving generalizations from others, but that generalizations are also formed from one's own experiences, referring to these generalizations as naturalistic generalizations. He describes naturalistic generalization as “conclusions arrived at through personal engagement in life’s affairs or by vicarious experience so well constructed that the person feels as if it happened to themselves” (Stake, 2005, p. 85). The rich, thick description that is inherent in all qualitative research, and the “time, place and person” (Stake, 2005,
p. 87) that is found in case study, allows readers to make these naturalistic generalizations and draw conclusions based on their own experiences (Stake, 2005).

**Researcher’s Positionality**

As a high school college counselor who works closely with undocumented students in their pursuit of postsecondary education, I acknowledge my personal and professional connection to the topic. The knowledge gleaned from qualitative research is influenced by the experiences of the researcher, and researchers play different roles as determined by their experiences (Stake, 1995). I strongly believe that not only should undocumented students have access to postsecondary education, but every high school agent should strive to ensure that all students are supported throughout the college choice process. I embarked upon this journey with a desire to conduct a study that would yield useful outcomes. I hoped to uncover knowledge that counseling professionals could use immediately in their work with undocumented students, as too often I hear my counseling colleagues questioning what they can do or wondering how they can help. With undocumented students possessing the lowest college attainment rate of any student population currently underrepresented in higher education, we have no time to waste. Therefore, in this study I served the dual role of teacher and advocate (Stake, 1995). In teaching my colleagues about the ways we can support DREAMers as they pursue their college dreams, I advocate for the students who so desperately need support.

However, my professional role as a college counselor, who works with undocumented students, created a potential for bias, especially when discussing the actions of the school counselors and college counselors. Yin (2009) identifies case-study researchers as particularly vulnerable to this bias since the methodology requires the
researcher to be quite familiar with the phenomenon. To minimize bias, I utilized a researcher’s journal to record memos, which captured my thoughts and emotions throughout the study. Journal entries took place after each interview and evening program observation. Although entries were usually short, they allowed for engagement in reflection and self-inquiry. This not only encouraged the revision of ideas and beliefs while allowing for the identification of bias, but also provided valuable insight into my actions as a researcher, thereby enhancing the trustworthiness of the study (Merriam, 2009; Willis, 2007).

Due to my role as a college counselor, it is perhaps not surprising that my journal entries often touched upon the work of school counselors and college counselors. In addition, many of the entries actually tied back to my work as a college counselor and my own high school’s college counseling program. As described in Chapter Four, with the exception of one school counselor, the high school agents knew very little about the population of undocumented students at the high school and they knew even less about their college options. This was completely unexpected. I did not begin this study with any preconceived notions regarding the high school agents, but after most of the interviews, I my journal entries were largely critical. I was more apt to highlight what could be done better than to laud that which was good. Comments were usually about programs, events, and knowledge rather than focusing on individual high school agents. I also found myself thinking about how my school, and usually more specifically my counseling department, does or does not support undocumented students. As a result of such entries, I implemented a number of changes within my own college counseling program. These changes included creating opportunities for teacher professional development on
undocumented students, developing strategies to invite undocumented students to self-disclose their status, and making information about the college choice process accessible to undocumented student without the need to self-disclose. I discuss these changes in greater depth in Chapter Six in the section addressing implications for practice.

**Limitations of the Study**

A number of limitations inherent in the research design must be addressed. As I was dependent on one member of the Counseling Department to assist in identifying potential students for interviewing, it is possible that she did not share information about the study with all eligible participants as a result of her own biases or a desire to assist me and only identify students she deemed to be good subjects. In addition, as described in the chapters that follow, there is a prevailing belief at the high school that all of the undocumented students are Latino. Therefore, it is possible that the counselor did not identify non-Latino undocumented students due to her lack of awareness regarding a student’s undocumented status. As a result, potential candidates who could have offered different perspectives might not have been aware of the study.

As many undocumented students are unwilling to share sensitive personal information, it is possible that this restricted what the students shared in their interview, and answers such as “I don’t know” or “I don’t remember” could have been rooted in a desire to not answer the question. In addition, both students and high school agents may have hesitated to share an unfavorable perspective of a teacher or counselor due to my professional role as a college counselor, and therefore some questions may not have been answered completely or truthfully. I hope that the Informed Consent and Student Assent/Consent, which addressed confidentiality, helped to mitigate any desire to hold
back. In addition, I hope by highlighting the value and importance of the study, all interview participants responded truthfully and to the best of their ability.

Parents play an important and influential role in the college choice process, but language restrictions (I am not a fluent Spanish speaker and the parents were not fluent in English) coupled with their undocumented status prevented their inclusion in this study. The literature has shown the important role that parents play throughout the process and as their voices are not heard, the results of the study are incomplete. However, through targeted questions during the student, school counselor, and college counselor interviews, information regarding the parent perspective as related to the college process emerged.

Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) provided a backdrop that did not exist when the idea for the study was initially conceived. As previously mentioned, three of the four students interviewed had DACA status. It is possible that this legislation affected the study findings by offering options that did not exist just a few years earlier. However, as seen in the findings, the college choice process for the undocumented student without DACA closely resembled the process for the undocumented students with DACA. Therefore, the value in understanding the influences of high schools and agents on an undocumented student’s college search remains pertinent. In addition, some undocumented students fear applying for DACA, others are ineligible for DACA consideration, and of course many more young individuals will cross the border in coming years. In addition, with a presidential election looming on the horizon, the future of DACA remains in limbo. Lastly, should immigration reform happen and the number of undocumented students begins to dwindle, the high school context will become even more relevant, as we are likely to see more schools with a small population of
undocumented students who go unnoticed and their needs unmet. The state of affairs of the undocumented students may change in the coming years but their significance and needs will not.

**Conclusion**

Yin (2009) described case study as a preferred method of research when “how or why questions are proposed, the investigator has little control over events, and the focus is a contemporary phenomenon within a real life context” (p. 2). The rationale for the study, coupled with its design, shows evidence of all three factors, thereby supporting case study as the preferred qualitative methodology for this study. Schwandt (2007) in his definition of reflexivity posited that “all accounts (in speech and writing) are not just about something but are also doing something. Written and spoken accounts do not simply represent some aspect of the world but are in some way involved in that world” (p. 260). Although Schwandt was making a case for the need to engage in critical self-reflection, a crucial aspect of this particular study, what he spoke of can also be applied to both the intent and act of the research. Fine, Weis, Weseen, and Wong (2003) also addressed the importance of research as social inquiry to realign “common sense” (p. 198) about issues related to social justice. Rooted in the notions of inquiry as action and the social responsibility of research, I intended to use research to inform practice, while attending to both reliability and validity. The chapters that follow will detail and discuss the findings of the study, explore implications for professional practice, and suggest areas for further research.
CHAPTER FOUR

CONTEXTUAL FINDINGS

Undocumented students face many challenges on the path to college, with most research pointing to limited financial aid as the most significant obstacle (Contreras, 2009; Pérez, Cortés et al., 2010; Perez, Huber & Malagon, 2007). However, as the college process is multifaceted, additional factors affect an undocumented student’s access to postsecondary opportunities. Using case study methodology and a combination of document review, observation, and interviews, this study explored how the structure of a counseling department, the college counseling program available to students and parents, and the knowledge and attitudes of high school staff impact an undocumented student’s college search.

Before delving into the study’s thematic findings in the next chapter, I will first provide contextual information about the high school, including state reported statistics and details gathered from the observations of the physical environment. Next, I will share basic information about the interview participants. I will also provide an overview of the Counseling Department and its college counseling program, including counselor roles and responsibilities, day meetings with students and evening programs for students and parents, and printed and web based materials that explain the college search and application process to families. Finally, I will address the teacher role in college counseling. This information will aid in understanding the high school, the student body
and staff, and the various elements of the college counseling program, to provide a necessary context for understanding the study’s thematic findings.

**Community Demographics and High School Data**

The student body is comprised of 3,000 students who live in more than 10 towns. Federal census information reveals that on the high end, these towns have a median household income greater than $100,000 and a median house or condo value of almost $400,000, and on the low end they have a median household income of approximately $50,000 and a median house or condo value of $150,000 (quickfacts.census.gov). The high school profile highlights a number of recognitions including the U.S. Department of Education designation as a School of Excellence, a Silver Medal by the U.S. News and World Report High School Ranking, and the College Board AP District Honor Roll. The district website states that the high school was included in Newsweek Magazine’s List of America’s Best High Schools.

As stated in Chapter Three, the high school is the only 9th-12th grade school in a well-resourced unit district with yearly student expenditures exceeding $22,000 and teacher salaries averaging $70,000, as reported by the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE). Labeled as high achieving by ISBE, more than 70% of students meet or exceed standards on the Prairie State Achievement Examination (PSAE), a test used in Illinois to measure the achievement of grade 11 students in reading, mathematics, science, and writing. However, in recent years, as indicated on the Illinois Report Card, both the Hispanic and low income student groups did not make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in Math or Reading as determined by the federal No Child Left Behind legislation, and as a result the high school was placed on Academic Watch Status.
The Department Chair for English Language Learners (ELL) reported that the ELL program enrolls approximately 37 students, with the incoming freshman class to add 29 students due to a change in exit requirements. The majority of ELL students are from Mexico and Central or South America, but the program includes students from Poland, Denmark, China, Korea, and Pakistan. The program monitors exited students for two years, and currently monitors more than 60 students.

The high school profile reports that 67% of teachers hold advanced degrees, the average class size is 23 students, and highly qualified teachers teach all classes. Course offerings, as described in the Program of Studies, include a multitude of honors classes and 30 Advanced Placement classes. More than 90% of student who take an AP exam score a three or higher. The high school profile states that the middle 50% composite score on the ACT is 22-30 and students at the 50th percentile score at a 25.6. The high school profile also reports that 95% of students graduate within four years and more than 95% of students pursue some form of postsecondary education immediately upon graduation.

The high school offers five academic levels (Accelerated, Honors, Average, General and Basic). The grading scale is atypical. Although it utilizes a standard 4.0 unweighted and 5.0 weighted scale with Honors and Accelerated courses receiving a positive weighted value of .5 and 1.0 respectively, General and Basic courses receive a negative weighted value of -.5 and -1.0, respectively. In addition, a grade of D receives a 1.0 value at all levels. The highest weighted GPA for the class of 2014 was 4.705 and the GPA at the 50th percentile is 3.365, with no information below this point provided on the high school profile.
As reflected on the 2014-2015 high school profile, 96% of graduates in the Class of 2014 pursued postsecondary education. Of the graduates who pursued college, 81% attended a four-year college and 19% attended a two-year college. Approximately 71% attended a public institution and 34% remained in state. Graduates have historically attended myriad institutions ranging from community colleges and technical schools, to state universities, liberal arts colleges and Ivy League universities. Graduates from 2010-2014 attended over 400 colleges and universities located domestically and abroad.

The preceding statistics portray a high performing large suburban high school, offering a broad range of academic courses that are taught by a highly qualified faculty. The communities from which the district draws its students represent a wide range of economic backgrounds. Next, I will provide descriptions of the high school’s physical characteristics with a focus on the counseling department.

**High School Physical Environment**

From January through June 2014, I spent ten afternoons at the high school conducting observations and interviews. I also observed six evening programs over the course of the 2013-2014 academic year, all of which took place in either the auditorium or the gymnasium. The descriptions that follow are gathered from the interviews with students and staff in addition to my observation field notes taken during and after each observation.

The high school is located within walking distance of the downtown area, across the street from a wildlife rehabilitation center. With only two access roads, travel in and out of the campus is congested immediately before and after school hours. The student parking lot is filled with mix of expensive cars and what could be described as beaters.
There are a surprisingly large number of SUV’s, many of which are much nicer than those in the staff lot. Many of the cars in the student lot have college stickers plastered on the back window or magnets with the high school’s logo and mascot decorating the trunk or back fender. 

The original high school building was finished in 1949, but major expansions occurred in 1956 and again shortly after in 1960. Although much of the high school was significantly renovated in 1999, including most of the classrooms as well as the athletic fields, both the inside and outside of the high school appear old and a bit dingy. In contrast to the high school, the athletic fields, located just behind the high school, are new and state of the art. As a result of an overhaul completed in 2008, much of which was paid for by private donations, the school community proudly boasts a new athletic stadium with an 8-lane outdoor track, and a new turf field for football, soccer and lacrosse.

**Main Entrance and Reception Area**

Unlike many neighboring high schools that have recently locked doors and built security areas that restrict visitor access to the building, the main entrance is still relatively open. Occasionally a paraprofessional greets visitors outside and holds opens the door, but usually visitors walk in unescorted. The ‘Security Desk’ is approximately 20 steps from the main entrance and is staffed by a plain clothed paraprofessional who scans the driver’s license of visitors to run against the national sex offender database. Wearing of the visitor’s sticker, which has both name and picture, is encouraged but if it falls off no one seems too concerned. The building is quite large and its odd shape is a direct result of the numerous additions and renovations. Visitors unsure of their way
around are apt to quickly get lost. Most visitors are met at the Security Desk by a staff member and directed to their desired location but those familiar with the building are free to continue on their way after check-in. The Security Desk is a hubbub of activity throughout the day, not only with visitors to the high school, but also deliveries of pizza for student activities and boxed chicken lunches to be sold for student fundraisers. Many of the walls near the entrance are lined with artwork, photographs of alumni, fliers announcing upcoming club activities, as well as trophy cases highlighting student successes. The school’s open hallway policy allows students to mill about, gathering to talk or study. Overall, upon arrival, the building feels inviting, and the front line employees are welcoming.

Counseling Office

The Counseling Office, located close to the main entrance, is newly renovated with a welcome area, a receptionist’s desk, and plenty of chairs for students and parents waiting to meet with a counselor. The Counseling Department staff consists of a department chair, eight school counselors (two of whom are designated to work with students whose home language is Spanish), two college counselors, a career advisor, a career specialist, and a guidance resource center coordinator.

The Counseling Office is shaped in a square with a receptionist’s desk in the front and counselor offices lining the hallways on each side and in the back. Counselor offices have glass windows, making it easy to see in or out and unless working with a student, most counselors leave their doors open. The two college counselors have the offices closest to the reception area and are visible to anyone walking into the Counseling Office.
Students can make appointments with a counselor, but many seem to take advantage of walk-in opportunities.

**Guidance Resource Center**

Around the corner from the Counseling Office sits the Guidance Resource Center (GRC), which is the heart of all college-related activity. Outside the GRC, two bulletin boards advertise volunteer opportunities and college related information including upcoming visits from colleges, summer precollege programs, college open house programs, and details about college entrance tests. The GRC is bright and cheery with lots of natural light due to the large windows that comprise most of the back wall. Pennants and posters line the other walls advertising different colleges, and college guidebooks and career information fill the bookshelves. Round tables with chairs allow for group work and meetings with college representatives, which are concentrated in the fall when over 200 college representatives visit the high school. The GRC is open every day during school hours, and is staffed by one paraprofessional who coordinates visits by college representatives and assists students with their college research and application completion. Use of the GRC by students is purposeful and students are rarely seen just hanging out in the GRC.

**Interview Participants**

I conducted 15 interviews, which included two current students, two recent alumni, six teachers, three school counselors, and two college counselors. All interviews took place at the high school either during school or immediately after school.
Students

Four undocumented Hispanic students took part in the study. They all arrived in the U.S. from Mexico under the age of 10, and all had transitioned out of the English as a Second Language program (now referred to as English Language Learners) before the start of high school. While in high school the students were all part of the free and reduced meals and book program. All four pursued a college preparatory curriculum that included Algebra II, which is considered the minimum math required for unrestricted admission to state universities in Illinois. All four students have plans to attend or are attending the local community college. All of the students took the ACT one time as part of the PSAE. Although the students explored a number of colleges, in the end they all applied only to the local community college. Three of the students have Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) status. To aid in understanding the student context, I will provide a short biographical summary for each student. Students are referred to by their chosen pseudonym.

Kevin. Kevin was a 17 year old senior. He had a weighted GPA of 1.74 and an ACT of 15. Kevin presented the lowest academic credentials of the four students, yet he was the most positive of the group of students, both when speaking about the present as well as the future. On the Prairie State Assessment Examination (PSAE), he scored below standards in Science and Reading and received an academic warning score in Math. He planned to attend the local community college intending to study computer science or mechanical engineering. During his college search, he visited Northern Illinois University, Illinois State University, another nearby community college, and the community college he planned to attend. Of the schools he considered, Northern Illinois
University (NIU) appealed to him most. By the time of our interview Kevin had been to NIU’s campus three times and had decided that it was likely where he would transfer to after receiving his associate’s degree. Kevin learned from his counselor about the guaranteed admission program for students interested in engineering. This program would allow him to transfer from the community college to NIU and he planned to pursue this path.

Kevin was born in Las Casas, Mexico (near Puebla) and came to the United States when he was three years old. Kevin crossed the border with his mother and older brother to join his father, who had moved to the United States two years prior. Kevin had DACA status and worked at a local golf course as a locker room attendant. His favorite classes in high school were part of the computer science curriculum.

Gabriella. Gabriella was an 18 year old senior. Gabriella had a weighted GPA of 2.92 and an ACT of 20. She met standards in all three areas on the PSAE. Gabriella planned to attend the local community college where she intended to study radiologic technology. Her plan was to use her two-year degree to get a job, and then return to school to “get a real degree” (Gabriella) and study psychology or counseling. Gabriella considered a number of universities in Chicago but she could not remember any of them by name.

Gabriella had two older brothers and two younger sisters. Her youngest sister was the only child who was born in the United States. Gabriella will be the first in her family to graduate from high school. Both of her brothers dropped out of high school to work when her parents divorced. Gabriella was born in Veracruz, Mexico and she came to the United States when she was five years old. Her parents were already in the U.S. and she
and her four siblings had been living with their grandparents in Mexico. Her parents
decided to bring them to the U.S. after her grandparents died. Gabriella and her siblings
crossed the border without their parents. Unlike the other students interviewed, Gabriella
had not yet applied for DACA. When asked where she was in the application process she
responded,

   My parents are trying to figure out how to do it and all this stuff. They’re trying to
figure it out on their own. They’re trying to find someone who actually knows
how to do it, ‘cause we heard that you can only do it once. (Gabriella)

**Monica.** Monica was 21 years old and had graduated from the high school in
2012 with a weighted GPA of 2.62 and an ACT Composite Score of 18. On the PSAE
she scored below standards in Science and Math and met expectations in Reading. She
was in her second year at the local community college and planned to graduate in May
2014 with her Associate’s Degree. When exploring colleges, Monica considered
Northern Illinois University, Elmhurst College, the University of Illinois at Chicago,
DePaul University, and Northwestern University. After her associate’s degree she
planned to transfer to Northeastern Illinois University or Loyola University Chicago to
study psychology or counseling.

Monica was born in Guanajuato, Mexico and came to the U.S. when she was
eight years old. Monica’s father was already working in the U.S. but he returned to
Mexico so he could cross the border with Monica, her mother, and her younger brother.
Monica had DACA status and she worked as a server at a local golf course.

**Nancy.** Nancy was 18 years old and graduated high school in 2013 with a
weighted GPA of 2.80 and an ACT Composite Score of 23. She met standards in all three
areas on the PSAE. Nancy was currently studying business at the local community
college. During her college search, Nancy considered the University of Illinois at Chicago, Northern Illinois University, and DePaul University. Nancy participated in a summer enrichment program at DePaul University through the National Society of Hispanics with a Master’s in Business Administration and due to her entrepreneurial spirit she hoped to one day open her own business, for which she already had many ideas. Nancy planned to transfer to a four-year university after obtaining her associate’s degree. Nancy had DACA status and worked as a sales representative at a cellular store.

Nancy was born in Mexico City and came to the U.S. when she was three years old. She crossed with her mother, father, and two uncles. Unlike the other students, neither of Nancy’s parents was already in the U.S. and also unlike the other students; her father has a college degree. Nancy’s father was an unemployed civil engineer in Mexico who originally applied for a visa to move the family legally. When the visa request was denied, he made the decision to move anyway.

My dad wanted me to go to a private school, like a catholic private school [in Mexico] and it would be too much money just for himself to fund, and the economy was going down and then originally he was going to get a visa. He applied and everything but he says that they weren’t going to give him one because my mom was a stay at home mom or something and he said he got mad. My uncle had crossed the border before him but my uncle came here when there was amnesty, so my uncle was able to get residency and everything. So my uncle was like ‘yeah just come over we’ll figure it out’ and my dad was like, ‘ok’.

(Nancy)

Table 2. Student Demographic Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Graduation Year</th>
<th>Cumulative Weighted GPA</th>
<th>ACT Score</th>
<th>Birth Country</th>
<th>Age of arrival in the U.S.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kevin</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>1.74</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabriella</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>2.92</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monica</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>2.62</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nancy</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>2.80</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Teachers

I interviewed six teachers, one from each of the five academic departments, English, mathematics, social studies, science and world language, and also one from applied arts. All of the teachers had experience teaching different levels of students across the four grades and all had written college recommendations, which I used as an indicator of more than basic familiarity with the current college application process.

Teacher #1. Teacher #1(T1) was a white male and had been a teacher at the high school for eight years in the applied arts department. After retiring from a 25-year career in the manufacturing business, he returned to school to get a second undergraduate degree in math education, after which he pursued a master’s degree. T1 taught all of the computer science courses, which are academic electives ranging from an introductory class on animation and game design to a post-AP Computer Science class called Data Structures. T1 was quite proud that the high school was one of few in the country that had a full computer science curriculum. T1 taught a broad range of students, and described the makeup of his classes in the following way:

I get students from all over the spectrum. It’s not like I get freshman in my intro classes and so on. In those intro classes I can get freshman through seniors. Maybe students are just trying to get their applied arts credit and be done with that, and I also get students all over the [spectrum]. I get brilliant students. I get average students. So it all depends on what they want to do or what they are interested in. (T1)

By choice, T1 taught six classes a day (a typical course load is five) and he also served as a Freshman Advisor and sponsor of the Robotics Club. T1 loved teaching and commented that it was the best job he ever had.
I can’t wait to get to work in the morning, you know? My lab is open early. Kids come in there and hang out, got the music playing and I have to kick kids out 4:30 when I go home. So I just really enjoy that process of getting to know individual students, and yet also there is this collective feeling of, there’s a real good vibe, you know? Kids just come in and hang out. (T1)

**Teacher #2.** Teacher #2 (T2) was a white male and had been a teacher in the English department for 10 years, hired immediately upon completion of his undergraduate degree. T2 went into teaching largely because that was what his friends were doing, but as a student he always loved social studies and English. He was inspired to major in English by his high school senior English teacher and by a poetry professor his freshman year of college. T2 taught a mixture of courses ranging from average to advanced placement, including a number of split-level courses with students taking the class for either honors or average credit. T2 had never taught a remedial (Basic) class. T2 also coached girls track and cross-country. One of T2’s favorite things about teaching high school was talking with students about their writing.

You know, I love having a conversation with kids about their writing and I find that language is so important, and just being able to kind of give them feedback, ‘here is something I think you can strengthen and here is something that is great’. (T2)

**Teacher #3.** Teacher #3 (T3) was a white female who came to the U.S. from Germany as an au pair 15 years ago. She was a teacher of German language in the fifth generation of teachers in her family. T3 was in her third year at the high school and currently served as the World Language/English Language Learners Department Chair; next year she planned to move into a new role as an Associate Principal and would only teach one class. When asked to talk about her career as a teacher she shared the following, ‘I’m passionate about teaching, [I] truly enjoy it. [I] truly enjoy working with
students’ foreign language acquisition and I’m glad that I’m still teaching one class next year to always stay in touch with the students” (T3).

Teacher #4. Teacher #4 (T4) was a white male who graduated from the high school in 2001. He joked that a number of bad history teachers inspired him to pursue teaching. After obtaining a bachelor’s and master’s degree in history, he was hired by the social studies department and had been teaching at the school for seven years. T4 taught a range of history classes including a lower level skills centered course for freshmen called Global Studies. He also taught AP U.S. History, open to sophomores and juniors. His niche over the years had become working with the students who were skill deficient. In addition to teaching history, T4 also coached football. When asked what his favorite thing was about being a teacher he replied,

The classroom. Being in the classroom, interacting with the students. It is hands down the greatest thing when you are having a class discussion or you are doing a lesson, you’re doing an activity and they are clicking, they are engaged. That is, that is hands down the best feeling and I guess I’m a junkie in that every day I need a little bit of that. (T4)

The previous year T4 achieved designation as a National Board Certified Teacher and aspired to take on a leadership role within the building, though unlike T3, he did not have any administrator aspirations. When asked why he pursued the rigorous process of National Board Certification he shared the following:

It’s something I really wanted to do, always. The school, the district encourages it through incentives, I guess, for lack of a better term. There had been, you know, a financial stipend for people who were National Board certified and then for a couple of years that went away and when I started the National Board program there was no financial incentive but it was something where the district kind of made it clear that if you were a National Board certified teacher you were somebody that was looked at as a leader. You were somebody whose opinion they sought. You were someone who they expected to kind of take a leadership role in
the school while not being an administrator, which I did not want to be an administrator but I wanted a leadership role in the school. (T4)

**Teacher #5.** Teacher #5 (T5) was a white male and had been a math teacher for 20 years. His previous teaching experiences included a catholic high school as well as a therapeutic day school for students with behavior disorders and learning disabilities. T5 had been teaching at the high school for six years and was currently pursuing his doctorate. His favorite part of teaching was being with his students and he loved the variety they offer.

You walk into work, I mean how many jobs can you where you walk into work and you don’t know what because you are dealing with 125 or 130 students a day? And all of those personalities and they all mix and you interact with all of them and it’s just different every day. (T5)

Unlike the other teachers interviewed, T5 did not follow a direct path to college after high school. Neither of his parents went to college, in fact his oldest brother did not graduate from high school. Like many first generation students, he did not know how to pursue college and therefore did not do so until his late twenties, when he enrolled at the same community college as the students interviewed here.

I mean no one ever did it, so how are you supposed to do it? So finally at like 28 years old I’m looking around going ‘I, I got to do something. I gotta do something different’ and I went back. I took one class and I loved it and then I went decided, ‘You know what? I can do this’ but it’s very hard to figure out the process. I can’t imagine what it’s like for someone who perhaps has a language barrier or something like that as well. For me to figure out the process at 28 years old, I was like, ‘uh I don’t even know where to get money from or how to schedule a class or anything’ and then finally you know I just said, ‘You know what? I’ve gotta do it.’ So I sat and I did it. Got started. I actually went to [community college] for two years. Loved [community college], phenomenal program, transferred to Northeastern [Illinois University] from there. (T5)

T5 had a varied teaching load. His students ranged from a morning class with accelerated eighth graders to an afternoon post AP calculus class (most students in the
class took his accelerated class as 8th graders) and wedged between the two was a low level Algebra II class for juniors and seniors who struggle with math.

**Teacher #6.** Teacher #6 (T6) was a white female and had been a science teacher for 13 years, all at the high school. She was in her first year as chair of the science department. Her original college major was physical therapy but while she loved her science classes, she hated her clinical experiences and made the decision to become a science teacher instead. She had taught multiple levels of biology including biology for English Language Learners (ELL). She had her ELL endorsement and was the first science teacher to teach ELL Biology, which previously had been taught by ELL teachers without a science background. She noted that all ELL science classes were now co-taught by a science teacher and an ELL teacher who was a member of the World Language Department.

**Table 3. Teacher Demographic Information**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Subject/Position</th>
<th>Years at the high school</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>T1</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Applied Arts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T2</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T3</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>German/Department Chair of World Language and English Learners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T4</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Social Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T5</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Mathematics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T6</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Science/Department Chair</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**College Counselors**

The high school employed two full time college counselors to work with students beginning in the junior year to guide them through the college counseling process. They also planned and implemented the college counseling evening programs as well as
updated the college counseling handbook and the additional guidebook for student athletes. In addition, they coordinated and administered all advanced placement testing.

**College Counselor #1.** College Counselor #1 (CC1) was a white female in her second year at the high school. She entered college planning to study opera music performance, but upon realizing that she did not want to be a starving artist, she changed her major twice before dropping out of college. After working for a few years in sales, CC1 returned to college and obtained her bachelor’s degree in business with an emphasis in personnel management (human resources). CC1 worked in human resources for a number of years, before leaving the workforce to raise her children. When she returned to work, she obtained a position as the college and career assistant at an area high school, which led her to return to school to study counseling. She intended to pursue a position as a generalist counselor but after working in the college and career center for six years, she realized that college counseling was of greater interest. She indicated that she felt incredibly fortunate to secure her position in light of her limited experience.

**College Counselor #2.** College Counselor #2 (CC2) was a white female in her sixth year at the high school. She had been a school counselor for four years and was in her second year as a college counselor. She began college with plans to study nursing, but during her clinical experience she realized that she had no desire to work in a hospital. She met with a career counselor and discovered that she was better suited for counseling or a school-related field, but felt that it would take too much time to backtrack and pursue either field so she studied business instead. Like CC1, she worked in business for a number of years before leaving to raise her children. She returned to the workforce when her children were school age and obtained a grant-funded part-time position at an area
high school, working with their career awareness programs and job shadowing. She realized how much she enjoyed working with high school students and again considered pursuing a counseling degree but was deterred by the teaching certification prerequisite. When her grant-funded position was eliminated she spent a few years working in marketing before learning that teacher certification was no longer required. She returned to school to obtain her school counseling certification and was immediately hired at the high school.

Table 4. College Counselor Demographic Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Years at the high school</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CC1</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CC2</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>6 (2 in current position)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

School Counselors

The Counseling Department had eight school counselors, each of whom had a caseload of approximately 375 students. In addition, the Department Chair also carried a small caseload of students. Students were assigned to school counselors in the freshman year and remained with the same school counselor until graduation. Two school counselors were assigned to work with students whose home language is Spanish and all assignments were made through the freshman advisory.

School Counselor #1. School Counselor #1 (SC1) was a Hispanic female in her 17th year as a school counselor. She began her professional career at a community agency in a grant-funded position as a screening, assessment and support services therapist. When the grant was eliminated, a friend encouraged to pursue a position as a school counselor. Born in Mexico, SC1 was fully bilingual in Spanish and English. Although at
the time she was not yet a certified school counselor, she was hired mid-year at an area high school where she worked for eight years. During that time she obtained school counseling certification as well as bilingual and ELL certification. Like many others, she benefited from the change in Illinois law that eliminated the teaching certification requirement for school counseling certification. She then moved to another suburban high school where she worked for two years before moving into her current position. SC1 was one of two school counselors for students whose home language is Spanish. She was the sponsor for the Latino Leadership Team, a school wide effort to promote Latino student integration, and she served as the district representative for a multi-district, one-day workshop that promoted Latino student college and career exploration.

School Counselor #2. School Counselor #2 (SC2) was a white female who graduated college with a degree in communications. After working in the field for a number of years she left to raise her children. While her children were young, she volunteered regularly in the high school and knew that she wanted to do something with high school students. When she attended her oldest daughter’s high school orientation and heard the presentation given by the school counselor, she knew immediately that she had found her calling. She returned to school to obtain her school counseling certification, but with no experience found it difficult to find a job. Like CC1, she worked at an area high school as the college and career advisor before being hired in her current position. She was in her second year as a school counselor and loved her job but said that if she knew how hard it was to get a counseling position, she might not have gone down this path:
I love it. I’m 100% glad I did what I did. If I would have known what I know now, it’s a very difficult career to get into. I am very lucky and fortunate that I have a job. If I would have looked at that before, I probably wouldn’t have done it. (SC2)

**School Counselor #3.** School Counselor #3 (SC3) was a white male who began his professional career teaching social studies, but left for a short while to pursue a career in business. He realized that he missed his students, particularly working one on one with students, and decided to get his counseling certification. He was hired at the high school immediately after finishing his degree, and had been at the high school for eight years.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Years at the high school</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SC1</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SC2</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SC3</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This section provided short descriptions of the 15 interview participants, who were comprised of four students, six teachers, two college counselors, and three school counselors. The next section provides detailed information about the counseling department and its college counseling program.

**Counseling Department and College Counseling Program**

The high school’s mission, as described on its website, emphasizes risk taking, critical thinking, communication, and lifelong learning as goals for its students. The Counseling Department mission is more outcomes focused and includes having students understand that counseling is a critical part of college preparation. Students are encouraged to explore their interests with their school counselor, and school counselor
goals include assisting students in the development of plans for post high school. School counselors and college counselors generally agree with these defined goals. When asked to describe what they viewed as the primary goal of the department, responses were largely outcome-based, focused on such things as preparing students for their postsecondary goals. They also addressed students’ social, emotional, and academic needs while helping them grow and prepare for life after graduation. SC1 stated that the primary department goal was to “…just get kids prepared for whatever lies after high school. For a majority of kids it’s college, getting them ready for college” (SC1). School counselors and college counselors shared similar views of each other’s roles, reflecting congruency among department members and a solid understanding of responsibilities. They generally described both positions quite broadly.

The general view of the counseling department among the high school staff was positive and counselors were complimented for their work in light of their large caseloads:

I think they do a really good job given a large caseload. I am imagining their caseload is maybe 300 or 400 students and so the ability to touch base with all of those can be challenging but it’s the norm for me to go to a guidance counselor and say, ‘hey talk to me about Suzie’ and they know exactly who I am talking about and her background and what she is going through and that sort of thing. It’s not like they have to look her up on the computer and figure out what her schedule is and that sort of thing. So I feel like there is a first name basis and I feel like they are doing a very good job of trying to know their students that help them guide their high school career and where they are going post high school. (T1)

However, it was mentioned that due to their large caseloads, counselors struggle to spend a lot of one-on-one time with students, and some said that the school as a whole does not properly support the students who exhibit an “I don’t care” attitude.
School Counselor Responsibilities

The counseling staff described the primary goals of a school counselor as preparing students for all opportunities, helping them navigate high school, and supporting students. CC2 shared that since the college counselors do not meet with students until junior year, freshmen or sophomores will go to school counselors with college questions. SC3 also emphasized the role that school counselors play in college counseling, as there are always a number of seniors who do not meet with a college counselor and turn to the school counselor for assistance and guidance in the college process. However, as the bilingual school counselor, SC1 highlighted how her job differed from that of the other school counselors, stressing the amount of work she does with families as opposed to working directly with students.

As a bilingual counselor working with Latino families, because the families are so close connected and involved, you can’t just work with the student. You can’t. So I would say that’s probably one of the biggest ways that my job is different from everybody else’s, is that I’m constantly with families. I think that for most of my colleagues, their families don’t just walk in. They have appointments and if they don’t have an appointment they’re not going to walk in the door, but I just have to be available. At any time, any day and not just one family member, but a whole office full of people and they just show up. (SC1)

Many aspects of SC1’s outreach are unknown to her colleagues. SC3 shared that while preparing for his interview, he learned that SC1 regularly makes calls to her Spanish speaking families to inform them about upcoming programs and encourage participation. He previously had no idea that she did this.

College Counselor Responsibilities

When asked to describe the primary goal of a college counselor, interviewees largely focused on the responsibility to help students move on after high school. CC1
shared that college counselors are specifically responsible to “help students understand the [college] process and to help them be aware of the tools that are available to them and be there as a resource” (CC1). SC1 highlighted the different roles of school counselors and college counselors in the following way:

My role as a generalist counselor and as a bilingual counselor, it’s just, there’s so many other features, facets of my job. I feel like a social worker. I feel like a case manager. I’m linking kids up to all different kinds of services, showing them things on the computer, meeting with their parents and it’s just very different. My role really is to set, kind of, the foundation for students to make that next step, to educate them, to inform them of the general information of what they need to know from freshman year on. Then the college counselors come in with the details. They update us constantly of the new things that are happening and [with students] the college counselors specifically deal with just the college piece. What’s a good fit? What are the pieces? What’s the process to apply? (SC1)

The college counselors are generally viewed as the experts on the college process and the relationship between the school counselors and college counselor is quite collaborative. School counselors will often share information about a student with a college counselor, and at times, they also sit in on college counseling appointments. The school counselors also use the college counselors as a resource in their work with students.

I go to them all the time if there’s a certain college issue that comes up, just to run ideas by them or here’s what this school wants, how should we handle this? You know, all the unique situations that come up. (SC3)

With a population that is predominately comprised of students with Spanish home language, SC1 highlighted that she does not feel as well versed in college counseling. As result of working largely with Latino students, whom she identified as typically not in honors and AP classes, she feels that she has not developed as strong a base of college knowledge as many of her peers. She often refers students to a college counselor, and she
often consults with a college counselor about specific students. She also uses the college counselors to build her own college knowledge.

With college counselors, I refer my kids to them all the time. We will consult about different kids. I’ll have them look at their scores, their GPA, their classes and talk about what’s going on, what the student has in mind and then just seek their input because I don’t feel like I’m as strong in the college piece for a lot of my kids, you know? Especially this year. I mean even it’s probably totally different from what you’re doing but my case load, that part of my alphabet, has shifted, so I’m at the end of the alphabet. I have a lot more students that I’m working with that are very, very high achieving kids, which I’ve never had before. I mean these are extremely bright kids that have been in honors forever and AP and my clientele, always, my entire career has been more working with Latino students, [who are] average, low average, at risk, so I feel much more expert in that area versus working with the really bright student. So when I work with the college counselors a lot of my dialogue with them is just building my confidence, my knowledge and working with all different kinds of students. (SC1)

**College Counseling Program**

The college counseling program is quite comprehensive and encompasses a variety of activities, including individual appointments with college counselors, as well as group meetings with students during the school day and evening programs with students and parents. Both school counselors and college counselors play active roles in the design, development, and execution of the various programmatic offerings. The department emphasizes that students should recognize their differences and individual needs when developing their academic and postsecondary plans. Programs are rooted in the idea that the process begins with student self-assessment, and the foundation of the college choice process can be found in what the department casually refers to as the five P’s: person (student), place (size and distance), program (major or career), people (diversity of campus student body) and price (college costs and family resources available). Every student or parent program attempts to address one or more of these
concepts.

The teachers all felt that the high school does a good job of preparing students for college, which they agreed is the path for most students.

I think we create an environment here overall that everybody should be going to college. I think that, that’s number one. It’s not, ‘hey you have to be from [name of town] to go to college’. I think it’s everybody here goes to college. 90 whatever percent go to college. I think that’s big right away. But I think that the guidance department does a really nice job of reaching out with our college nights, with our transition nights. You know I feel like there’s a lot of hand holding, where they walk, not just that population, but everybody kind of through the process. So I would say from what I’ve seen it’s very inclusive. It’s very ‘hey everybody come to this night where were going to talk about what the next steps are for the ACT, the SAT, and college rec[ommendation] letters of recommendation’. And they sent home a letter in English. They sent home a letter in Spanish. It goes to every kid so to me it’s this sense of ‘hey you know everybody should be coming to this’ that I think is probably the biggest outreach. I know they do have, I think they have, nights where they try to specifically reach out to those populations and bring them in here. (T4)

The college counselors and the college counseling program have historically been one of the strongest aspects of the Counseling Department. However, multiple teachers expressed concern that the high school places too much emphasis on college as the only valued outcome. One teacher stated the concern that school counselors only encourage students to choose courses based on college admission requirements rather than a student’s interest.

I feel that when they’re advising students it’s more like numbers and averages and this is what you need to do, like black and white rather than really what the student is communicating to them that they want and need….Based on what would look good rather than what’s really their interest….So it’s like these what are the prestigious courses even though it’s not necessarily the best thing for the student. You are just padding a transcript rather than giving them an experience….I see that often where it’s like, ‘ok well I can’t take this course or you know why I can’t take a computer science course, because I need to fit these other things in’. (Teacher)
Similarly, another teacher felt that there was too much emphasis just on college rather than encouraging the exploration of all post high school options.

It would be nice, I think, to be more inclusive, open-minded. You know there are different paths that you can take...some of the jobs available, we don’t have people trained for them. Like the nanotechnology...so there is a two year program and then you are hired and then you get a job....I think it would be great if there were an avenue where that was more part of the school culture. I like to think, I am not sure that college counselors are talking to kids about that, but then I don’t even know how many kids actually really have that conversation with their college counselors. I mean just the name college counselor is showing you kind of the stance of the community and the school. (Teacher)

The teacher went on to question whether the college counselors really help students figure out what route is best for them or if they just direct everyone to college.

But I think those resources are in place with the college counselors to go and seek help. How much is able to come to them I don’t know because again we have two people in the building for graduating class of say 800 or so. It’s quite a few. And the school too, as a building, the guidance department always puts up little pennants with the student’s pictures and where they are going. So there is again, I think, that pressure you know get your picture up and announcing where you’re headed and what you’re up to. I haven’t found one yet that isn’t a school. So I don’t even know if they put them up if someone is going to a different route....Yeah I think it would be all universities and then the military academies would be about the only thing I have ever seen up. So I don’t know if certain kids were just like ‘oh you’re going to start working? Well you don’t get a picture up.’ That is, I think the resources are in place but you have to be a go getter to get full benefit of them. (Teacher)

**College counseling appointments.** College counselors begin their work with students in the junior year with college planning appointments that start in late November and end in April. No appointments take place in May because, in addition to their college counseling responsibilities, the two college counselors are also responsible for coordinating Advanced Placement testing, which takes place nationwide the first two full weeks of May. College counselors typically meet with students once during the junior year, and parents often participate in the college meeting. During the course of the
college search and application process, each college counselor will meet with approximately 225-250 students and, due to the size of the class, only 10% of students will schedule a follow up appointment. Due to limited access to college counselors, some families will also work with an independent college consultant in addition to the counselor and college counselor. According to one college counselor, the cost for this outside assistance ranges between $150/hour to a package rate of $5,000, and most low income and first generation college students, as well as those whose parents have limited English proficiency, are less likely to have access to such support.

**Naviance and Career Cruising.** The high school utilizes two web-based tools, Naviance and Career Cruising, to assist students with college and career exploration. Students activate their individual accounts during the second semester of the freshman year, when they begin to work on self-assessment and its role in career planning in their freshman advisory.

Career Cruising allows students to explore careers and educational pathways through the use of career profiles and videos of interviews with people employed in a variety of fields. Students can take an ability and skills assessment, in addition to a learning inventory to discover the careers for which they are well suited. Naviance’s career offerings include a personality assessment, career interest profiler, resume builder, and detailed career information. The site stores personal information such as a grade point average and college entrance test scores and also maintains a database of the colleges applied to by each student. Students largely utilize the scattergram function of Naviance, through which they can assess chances for admission at a particular college by comparing their own grade point average and test score against the admission averages.
outcomes for previous applicants from the high school. Naviance also allows students to look at how many students previously applied to and enrolled at a particular college. Other features including the ability to research colleges and compare colleges, as well to build and store a college list.

All of the school counselors highlighted the role they play in the college planning process. When asked to describe their involvement, they repeatedly referred to helping students understand how to utilize Naviance and Career Cruising. Yet, when students were asked in the interviews about tools they utilized in the college search, none of them identified either program as a resource.

**Day meetings.** The Counseling Department offers a number of college meetings throughout the school year for all grade levels. School counselors or college counselors usually lead the meetings through the high school’s advisory program. These meetings included: freshman advisory meetings in October and November, sophomore advisory meetings in September, junior advisory meetings in October, November, and March, and the senior advisory meeting in early September. A school counselor leads all counseling related advisory meetings that occur in grades nine through eleven, and a college counselor leads the grade twelve advisory meetings. Most of the advisory meetings have a college element such as testing, researching colleges, course preparation, resume building, completing applications, and requesting transcripts. None of the advisory meetings include information specifically relevant to an undocumented student.

**Evening programs.** While the advisory meetings during the day are solely for students, the evening programs are for both students and parents. Students are expected to be involved in every aspect of their college search, so the only program intended just for
parents, takes place immediately after the start of school in the fall of senior year, and covers the same information heard by seniors in their advisory meeting. Although the college counselors are largely responsible for developing and executing the evening programs for students and parents, school counselors attend most of these programs to take advantage of the opportunity for valuable face time with parents. In addition to talking with parents before the program, school counselors help manage crowds, distribute handouts, and sometimes serve as a necessary barrier between eager parents and presenters.

The evening programs addressed such topics as the college application process (seniors), financial aid (all grade levels), an overview of the college search process (juniors), a question and answer session with a panel of college representatives (all grade levels), and preparing for the college process (sophomores). In an effort to reduce stress on students, the program for sophomores on preparing for the college process had been eliminated in recent years but was brought back as a result of parent requests for information earlier in the process. The high school also hosted a college fair in the spring attended by over 200 colleges and universities across the country. Held yearly, the college fair is geared toward showing sophomores and juniors and their parents the myriad options in postsecondary education, and it is open to students from neighboring high schools.

The counselors also hold an evening meeting for freshman and parents, during which they talk about the registration process and how to make the most of high school. For this program, I reviewed the presentation and corresponding handouts. Although the counseling staff emphatically claimed that the college process did not begin until junior
year, the topic of preparing for college surfaced in this freshman registration program. Just prior to reviewing the multi-step process for selecting future courses, school counselors discussed the academic four-year plan and its impact on college options. Admission requirements for Illinois state universities, out-of-state public universities, private colleges, highly selective colleges, and community colleges are highlighted, and school counselors note that the first step in post high school planning is choosing classes. In addition to introducing the five P’s, the school counselors point out that with 96% of students pursuing postsecondary education, college is the assumed next step. They also introduce the career planning aspect of Naviance, and prepare students to utilize this tool in their freshman advisory.

Overall evening programs are well attended, and although a number of parents attended without their student, many parents and students attended together. Many parents could be seen taking notes or screen shots of the presentation. However, many students, and a few parents, could be seen on their phones texting, sending emails, or searching the Internet. As with the day programs, no information at any of the evening programs directly addressed circumstances specific to an undocumented student.

I noted that attendance at the evening programs by families of color or immigrant families was poor, which SC1 and CC2 confirmed. CC2 reported, “as I’m looking out in the audience, I don’t see a large Hispanic population by any means” (CC2). SC1 shared that only two of all evening programs are offered in Spanish and both are for freshman. The first is an orientation program for freshman and parents, which takes place right before school begins, and the second is the registration meeting. The Spanish programs
take place an hour earlier and are led by SC1. Attendance at these programs is also usually low.

This year it [attendance] was smaller, so I don’t know. That’s one of the frustrations. You kind of put these programs together and you hope that people come in and get the information and get involved and then you don’t have a very high turnout. (SC1)

**College counseling website.** The Counseling Department website covers a broad range of topics beginning with the Department Mission and Counselor and Student Goals. College related information includes an overview to grade specific college programs (both day and evening) with short descriptions addressing what is covered at each meeting, basic financial aid information, suggested websites with college information, and resources available in or connected to the GRC. However, much of the information listed is outdated, as it refers to videos, DVD’s, paper college applications, and college catalogs, all of which are no longer printed, made, or distributed by colleges.

Also included on the website is extensive career information, including details about Education to Careers, a partnership between multiple school districts and the local community college that provides students with career exploration opportunities, including a career expo, websites with career information, and the Student Volunteer Program, which connects students with volunteer opportunities within the community. Students with an interest in the military can find links to the various branches, and students interested in joining a support group will find the offerings listed under Focus Groups, although descriptions of the groups are absent. The final section of the website highlights procedures for making an appointment with a counselor or college counselor, requesting a transcript, the hours for the GRC, and how to attend a college visit at the high school.
The website is easy to navigate and information is readily accessible to even the most novice of Internet users. However, the site presents no information specific to undocumented students, such as links to relevant websites, information about the impact of undocumented status on the programs offered through Education to Careers, or information about a support group for undocumented students. The website is also completely in English, with no option to translate any pages into another language.

**College counseling printed materials.** Written information about the college process flows freely from the Counseling Office. Information lines the walls of the Guidance Resource Center and the Counseling Office, advertising the college counseling programs offered at the high school, upcoming visits by college representatives, tips on how to best prepare for college entrance tests, summer program offerings on college campuses, and myriad volunteer opportunities. In addition, students receive numerous handouts at advisory meetings and evening programs on such topics as registering for classes, taking personality assessments and exploring careers, understanding admission requirements, procedures for completing applications, why to consider a GAP year, requesting a transcript or teacher and school counselor recommendation, NCAA eligibility requirements, and instructions for how to complete the Common Application, a universal admission application used by over 600 colleges.

The most widely referenced written publication is the college planning handbook, which is a comprehensive 38-page publication divided into six sections: college planning, research, entrance exams, financial aid and scholarships, postsecondary alternatives, and forms and guidelines. Supplementing the college planning handbook is a shorter guidebook for student athletes that addresses the differences between the different
athletic divisions, how to develop a cover letter and athletic resume, understanding recruitment, and, perhaps most importantly, determining eligibility. No supplement to the college planning handbook, nor pages within it, provides any information pertinent to the college choice process of an undocumented student.

This section discussed the high school’s counseling department and the college counseling program. The final section shares information about the role the teacher’s play in a student’s college choice process.

**Teacher Role in College Counseling**

Castrol-Salazar and Bagley (2010) highlighted the positive impact of teachers who exhibit belief in a student’s worthiness and ability, and De Leon (2015) identified the critical role a teacher plays in postsecondary attainment. Although school counselors at the high school were unsure exactly how much teachers, especially freshmen teachers, talk about college with students, the teachers collectively agreed that they have a role in not just building college aspirations but helping students think about their life after high school, whatever that may include. When asked about this, T1 replied, “I think that’s a huge part of my responsibility, helping students see through, looking through high school and looking beyond” (T1). As an advisor he plays an even greater role through the college and career unit, which is something he really enjoys.

I think my role, whether it’s being an advisor or being a teacher in a classroom or being a sponsor of a robotics team, is helping students to be able to see where they are going to be going, what they want to do. So I love that conversation about what do you want to do? Where do you want to go? (T1)
T5 talked about feeling deeply invested in his students’ success and often remains in contact with students even after they leave his class, helping them choose their college classes, providing tutoring, or supporting them in the college process:

She’s graduating this year, but I don’t see her. I had her two years ago and she wants to be a teacher and because she was in my class she asked me to write a recommendation for her for Northern [Illinois University] because she got into Northern and now she’s trying to get money to pay for it. And I was more than happy to write those because she is the kind of person that deserves to be helped and goes back to that idea of there’s no greater equalizer than allowing those who have struggled, [to receive] the education that the rest of us get (T5)

**Teacher Communication with Counseling Staff About Students**

Teachers indicated that they talk regularly with school counselors about students. For T3 the conversations are usually about a student wanting to drop a language class and its impact on college requirements. T5 talks regularly with SC1 about students who are struggling in his class, especially as it relates to their math placement in college. T4 indicated that he often talks with school counselors to get some additional information if he is writing a letter of recommendation for a student and wants to fill in some gaps.

However, only T1 has ever spoken with a college counselor specifically about a student’s postsecondary plans. T1 was also unique in that he commented that he often utilizes the support of both school counselors and college counselors in his work with students.

Those conversations happen fairly regularly for me. One in particular I can think of. A couple of years ago I was tutoring in an after school, it was like the night school program at [the high school] so this is a student who wasn’t working, day school didn’t work for them. I wasn’t tutoring her but I observed that she was just never really needed help. Just really focused and really not like your traditional evening student. We got to talking over time and chatting and the bottom line is it came down, I said would you ever consider taking my AP computer science class my last period of the day just before you get started at night and it turned out that she did and she did really good at it and she was in a situation where she was
going to leave school or it was just school was barely functioning for her and then I got a college counselor connected because she had never gone through the traditional counseling rules...She took [the student] under her wing and together, [the college counselor] and I and a group of other teachers got this student, she was the first one to go to college, she went to Elmhurst. [The college counselor] arranged at Elmhurst for them to catch her on that side of it and it was an amazing thing. (T1)

**Teacher Communication with Students About College**

The students all commented that they talked with at least one teacher about college. Occasionally they talked about aspects of the process, but most conversations took place senior year about what college students were attending. “Since we are seniors, they kind of tend to ask a lot, ‘oh where are you going?’ and then like they just tell them, and then they are like, ‘oh, why did you go there?’ and stuff like that” (Gabriella). Nancy commented that she talked mostly with her Spanish teachers, all of whom are Hispanic so she felt comfortable talking with them due to their similar backgrounds. Kevin commented that some of his teachers talked a lot about college, which he liked. His English teacher spoke at the beginning of the year about having different expectations for seniors to help them prepare them for the transition to college, which Kevin described the following way,

...you guys are seniors, we’re going to have to start treating you like adults now basically, and she was like ‘in college there’s no more going after you. There’s no more doing this. It’s assignment, okay, do it, turn it in. There’s no more going after you...are you going to turn it in? When are you doing it?’...and like for my English teacher, she’s the one that prepared [us], she’s given us good hints and good tips for college and I appreciate that. So that’s one good thing. (Kevin)

Kevin thought it was important that teachers talk about college and push students toward it, but he recognized that students also have to be willing to do their part and do the work that’s required to get to college. He commented multiple times throughout the interview
how grateful he is for all of the support he has received throughout high school from his teachers, his school counselor, SC1, and his parents.

The teachers generally agreed that the conversations they have with students vary significantly based on the classes. T3 talks about the importance of language as tied to college and career outcomes, while T4 and T6 have conversations in their AP classes that are usually student initiated and focus on what colleges they are considering, what they want to study, their need for a recommendation, or their fears about not being admitted to an acceptable school. However, with T4’s freshman classes and T6’s ELL classes, the teacher initiates the conversation. T4 approaches the topic as if all his students will be attending college, stating that a teacher’s job is to get students to “shoot as far as they can go” (T4). This is a sentiment shared by T6, who believes that as college is the expectation for most students at the high school, she wants the same for the ELL students. She uses college as an incentive for her students who are less academically motivated, hoping that it will light a fire.

Because even when they would talk about, ‘well I’m just going to work for my father’s landscaping company’ I said ‘well then you can do that and still go and get a business degree and then you can know how to run it and you can take over the company efficiently and you can have people working for you and coordinate that whole thing’. I don’t know if that did anything. I don’t know. (T6)

T5 spends a lot of his time talking with his upper level math students, who are always very concerned about the name of the college, about that notion that “it’s not where you’re going, it’s about what you’re learning” (T5). He expressed a concern that their parents run their lives, and he spends a lot of time reminding students that they should follow a path that excites them, not their parents. With his Algebra II students, he always begins by telling them his own story and how when he made the decision to return to
college, he was placed into a math class that was three levels below college credit. He talks about how frustrated and disappointed he felt but he stuck with it. He spends a lot of time talking about the value of a college education and encouraging all of them to pursue college.

It’s not impossible. You can figure out how to go to school. Sometimes you’re kind of figuring out, you know, as you go, but you can figure it out and you can go. And the other side of that is you don’t have to go to school, you don’t have to go to college. I mean I think, I think it’s good....Where are you and what is it that you want to do? I think that’s part of the conversation I have with them. I think education is great for everyone. I also tell them that I think education is the great equalizer. I do. I think that in the world of haves and have nots, the only thing that is going to equalize that is a good education. I really do. I mean I strongly believe that and maybe I’m crazy but I strongly believe that and I said, ‘you know what? To improve your place in life the best thing you can do is continue your education. If you’re ready for it next year that’s great, if you need to wait a few years that’s great too but just go back sometime’. (T5)

T5 feels that this message is well received. He is often frustrated by the fact that many of his students think that they have no options and have never before heard the message that they can and should go to college.

I have a really good relationship with my students where they kind of look at me and say well no one’s really ever said that to me before and I’m like well you need to, first of all you need to grow up. You realize that you’re at a point now where your decisions are going to be very important and you have choices. And no one is going to deny you those choices. Ugh. I get worked up about it sometimes because I feel like sometimes they feel that doors are just shut. And they can’t get through them and I’m like you can. It may take some persistence and if I could ever help you let me know I mean if there is something that doesn’t make sense all you have to do is email me and we’ll figure it out. Cause I think the biggest problem they have for some of them is their parents have never been to school. And I was in that same situation they had no idea how to go to school, how to go to college beyond just knowing it’s there. (T5)

T2 also talks with his students about college but most discussions are casual conversations with his cross-country runners about where they are applying, and their fears about finding the right school. His conversations with his students in class usually
start when he brings up plagiarism and how plagiarism in college results in expulsion.

Unlike T4, he tries not to assume that all students are going to pursue college, but knows that is the path that most students will take.

I try to be a bit careful about saying you know, whatever you do after school, after high school, whether it’s college or work, you are going to need these skills. When we talk about them we try to be open, but I think throughout the school there is always that undercurrent of the expectation you are going to [attend college]. (T2)

T2 also shared that many of his conversations over the last few years have centered more on costs and students’ decisions to attend the community college to save money, which he strongly supports. He believes that most of the faculty openly support any student’s decision to attend community college, whether it is due to cost or a need to build skills.

T5 thinks some teachers do not talk enough about college with students either because some are so driven by the curriculum and what they need to accomplish that they feel they cannot afford to spare the time or they are leery of having overly personal conversations with students.

I think that some teachers are so set on you know we’re so driven by tests and by curriculum that I think many teachers forget that there’s a human being there and I don’t say that there are bad teachers here, I think we’re a fine group of teachers, but I think sometimes they just, they’re so overwhelmed with other stuff. They can’t take 20 minutes out. They feel like that can’t take 20 minutes of their day just to sit and have a good conversation with the class and I think some teachers in this day and age I think are a little bit unwilling to open up some because I think there’s so much you know just being that personal with a student I think sometimes scares teachers. Where they keep a very strict wall up and they and then maybe they’re a little put off by being that personal about it (T5).

Conclusion

The process of choosing a college is complex and challenging for most students, but for undocumented students the complexity is exacerbated by myriad factors that
restrict access. Utilizing interviews, observation, and document review, this case study examines influences on undocumented students as they navigate the college process. This chapter provided contextual information about the high school’s facilities, the college counseling program, and the study participants. The next chapter will build on this information to highlight the study’s thematic findings.
CHAPTER FIVE

THEMATIC FINDINGS

My goal in designing this study was to uncover information that high school counselors as well as college admission professionals could use when helping undocumented students navigate the college search and application process. In addition, I intended to examine the relevance of college choice theory to undocumented students, an area of research that largely has not addressed their unique challenges. Initially, I believed that the student interviews would be the most insightful aspect of the study. Although these informative interviews provided useful data, the interviews with teachers, school counselors, and college counselors also provided relevant and insightful information that highlighted the extremely high levels of uncertainty with which educators guide undocumented students through the college choice process. This chapter will detail the study’s thematic findings.

Research Questions

This study examines how high schools and high school agents influence an undocumented student’s college choice process. The following four sub-questions guided data collection and the subsequent data analysis:

(1) How does the organizational structure of a high school counseling department impact an undocumented student’s college search process?

(2) What elements of a college counseling program offered by a high school impact an undocumented student’s college search process?
(3) How do teachers and counselors transmit the college knowledge necessary for an undocumented student to successfully approach and navigate the college search process?

(4) How do teachers' and counselors' attitudes toward and expectations of an undocumented student affect the college search process?

**Themes**

Through the data analysis process described in Chapter Three, five themes surfaced, each of which I will discuss separately:

1. Undocumented students do not engage in the formal college counseling program offered at the high school, but they do respond to targeted outreach and partake in specialized programmatic efforts.

2. Undocumented students lack accurate information about admission and scholarship requirements, as well as the financial aid process. They are also largely unaware of the relevant federal and state legislation and policies that impact their college options.

3. High school agents (teachers, school counselors, and college counselors) express strong support for undocumented students in their pursuit of a college degree, but they hold numerous incorrect beliefs, and lack pertinent information regarding undocumented students' postsecondary opportunities.

4. Undocumented students are invisible within the school community.

5. College bound undocumented students exhibit mixed levels of perseverance and resilience in three areas: academic achievement, family and peer support, and paying for college.
Lack of Engagement in the Formal College Counseling Process

As described in Chapter Four, the high school supports a comprehensive college counseling program that includes numerous programmatic offerings in addition to specialized college counselors, who guide students through the college choice process. Students and high school agents discuss college daily.

And we have, we do have those conversations with kids all the time. I mean 96% of our students here go on to college, and so every conversation, everything we have here is all college. It would be impossible for [students] to be unaware of the opportunities because that’s all that’s talked about here. (SC1)

Language challenges. Although the Guidance Department offers a number of evening programs for students and parents, none of the students attended any of these programs, citing language challenges as one the reasons for lack of participation. Nancy shared that although her dad understood English, her mom did not. Gabriella commented that if the programs had been in Spanish, she probably would have attended with her parents, which is something that SC1 recognized as well. “…It’s very few that will come and it’s because it’s in English. They don’t feel comfortable coming, because they don’t understand, but I’m always here. I’m always here just in case [they attend] or they bring their students with them” (SC1).

Perceived irrelevance of programs and activities. Nancy also highlighted her frustration when attending programs or presentations, especially those about financial aid, which were not pertinent to the undocumented student. She saw no point in attending a program where the speakers would be sharing information that did not apply to her.

Because I’ve been to a lot of, like I said, financial aid resources and then it’s like, ‘oh why are you telling me all this information if I don’t qualify for it?’ So it’s kind of like a waste of time for the undocumented people so I feel like they should have their own little workshops. (Nancy)
She went on to say that her parents know nothing about the college process and bringing them to meetings where they heard things that were not applicable to her situation further confused them.

I was like, why bother coming and then my parents wouldn’t like they don’t really understand how it all works, because like random people will tell them like ‘oh my son got financial aid’ and I’m like, ‘mom, that’s because he was born here,’ because then sometimes she’ll come like ‘why don’t you apply?’ Yeah, then and so they really don’t know and then that’s why I was like, why bother bringing them if they are just going to get all hyped up and [I’ll] be like, ‘no mom’. (Nancy)

When asked why she didn’t attend other programs, which were not about financial aid, she replied, “I don’t know why [I didn’t attend]. I just didn’t. No one really made a big deal out of them” (Nancy). Nancy went on to say that she saw no need to attend because she felt that she got everything she needed from SC1 in addition to the admission presentations at the college visits and her summer programs.

Once Monica and Gabriella knew that they were going to the community college, neither saw any point in attending the evening programs. “I was just like, ‘oh, I’m going to [community college] so why bother?’” (Monica). Kevin did not attend any of the evening programs because he was initially unsure if he was going to attend college due to his undocumented status, so like the others, he saw no point.

No, because at that time, I still had doubt of to whether school was for me since the whole Dream Act thing was barely going on. So I was in that stage where I was kind of like, why should I go? (Kevin)

In speaking about the undocumented population at the high school, CC1 recognized that lack of engagement in the college process due to concerns about relevance is an issue for a number of students, including undocumented students.
I think undocumented students and some other lower socioeconomic students as well, they just give up. They just don’t feel that [college] is even an option for them. They’re not even aware of what’s out there and what’s available, and they shut down when they’re in these guidance sessions surrounded by other kids that are going to four-year schools, and they’re just thinking, well this isn’t for me. I’m not even going to listen. I’m just going to tune it out. (CC1)

CC1 is aware that there are students at the high school who are not as visible and not connected to the Counseling Department and its college programming, as she and others would like.

…I was thinking about that, and there is a population here at this school that I know goes unnoticed because they kind of slide under the radar, and that’s the population you’re talking about. Maybe they don’t feel they’re even, that they have a chance to go away and so they’re not, they almost feel embarrassed because they don’t want a four-year school, so they’re a loser if they don’t want a four-year school and that’s always, that’s a population that’s always been near and dear to my heart and I’d like to have the time to focus on that more. We honestly don’t. (CC1)

Both CC2 and SC3 recognized that the department could do a better job of making sure that all students and parents know what college options exist, and that participation in programmatic efforts by undocumented students is poor.

I think that goes back to our identification process. You know maybe if we knew who these families were, maybe we could do like a separate email blast or a separate phone call message or you know something to make sure that they were really being targeted and felt included. (CC2)

SC2 and CC2 both pointed out that, while they offer a lot of college programming, they do not tailor any programs specifically for the needs of first generation college students who are new to the college process and possess limited college knowledge. SC2 stated that most of what they offer is really directed toward high achieving students. CC1 commented that SC1 does a great job of working with Latino students and the
undocumented population, but she wonders what more the rest of the counseling department could do to help undocumented students.

**Fear and insecurity.** The staff all made reference to segregation at the high school being largely rooted in socioeconomic status rather than race or ethnicity. “I think if you are multicultural and you’re from a family of means, you feel more accepted than if you are multicultural and you are from a family of no means” (CC1). T5 shared his belief that most minority students do not take advantage of many of the high school’s offerings, not because of lack of awareness, but because of fear and insecurity. He believes they are intimidated by the wealth of their peers and just do not feel that they fit in, citing events such as back to school night, where most of the families that participate are from the majority white population, to support this notion.

**Targeted programming.** When asked what programs they did attend, the students all spoke of things that were organized by SC1 and about which she sent them emails. These programs targeted minority, and in some cases, specifically Hispanic students. All of the students mentioned that SC1 encouraged them as freshmen to participate in a Latino college and career workshop. She also provided them with information about the college trips organized by the high school, helped them think about potential careers, and facilitated their participation in the United States Hispanic Leadership Institute (common referred to as USHLI) College Fair that is held every year in downtown Chicago. She also brought them into the Guidance Resource Center (GRC) to explore college resources, sent them information about scholarships, and gave college presentations as part of the high school advisory program. Through the support of SC1, all four students participated, or will participate, in a transition program at the local
community college the summers after junior and senior year of high school. The program builds math and reading skills to help students prepare for their placement tests. The students highlighted their participation in the program as a factor in their comfort level with the community college and also highlighted a scholarship opportunity for students who attend the summer after senior year. Nancy received one of these scholarships and Kevin indicated that he was determined to receive one the upcoming summer.

Kevin received most of his college information through the advisory meetings with his school counselor during junior year and he did not recall ever going into the GRC for any reason other than an advisory meeting. Kevin pointed specifically to the USHLI College Fair as something that helped him with his college search. He attended the fair three times throughout high school, learning more each time about different colleges and the college process.

Because everything, all of the colleges, everything was all together in one room so basically whichever school I wanted to go or like get more information about, I could just see if it was there and get more information about it and get the paper, the fliers, their brochures. And I collected those and so I could go home and just read a little bit more about it….I filled out cards to get more, more mail from them….At first I was like, ‘oh, ok, cool’ and then it’s like junior year came along and so it’s like I started reading them more and paying attention to it and that’s when I started interacting more with it. (Kevin)

Although Kevin spoke highly of the USHLI College Fair, he never attended the high school’s college fair. He did not know any details about it such as the colleges that participated, or even when it was held.

Kevin also spoke at length about the college visits arranged by SC1 and how his first visit to Northern Illinois University, where he toured the campus and sat in on a class, really opened his eyes to the differences between high school and college.
I remember saying, wow, this is so big. We were barely in one building and I’m like, ‘wow, this is like something, something very amazing.’ It’s like there is still more to it, and you could also live there and whatnot and so many clubs, sports you can play. I thought it was pretty cool….We were, we got the chance to sit all the way in the back while the class was going on and it was just a different feel. Like most of it, which is just on their laptops this and that. I was just like wow this is pretty cool. So much freedom….It was so, I forget what they were doing but they were participating in something, they were actually being interactive and then most of which was paying attention to like what was going on, and it caught my attention and it was, I liked it! (Kevin)

During the students’ senior year, SC1 also arranged for a representative from the community college to come to the high school to help students complete the application for admission, and all of the students highlighted how easy this made it to apply.

My counselor was the one that told me that [the community college] is coming here with applications and it will be free….You don’t have to pay anything to fill it out, nothing. And then she recommended to do it here, so I did. It’s basically how I got applied. (Kevin).

Gabriella echoed Kevin’s experiences with the onsite application process, stating, “They came here. So you just had to fill in phone number, email, like basic stuff and then just pass it and get guidance to send your transcripts” (Gabriella).

…I think the biggest thing is reaching out to these families, that I think it’s the biggest concern to me because even when I, at the schools I was at before, it’s not a population that is going to feel comfortable asking questions or getting those questions answered. I don’t look at any of the evening things or college nights that I’ve been to and thought, ‘okay, if I was an undocumented student would I leave here positive and happy that my future [is clear], that my questions [were answered]?’ It’s a different sort of beast in itself that almost has to be separate and I think in our one-on-one college counseling appointments that could be done. Now again, it’s reaching out to those kids to say, ‘hey, you need to do this. This is somebody that’s going to help you, they understand.’ They are not going to you, you know, because I don’t think they want to give that information to everybody. It’s a whole different type of how you [help], so that is where that one-on-one, or that smaller situation in helping students and their families because it’s the whole piece of educating everybody. (SC2)
SC1 serves as the main source of information and support. Although the high school employs two specialized college counselors, none of the four students interviewed worked with, or even spoke with, either of the college counselors about their college plans. Gabriella admitted that her first and only encounter with a college counselor was when she contacted CC2 to set up her interview for this study. Monica, Nancy, and Gabriella identified their school counselor, SC1, as their only source of college information and they all highlighted her and the encouragement she provided as the key reasons they are enrolled in college. Additionally, Monica shared that SC1 not only helped her get to college but she has remained in contact with her even though she is no longer a high school student.

She’s great. I mean she’s always encouraged me. She’s like ‘I see you in a four-year but right, I mean this [two-year] is possible’. Every time there’s a scholarship, ‘here look, apply to this, do this.’ She’s been so helpful to me. I mean, I just think it’s amazing you know? She still takes her time, despite everything and, ‘oh apply for this, check out this, or go to this’ and I don’t know, I mean, I think it’s a very, it’s not a lot of people do that and it really encouraged me. Well, she sees me more than that, you know? She wants me, she knows I can do better. (Monica)

Kevin identified SC1 as a significant resource for college information and activities, stating, “she’s more into it than my other counselor,” but also identifying his school counselor as someone to whom he often spoke about the college process.

She would tell me, she would constantly ask me, ‘well, what you are planning on studying? Where do you want to go? Start thinking about it, like preparing for it and stuff”...it was a good thing, yeah, because she knows more. She knows like what for me to go where and classes to put me in here, so for like what I want to major, she would say, ‘ok, well this class would help you get a feel of it’.“
(Kevin)

When Kevin made the decision to attend the community college, he was reassured by the fact that his school counselor had attended the same community college.
My counselor…she’s the one who went to [community college] as well, so that’s why she’s always sharing stuff about it, so I know it’s a great school. She basically did the same thing as I want to do. Go to [community college] and then go to NIU so that’s what she did and so basically told me to do this, do that. It was fun and she shares with me her experiences, so that’s where I got it from. (Kevin).

As mentioned in Chapter Four, Kevin presented a positive persona throughout the interview, and when speaking about his school counselor and SC1, he mentioned multiple times how grateful he was for all of the support he received from the high school throughout the college process. “…Everything they’ve done so far has helped me. I feel like they have done an effort to help out those that don’t have the same options as everyone else.”

When asked about the support she gives to undocumented students, SC1 immediately referenced the work she does one-on-one with students and the encouragement she offers to them.

Then so they tell me [that they are undocumented] I say, ‘it’s okay, you aren’t eligible for FAFSA but there are all these other scholarship programs and stuff’ and then I usually take them to the ICIRR website and I give them the undocumented guide, the guide for undocumented students. I’m like, ‘check your email because if there’s any scholarship that comes through that you might qualify for, I’ll shoot you an email with that kind of information. It’s you know, you can go to college in the state of Illinois, no problem. You’re lucky you know, kind of an undocumented friendly state. You’re very fortunate to be here. If you want to go to college, you can go to college. It might cost you more, it might take you longer, but there’s going to be opportunities for you to go. (SC1)

**Challenges of being the sole source of support.** SC1 talked extensively about the time constraints that affect her ability to work with students as much as she would like.

I’ve had some of my counseling interns follow up with the kids after things like the college fair or [the freshman Latino college and career workshop], just to kind of continue the dialogue and you know, what did you learn? What impact has it made? That kind of stuff and so, there’s still in my head, I always feel like there’s so much more that I can do, continued conversations with the same group of kids,
do something a couple of times a year, but there’s just never enough time. Never
enough time. So things like that and then individually when I’m with my kids, it
is on a case by case basis. But when I have a student during registration time,
those are some of the conversations I’m having with them. What do you want to
do with your life? Have you thought about college? We go into Naviance. We go
into Career Cruising. I spend a lot of time with my kids on those kind of things.
Helping them just to kind of start thinking about it and then where the college
piece comes in, again it’s just a lot of Naviance and talking about financial aid,
and getting them to fill out the FAFSA and getting them to fill out scholarships
applications. I send a lot of emails to students with regards to scholarships and
different events that are coming up and stuff so at least they are informed because
I can’t reach them all at the same time. (SC1)

When asked if she supported the current counseling structure, which places most
students with Spanish home language on her caseload, she responded that initially she
didn’t like it. She felt pigeon-holed working with one student population. However, she
has grown to like it, and now she really loves working with the population. She has come
to realize that diversity exists even within this small group of students. However, she also
recognizes that the system is not always best for students, citing two very different types
of Hispanic students at the high school.

There two different kinds of Latino kids. It’s the Latino kids who totally embrace
their culture and only want to hang out with the Latino kids that kind of hang
together, and there’s a lot of kids who are Latino kids who don’t want to be
associated with the Latino, either because they live here in [town] or they, it’s just
different....We have a lot of our low classes, like our basic level classes, mostly
Latino kids, so our English classes and our earth science and our global science
are basic, low average classes. You go in there and you look at the class roster and
it’s all Latino kids and you can kind of see that split between the Latino who loves
being Latino and the Latino who does not like being Latino and doesn’t want to
have anything to do with it. (SC1)

SCI did not elaborate on what she thought were the reasons for these differences,
but to help mitigate the discomfort felt by the second group, during her advisory meetings
she began to pair up with another counselor so that the meetings include a more diverse
group of students. One of the school counselors she paired with was CC2, who was a
school counselor at the time. As a result of this pairing, CC2 began to also assist SC1 with a leadership club for Latinos. CC2 noticed that over time, some of the Latino students began to come to her with questions. “So, if SC1 wasn’t available, sometimes her kids were coming to me, which was great. It was just really nice that they felt comfortable enough to come into me.” (CC2) CC2 was excited to develop these relationships, noting that this year, for the first time, a few Latino juniors made college planning appointments to meet with her.

Although the high school offers a broad college counseling program with many day and evening programs, and a variety of activities and resources, the undocumented students generally do not attend the school-wide programs or utilize these resources. The students’ disconnect from formal programming is a result of language challenges, questions of relevance, and fear or insecurity. Instead, the undocumented students garner most of their information about the college choice process from the school counselor designated to work with Spanish speaking families, and the programs she has implemented that are targeted toward underrepresented students. SC1 faces challenges, which include lack of time to meet the demands of students, some of whom are not on her caseload, as well as working to meet the needs of a diverse group of students who are lumped together because of their shared language spoken at home.

Gaps in Students’ College Knowledge and Relevant Legislation

The interviews brought to light the students’ lack of detailed information about the college choice process specifically related to admission and scholarship requirements, and the financial aid process. In addition, they are relatively unaware of federal and state
legislation and policies that have the potential to impact an undocumented student’s college options.

**Admission and scholarship requirements.** Kevin began high school under the assumption that he could not attend college without a social security number. Not until sophomore year, when he received DACA status and obtained a social security number, did he begin to consider attending college. At the time of the interview he still believed that a valid social security number was a requirement to attend college.

Although the other students always planned to attend college, they all expressed minimal knowledge of the role the ACT played in both admissions and scholarships, and none of them indicated any concern about their score. All of the students took the ACT just one time and most of them were unsure as what score they received. Gabriella only remembered that she received her score in the mail and that she scored better than a friend. She knew that some students took the test multiple times, but since she planned to go to community college, she saw no point in retaking. Nancy took advantage of the ACT test prep class offered in the winter of her junior year to all students in the free and reduced book and lunch program. She felt the preparation did not help however, because by the time of the April test, she remembered nothing from the class.

In the freshman advisory presentations, under the guise of “advice from seniors,” school counselors emphasize that grades and courses play an important role in the college choice process. However, most of the undocumented students interviewed did not hear nor internalize this message, which was acknowledged by SC1. “Do they get it? I would say yes, but during freshman year it doesn’t matter to them. It doesn’t matter to them [until] late junior year, sometimes senior year” (SC1).
All of the students highlighted their lack of awareness and understanding regarding the importance of both their grades and curriculum for receiving scholarships. Nancy reported being uninformed about the any of the scholarships open to undocumented students, and although she knew that her grades mattered more for her than for other students because of her need to receive scholarships, she was unaware of this until junior year, at which point she felt it was too late. After making the decision to attend community college, she let her grades slip (dropping from a high of 3.0 in her freshman year to a low of 2.3 her senior year) because she felt her GPA no longer mattered.

So like if my friends slacked off, oh it’s fine they are slacking off, I can slack off too. It doesn’t matter if I get a B you know? It’s ok if my GPA is not higher than 3.5 you know? So then by the time I was a junior it was too late, it was like, ‘ahhh, there’s no way’. In the enrichment program, a lot of them were sophomores, and I was a junior so it helped them a lot because they could still change things and I was kind of just like, ‘ugh why did I not do that?’ and like for Notre Dame, they gave you a full ride if you have a certain ACT score and a certain GPA, and I’m just like ‘why?’ Like I wished I had tried harder because it’s all based on GPA and there’s no other way I could have changed the GPA [then] because it was lot of classes. It wasn’t even like I failed the class, it was more like a C here and this one semester C, over there a B- and then it kind of just brought it down and then towards my senior year I just didn’t care anymore, because I was going to go to community college so I was like why bother? (Nancy)

Monica also shared the sentiment of not understanding the importance of her grade point average until late in the process, and she expressed a wish that she had heard the message as to how much grades and classes mattered as early as freshman year.

I honestly wish I would have started the whole thing with my grades and just all these clubs my freshman year. Just because I know things would have expanded a lot more. I would have been able to know that it’s not just about passing it’s more about your GPA. That’s what my mentality was freshman year. You just have to pass. No, no, it’s more about your GPA. I know that we talked [about grades], like there’s freshman advisory. I was an advisor, a mentor for them but it’s just about pushing that [message]. It’s like I said, it’s more than about just your GPA. I feel
like when you’re a freshman you just feel like it’s about passing especially coming from a background where you don’t have anyone that has graduated high school or college. So you don’t really know what you’re headed into. So if you would just see exactly like oh wait you need a good GPA in order to get scholarships, and you need to be involved in the community, that would allow you to get more money. A lot of people are just shy, they’re afraid to ask or to I say I don’t know. I feel like also as a freshman you want to pick up the easier classes. Oh let’s go for [this class] because you can pass it. No you want to challenge yourself and the help is there….I mean I feel like it’s more you have to challenge [yourself]. That’s what I didn’t do, [I was] like just give me the easier classes and I didn’t think until senior year I can do better than this. My math class, like, I could have even been in a more advanced math class but I’m still stuck in this because I chose to be, you know?...I would’ve, like I said before, just taken advantage of all the help, gotten into, started earlier, joining clubs, meeting more friends, challenging myself when it came to classes. I know that I had a lot of opportunities where I could move up, but I decided to just stay in that level because it was easier. I know that I would have probably taken higher courses, been able to have a chance to apply for more scholarships, just more money, and just been really focused on what my goals were. (Monica)

Gabriella, too, would have liked information about scholarships and their requirements earlier in the process, saying, “I think you would want more information earlier, so you kind of start planning because your friends are doing something completely different than you and you kind of have to do your own thing.” Unlike Monica, Gabriella had a sense of what was a good GPA, indicating that she thought it was something around a 3.2. However, she was unaware of her own GPA although she knew that it was not a 3.2. Gabriella’s said that her school counselor, SC1, shared information with her about a number of colleges that awarded scholarships to undocumented students, but she forgot the names and never followed up because she had already decided that she was going to community college.

I knew that the community college had the program that I wanted to go to, so I just kind of decided to go there. I didn’t really apply to other colleges because I mean I couldn’t get grants and my parents can’t really pay for like all that money for just one semester. (Gabriella)
When pressed on the subject of scholarships, Gabriella admitted that she did not apply for any outside scholarships or those offered through the community college, stating multiple times that that she was unaware of any that were appropriate for her.

… [M]ost of the ones, that mostly like the school, like the ones that the school offers and like they promote, you have to have a social security number…. I mean like the guidance office should kind of like, I don’t know, it’d be easier if they printed something out and said like what you need for the scholarship or something. (Gabriella)

Kevin was aware that most scholarships required a certain GPA and certain classes, but like Gabriella, he was unaware of his GPA, and thought it was around 2.0. He felt that he really didn’t understand the importance of his GPA until the end of sophomore year and wished he could repeat his freshman year. “Freshman year, I want to say that I messed up a lot on my classes. I feel like I didn’t put enough effort into it. That affected my grades a lot, which affected my GPA the most” (Kevin).

**Financial aid process.** All four the students knew that their undocumented status prevented them from receiving federal and state aid, but none of the students indicated an awareness that some colleges offered need based financial aid through institutional grants to undocumented students. Overall, the students did not thoroughly understand what the FAFSA is, what other types of financial aid forms exist, or how the financial aid process works.

Monica and Gabriella knew as early as freshman year that their undocumented status affected financial aid and their college search. Gabriella was unable to pinpoint when she learned this information, though she repeatedly referred to freshman year. Monica, however, pointed to the one-day program she attended freshman year at the local community college, designed to encourage Latino students to think about life after high
school, as when she learned that she was unable to submit the FAFSA. However, the reality of what this meant did not hit home for either student until senior year when they attended a program at the local community college. There they learned from a panel of Latino students that they could not access most financial aid resources due to their undocumented status. Nancy also knew early on that she was ineligible for financial aid due to her undocumented status, but after receiving DACA status, she questioned whether it made her eligible for financial aid.

... I didn’t know, at that time I didn’t know, I was like will I get FAFSA too because if I do then I can go to a better school, like an actual university and then work on campus and pay off the rest all together and then hopefully there’s also scholarships somehow. (Nancy)

Nancy repeatedly used the phrase “get FAFSA” throughout the interview and did not seem to understand that the FAFSA was a form used to apply for aid rather than a type of financial assistance.

**Federal and state legislation and policies.** None of the students understood the details of how federal or state legislation affected them as undocumented students except as related to financial aid. Nancy, Monica and Gabriella all had a solid understanding of the main points of the Dream Act, knowing that it would have created a path toward citizenship, but they knew few details. Kevin, however, was relatively uninformed and was unable to identify the key points of the legislation. Although three of the four students held DACA status, and the fourth was in the process of applying, all four students repeatedly confused DACA with the Dream Act when talking about their ability to work legally. “But then he was only paying me $6 an hour, so I only worked there for
three days and then after that the Dream Act thing came into place, like right on time when I turned, like my senior year” (Nancy).

Nancy was unaware of the Illinois Dream Act but she was aware of the Illinois Dream Fund and knew that it offered a scholarship, crediting SC1 for giving her the information. However, she did not apply for the scholarship and knew few details. She knew that Illinois was a state supportive of its undocumented residents, but she was unaware that due to tuition equity legislation, undocumented students could pay in-state tuition rates at state universities.

Monica and Gabriella also knew of the Illinois Dream Fund Scholarship, but like Nancy they did not know about the Illinois Dream Act. Kevin was unaware of either. Gabriella remembered getting an email from SC1 about the Illinois Dream Fund Scholarship during junior year, but she was not then eligible to apply. She did not apply this year because she did not know the application period. “It said like, ‘oh, we’ll send you an email’, they’re like ‘sign up for an email to know when it’s open again’ and I never really got an email so I didn’t know it was” (Gabriella).

The undocumented students possess a dearth of information about the college choice process. They were largely unaware of the role grade point average plays in both admissions and scholarships until very late in the process. They are also unaware of the opportunity to receive privately funded, need-based financial aid, and lack detailed information, such as requirements and deadlines, about scholarships that are open to undocumented students. Undocumented students also hold, at best, rudimentary knowledge of federal and state legislation that impacts an undocumented student’s
college options, such as the Illinois Dream Act or tuition equity legislation, and they are also likely to also confuse DACA with the Dream Act.

**Agents Support College but Lack Information About College Options**

The teachers all expressed strong support for undocumented students in their pursuit of a college degree.

I’m a firm believer in the concept that higher education, college, is going to lead you toward something really good. It’s going to lead you toward your passions. You will wind up directing yourself into something that you are interested in and that that’s a good thing and that for any individual that’s going to help them to become productive citizens and I think that’s a good thing for anybody. (T1)

T3 wanted her ELL students to pursue a four-year degree, stating,

I wish I could help them go beyond [community college] to really go, not sure where, to go to a four-year university and have the same chances and opportunities like any other kid who has grown up in the country. (T3)

She often shared with her students the notion, which she learned at a workshop, that not only can undocumented students go to college, but that they should attend college.

…encourage them to do it because if they are going to become a dentist they can go back to Mexico and they are going to be much better off in Mexico as a dentist than somebody with no college degree at all. So even if they don’t get a job here they are prepared and have made themselves a better life for the future. (T3)

Yet, as a group, the teachers and counseling staff, like the students, possess a dearth of information, and also hold many incorrect beliefs regarding an undocumented student’s postsecondary options.

**College counseling programming.** The teachers knew that the Counseling Department offers a lot of college programming, but other than the College Night, they knew few details. Most of the teachers were unaware of any programs geared toward the non-majority student and parent population, but they were confident that they take place.
T5 spoke about a program in which he had previously been involved, where staff of the high school and the district Director of ELL conduct parent programs at the elementary school with the largest Spanish speaking population, but he was unaware that the program had been discontinued years earlier. T5 also mentioned that for certain programs and events, the district would provide bus service to the high school for families that lived in areas far from the high school and might not have access to transportation. However, this opportunity has also been discontinued to lack of utilization.

**Admission, financial aid, and scholarship eligibility.** When asked to relay details regarding an undocumented student’s postsecondary educational opportunities, the staff’s answers reflected a lot of uncertainty and they all readily admitted that there was much they did not know. Only T3 and SC1 had ever attended any type of workshop, seminar or conference session about undocumented students.

Teachers generally held the impression that most institutions restricted admission of undocumented students. All of the teachers thought a social security number was required for application. They assumed that, even if admitted at an Illinois public institution, undocumented students would not be eligible for in-state tuition.

My understanding is that those doors are mostly closed off to them, so if I am stating it correctly for example, an undocumented student would not be eligible for in-state tuition, or I’m not even sure if there are other regulations that would keep them from the application process. (T1)

T2 wondered if undocumented students were eligible for programs such as the free and reduced book program without a social security number, adding that he thought this was a requirement to receive application fee waivers.
Most of the teachers knew of significant financial aid challenges, and a few knew that undocumented students could not complete the FAFSA, but all were unclear as to what type of aid, if any, would be available. They were also unsure if undocumented students would be eligible for any of the scholarships offered through the high school. They all expressed a desire to learn more about such things as the basics of the college process and how it differs for undocumented students, college options both within and outside of Illinois, and how to help undocumented students access funding.

Counselors are more aware than teachers that undocumented students have college options, but their lack of experience in working with undocumented students limits their knowledge. CC2 readily admitted that she is not as aware she should be of the college options for undocumented students, while CC1 also recognized how much she she does not know and said that her desire to learn more motivated her interest in the study.

It’s something that we, one of the reasons why I wanted to help you with this study is to become more aware of the available resources and to, because we’re not as, we have one counselor who works with this population probably more than any other counselor, and so I know she’s got more of a handle on it. I honestly don’t know much and again, you know, it’s kind of like I’m just feeling like I’m getting my feet on the ground, the second year, but that it is something that I want to do. I wanted to say, how do you work with these students and what do you do and how do you do it?...And then all those great resources on IACAC, which I didn’t even know we had available to us, so this is all you know becoming an awareness that we’ve got to have, but at this point as far as I know, and as far as our college side goes, no we do not have something specific for this particular population. (CC1)

**Legislation and policies.** SC1 was by far the most knowledgeable of the legislation, although a number of the high school agents knew the basics of the Dream Act, and a few even knew such details as military service providing a path to citizenship.
A few also thought that the Dream Act provided funding for undocumented students to attend college, and like the students, almost all of them at some point in the interview confused the Dream Act with DACA. T1’s support for the Dream Act was grounded in the incorrect belief that the Dream Act would only offer a path to permanent residency.

And again I understand the tension about someone being here in the states illegally and then thinking that there might be a path toward citizenship but again I don’t feel threatened by that when I look at the Dream Act because I’m thinking its permanent residency not citizenship. That is, permanent residency doesn’t seem to hold up a red flag for me at all, like that’s a good thing. People want to be here. They want to be productive citizens. We ought to release barriers to that to allow people to do that. (T1)

Collectively, the staff knew even less about the Illinois Dream Act and DACA. Some knew that there were such things as state dream acts, but could not tie the Illinois Dream Fund to the Illinois Dream Act, and no one but SC1 knew the other facets of the Illinois Dream Act legislation. A few knew of a scholarship in Illinois for undocumented students, while most knew nothing about Illinois’ tuition equity legislation. In general, their knowledge about DACA was minimal. One high school agent thought that it went so far as to provide a green card, while most did not even know what it was. Most of the high school agents expressed embarrassment regarding their ignorance and uncertainty regarding legislation, but highlighted the school’s general support of all its students.

They definitely face challenges. Like I said, I kind of compare them to challenges that other students would have with other issues at home but, yeah boy, I’m feeling really bad I don’t know about that Obama law. That’s what I’ll say is that I wished that I knew but I just think overall the school is creating an environment where regardless of what your situation is you can do anything service wise, it’s provided to you. Teachers make an assumption that culturally you know we’re all in this together and we’re all going to get you to same place. I’ve always thought that regardless of where your background is, what your home life is, when you come into my classroom you are equal and we’re all in this together and I would hope that undocumented students would feel that exact same way when they came in. (T4)
SC1 was the only staff member who spoke of how the legislative changes over the years have created more options for students. She saw increased opportunities in her seventeen years working with undocumented students.

Being a counselor many years ago and working with undocumented students then, oh my gosh that for me, that was devastating to see these kids who are full of potential, full of passion, excitement and dreams. They have all these aspirations to go to college but they couldn’t go because they couldn’t afford it...Now they can go to school in the state of Illinois and not be charged international tuition, and then with deferred action, now they can apply to school and it’s not as big a deal and there’s scholarships available and everything, so it’s definitely moving in the right direction. The momentum is there....It would be awesome if [the Dream Act] would pass because there are so many students that don’t get to fulfill their dreams. I think that’s probably why I’m not aware of a lot of kids that have moved on past [community college] or even past high school because they don’t have the money. It’s hard with transportation. At least now with deferred action they can get their driver’s license and things are moving in a much more positive direction for them. It’s a lot better than it was. (SC1)

Although the high school agents unanimously expressed the belief that undocumented students should pursue college after high school, they are unable to fully support students in the college process due to a lack of awareness regarding the programmatic offerings at the high school, incorrect beliefs regarding college options, and unfamiliarity with federal and state legislation that creates options through scholarships and tuition equity.

Invisibility within the School Community

The undocumented student population at the high school is believed to be small, but none of the agents interviewed were sure exactly how many students are undocumented. The undocumented students themselves are only minimally aware of the other undocumented students at the high school. In general the students did not share their status with many staff members or with high school friends. The staff and the
students both expressed uncertainty regarding the relevance of status as related to the
teacher and student relationship.

**Teacher awareness of undocumented students.** The teachers overall know very
little about the undocumented students who attend the high school. When asked questions
about the population, the most common answer was, ‘I don’t know’ or ‘I haven’t really
thought about it’. T2 shared that his mom was born in Japan and his only experience with
immigration was through legal channels, so he never really gave it thought, saying,

> I assume we have some, but there is no specific student I can think of that I had a
feeling was undocumented or knew was undocumented at all. It’s interesting,
something I have never even really thought about, to be honest.” T1, who had
Kevin in class at the time of the interview, said, “I can’t think of coming across an
undocumented student. I am sure that I have but I just don’t know that piece about
them. (T1)

Another teacher shared the following,

> So you know it’s something that that I’ve never really I guess allowed myself to, I
don’t want to say worry about, but allowed myself to invest a lot of attention in
how they’re different. I think just because I can’t identify them, so I’ve never
thought about a way to address them as individuals because I’ve never I guess
been allowed to pull them out as individuals. (T4)

Only T3 and T6 had ever spoken with their colleagues specifically about an
undocumented student. For both, the student was usually an undocumented ELL student.
T3 usually found out a student’s status from an ELL teacher, when she was brought in to
address an unrelated academic issue. T6 usually learned of a student’s undocumented
status from another student, and as the students began to know and trust her, they shared
this information more readily.

Although he knew little about the undocumented population other than that it was
small, T5 was aware that he has likely had undocumented students in his classes. He was
the only teacher interviewed who mentioned a conscious effort to be inclusive with his language.

So when I speak about college and things like that, I’m like there are all kinds of programs for everyone, no matter what your situation is, because I know they’ve gotta be there. And I would never say anything specifically but I would say that there are options for everybody. (T5)

However, he went on to question whether he should be more specific with his language to make sure the message reaches all students, including undocumented students.

Although they know little about the undocumented student population at the high school, all of the staff members indicated some level of understanding regarding the challenges that undocumented students face in daily life. They imagined such things as always looking over your shoulder, wondering who was going to figure you out, and feeling fearful, ashamed, different, intimidated, inferior, and unwelcome. One teacher talked about what a burden it must be for a student who thinks she is the only undocumented student in the entire school. They all speculated that undocumented students might question what options they have for college, or perhaps wonder if they have any college options at all. Some teachers also wondered about family support for college, especially if the student is relied on to work and contribute to family expenses.

The teachers expressed a shared sentiment that the status of a student was not something they should or could know about and they all thought that it was illegal to ask students about their status. While a few teachers adamantly believed that counselors and college counselors should and did know which students were undocumented, there was uncertainty as to whether or not it was relevant that teachers know. T1 stated early in the interview that he thought it was not important.
So first of all, I think it’s appropriate for me as a teacher to have, what’s the right way to say it? That it would not affect my vision of looking at a student, so I think it’s wholly appropriate that I don’t know if somebody is documented or undocumented. They are just a student in my classroom. They are going to receive the same attention and same instruction that every other student should get. (T1)

However at the end of the interview, he presented a very different perspective, sharing the following,

I am really interested in your work. I am kind of curious to hear what, when your work is finished to understand more about it. But I think, candidly, I hadn’t really thought about it a whole lot, or being aware of undocumented students in my classroom or what the impact is for them and I have to catch myself up sometimes to remember that it’s not all about the curriculum. It’s not all about just getting through the day or getting through the lesson plans but that kids often, well I have found out in teaching that when the backstory is revealed to me about a kid that it brings a whole new level of insight and to where they are coming from…. I think understanding this backstory would be, I think understanding it in general of what those students have to deal with would be a good thing to understand. (T1)

T2 also echoed this sentiment at the end of his interview, saying,

It’s got to be so alienating for some of those kids and that’s kind of the first time I really sat down to think about it, and again how little I know about the laws has been revealed. So that’s kind of the only thing I come away with, is just sort of like wow I need to learn more but then it also kind of brings up the question to me as a teacher what are some other things that I know about but I don’t know about …. This is kind of one of those moments I think where, yeah it makes you kind of wonder, you only see this face of them in the rows or in the circles and what’s going on at home. (T2)

Most of the teachers had never spoken about the topic of undocumented students with their colleagues or administrators, and none had ever discussed it at a department or faculty meeting. When asked if they thought that the school or district had a responsibility to educate staff about the undocumented students at the high school, the response was unanimously in support of the idea.

I would guess outside of maybe guidance, history department, and a handful of teachers in world language that I feel like I know nothing and I would think that
most of the staff knows less than I do….. So yeah I would think that would be a responsibility that we would have and someone needs to have more light shed on it for sure. (T2)

T6 emphasized that teacher training about undocumented students is critical, stating,

I think it would be completely irresponsible to have this conversation and not, like great, we have built your hopes up, and this is something that you can definitely do, but now we have no money, or no idea how to actually get you through that….I can just picture a student saying, ‘what do I do?’ and then the adult that they are going to has no idea. I could just see that as completely as, ‘well, if she doesn’t know and she’s the authority figure then how the heck am I ever going to be able to figure this out?’ (T6)

T6 and T3, using their administrator lens, both felt it important for teachers to know information about undocumented students, emphasizing that teachers see students daily and form different relationships with students than counselors, who might only see a student once a year. However, both admitted that they had not spoken about undocumented students with department members this academic year.

T5 shared that if he were to have an undocumented student come out to him, he would want to immediately connect the student with SC1, whom he perceived would know what to do, but he emphasized that supporting undocumented students needs to be a collective effort.

It can’t always be, ‘just go see [SC1]’ because [SC1] is one person and if the student comes to you, meaning me that means they trust me, not [SC1]. That means they trust me to help them and I should be able to at least help them with the basics and I would assume my school district should provide that for me. (T5)

School counselor and college counselor awareness of undocumented students.

The school counselors and college counselors are all very aware of the undocumented population at the high school, but with the exception of SC1, none of them had had an
undocumented student come out to them, and as a result they admit to knowing little about the student population. SC2 suspected that one of her freshman was undocumented because the student spoke of challenges completing some paperwork due to what the student described as “immigration issues,” but she was waiting until they developed a better relationship before broaching the topic directly with the student. SC3 stated that with only one exception, he has never had any students with home language Spanish on his caseload, so he always felt that he did not have to know much about undocumented students. He did not indicate awareness that there could be undocumented students who are not Hispanic. He referred to SC1 as the expert and acknowledged that this is at the expense of the rest of the counselors, who hold limited knowledge. He said that while SC1 is fantastic about sharing information, he learns by doing and felt that if he worked with an undocumented student, he would know a lot more. He believes that the entire department should receive training on the topic and that they ought not rely on SC1 to teach everyone.

SC1 confirmed that although she works the closest with the undocumented student population, even she does not know how many students are undocumented. At the time of the interview, she knew approximately 30 students on her caseload of 350 were undocumented. However, she suspected that there were likely more, as evidenced by the large number of current students and graduates who reached out to her after DACA began, requesting copies of their transcripts to support applications. One college counselor questioned how they could know details about the undocumented student population if even SC1 is unsure as to who is undocumented. “It’s really hard to identify these kids, and I know [SC1] has even had a hard time although she knows her kids fairly
well, but I think she’s very hesitant and very careful with asking that question as well” (CC2). SC2 commented that the students and parents at the high school were not as open about undocumented status as students in the high school where she previously worked. She also felt that her colleagues were not as open to talking about undocumented students as the staff at her previous school, and she recognized that the small number of undocumented students at the high school could be the reason for both of these differences.

Similar to the school counselors, neither college counselor had ever knowingly met with an undocumented student, and they, too, felt very uninformed about the population. “I would think they are probably afraid and intimidated, and I have not worked with any of them that I know of. They have not come forward as such to me. I don’t know enough about that population” (CC1).

All of the counselors strongly supported ongoing training for all members of the counseling department. SC2 expressed a desire for a manual that would walk her through the steps of counseling an undocumented student on postsecondary plans, but recognized that this is not realistic due to the individual nature of each student’s college choice process. However, they all felt that while SC1 could be the expert, just as they have an NCAA expert or an expert for counseling students with learning disabilities, she should be a resource for the department rather than do it all herself.

Counselors also knew of the many challenges that undocumented students face, highlighting such concerns as fear of disclosing, and feeling alone and isolated. Regarding postsecondary options, CC2 expressed concern about their academic preparation, stating that most of the Hispanic students she worked with as a generalist
were not high achieving. SC1 also indicated that most of the Hispanic students on her caseload attended lower level classes, but she emphatically felt that cost, not academic preparation, limited their college choices. Like the teachers, CC1 emphasized the challenges placed on undocumented students to work, causing her to question family support for college.

I think these kids are probably working quite a bit to help support the family, so that minimizes time spent on school work and things like that, and I think their goal is to make ends meet. You know their families, a lot of them, I don’t want to generalize but you know, I think, they’re trying to just keep above water so you know, it’s yes, we want you to get an education, but we’ve got to have you have a job too. (CC1)

Unlike the other counselors, SC1 understood firsthand the challenges undocumented students face in their college search, as she also immigrated to the United States, and when she pursued her master’s degree in counseling, she paid tuition as an international student.

I got that bill and I was like, ‘holy cow!’ I know exactly what these particular kids are going through because I got that bill and it was like, ‘oh my gosh, I’ve lived in the United States for practically my whole life ad you’re going to charge me as an international student?’ (SC1)

When asked about teacher awareness of undocumented students, the counselors generally thought the teachers are aware that undocumented students exist at the high school but on a collective rather than individual basis. SC3 thought that most teachers would be surprised to find out which students are undocumented, and the counselors overall felt that teachers have very limited, if any, knowledge about the challenges undocumented students face. SC1 echoed this sentiment, emphasizing that teachers of honors and AP classes are very unaware of many issues that students deal with.
I had a teacher that I was working with this year who was in his first year working with the basic level students and for him it was like, ‘holy cow, all these issues. I had no idea. This is so different for me. I didn’t even know’. (SC1)

However, CC2 commented that she thought a teacher would likely be the first to know about a student’s undocumented status because teachers see students daily, and therefore develop closer relationships with students. The large counseling caseloads construct barriers preventing counselors from knowing students as well as they could.

The teachers might see it a bit more because they are with the kids every day and so they might have a better feel for you know, is everything okay with that student. What’s going on? You know we, we don’t because again, certainly not me and as a generalist with caseloads of 400, you just don’t get to know the kids very well unless they are in full blown crisis mode. You know it’s not just like they drop in. (CC2)

The counselors all felt that teachers, especially ELL teachers, should receive training on undocumented students, citing the role teachers play in building college aspirations. However, a few counselors expressed concern over the potential for teachers’ personal views to interfere with their support of undocumented students, as well as the dangers of the school being too public about the presence of and support for undocumented students, citing the potential for backlash from parents and other community members. Both T3 and SC1 talked about tension with the majority population over designated programming or perceived special benefits, such as college visits or ACT tutoring. This tension has caused T3 to question whether it is good to publicly advertise the work that they are doing. “In utopia I can have ‘oh let’s run this campaign and make posters’, but sometimes you drum up something and then ignorant people are just running against it” (T3).
Self-disclosure. The students overall indicated that they share very little with staff or other students about their status. As a result, like their teachers, they knew very little about the other undocumented students at the high school. The students rarely talk about their status with friends because they feel that even their Latino friends, especially the ones born in the United States, don’t understand their experiences and the challenges they face. “Because I had a friend and I told her about it and she’s like, that sounds like fun crossing the border” (Nancy). There is also an element of secrecy, usually rooted in fear, which is impressed upon them by their parents. Gabriella did not know any other undocumented students in the school, let alone in her grade. She knew they existed but did not know who they were. She has only told a few close friends about her undocumented status, and did not do so until they began talking about college. “I think we were talking about college, yeah, like getting in, like getting grants and loans and then just, like, I can’t get any, so they asked why and I just told them” (Gabriella). She felt that her undocumented status was not a big deal to her friends since most of them have at least one undocumented parent. Monica knew of only four other undocumented students at the high school, noting is not possible to know someone’s status from appearances. She was uncomfortable asking someone directly about status, and although some students readily share this information, others do not. Nancy, who claimed to be comfortable talking about her status, spoke about it with very few students while in high school. Nancy, Gabriella, and Monica felt that that most of the students at the high school do not realize that some of their classmates are undocumented, and that their peers do not understand how fortunate they are to have citizenship.
Kevin, however, felt that his classmates were aware that there are undocumented students in the high school, but they do not talk about it because they understand how hard it is to be undocumented and they also know that nothing can be done to change the situation. Kevin has two friends who are undocumented, both of whom he met in middle school through the ELL program. He shared that it is usually easy to figure out someone’s status once you become friends.

I guess, I want to say, it’s like, I think you just like, how can I put this? You just like, know when you’re, when you start becoming friends with someone and they start telling you, they tell you more things, it’s just like, ‘ok well, yeah, I don’t have this, I don’t have that’ and then other times, it’s like, ‘well I can’t get my license, I can’t get a good job’ and then you are just like, ‘oh, well, why?’ And then sometimes they’re just like either embarrassed or either some they say it and what not, and I mean that’s how most of the time you find out. (Kevin)

All of the students stated that their school counselor knew about their status, but none remembered explicitly telling her. The assumption was made that since she was the school counselor, she knew. “I might have shared or I thought maybe she had known because, I mean, she’s the guidance counselor. So I pretty much I think I assumed that she knew” (Monica). Nancy felt that most of the secretaries in the counseling department also knew, since they have access to all student files. She assumed that there was a place on the transcript where a social security number should be listed. Even though they had never talked about it, Gabriella was sure that her Dean was aware of her undocumented status because she was the Dean for her older brothers who are also undocumented.

SC1 confirmed that most often a student’s undocumented status comes out when talking about college. She has learned over the years how to get at information about status without asking directly, although she is comfortable asking a student directly.
I do. I ask [about status]. So generally, you know, as we are talking, it’s that question, ‘do you want to go to college?’ And then it starts a conversation, ‘where do you want to go to school? What are your concerns?’ and you can usually tell, or I’ll say ‘were you born in the U.S?’ Then we are talking about scholarships and financial aid, ‘were you born in the U.S.? Are you eligible to apply for financial aid? And sometimes they will be like, ‘huh? What?’ So you know then you have a conversation but I feel like I have a pretty good relationship with a lot of my kids and they share. It’s not, for them, it’s not a big deal. (SC1)

None of the students ever shared their status with a teacher directly. Nancy often wrote about it in an English or psychology assignment, but her teachers never said anything about it other than to recognize that she was foreign born. She felt comfortable sharing her status and continues to do so in college. At the time of the interview she had an English assignment to write a definition paper and she was writing on how to define an “illegal immigrant”.

When asked how teachers and counselors could better support undocumented students and foster an environment where students would feel comfortable sharing their status, SC1 highlighted the importance of building relationships.

I think it depends. It depends on the teachers. It depends on the student. Sometimes if a teacher will take extra, make extra effort you know to help that student achieve, it can absolutely make a difference, because you’ve got, there’s just another person in your corner rooting for you, cheering them on and you know, what I mean, and a lot of times those kids just that so meaningful for them you know that they have that support, and they have the encouragement from somebody beside their parent, it absolutely could make a difference. (SC1)

When asked how teachers and counselors could foster an environment that promotes opportunities for an undocumented student to self-disclose their status, SC1 again identified relationships as key to helping students share more than just status.

They [teachers] could, if they felt comfortable enough, they could bring the student aside and say, ‘I care about you. You know I see great potential in you.’ I think it’s just that, building that rapport, establishing the relationship because I think once the relationship is established, that child will tell you and it’s not necessary that being undocumented is the issue. It’s more of, ‘how do I?’ for the
kid to explain, ‘I’m concerned about how I’m going to pay for college. I don’t even know where to go to college.’ I mean those I think are the more important conversations. Whether or not they are undocumented, I think is probably less important….More of that conversation, you know? So for a teacher to notice that you are college material, ‘I would love for you to go to college. Have you talked to your counselor about where you can go?’ Just taking that extra step, and if they don’t feel comfortable asking those questions, or if they suspect that there might be other factors limiting their opportunities, [say] ‘you should go talk to your counselor. You should go talk to your college counselor’ or even better, ‘let’s go on the computer and look at different college programs.’ (SC1)

The students all initially did not think that their status was relevant in their high school experience. Nancy commented that she always assumed that her parents struggled because they spoke Spanish. She thought things would be easier for her simply because she spoke English. For her, as with the other students, status was not an issue until she took driver’s education and wanted to get her driver’s license. It fell to her school counselor, SC1, to tell her that she was unable to get her license due to her undocumented status.

Monica did not tell any of her teachers about her status, partly because she was afraid, but mostly because for a long time she did not see a need to tell them. It was not until she needed helping searching for scholarships senior year that she decided to disclose. In hindsight, she questions whether it might have been helpful to disclose her status earlier.

Sometimes I feel like if I would have actually put more out there, it might, my status, maybe I could have received more help like from my teachers. I don’t really know. But then at that time I was thinking that does not have to do with anything. I don’t know. I didn’t really think it mattered. Now, I do think so, but I really don’t know. (Monica)

Nancy talked with her school counselor about her undocumented status the first time they discussed college because she knew it might be germane. She stressed the need
for staff to find out if students were undocumented so they could identify the right
opportunities for them, and not share irrelevant information.

To find out if they are [undocumented] first, because I’ve been to a lot of financial
aid resources and then it’s like, ‘oh, why are you telling me all this information if
I don’t qualify for it’? So it’s kind of like a waste of time for undocumented
people, so I feel like they should have their own little workshops. (Nancy)

However, she recognized the challenge of tailoring information for undocumented
students, knowing that some might feel uncomfortable if asked outright. She described a
friend who did not want anyone to know she was undocumented.

Gabriella felt strongly that if a student chose to disclose to a teacher, the teacher
should be open to the information, not be judgmental, and should protect the information.
Kevin shared that he never felt embarrassed by his undocumented status, but he usually
only talked about it when he needed help filling out paperwork that asked for a social
security number.

Staff and students expressed similar uncertainty regarding the undocumented
student population at the high school. In addition to staff members being uncertain who
are the undocumented students at the high school, they were also skeptical that they could
know a student’s status, and some were not initially convinced that it was even pertinent
for a teacher to know a student’s status. Professional development opportunities about
undocumented students are rare, although all of the high school agents agreed that they
are needed. The high school agents indicated a general understanding of many of the
challenges that undocumented students encounter in their daily lives as a result of their
undocumented status. The undocumented students themselves are largely unaware of
who else shares their undocumented status. In general, the students talk very little with
staff or even other students about their undocumented status, and most did not disclose their status to a high school agent until they needed assistance with a form or had questions regarding the impact of their undocumented status on the college process.

**Perseverance and Resilience**

At the time of the interviews, the students were all either currently attending the local community college or planned to begin in the fall, and had already attended new student orientation and registered for classes. When talking about their path to college, the undocumented students showed varying levels of perseverance and resilience in three areas: academic achievement, family and peer support, and paying for college.

**Academic achievement.** The students in the study presented varying levels of academic achievement with significant differences in course rigor, grade point averages that ranged from 1.47 to 2.9 and ACT scores of 15 to 23. Their college application and final choice behavior was the same, however. Nancy shared that her Hispanic friends consider her a high achiever, but when she compares herself to other students at her high school, she believes that she is just average, and too many Hispanics think that average is acceptable.

One thing that I didn’t like about my Spanish class was because most, I realized that most Hispanic kids don’t try as hard as they should in school and that kind of frustrates me a little bit because in my Spanish class I was viewed as really, really smart and everywhere I go where it’s a bunch of Hispanics, I’m viewed as really smart but when I compare myself to [high school name] like no race then I’m just an average student. So that’s why I don’t like that, because Hispanics think that average level work is amazing and it’s not. I feel like they should achieve for higher because I have a cousin, he’s also undocumented and he got a scholarship, and the senator of the Chicagoland area congratulated him and everything, and his parents were bragging about it and I’m like, ‘what did you get?’ and he says, ‘I got a 27’ and I’m like, ‘oh that’s awesome’ and then I told my parents, ‘dad, there are people at my high school that are getting thirty sixes.’ That’s what I tell them. (Nancy)
However, later in the interview she commented that students who attend predominately Hispanic high schools (such as the ones in Chicago where her cousins attend) sometimes benefit because when compared with one another, rather than with a majority white student body, their achievements are better recognized. She highlighted a few times that most of the Hispanic students she knows are not academically motivated and far too many do not graduate high school. She lamented the waste of potential, especially among the Hispanic students who are citizens. Nancy wanted younger Hispanic students at the high school to know that they have to work really hard but that they could do it.

Gabriella spoke multiple times about how easy school was for her, but she admitted dropping challenging courses if they became too hard or if she did not connect with a teacher’s teaching style.

…I tried honors classes but I kind of wasn’t into that because I knew that I’m not a trier. I’m not going to try if I don’t feel like the class, I’m not going to try….Like for any reason if I don’t like the teacher, well, I don’t really care about the teacher. I don’t care about their personality, but as long as they’re a good teacher, they teach good, then I don’t care about the rest but if it’s the subject or how the way they teach, then I don’t. (Gabriella)

Gabriella talked about the impact of being the only Hispanic in a number of her classes and the response of teachers when this happened. “I remember I went in the class cause I kind of got lost….and the teacher looked at me funny and she’s like, ‘are you in the right place?’ and I was like ‘yeah, it’s my schedule right here’” (Gabriella). She then admitted that as the only Hispanic in her AP Stats class, she felt very out of place. When the class became difficult, she easily decided to drop it because she had no friends in the class encouraging her to stay. Both SC1 and T2 addressed the challenge of keeping Latino students in honor and AP classes. T2 highlighted his experiences with many Latino
students who score well and are placed into AP English, but do not stick with the class. SC1 also talked about the challenge of keeping Latino students in honors and AP classes. She created student cohorts in classes so that students developed personal connections with others in the class and did not shut down when the material became difficult. At the end of her interview, Gabriella expressed regret for not taking more challenging classes and wished that she had received more support from teachers to take challenging courses.

I think it would be better, like [teachers] don’t just tell them [students] ‘oh you did good in this class’ but also ‘you need to push yourself further because I can tell that it’s not challenging at all for you. (Gabriella)

Gabriella wanted younger students to know that they should never give up and they can successfully complete the hard work necessary to get to college.

Family and peer support. When asked who encouraged them to pursue college, the students all spoke of their parents. Monica spoke specifically of her mom, who always emphasized the importance of college.

My mom, she’s always been very, like, education first, education, education, education. She’s like, ‘you don’t want to not [go to college], that’s going to take you up levels. You’re going to keep getting higher, who cares what’s going on. If you keep studying, you keep learning more.’ (Monica)

Even Kevin, who did not begin high school with college aspirations, mentioned that his parents always talked to him about the importance of college.

Well, it was since freshman year, my parents have always told me, ‘start thinking about college, it’s never too early, it’s never too late….be sure what you want to do and don’t go there and be stuck in neutral….go to college, have a better job than us’. (Kevin)

As a result, Kevin’s college aspirations are rooted in his desire to make his parents proud and also to help support them financially.
I want to get out of that circle. My family, since they couldn’t go, since they couldn’t have a good job here, I want to be that person since I have the opportunity to and basically, I want to make them proud. I want to do something good of my life, and just have them be proud of me. That’s what pushed me to say, ‘yeah, I’m committed to college.’ I want to go and I want to do something good out of it….I want to be able to grow up with my job and help my parents out and basically give back for bringing me here and the opportunities and everything and just help give back to my parents. (Kevin)

Although the students spoke of the support they received from family, they also talked often about how much harder the college process was for them than for most of their classmates due to the limited college knowledge of their parents. Gabriella said that her mom was the most influential in her plans to attend college, but she never thought to show her the admission letter because her mom had not been involved in the college process.

Because, I mean, most of our parents didn’t go to college, so they don’t know what to do. It’s kind of like they are out of the loop and most white people, like their parents did go to college and like most people were informed about it, but our parents have to work and stuff like that….Well, I mean, I don’t, they don’t really know like how to do any of this, so we kind of had to figure it all out by ourselves. (Gabriella)

Monica also shared how much harder it was to navigate the college process because her parents do not understand the college choice process. Everything about college, from choice to application, financial aid to housing, is unfamiliar to them.

If you’re looking into it [college process], like a Caucasian, they get a lot of help from their own parents because a lot of them, well especially coming here [the high school], the parents are already educated so if they have any specific type of question and anything about school, college, ‘let me go talk to my parents’ and when it comes to us, ‘oh hold on, my parents don’t know anything’. So it’s like you have to put a little bit more effort into trying to find the right connections, who to talk to, what to look for, what kind of questions to ask. So I mean it’s a little different and like it’s possible, but you just have to work, it’s a lot more work than [for] someone born here and I mean even Hispanics too that were born here I feel like they have the same type of problem but they can actually apply for
financial aid or get help that someone that like is undocumented does not get that type of advantage. (Monica)

SC1 echoed the student perspective when she talked about the work she does with her bilingual students and parents.

A lot of my families don’t necessarily know the process for applying to college or scholarships. They all want scholarships for their kids, but they don’t necessarily know the process of where to look. Who’s eligible? How can they apply? How can my kids get into college? How can my kids get a scholarship? A lot of my job is more educational for the parents, breaking down some of the stereotypes that they have or misperceptions or misconceptions about college and is it affordable or can my student go, those kinds of things....I get phone calls all the time from parents, and so from that perspective they are involved. It’s definitely not like they don’t care, but a lot of them don’t know. (SC1)

Overall, the students all felt that their friends are supportive of their desire to attend college, but only Kevin felt that his friends positively influenced his college plans. He credits them with being the reason that he went on his first college visit, saying, “...Freshman year, when I went, what got me to go was, I want to say, because most of, some of my friends were going, so they said, ‘well you should try going and see if you like it’” (Kevin). He later expanded on the role his friends have played.

They know it’s cool, it comes first. And we all say that. We’re like, ‘ok, well, school comes first and then whatever’s next’....the one way that they’ve inspired me to go to college, it’s because you hear, you hear them say, ‘well, I want to major in this, I want to major in that’ and at the same time you’re just like, ‘well, I want to win [earn] more money than them’. So it just kind of pushes you, it’s like if you do better than me, then they are going to look at you and say, ‘wow, he’s doing better than us, than me’. (Kevin)

All of Kevin’s friends are going to college, but most are attending community college with plans to transfer to a four-year college after completing their general education classes. Most of Gabriella’s friends are also attending community college, with the
exception of one friend who is not starting until spring because her FAFSA was rejected. When asked if this friend was undocumented, Gabriella stated no.

Monica commented that while her friends support her college dreams, she sees the long-term value in a college degree, which they do not see.

I just keep going [with my education]. I feel like they [my friends] just see money, like a job offers them, ‘oh here, take $12.00 an hour’ and they’re like, ‘that’s sufficient. I don’t want to keep going to school, like what is school going to do for me?’ and I just see school as being beyond $12.00 an hour. I mean it’s money, but it’s insufficient. I want to be way above that you know? I know how the economy is and a lot of people say, ‘oh you’re a graduate, you’re not even going to get a job, college degree this and that’ and I mean regardless, you know, it’s still like not a lot of people get through all that education, especially with the amount of struggles and obstacles you are facing. (Monica)

As a result, most of her friends who began college did not persist. “Some of them didn’t go, but majority of them did and they just ended up dropping out. So, now that I’m graduating, I know this year, I think I am the only one” (Monica). Monica also shared that while she feels her friends support her, they do not necessarily know how to help her. She reflected on a need for Hispanics to support one another more.

It’s hard work, of course, but what isn’t? Hispanics, you know, we have to realize that who cares if we don’t go to parties, who cares if our friends are talking to us like if they go away to school then that means that they weren’t there for you? You have to encourage one another. That’s another thing about the Hispanic community, we don’t encourage each other enough...I don’t know, just we put each other down. You see another person succeeding and it’s like envy, I guess. I’ve seen it too. (Monica)

She recently met an undocumented student attending Northeastern Illinois University, who is helping her explore the transfer process. She emphasized the value of this type of mentor relationship, saying “…when you say mentoring, maybe that’s where I could have expressed my status and maybe let people know that, ‘look, I’m doing this [and I’m undocumented], what’s your excuse?’” (Monica).
Although the students felt that their friends are supportive of their college aspirations, SC1 expressed concern about external influences that often steer students away from college.

They [students] don’t know how to get there [to college] and they don’t necessarily have the right people encouraging them to do the things that are going to be in their best interest long term. They might thinking short term, whatever, senior year, let’s just blow it and not take a lot of classes, but they have these goals and so you have to try and make then understand the connection between what you are doing now and how that’s going to help or hurt them down the road. (SC1)

SC1 also talked about trying to understand what motivates the students who are academically successful in spite of the negative influences.

I have these conversations with my students all the time, like what influences you to perform as well as you do and to have these high expectations and to do so well when everybody around you, when your friends are not taking AP classes, and your friends are getting into trouble and your friends are getting detentions and dropping classes left and right. You know we have that conversation all the time and [they say] it’s just important to them. (SC1)

**Paying for college.** The students’ undocumented status restricted their employment options until they received DACA. However, even before receiving DACA, three of the students found a way to work, either using false documents or working for cash below minimum wage. Two of the students were fired from their jobs due to their undocumented status, leaving them fearful of applying for other work. Having received DACA status, they could now work legally and have obtained better paying positions, which they highlighted as a critical factor in their ability to attend college. Gabriella is not working, although she plans to get a job once she receives DACA.

Although they all considered four-year colleges, the students realized that community college was the only affordable option and they did not submit any additional
applications. Gabriella participated in a number of the college visits arranged by the high school, but claimed to always have known that she would start at community college. Monica also visited a number of colleges, but she chose a two-year school because of its low cost and her limited access to financial resources. She received two scholarships to attend the community college and is paying for the rest of it herself. She indicated that even the cost of attending a two-year school is challenging at times.

Just having to stay local, like two-year. I mean nothing’s wrong with it, but it’s not perfect. When I was a senior I’m like oh I want to go here and I want to apply to all these places but then money is not available, so I realized that I have to stay here. But it’s just financially, you have to put in a lot, you have to work more because you have to pay for school, you have to help out your parents, you have to drive. There’s all these expenses like these things you have to pay and so you have to work more and instead of focusing so much on school it’s like you have to divide up your time. So I mean I see some friends and I’m like oh are you working? No I’m not, I’m focusing on school. It’s like well they have that luxury, you know? (Monica)

Prior to her senior year, Nancy considered a number of different colleges, but after talking with her parents about what they could afford and learning that she was ineligible for financial aid, she made the decision to go to the local community college.

So then I was like I can’t afford it, because my parents told me, they were like, we can’t afford like $35,000 a year, that’s more than we make. So then they were like, you could go to [community college]. We’ll pay for what you need, like your food and shelter and all that stuff, but you have to work and pay for your school. (Nancy)

Nancy repeatedly commented how much harder she has to work and how stressful college is because of her need to work to pay for school:

I have to work to pay for school, so if I did have, I guess, papers, I wouldn’t work. I would go to school full time and just focus on that and then get a scholarship somehow, but I have to work and like manage everything and it’s really stressful. (Nancy)
Kevin’s parents offered to help him pay for college, but he chose to pay for it by himself, using money he earned through his job at the golf course. He felt so strongly that paying for college was his responsibility that he did not share any information with his parents about college costs or payment options. He had not yet applied for any scholarships, but indicated that there was one through the golf course and another one about which he received an email from SC1, “Latinos something…and a few other ones that I just can’t remember off the top of my head” (Kevin). He also was hopeful that he would receive one of the scholarships offered through the summer transition program at the community college. When asked how he heard about most scholarships, he said that he usually received an email from SC1 and used a link to scholarships on the counseling department website. Gabriella indicated that until she receives DACA and can work, her brothers and her mother will pay her college tuition.

On the path to college, undocumented students show varying levels of resilience and perseverance as related to areas of academic achievement, family and peer support, and paying for college. The students experienced wide ranges of academic success in high school, and highlighted the effects of attending a high school with a low Hispanic student population, which included not feeling successful when compared to their non-Hispanic peers, and often feeling isolated in higher level academic courses. The students all felt supported by their friends in their college pursuits, and they all credit one or both parents for instilling their desire to attend college. However, they also spoke of the challenges they encountered navigating the process as first generation college students. Although parents strongly supported their college goals, none of the students will receive financial help from parents in paying for college. All of the students highlighted the
importance of DACA in allowing them to work legally. The students received very few scholarships to assist with college costs and with the exception of Gabriella, who has not yet received DACA, they are all paying for college themselves.

Conclusion

The process of applying to and choosing a college is multi-faceted, and undocumented status impacts the process in myriad ways, resulting in fewer than 10% of undocumented students in the United States pursuing any form of postsecondary education immediately after high school (Gonzales, 2009). With low rates of postsecondary attainment, educators must learn more about the college choice process of the undocumented student. Through interviews of students, teachers, school counselors, and college counselors, observations of college programs and activities, as well as document review of all college related materials, this qualitative study examined the influence of a high school and its agents on guiding and supporting an undocumented student on the path to college.

Summary

This chapter described the five thematic findings of the case study:

1. Undocumented students do not engage in the formal college counseling program offered at the high school, but they do respond to targeted outreach and partake in specialized programmatic efforts.

2. Undocumented students lack accurate information about admission and scholarship requirements, as well as the financial aid process. They are also largely unaware of the relevant federal and state legislation and policies that impact their college options.
(3) High school agents (teachers, school counselors, and college counselors) express strong support for undocumented students in their pursuit of a college degree, but they hold numerous incorrect beliefs, and lack pertinent information regarding undocumented students’ postsecondary opportunities.

(4) Undocumented students are largely invisible within the school community.

(5) College bound undocumented students exhibit mixed levels of perseverance and resilience in three areas: academic achievement, family and peer support, and paying for college. The next chapter will discuss these findings, make recommendations, and share suggestions for further research.
CHAPTER SIX
DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In this chapter, I provide a summary of the dissertation study and discuss the results as related to the literature review provided in Chapter Two. The literature focused on the evolutionary history of models of college choice, the federal and state legislation and policies that affect the college choice process of undocumented students, and the individual and organizational factors that also impact an undocumented student’s college choice process. After a discussion of the findings, I address the implications of the research and propose ways in which high schools and high school agents can best assist undocumented students as they move through the college choice process, as well as identify areas for further research. I conclude the chapter by sharing my final thoughts on the dissertation study.

Overview of the Study

This dissertation explored how a high school and high school agents influence an undocumented student’s college search. To answer this question, the following four sub-questions were investigated:

(1) How does the organizational structure of a high school counseling department impact an undocumented student’s college choice process?

(2) What elements of a college counseling program offered by a high school impact an undocumented student’s college search?
(3) How do teachers and counselors transmit the college knowledge necessary for an undocumented student to successfully approach and navigate the college choice process?

(4) How do teachers' and counselors' attitudes toward and expectations of an undocumented student affect the college choice process?

The qualitative dissertation utilized case study methodology and was grounded in a conceptual framework of models of college choice. The unit of analysis – a large public high school in a suburb of Chicago, Illinois – presents as a unique case. Most undocumented students attend poorly resourced, underperforming, urban high schools with low college-going rates (Abrego, 2006; Perez Huber & Malagon, 2007), and as highlighted in Chapter Three, the high school in this study presents very different characteristics. In addition, the Midwest location of the high school also contributes to its uniqueness, as previous literature and research on undocumented students and college access has focused almost exclusively on Latino students living in California or Texas (Abrego, 2006; Abrego & Gonzales, 2010; Castro-Salazar & Bagley, 2010; Contreras, 2009; Flores, 2010b; Gildersleeve, 2010; Gonzales, 2010b; Menjívar, 2008; Pérez, P., 2010; Pérez, Espinoza, et al., 2010; Pérez et al., 2009; Perez Huber & Malagon, 2007).

The study took place over a ten month period and employed multiple methods of data collection including interviews, observation, and document review, to triangulate the results and offer comprehensive insight into the unit of analysis, the high school. In addition, the study also utilized data triangulation as a means of collecting various perspectives on the same phenomenon (Merriam, 2009) by including semi-structured interviews with students, teachers, school counselors, and college counselors. I observed
the high school’s physical environment and all of the evening programs presented to students and parents on the college choice process. I also engaged in document review of all printed and web based materials provided by the high school about the college choice process. Both document review and observations were guided by protocols, and field notes were recorded after each interview and observation. In addition, recognizing the potential for bias due to my connectedness to the topic, I kept a researcher’s journal throughout the study and recorded thoughts and perspectives after each interview and observation, and also while coding and writing.

The foundation for data analysis came from a conceptual framework of models of college choice. The overarching conceptual framework for the development of the study was Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) three stage model of predisposition, search, and choice. However, because undocumented students, like many students underrepresented in higher education, present unique characteristics that Hossler and Gallagher did not consider in their model, I also considered models of college choice rooted both within and outside the high school context in data analysis. Utilizing the data analysis process described in Chapter Three, five themes surfaced:

(1) Undocumented students do not engage in the formal college counseling program offered at the high school, but they do respond to targeted outreach and partake in specialized programmatic efforts.

(2) Undocumented students lack accurate information about admission and scholarship requirements, as well as the financial aid process. They are also largely unaware of the relevant federal and state legislation and policies that impact their college options.
High school agents (teachers, school counselors, and college counselors) express strong support for undocumented students in their pursuit of a college degree, but they hold numerous incorrect beliefs, and lack pertinent information regarding undocumented students’ postsecondary opportunities.

Undocumented students are invisible within the school community.

College bound undocumented students exhibit mixed levels of perseverance and resilience in three areas: academic achievement, family and peer support, and paying for college.

As stated often throughout this dissertation, the research on undocumented students is scant and significant gaps in the literature exist (Abrego & Gonzales, 2010; Gonzales, 2010b). In addition, the voices of the students themselves are largely absent from the literature (Castro-Salazar & Bagley, 2010; Morales, Herrera, & Murray, 2011). It is unclear how many undocumented students attend college immediately upon graduation from high school, but of those who have lived in the United States for at least five years, the figure is estimated to be fewer than 10% (Gonzales, 2007; Gonzales, 2009). Researchers have highlighted the challenges faced in conducting research on undocumented students (Abrego, 2006; Flores, 2010a; Flores, 2010b; Kaushal, 2008), who are hard to reach due to their classification as a vulnerable population (Abrego, 2006). The lack of research on undocumented students, coupled with their low rate of postsecondary attainment, highlight the critical need for this study. This study gives a voice to the undocumented student and provides an important addition to the nascent body of literature.
Discussion of Thematic Findings

This section utilizes the thematic findings presented in Chapter Five supported by the contextual information described in Chapter Four to respond to the four research sub-questions upon which the study was developed. Due to the overlapping nature of the findings in regard to the research questions, this section is organized by theme rather than by research question. The results of the study largely corroborated or added to the existing literature discussed in Chapter Two. However, instances of contradiction are also identified and discussed.

Lack of Engagement in the Formal College Counseling Process

Unlike previous studies that found that most Black and Latino students attend high schools with minimal resources that promote college enrollment (Perna & Titus, 2005), the high school in the study offered a very comprehensive college counseling program. However, the undocumented students interviewed did not participate in most of the school-wide college counseling meetings and activities that were intended for students and parents. The students also did not utilize either of the college counselors at any point during the college choice process. When asked why they did not attend any of the programs, the reasons provided included a lack of awareness of programmatic offerings, parental language challenges, and the belief that the high school programs did not address their unique needs and challenges as a result of their undocumented status.

Language challenges. Unfortunately, all of the college counseling programs were presented in English, which most parents of undocumented students did not understand well, if at all. As a result, the students felt that attending the meetings with their parents would not be worthwhile and they indicated discomfort in attending alone. When asked if
they might have attended with their parents if the programs had been offered in Spanish, the students responded favorably. However, none of the students indicated that they had attended the freshman registration meeting that SC1 held in Spanish. SC1 mentioned that participation by Spanish families was low even when the high school offered programs in Spanish.

Lack of awareness and perceived lack of relevancy. The students indicated little connection to the school-wide college counseling programs. The college counselors implemented most of the college counseling programs, and although SC1 encouraged undocumented student participation, with no college counselor–student relationship, there was little motivation by the students to attend. Although Kevin attended the United States Hispanic Leadership Institute College Fair multiple times, and highlighted it as instrumental in helping him develop his college knowledge, he was unaware that the high school offered its own college fair each spring attended by over 200 colleges. The students also shared the belief that information relayed at college meetings was not only irrelevant, but also at times contradicted what they knew to be true for their circumstances, especially as related to financial aid. The students found it disappointing and frustrating to have to explain to their parents that the information presented did not apply to them.

Although the students did not attend most, if any, of the school-wide college counseling programs, they did engage in programs targeted to underrepresented students, especially those at the community college, which they typically learned about from SC1.

Targeted programming. Undocumented students generally report frustration navigating the college process (Castro-Salazar & Bagley, 2010) and the students in this
study were no different. Although they generally did not partake in the school-wide college counseling programs, they did attend programs targeted toward underrepresented students, and in most cases, specifically Hispanic students. Many of these programs were either coordinated by SC1 or she was the one who informed them of the opportunity. They spoke of attending the United States Hispanic Leadership Institute College Fair, college visits, and programs that took place at the community college. Like many undocumented students, they began high school aware of the challenges presented by their undocumented status. However, only through the programs at the community college that addressed undocumented student issues in the presented material did they truly begin to understand the challenges and limitations of their undocumented status.

**Effects of programming with the community college.** Abrego (2006) found that undocumented students possess the same educational aspirations as their citizen classmates, until they begin the college process. The undocumented students in the study maintained these aspirations through much of the college search, but like so many other undocumented students, they were unable to translate these aspirations to four-year college matriculation.

In her study exploring why Latino students enroll in community college at higher rates than other racial or ethnic groups, Kurlaender (2006) examined the influence of a number of factors on postsecondary outcomes, including academic achievement and preparation, as well as degree intention. She concluded that Latino students were more likely to enroll at a community college than African-American students or white students with similar levels of academic achievement. She also found that Latino students who intend to pursue a bachelor’s degree were more likely to enroll in a community college
than a four-year college. The findings of the case-study mirrored the results that Kurlaender described, and although Kurlaender did not distinguish between documented and undocumented students, previous research has shown that most undocumented students who pursue higher education will enroll in a community college, largely due to cost (Abrego, 2006; Castro-Salazar & Bagley, 2010; Perez Huber & Malagon, 2007).

All of the students interviewed began the college choice process with shared aspirations to attend a four-year college. However, none of the students submitted applications to four-year colleges. Instead, like many undocumented students, they decided to put their four-year dream on hold and attend community college. The academic achievements of the students were quite varied, with Kevin earning a grade point average of 1.74 and an ACT of a 17, and Nancy earning a grade point average of 2.8 and an ACT of 23, supporting Kurlaender’s (2006) research that academic achievement had little impact on college choice.

Although the students took part in a number of college visits to four-year universities, and Gabriella even attended a summer program on the campus of a four-year university, they all spoke of their level of comfort with the community college due to the amount of time spent on campus, coupled with the ease of applying and their connections with the community college admission representative. They attended multiple programs at the community college and took part in their summer transition program. Swail and Perna (2002) posited that pre-college outreach programs promote college access and success among underrepresented students, and Castro-Salazar and Bagley (2010) found this to be true for many undocumented students as well. These programs often provide academic preparation through coursework, emotional and social support from
connections with program staff, and sometimes even financial support, all of which are important in helping undocumented students access and succeed in college (Swail & Perna, 2002). Kevin, Gabriella, and Monica each spent one or more summers participating in a pre-college program at the community college. They spoke of their preparation for placement tests, the connections they made with community college faculty and staff, and the potential scholarships offered to summer program participants. Once they decided to enroll in community college, they felt that there was nothing else they needed to know or do regarding the college process. They gave little thought to the postsecondary opportunities that might be available once they received their associate’s degree, and instead, upon deciding to attend the community college, they abandoned the college choice process.

P. Pérez (2010) highlighted the number of undocumented students in California who were directed by counselors toward a community college rather than a four-year university due to challenges of cost, without considering options created by the state’s tuition equity legislation. Illinois, like California, permits undocumented students to pay in-state tuition rates. However, all the undocumented students interviewed were unaware of this opportunity. Developing programs with the community college may help the high school ensure that undocumented students pursue postsecondary education. However, one could also argue that by not encouraging undocumented students to explore all options and instead steering them toward the community college, the high school serves as a gatekeeper to a four-year university.

The high school offers a comprehensive college counseling program, but the undocumented students only engage in programs targeted toward underrepresented
students. As a result, they miss out on important information about the college choice process. In addition, engaging extensively in programming with the community college appeared to channel them toward a community college before they fully pursued all post-secondary avenues.

**Gaps in Students’ College Knowledge and Relevant Legislation**

As previously described, the undocumented students did not engage in the formal college counseling program offered by the high school. Monica, Gabriella, and Nancy all identified SC1 as their sole source of college information and support in the college process from within the high school. Even Kevin, who spoke regularly with his school counselor about college, identified SC1 as critical to his college search and application process. However, the structure of the counseling department and the students’ lack of engagement in the formal school-wide programming contributed to their lack of general knowledge about the college choice process and postsecondary options.

**Counseling department structure.** Perez Huber and Malagon (2007) and Contreras (2009) emphasized the need for counselors to be aware of undocumented students’ college opportunities in order to ensure that they provide students access to accurate information. Unfortunately, many high school counselors lack the necessary general training to help students navigate the college counseling process (Bridgeland & Bruce, 2011; Clinedinst, Hurley, & Hawkins, 2011; McDonough, 2005), let alone specialized knowledge of undocumented related issues. Large caseloads, such as those at the high school in the study, make it difficult for counselors to know their students on a personal level, which is a prerequisite for developing the type of relationship necessary for undocumented students to feel comfortable disclosing their status.
Even when high school agents provide support in the college choice process, institutional structures often simultaneously restrict access (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Although her teaching and counseling peers viewed SC1 as the undocumented student expert, she readily admitted that she was not as knowledgeable generally about the college process, especially college options, as the college counselors, or even some of her school counselor colleagues. She reported feeling very underprepared in assisting high achieving students with the college choice process, as most of the Hispanic students with whom she worked over the years did not pursue advanced classes and were not high achieving.

Although SC1 worked to expand her knowledge about college counseling, this responsibility was just one aspect of her job and with a caseload over 375 students, she commented that she had limited time to work individually with her undocumented students, which their unique circumstances necessitate. She often relied on her interns, who are graduate students pursuing licensure in school counseling, to follow up with her students and to continue the college conversation.

**Limited use of school-wide programming.** Unfortunately, the undocumented students perceived the targeted programs described earlier, as replacements for the school-wide college counseling programming, rather than as supplemental. Although the formal college counseling program did not address their unique needs, in not attending the school-wide programs the students still missed out on information that was not shared at the targeted programs. For example, the students spoke about not understanding the concept of grade point average and the notion that simply passing classes was not good enough. They all indicated a desire to know early in high school about the impact of
grades not just for admissions but also for scholarship consideration - the latter being especially critical in helping undocumented students pay for college. As grades and courses are not as important for admission to the community college with its open admission policy, this information was likely not sufficiently stressed at the community college programs. However, this information was shared at freshman advisory meetings, as well as at the freshman evening registration meeting, where counselors addressed the importance of grades and courses to the college choice process. As a result of opting for the more targeted programs rather than the school-wide events, they often missed out on much pertinent information.

The students possessed limited knowledge about their postsecondary options as well as relevant legislation. They were unaware of the Illinois tuition equity legislation, the Illinois Dream Act, colleges that offer institutional aid to undocumented students, and scholarship opportunities. There was a definite disconnect between the undocumented students’ need for information about the college process and the information that is available to them. SC1 knew the undocumented students and was aware of the challenges they encountered, whereas the college counselors knew the college choice process. The findings of the study indicated a need for greater collaboration within the department, for SC1 to learn more about the college choice process, and for the other school counselors and the college counselors to learn more about the unique needs of undocumented students. This will ensure that undocumented students possess thorough information about the college choice process and their postsecondary options.
Agents Support College but Lack Information about College Options

The literature highlights the critical role high school agents play not just in providing undocumented students with access to information about the college choice process (De Leon, 2005; Pérez, Cortés, Ramos & Coronado, 2010), but also in supporting their postsecondary dreams by showing them that a college degree is possible (Godinez & Espejel, 2010). However, negative experiences with high school agents are likely to affect undocumented students’ motivation and academic achievement, and can also cause reticence in sharing information about their undocumented status (Menjívar, 2008). Just as the literature on the influences of high school agents is conflicting, so too are the findings of this study.

The undocumented students interviewed indicated no instances in which they felt discriminated against by a high school agent. Instead, Kevin repeatedly expressed his gratitude to everyone at the high school for the support he received. De Leon (2005) and Gonzales (2010b) described the important role that teachers play in the college process, and although the teachers interviewed admitted to talking regularly with students about college, some were uncertain about the role teachers should play in a student’s college choice process.

Castro-Salazar and Bagley (2010) highlighted the positive impact of high school agents who exhibited belief in undocumented students’ abilities and worthiness, and although the teachers and counselors expressed strong support for undocumented students in their pursuit of college, this support was hindered by lack of knowledge about the undocumented student population at the high school, as well their limited understanding of students’ postsecondary options.
Misinformation and lack of information. Due to undocumented students’ lack of knowledge about the college process and the unique challenges they face as a result of their undocumented status, the need for counselor and teacher input is crucial (Castro-Salazar & Bagley, 2010; Menjívar, 2008). However, Muñoz (2008) reported that teachers and counselors were not the primary source of college information, and that interactions with high school agents were both positive and negative.

The findings of the study confirmed much of the previous research. Although the high school agents were aware of the challenges undocumented students faced as a result of their status, with the exception of SC1 and T3, they knew very little about the undocumented population at the high school, and they knew even less about their postsecondary options. Most were unaware of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) legislation, and those who were familiar with DACA were likely to confuse it with the Dream Act. Many incorrectly assumed that undocumented students in Illinois were unable to attend a state university without a social security number.

Recognizing that the high school agents knew very little about an undocumented student’s postsecondary options, it is perhaps a good thing that they were generally unaware of a student’s undocumented status. While it would be unfortunate if a student missed out on an opportunity to receive pertinent information, it would be detrimental if the information shared was incorrect and diminished rather than supported an undocumented student’s college dreams.

Identification and dissemination of accurate information go hand and hand. Teachers cannot share information (assuming, of course, that they possess correct information) if they are unaware of the undocumented students within their classes.
Knowing about undocumented students, including an awareness of their presence in the high school and the challenges they face in their daily life, is the first step. The second step involves creating opportunities for students to self-disclose. While teachers cannot and should not be expected to possess a comprehensive knowledge base about undocumented students’ postsecondary options, they should be minimally aware that options exist, and they should know who in the high school can offer support to undocumented students on their college journey.

Invisibility within the School Community

Research on undocumented students is challenged by the fact that the undocumented student population is hard to reach (Abrego, 2006). Undocumented students are difficult to identify and many are very hesitant to share their status due to fear and a need for secrecy, which is often instilled in them by their parents (Gonzales, 2010b). Non-Latino undocumented students face additional challenges stemming from their invisibility in society. With the focus of attention on Latino undocumented students, non-Latino undocumented students often hide in the shadows. While being invisible provides them with a sense of safety, many non-Latino undocumented students feel isolated (Chan, 2010). Non-Latino undocumented students are likely to slip through the cracks, as most support systems and outreach programs are designed and geared toward the Latino undocumented population. They are unlikely to discuss their status with anyone outside of their immediately family. Unfortunately, students who do not share their status are less likely to learn about postsecondary opportunities, and as a result are less likely to enroll in college (Chan, 2010; Gonzales, 2010b).
The literature on non-Latino undocumented students is noteworthy as much of what has been highlighted regarding their invisibility and its impact on the college choice process directly correlates to the experiences of the undocumented students in this study. The Latino undocumented community may be visible nationally (Chan, 2010), but as individuals, the undocumented students interviewed were not visible within the school community. Few people at the high school were aware of their presence, and their support network was limited to one counselor, SC1, and perhaps a few friends.

A pervasive belief existed that all of the undocumented students at the high school were Latino, and assigning students with a home language of Spanish to the school counselor who is known as the undocumented student expert has reinforced this belief. However, as undocumented students originate from many countries, it is possible that there were also undocumented students at the high school from other racial and ethnic backgrounds who were even more invisible than their Latino peers. With not even SC1 aware of their existence, they received no support from the Counseling Department in regard to the everyday challenges they encountered, let alone those experienced navigating the college choice process.

**Self-disclosure to friends.** Overall, the undocumented students disclosed their status to a very select group of individuals at the high school. They shared their undocumented status with few U.S. born friends, stating that while many of their friends had family members who were also undocumented, their U.S. born friends were often unable to relate to their experiences as an undocumented immigrant. The students interviewed also had a very small network of undocumented friends, and in fact Gabriella
completed four years of high school without ever knowing any other undocumented students at the high school, let alone in her class.

**Self-disclosure to teachers.** Gonzales (2010b) found that undocumented students who shared their status with high school teachers were not only more likely to access relevant and pertinent information, but also emotional support, and occasionally financial support as well. However, Menjívar (2008) found that teachers were generally unaware of the undocumented students within their classes, which resonated with the findings of the study.

The teachers at the high school admitted to being very unfamiliar with the undocumented students within the student body, let alone within their classes. A few teachers expressed with certainty that they had never had any undocumented students in their classes. However, one such teacher had a study participant in his class at the time this claim was made. While none of the undocumented students interviewed shared their status directly with any teachers, Nancy occasionally shared her undocumented status through a writing assignment, but her teachers’ lack of response regarding this disclosure reaffirmed her belief that her status was not relevant to her high school experience.

Most of the teachers interviewed initially responded that they did not believe that a student’s undocumented status was something that they needed to know or even could know. The teachers cited a general concern for the well being of all their students, and a hope that every student would feel supported within the high school. However, at the end of their interview, a few teachers expressed a change of heart and indicated an understanding as to how students’ backstories, such as their immigration journey and undocumented status, could be relevant to their overall classroom experience.
Interestingly, the counselors all saw a significant value in teachers knowing of a student’s undocumented status. They pointed to the close relationships that teachers form with students as a result of their daily interactions and small class sizes. Some counselors expressed the general belief that teachers knew which students in their classes were not undocumented, while others thought that most teachers had no such knowledge and in many cases would be surprised to learn of a student’s undocumented status.

**Self-disclosure to counselors.** The students generally assumed that their school counselor and a few others in the Counseling Department knew of their undocumented status, and they did not see a need to discuss it until they began the college search process. The students acknowledged receiving significant support from SC1, but they did not understand how talking with her earlier about their undocumented status could have provided greater access to accurate and detailed information regarding their college options. Although SC1 often referred her students to the college counselors, none of the students interviewed indicated any type of relationship with either college counselor, the known college experts, and neither college counselor had knowingly ever met with an undocumented student.

Despite the fact that the counselors were generally aware of the undocumented student population, with the exception of SC1, they, like the teachers, knew very little about the undocumented students at the high school or how to support them. The counselors knew little because over time SC1 assumed the role within the Counseling Department, and the high school as a whole, as the undocumented student expert. The school counselors and the college counselors interviewed expressed a shared a desire to know more about the undocumented student population at the high school and how to
best support them in the college process. They all felt strongly that SC1 could serve as a resource to the department on undocumented student issues, but that she alone should not be responsible for working with all undocumented students. However, none of the school counselors or college counselors had pursued avenues of professional development that would allow them to expand their knowledge of undocumented student issues. The lack of urgency to do so resulted from the perception that all the undocumented students were assigned to SC1 and therefore they received all necessary information and support from her.

The structure of the department, which assigned all students with the home language of Spanish to one or two school counselors, was rooted in the belief that all Spanish speaking families were appropriately identified and therefore benefited from the relationship with SC1. Yet, the findings of the study showed instances where students with a home language of Spanish were assigned to a school counselor other than SC1. It is highly probable that with a student population of over 3,000 students, the school counselors all had an undocumented student on their caseload at one time or another and it is likely that some have had more than one. However, with minimal college counseling programming geared toward undocumented students and self-disclosure a prerequisite to access the information provided by SC1, it is likely that some undocumented students are not being appropriately supported.

Perseverance and Resilience

Ladson-Billings (1995) presented the need for educators to engage in culturally relevant pedagogy, which is based on the supposition that teachers must ensure that all students experience academic success, develop and maintain cultural competence, and
develop a critical consciousness that empowers them to challenge the status quo of the social order. Yosso (2005) highlighted the alternate forms of capital that marginalized students exhibit, such as aspirational and navigational capital, both of which play an important role in the college choice process of many underrepresented students. While neither Yosso nor Ladson-Billings developed their work with undocumented students in mind, significant relevance exists.

Gildersleeve (2010) highlighted the need for high school agents to not only learn about the social and cultural contexts of undocumented students, but also to recognize how their lived experiences could serve as assets in the college process. Gildersleeve suggested that by considering how undocumented students’ social constructs such as school, family, and work affect their college choice process, high school agents can become “college-going pedagogues” (p. 3) for undocumented students by helping them develop “college-going literacy” (p. 4).

However, Gildersleeve (2010) found that for most undocumented students, development of college-going literacy was largely coincidence, occurring more as the exception rather than the norm. While the formal college counseling program at the high school was normative, any programmatic efforts that addressed the needs of undocumented students occurred by happenstance. Overall, there was little consideration of the undocumented social constructs of school, family, and work. The capital identified by Yosso (2005), as well as areas identified by Gildersleeve (2010), correlate directly with the three areas in which the undocumented students exhibited mixed levels of perseverance and resilience, which are academic achievement, family support, and paying for college.
**Academic achievement.** While the students exhibited varying ranges of academic success, they all maintained their college aspirations and pursued postsecondary education. The students shared their struggles due to the few Hispanic students in some of their higher level classes. Lacking in self-confidence, they often opted not to pursue challenging coursework, and feeling out of place often led them to drop a class when the content became difficult. The students expressed shared a desire for younger undocumented students to know that they could successfully complete the hard work required to go to college.

Gildersleeve (2010) found that undocumented students who attended well-resourced high schools with strong college-going cultures benefited from peer relationships that not only built college aspirations, but also offered guidance and support. Unfortunately, the students interviewed for this study did not experience these peer group effects described by Gildersleeve.

**Family support.** Gonzales (2010a) identified the disconnect that can exist between an undocumented student’s desire to attend college and a parent’s expectation that a student contribute financially to the family. However, Abrego (2006) found that many undocumented parents stress education and support their children’s desire to attend college. Undocumented parents often have less than a high school education, and even those who support their children’s goal of higher education usually lack the means to offer guidance (Abrego, 2006; Olivérez, 2006; Pérez et al., 2009). Like many other parents who did not attend college, they are unfamiliar with the U.S. system of higher education and as a result, are unable to help their children navigate the college process (Castro-Salazar & Bagley, 2010).
The findings of the study strongly mirrored previous research that highlights undocumented parents’ support of their children’s college dreams. All of the students stated that their parents conveyed to them the importance of education and they all pointed to their parents as the source of their college aspirations. The students made very clear the unequivocal support they received from their parents to attend college. Previous research identifies the mother as the strongest provider of that support (Castro-Salazar & Bagley, 2010; Muñoz, 2008), which was also apparent in the findings of the study with both Monica and Gabrielle identifying their mother as most influential.

Gildersleeve (2010) found that familial influences are greater for undocumented students than for first generation immigrant students. Family serves as more than just a motivator to attend college, it fuels their desire. Like many undocumented students who identify the sacrifices and struggles of parents as a strong motivator to succeed academically (Abrego, 2006; Gildersleeve, 2010; Morales et al., 2011), Kevin and Gabrielle talked about wanting to go to college to be able to give back to their parents for all the sacrifices they made in coming to the U.S.

Regrettably, undocumented students’ parental support of college is neither celebrated nor even recognized by the high school. There is a dearth of programmatic efforts to inform first generation college parents about the college choice process. The high school did not encourage parents to provide support and assistance to their children, but instead kept them out of the process. Consequently, the students commented on the challenges they faced having to navigate the college process alone. Gabriella commented that she did not even think to show her mother her letter of admission when it arrived in the mail.
Paying for college. Often the college aspirations of undocumented students conflict with the parents’ desire that students contribute financially to the family (Gonzales, 2010a). However, as previously described, the parents of the students interviewed all supported their children’s desire to attend college. Yet, without access to federal or state aid, and with few available scholarships, paying for school was usually more difficult for undocumented students than for the general student population. Some undocumented students worked as many as 16-40 hours per week to pay for school (Castro-Salazar & Bagley, 2010; Contreras, 2009; Perez Huber & Malagon, 2007), and the students in the study were no different. In some cases, parents or older siblings provided assistance with paying for college, but all of the students indicated a need and a desire to work to contribute to college costs. While navigating the usual stressors of college, the undocumented students had to respond to additional challenges created by the need to balance work and school.

Undocumented students’ ability to succeed in spite of the many challenges they encountered is notable and worthy of recognition. However, the school community did not celebrate the accomplishments of these hardworking and motivated students, and in turn neither did the students themselves. The high school could better assist undocumented students in the college process by normalizing their college counseling experiences, celebrating parental support, and working to engage them in the college choice process, while also recognizing undocumented students’ achievements and accomplishments.
Discussion of Theory Findings

In addition to examining how a high school and its agents influence an undocumented student’s college search, this dissertation also sought to examine theory. Models of college choice have long been used to understand and predict student behavior in the college process (Litten, 1982). Newer models, many of which are designed with the non-traditional student in mind, have become valuable tools for promoting college access (Hossler, Schmit & Vesper, 1999; McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2006). However, even the most recent models do not directly address the unique challenges faced by undocumented students, making their applicability to undocumented students unclear. I begin this section with a short discussion of the study findings as related to the three theoretical perspectives in which most models of college choice are grounded: sociology, economics, and psychology. In the part that follows, I discuss the college-going behaviors of the four students using specific models of college choice rooted within and outside the high school context. The analysis showed relevance for models rooted both within and outside the high school context, highlighting the significance of financial aid as well as legislation and policy decisions in addition to the influences of the high school.

Theoretical Perspectives and Influences

McDonough (1997) identified three stands of college choice theory: sociological (goal of status attainment and the effects of social and cultural capital), economic (investment of human capital and cost-benefit analysis), and social psychological (importance of student-institution fit). While most early models are rooted in a single perspective, newer models are likely to combine multiple perspectives (Perna, 2006).
When examining the college choice behaviors of the four undocumented students during the college choice process, aspects of all three theoretical perspectives were evident.

**Sociological perspective.** As the first in their families to attend college, the students spoke of the many challenges they faced while navigating the college choice process, and the lack of help and guidance from their parents and friends. Their parents, although unfamiliar with the college process and unable to offer specific assistance in the college search, all stressed to their children the importance of a college degree. With the exception of Kevin, the students entered high school with a predisposition to attend college and when asked who most influenced their decision to attend college, they all spoke about their parents. Gabriella and Monica pointed to their mothers as influential, while Nancy identified her father, who gave up everything he had in Mexico so that she could do have a life in the United States. Although Kevin did not make the decision to attend college until his sophomore year of high school, his parents also regularly shared the college message with him. The students all perceived their friends as supportive of their college plans, although most were either not attending college or were also attending the local community college.

**Economic perspective.** As previously stated, the students all decided to attend community college because of its lower costs coupled with their inability to receive financial assistance due to their undocumented status, or institutional merit aid due to their academic performance. Kevin, in particular, indicated that he made the decision to attend the community college over Northern Illinois University because of its affordable cost and the impression that, while Northern Illinois University might have a greater number of courses, the community college offered a similar educational experience.
Even in light of the financial costs (paying for school) and personal costs (balancing demands of work and school), the students recognized the benefit of a college degree and they rejected the option to forgo college. Three of the four students planned to work to pay for college. Only Gabriella, who without DACA status was reluctant to work, depended on financial support from her family, specifically her brothers, to attend college.

Monica shared that many of her friends were not attending college, having chosen instead to work. Although many people around her thought that she would not be able to get a job after college, Monica highlighted that she saw college as something more than just a path to employment. She believed that her long term financial gain would be greater with a college degree. Kevin, like Monica, saw college as an avenue to earn more money than many of his peers, which was very important to him.

**Psychological perspective.** In speaking about their decision to attend the community college, the students highlighted their familiarity and comfort with the community college, as well as the majors offered, as important factors in addition to cost and affordability. They all pointed specifically to their summer classes at the community college, which were designed to help them prepare for the placement tests, and the admission representative who helped them fill out the application, as critical in helping them transition to the college.

Kevin, who planned to study computer or mechanical engineering, solidified his decision to attend the community college upon learning that it offered a guaranteed admission program in mechanical engineering with Northern Illinois University and the University of Illinois. Like Kevin, Gabriella decided to attend the community college
because it offered courses in the field she wanted to study. Monica spoke also about the importance of institutional mission as she prepared to transfer from the community college. She expressed her interest in transferring to Northeastern Illinois University because of its commitment to supporting Hispanic students.

The college choice process of undocumented students reflects influences of sociological, economic, and psychological theoretical perspectives. Next, I will examine six models of college choice for evidence of relevance in order to better understand an undocumented student’s behavior in the college choice process.

**Models of College Choice**

I briefly summarize each theory to aid in understanding why the theory was selected for study. Next, I discuss whether the findings of the study indicate relevance for the theory as related to undocumented students. Additional details of each theory can be found in Chapter Two.

**Organizational habitus.** Focusing on the interaction between social class and the high school context, McDonough (1997) posited that habitus (perceptions about the world that are influenced by one’s environment) can also exist within an organization, such as a school, creating what she describes as an organizational habitus. McDonough studied the normative structure and resources of the high school that are dedicated to helping students in the college choice process. Examining the resources of time, availability, and support for college counseling, and the normative aspects of a college-rooted mission, assumptions of students’ cultural capital, and counselor role expectations, McDonough determined that the organizational habitus of a school can impact a student’s behavior in the college choice process.
As related in Chapters Four and Five, the organizational habitus of the high school was college-going, prioritizing college as a postsecondary outcome. Most staff talked about college regularly, and the high school allocated two full-time staff to college counseling and also offered a comprehensive college counseling program with myriad college activities. The teachers and counselors unanimously described college as the expected outcome for graduates, and ninety-six percent of graduates in the class of 2014 attended college, with over 80% enrolled in a four-year college. However, the undocumented students, who possess a dearth of knowledge about the college process, did not engage in school-wide college programming and activities. Instead, they identified SC1 and activities geared specifically to Hispanic students as critical in their college choice process.

Although college was their chosen outcome, they each attended or planned to attend a two-year, rather than a four-year, college. SC1 was unable to identify any undocumented student who had ever attended a four-year college directly from high school. The impact of the college-going organizational habitus on undocumented students is unclear. Although the students do appear to benefit from the greater college-going organizational habitus that directs students toward college, they appeared to inhabit a smaller “community college” habitus that exists within the greater organizational habitus of the high school. The undocumented students’ behavior in the college choice process suggests that not all students experience an organizational habitus in a similar way.

**Chain migration and social capital.** In this model, Pérez and McDonough (2008) built off the immigration concept of chain migration, to describe a college choice
process in which Latino students utilize a strong social network of friends, family, and high school counselors for both college planning and college choice.

With little support from friends or family, the undocumented students turned to the high school and their school counselor for support. They unanimously identified SC1 as their main resource for information about the college choice process, and for most of the students she was the sole source of information. In addition to receiving support from SC1, Kevin also talked with his school counselor about his college plans. He felt reassured in his decision to begin at community college, as this was the same path taken by his school counselor.

Although trusted by the students to guide them through the process, SC1 was not knowledgeable about the college process. Recognizing her limited knowledge base, she regularly turned to the college counselors for advice and guidance. However, the college counselors professed their ignorance about undocumented students, leaving the undocumented students with a limited network of support within the high school.

Pérez and McDonough (2008) noted that a student with a small or weak network can have fewer college options, which is particularly relevant to this study. As previously shown in this chapter, the undocumented students at the high school had a very small network of college support, receiving some guidance from high school agents and little or no guidance from family. Few of their friends were attending college at all, let alone a four-year university. All four undocumented students, like all of the undocumented students who graduated before them, applied only to the local community college. No undocumented students at the high school were known to have ever attended a four-year college directly out of high school. The peer effects of relationships with high achieving
classmates as described by Gonzales (2010b) are not evident in this study, possibly due to limited interactions with their higher achieving classmates as a result of the classes they pursued and their assigned advisory. Instead, the undocumented students’ chosen postsecondary outcome of community college reflects the effect of their limited network.

**College-linking strategies.** The typology of “college-linking” strategies developed by Hill (2008) places high schools in one of three categories (traditional, clearinghouse, and brokering) based on the intersection of the school’s resources and norms related to the college choice process. Hill suggests that these resources and norms not only affect college enrollment, but also influence whether a student attends a two-year or a four-year college. The first category, traditional, involves large group dissemination of basic and limited information without any follow up. The second category, clearinghouse, involves more input from the high schools with attempts to channel the information to the appropriate population, but is largely dependent on the resourcefulness of students and parents. The third category, brokering, requires a high level of involvement, in that not only are students and parents provided access to greater resources, but the high school also works to ensure that students and parents utilize the information that is disseminated. Utilizing Hill’s typology, the high school’s college counseling approach is described as clearinghouse with a strong organizational commitment to college and significant resources allocated to college planning. However, unlike brokering high schools, which contact parents regarding the student’s college choice process, access to these resources is heavily dependent on student and parent initiative. Although the college counseling program does not implement a brokering approach, SC1 engages in a number of brokering activities, such as regular emails to
students about potential scholarship opportunities and calls home about upcoming programs. The effect of this contact appears to be limited, as there is little parent participation at evening programs, even when conducted in Spanish. Although the students acknowledged that SC1 regularly shared scholarship information with them, the students applied for very few scholarships and claimed to not know what was available for them. It is unclear whether brokering strategies are successful for undocumented students, or if they were ineffective because of the information shared or the means by which it was communicated.

Hill (2008) determined that the effectiveness of these approaches differed based on the students’ racial or ethnic backgrounds. In her study, Latino students attending high schools that offered strong resources but did not facilitate equal access to these resources, such as those implementing a clearinghouse approach, were more likely to attend a four-year college over a two-year college. However, they were also more likely to forgo college than enroll in a two-year school, supporting the notion that disadvantaged students are more likely to rely on their high schools for information about the college process, but are less likely to seek out these resources. This finding failed to predict the decisions made by the undocumented students in this study, none of whom chose to attend a four-year college over a two-year. However, also contrary to Hill’s findings, none of the students chose to forgo college completely. All four students were attending or planning to attend a two-year college. The issue of brokering should be further explored because, although the high school offered a clearinghouse approach to college counseling, some of SC1’s brokering activities had impact. She supported their college aspirations by connecting them with relevant programmatic offerings, connected them
with the community college, and maintained contact even after they graduated from the high school. The effects of her brokering outreach are noteworthy because they were all attending college, albeit a two-year college.

**Counseling opportunity structure.** Engberg and Gilbert (2014) examined the norms and resources of a counseling department, which they described as the counseling opportunity structure, and their effects on four-year college enrollment. Their findings suggest a three-level classification system of divergent, emergent, and convergent. Divergent schools had relatively small caseloads but spent very limited time on college counseling, offering few college related activities and programming. Department norms were unlikely to focus on college counseling as the primary department goal. In emergent schools, counselors had larger caseloads, but spent a greater percentage of hours on college counseling than counselors in divergent schools, and although still low, a higher number emphasized college counseling as the primary goal of the counseling department. Overall, these schools offer greater resources to students in the college choice process than do divergent schools, but the norms of the department are not yet fully college-going. Convergent schools have smaller caseloads than schools in the emergent cluster, and counselors spend the greatest percentage of hours on college counseling. They are the most likely to specify college counseling as the primary goal of the department, and they also have a greater likelihood of offering a number of college related programs and activities. Schools in this cluster indicate strong college-going norms and offer multiple resources for students and parents in the college choice process.

The typology suggested by Engberg and Gilbert (2014) is useful in examining the counseling department of the high school in the case study, which can clearly be
described as convergent. Preparing students for life after school, which is believed to be college for most, is the self-described primary goal of the department. While the counseling caseloads are large, each counselor described the significant role school counselors play in college counseling, in addition to two staff specifically designated to do college counseling. The department also offers a myriad of resources to assist students and parents with the college choice process.

In their study, Engberg and Gilbert (2014) found that while the organizational habitus of the high school impacts the college-going culture, the counseling department also impacts college-going rates through its own norms and resources. Schools that offer resources geared toward college counseling, such as financial aid assistance and college fairs, and also allow school counselors to spend more time on college counseling, have higher four-year college-going rates. These results also indicate relevance to the high school in the case study with its similar resource offerings and high four-year college-going rates for the majority of the student body. However, surprisingly Engberg and Gilbert also found that schools that offer college visits to students have a higher rate of students attending a two-year college rather than a four-year. They posited that many of these college visits were likely targeted to local community colleges. This finding also relates to the high school, where the undocumented students all took part in college visits offered, yet enrolled in a two-year college. Although the undocumented students participated in visits to four-year colleges, they spent the greatest amount of time on the campus of the two-year college, which they admitted impacted their decision to attend.

Multilevel conceptual model. Perna (2006) posited in her four level model that at the core of the college choice process is a human capital investment in education,
which is then impacted by four contextual levels: student habitus, school and community context, higher education context, and social, economic and policy context. The impact of the high school (level two) is quite evident, with each of the four students identifying SC1 and a number of targeted programs and activities as key factors in their college attainment. However, the higher education context (level three) as well as legislation and policy (level four) also significantly impacted the college choice process in each of the three stages (predisposition, search, and choice).

Unlike the other undocumented students, Kevin did not enter high school with plans to attend college. He began high school thinking he could not attend college due to his undocumented status and lack of a social security number. Once he received Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival (DACA) status and obtained a social security number, he began to seriously consider college as a postsecondary outcome. In regard to paying for college, the effect of the DACA legislation was critical, with each of the four students identifying the ability to work legally as an essential means of paying for school. However, the students were generally unaware of state legislation that supported their postsecondary opportunities, such as Illinois’ tuition equity law, which enabled undocumented students to pay in-state tuition rates, or the Illinois Dream Act, which offered an avenue for scholarship.

All four students identified their inability to receive federal or state aid as a restrictive and significant factor in their college search as well as their final choice. While some colleges offered merit aid to undocumented students, the students believed they were ineligible for those scholarship opportunities due to their lower levels of academic achievement. Yet the scholarships for which they were eligible went largely unexplored,
and although the paucity of scholarship opportunities impacted their college options, it
did not prevent them from attending college. The students exhibited an awareness of
some of the colleges in Illinois that were welcoming of undocumented students, but they
knew little about colleges outside of Illinois, and overall, they were very unaware of all
colleges’ institutional aid policies.

Perna’s (2006) model indicated relevance for undocumented students on all four
levels, although in regard to level three (higher education context) and level four
(legislation and policy), the students only possessed awareness of the restrictive
influences and were generally aware of the aspects that supported their postsecondary
options.

**Student-choice and financial nexus model.** Recognizing that paying for college
is the most significant obstacle for undocumented students in their pursuit of a college
degree (Contreras, 2009; Pérez, Cortés et al., 2010; Perez, Huber & Malagon, 2007), I
believed it necessary to also test a model that was rooted in costs and financial aid. These
variables made this study of particular interest due to an undocumented student’s
generally restricted access to financial aid and their repeatedly-voiced concerns about
paying for college. Paulsen and St. John (2002) found that the low-income students in
their study overwhelmingly chose a college because of available aid, low tuition, or both,
and more than half of the low-income students chose their college because of its
proximity to work. In addition, more than 60% of students in the low-income group
attended public or two-year colleges and few lived on campus. They also found that low-
income students whose college choice was impacted by low costs, but not financial aid,
were less likely to persist.
Like many of the low income students in the Paulsen and St. John (2002) study, the undocumented students in this study did not receive financial aid and chose to attend the community college solely because of its low cost. Therefore, their findings highlight a potential area of concern as related to undocumented students and college persistence. Monica shared that most of her friends who started community college with her had since dropped out. While the race, ethnicity, and status of Monica’s friends is unknown, early in the interview she shared that the majority of her Latino friends were all currently working and not attending school. The full relevance of the study’s findings to the undocumented students in the case study is not yet known as two of the students were just beginning college and the other two were still in college. However, the findings of Paulsen and St. John (2002) are definitely unsettling and warrant further research.

This section discussed the influence of three theoretical strands of college choice theory: sociological, economic, and social psychological. In addition, models of college choice rooted both within and outside of the high school context were examined for relevance and applicability for the undocumented student. The results of the examination highlighted the role of the high school, financial aid opportunities, and the effects of legislation and policy decisions, on an undocumented student’s college choice process.

**Implications**

This dissertation study adds to a nascent body of literature by describing how the college search of undocumented students is influenced by the high school they attend, the college counseling programs offered by the high school, and the attitudes and knowledge of the high school agents with whom the undocumented students interact. The next section provides implications for practice, and for areas of future research.
Implications for Practice

Throughout the study, I engaged in ongoing self-reflection of my own college counseling practices as well as the college counseling program implemented at the high school where I work. As a result, I have identified three areas where high schools should strive to improve their support of undocumented students in their pursuit of postsecondary education.

(1) Improve undocumented student visibility by developing opportunities that invite undocumented students to self-disclose their status to high school agents, as well as by creating undocumented student networks within the high school.

(2) Ensure that undocumented students have access to relevant and pertinent information regarding the college choice process without the need to self-disclose their status.

(3) Provide professional development opportunities for all high school agents about the undocumented student population at the high school, the challenges they face in daily life, and their postsecondary opportunities.

As described in the section that follows, I have implemented many of the suggested strategies within my own high school.

Invite self-disclosure and create undocumented student networks. In reflecting on the invisibility of the students within the high school, I thought back to my early days as a college counselor, when all student services professionals had rainbow stickers on their office doors to let LGBTQ students know that our offices were safe spaces. We hoped that this small gesture would enable students to feel comfortable
sharing their sexual orientation with us. Building off this experience, I downloaded from the National Educators Association (NEA) website a jpeg of a monarch butterfly with the words DREAMERS WELCOME (see Figure 2). I initially saw a poster with this image on Representative Castro’s (D-Texas) office door when I was lobbying in Washington, DC. The monarch butterfly has become a graphic representation of migrants. This particular image, created by California artist Favianna Rodriguez, who strongly supports DREAMERS and their advocates, was designed specifically for the NEA with the intention that it be shared with educators (National Education Association, 2013). I initially color copied and laminated the image, but after deciding that a more professional look was needed, I reached out to my principal to see if he would fund the purchase of stickers, which could be placed on doors, bulletin boards, walls, or even laptops. I also asked if he would be willing to support faculty and staff engagement in United We Dream’s National Educator Coming Out Day. Held in November, the intent of the day is to encourage educators to show their support of undocumented students (United We Dream, 2015). The principal requested a meeting with a small group of undocumented student advocates to discuss this upcoming event. Five individuals (principal, bilingual social worker, director of English Language Learners, a bilingual school counselor, and me) met one afternoon for 30 minutes. We talked extensively about the potential for both positive and negative community response. We determined that it was important for our school to take part in the event. Shortly after meeting, the principal sent an email to all high school faculty and staff inviting them to take part in National Educator Coming Out Day. Any high school agent interested in participating received an 8.5 x 11 sign to display in their classroom that said, “I AM AN UNAFRAID EDUCATOR WITH AND
FOR UNDOCUMENTED STUDENTS” (see Figure 3). The response from high school agents was overwhelmingly positive. A large number of high school agents displayed signs, many of which can still be seen today.

I continue to distribute the DREAMERS WELCOME stickers whenever I give a presentation about undocumented students and college access to counseling staff, higher education professionals, or graduate students. I also shared this image on professional listservs and Facebook groups. As a result, use of this image has exploded, especially within the state of Illinois. Many high schools and colleges have adopted its use, and last year it also served as the conference logo for the Sharing the Dream educator conference on undocumented student issues organized by the Illinois Association for College Admission Counseling. The logo appeared on all of the conference publications, and all participants received a magnet with the logo for display in their offices.

Figure 2. DREAMERS WELCOME Sticker (National Education Association, 2013)
Dreamers and Allies group. The decision to start a Dreamers and Allies group at my high school was rooted in research that addressed the benefits of helping undocumented students develop a public identity, as well as the critical need for educational role models and mentors. Abrego (2008) highlighted the psychosocial benefits of tuition equity legislation in California, where undocumented students refer to themselves as AB 540 students (AB 540 being the California statute that allows undocumented students to pay in-state tuition). She found that being referred to as AB 540 students not only provided undocumented students in California with a public identity that did not highlight their undocumented status, but it also provided undocumented students with the confidence to share their status more freely. However, Contreras (2009) did not find the psychosocial benefits as experienced by students in California to hold true for undocumented students in Washington State. Although similar tuition equity legislation exists in Washington, undocumented students there did not share a public identity such as the one in California.
Pérez and McDonough (2008) highlighted the benefits for college planning and college choice for Latino students with a strong social network of friends and family, and Abrego (2006) described the negative impact of the lack of educational role models. The findings of the study identified the limited social networks of undocumented students who attend a high school with a small and invisible undocumented population. The undocumented students in the study did not know many other undocumented students at the high school, and they were aware of few undocumented students who had pursued a four-year degree. Monica spoke of meeting an undocumented student who attended Northeastern Illinois University and was helping her with the transfer process. Her experiences and interactions with this student helped her see the benefit of having a mentor.

With previous research and study findings in mind, and motivated by a session we attended the previous year at the Sharing the Dream educator conference on undocumented student issues, our school’s bilingual social worker and I started our Dreamers and Allies group in August 2015. Our mission is simple: to provide a safe space for Dreamers where they can access a network of support. Developing a Dreamers and Allies group has helped connect undocumented students with one another as well as with their ally classmates. Through the Dreamers and Allies group, undocumented students have received earlier access to information about college, as well as information about Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals. Older students have shared their experiences and offered advice to younger students, serving as role models by showing them that college is possible. The group sponsored its first school-wide event in March 2016, hosting a screening of the movie, No Le Digas A Nadie (Don’t tell Anyone), which
tells the story of Angy Rivera, an undocumented student in New York. With over fifty students and staff in attendance, the undocumented students shared afterward they felt visible in the high school and empowered to tell their story. The Dreamers and Allies club has created a community of support for undocumented students, while also helping them develop a much needed voice within the greater school community.

The Dreamers and Allies group has also resulted in the development of a small network of colleagues doing similar work with undocumented students. At the same time the bilingual social worker and I began our conversations about starting a Dreamers and Allies group, two counseling colleagues from an area high school asked me for assistance with a similar club they wanted to start at their school. I suggested that we all meet to brainstorm ideas. I also invited a counseling colleague from a different area high school who had started a Dreamers and Allies group at her high school the previous year. With a year of experience, I knew she would offer a valuable perspective. I also reached out to colleagues at two other high schools who I thought might be interested in starting a club. As a result, eight counseling and social work professionals from five suburban high schools now meet quarterly to share information, exchange ideas, and provide one another with support. We also regularly share information through email regarding academic opportunities, scholarships, and programmatic information.

Provide access to college information without self-disclosure. As evident from the findings of the study, undocumented students often do not have access to accurate and complete information regarding relevant legislation, postsecondary options, financial aid, and scholarships. While self-disclosure is known to be an important factor in helping undocumented students access necessary information, many students are fearful of self-
disclosing even when provided the opportunity to do so (Gonzales, 2010b). In addition, as the findings of this study indicated, undocumented students do not always see a need to self-disclose. Unfortunately, undocumented students too often do not see their needs reflected in the formal college counseling program. As shown in this study, although targeted programming is effective, it is not comprehensive leaving gaps in information. In addition, students who do not self-disclose may not have access to pertinent information. Therefore, information relevant to undocumented students must be included in all aspects of a school-wide college counseling program. Financial aid nights should address what types of aid undocumented students are eligible for, and when and how a DACA student should complete a FAFSA. Evening college programs should include undocumented student concerns regarding college options, tuition equity legislation, and application completion. The undocumented students shared that poring over lists of scholarships to find the few that were open to undocumented students was time consuming and discouraging. Scholarship information should be disseminated via a separate document that lists only scholarships that do not require students to be a permanent resident or citizen. This information can also be captured as a search field in the scholarship section of Naviance, the high school specific web-based tool that students use in the college choice process (additional details about Naviance can be found in Chapter Four). College planning handbooks and brochures and counseling websites should address the specific needs of undocumented students, just as they do students with disabilities and athletes. Normalizing the process for sharing relevant information will result in undocumented students’ greater engagement in school-wide programming.
Create professional development opportunities. Every high school agent interviewed felt a strong need for professional development about the undocumented students at the high school, their social and cultural contexts, and postsecondary options. T6 went so far as to say that it would be irresponsible of high schools to encourage undocumented students to self-disclose their status and not give teachers the tools to respond appropriately. I realized that if high school agents were going to display the DREAMERS WELCOME butterfly sticker and invite students to disclose their status, they must be informed about undocumented student issues. I partnered with the bilingual social worker to offer a session on undocumented students at the winter District In-Service. The session was open to all staff, but I specifically targeted teachers. During the week-long registration period, our session completely filled and we had to move the location to accommodate everyone who wanted to attend. We shared information about the undocumented population at the high school and their daily challenges. We also addressed the topic of college access, and conveyed the message that college is possible and should be encouraged. Every participant also received a DREAMERS WELCOME sticker. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive, with many teachers sharing that they found the session informative and engaging.

Sharing the Dream educator conference. At the conclusion of each high school agent interview, I noted in my researcher’s journal how much educators did not know about undocumented students. In June 2015, around the time I finished my interviews, I received information about an educator conference in Seattle, Washington on undocumented student issues. With financial support from the Illinois Association for College Admission Counseling, I attended the one day conference along with a college
admission colleague. The conference addressed a variety of topics including the mental health needs of undocumented students, how to support them on the path to college, and best practices for encouraging persistence to graduation. As my colleague and I flew home, we discussed the feasibility of having a similar event in Illinois. We brainstormed a list of colleagues who would likely be interested in joining us with this endeavor, and by the time we landed, Sharing the Dream 2015 was born.

Over the next eight months, nine high school, college, and community-based organization professionals planned a conference for Illinois educators on undocumented student issues. The conference took place in May 2015 at a suburban college. Attendees included high school teachers, administrators, school counselors, college counselors, social workers and administrators, as well as student affairs professionals and college access professionals from community-based organizations. Sessions topics included the following, being an effective ally for undocumented high school and college students, supporting DREAMers in their transition from a two-year to a four-year college, myths and misconceptions, tending to undocumented students’ mental and emotional health, career options, and parents as allies in the college choice process. We were also fortunate to have Roberto Gonzales, Professor of Education at the Harvard University Graduate School of Education and a well known researcher on undocumented student issues, give the keynote. We initially hoped to have 150 attendees and we closed registration at 350.

The conference was intended as a one-time-only event, but we received such positive feedback that we have planned another for May 2016. After the success of last year’s conference, a number of colleagues from the National Association for College Admission Counseling expressed interest in offering a similar conference in other states.
and as a result, many will attend this year’s conference with the plan to replicate it on a local level.

**Implied for Future Research**

With fewer than 10% of undocumented students enrolling in college immediately after high school and most beginning at a community college due to cost, it is critical that further research examines how undocumented students choose a college, what influences them in the college choice process, and what happens to undocumented students who aspire to a four-year degree but start at a two-year college. In addition, undocumented student identity development and professional development for educators on undocumented student issues must also be explored. Finally, recognizing the important role parents played in motivating their children to pursue college, additional research ought to examine the parent perspective and present the parent voice.

**College choice theory.** This study grazed the surface regarding the examination of the relevance of models of college choice to undocumented students. There is a critical need for continued research on college choice theory and undocumented students. Results of the study showed influence of all three theoretical strands: sociological, economic, and social psychological. Evaluations of the models of college choice showed significant relevance of the high school on an undocumented student’s college choice process. As described previously in this chapter, two theories rooted in the high school context indicated potential applicability to undocumented students and warrant additional research. The first is McDonough’s (2005) model of organizational habitus, which studied the normative structure and resources of the high school that are dedicated to helping students in the college choice process. The second is Engberg and Gilbert’s
(2014) model of counseling opportunity structure, which examined the norms and resources of a counseling department.

Previous research has shown that most undocumented students begin at community college (Abrego, 2006), and although high achieving undocumented students apply to and are accepted at highly selective universities, they usually cannot afford tuition and, therefore, rarely attend (Abrego & Gonzales, 2010). However, some undocumented students are able to achieve the dream of enrolling at a four-year college. Many will do so through the support of scholarship programs such as the Golden Door Scholars (http://www.goldendoorscholars.org/), which has partnered with 18 colleges to provide scholarships to undocumented students. Learning how, or if, a high school positively contributed to the success of these students, could enable more students to qualify for and receive this critical financial support.

The impression that Latino students give up when classes become challenging, along with the belief that average academic performance is acceptable surfaced often throughout the interview. Unfortunately, due to their dependency on merit scholarships to pay for college, average is not acceptable for the undocumented student who dreams of attending a four year university. Additional research that investigates the reasons behind these beliefs and behaviors, in addition to unpacking how high schools help undocumented students develop a stronger academic identity is critical in ensuring that they are academically competitive for the merit scholarships that they desperately need.

Finally, there is much to be learned from the 90% undocumented students who do not make it to college. Additional research ought to explore what factors affected the college choice process for undocumented students who had college aspirations and
pursued a college curriculum in high school, but did not enroll even in community college. There is as much to be learned from students who opted out of higher education as there is from students who opted in.

Path from community college to a bachelor’s degree. As found in the literature, and confirmed by the results of the study, most undocumented students begin at community college due to cost. The research of Paulsen and St John (2002) showed the negative impact on persistence by students who did not receive financial aid and chose a college due to its low cost. This study is particularly relevant to the college choice process of undocumented students, as most do not receive any type of financial aid and choose community college due to its lower costs. It is unknown whether undocumented students experience the same negative impact on persistence, or whether they are able to persist to degree completion. In addition, although most undocumented students who begin at community college have four-year aspirations, little is known about their transfer rates to four-year colleges and persistence to graduation. Research that examines the transfer patterns of undocumented students enrolled at two-year colleges is needed.

Effects of professional development. Study findings indicated a significant and urgent need for high school agents to learn more about undocumented students. Building on the research of Gildersleeve (2010), I suggested in the discussion section that high school agents should learn not just about undocumented students’ postsecondary options, but also about their daily challenges as a result of their undocumented status. Therefore, research is necessary to determine exactly what information high school agents should know in order to positively affect an undocumented student’s college process. The effects of this acquired knowledge on an undocumented student’s high school experience as well
as their college choice process should also be explored. Moreover, recognizing that this information can be shared in a variety of ways, including professional conferences, school in-service days, or small group dialogues, additional research should also investigate the best methods for information dissemination. Finally, research in this area ought to explore what role undocumented students can play in information compilation and dissemination. I maintain that providing undocumented students with the opportunity to share their experiences directly with high school agents would positively impact the undocumented students as well as the high school agents.

**Dreamers and Allies groups and identity development.** Contreras (2009) found that unlike their undocumented peers in California, undocumented students in Washington State did not develop a public identity as a result of the state’s tuition equity legislation, possibly due to their smaller numbers and lower visibility. The undocumented students in the study, who are invisible and have small numbers, also did not share an identity. I have proposed that undocumented students can develop an identity, increase visibility, and improve academic achievement through membership in a Dreamers and Allies group. High schools agents can also use Dreamers and Allies groups to build undocumented students’ levels of resiliency. Additional research is warranted to determine the effects of membership in Dreamers and Allies groups on academic achievement, identity development, resiliency, visibility, and postsecondary attainment.

**Parent voice.** The results of this study support previous research by identifying the strong role that parents play in the college choice process. The students all identified one or both parents as influential in their decision to attend college. However, little research has been conducted that directly involves the parents of undocumented students.
Most of what is known has been gleaned through research conducted solely on the student. A critical need exists for research that directly engages the parents, in order to better understand their role and to ensure that their voice is also heard.

**Conclusion**

The college choice process causes anxiety for students and parents alike, but for undocumented students the process is additionally complicated by myriad factors that restrict access. This case study explored the influences on undocumented students as they navigate the college process. Rooted in a conceptual framework of models of college choice, this study examined how a high school and its agents affect an undocumented student’s college choice process.

Findings from this study pertained to undocumented students as well as high school agents. College-bound undocumented students exhibit mixed levels of perseverance and resilience in academic achievement, family and peer support, and paying for college. Unfortunately, invisibility within the school community can limit an undocumented student’s access to information about admission and financial aid processes. In addition, undocumented students are often unaware of federal and state legislation and policies that impact their college options. While undocumented students do not engage in school-wide college counseling programming, they respond favorably to targeted outreach and partake in specialized programmatic efforts. Although high school agents (teachers, school counselors, and college counselors) express strong support for undocumented students in their pursuit of a college degree, they hold numerous incorrect beliefs, and lack pertinent information regarding undocumented students’ postsecondary opportunities.
Implications for high schools include professional development for all high school staff on undocumented student issues. High schools should provide undocumented students with opportunities to self-disclose their status, but they should also provide undocumented students with access to accurate information about the college process and their postsecondary options without requiring self-disclosure. Finally, reaching out to undocumented students through a Dreamers and Allies club can foster a community of support, while also helping undocumented students develop a voice within the greater school community.

Although undocumented students are encouraged as children to take part in the U.S. educational system, many find their path to college blocked by multiple barriers as a result of their undocumented status. Some students will succeed in achieving a college education, although most will attend a community college due to cost. Through further research we will learn more about the undocumented student’s college process. Continued research is necessary to enable more undocumented students to take part in the higher education opportunities that are afforded to their citizen peers.
APPENDIX A

RECRUITMENT MATERIALS
Recruitment Email to Counseling Department

Aliza Gilbert, a doctoral student in higher education at Loyola University Chicago, is conducting research on undocumented students and college access. She is looking at how a high school and its agents influence an undocumented student’s college search. She is conducting a case study on our school district, and her data collection will involve document analysis, observation, and interviews. In addition to interviewing students, she would like to interview members of the counseling department. She hopes to interview at least three school counselors and two college counselors. Interviews will last approximately 60 minutes and will take place at the high school. The information shared in the interview will remain confidential as will the identity of all interview participants. Individuals interested in taking part in the study, or those desiring additional information are asked to contact her directly at alizagilbert@yahoo.com.

Recruitment Email to Teaching Faculty

Aliza Gilbert, a doctoral student in higher education at Loyola University Chicago, is conducting research on undocumented students and college access. She is looking at how a high school and its agents influence an undocumented student’s college search. She is conducting a case study on our school district, and her data collection will involve document analysis, observation, and interviews. In addition to interviewing students, she would like to interview members of the teaching faculty. She hopes to interview at least one teacher from each of the five academic areas (English, math, social studies, world language and science) and one additional teacher from fine and applied arts. Interviews will last approximately 60 minutes and will take place at the high school. The information shared in the interview will remain confidential as will the identity of all interview participants. Individuals interested in taking part in the study, or those desiring additional information are asked to contact her directly at alizagilbert@yahoo.com.
APPENDIX B

LETTERS TO PARENTS OF STUDENT PARTICIPANTS
Letter in English

Dear Parents/Legal Guardians,

My name is Aliza Gilbert and I am graduate student at Loyola University Chicago. I am conducting research at X High School on undocumented students and college access. We know that undocumented students face many challenges in their pursuit of college and I want to learn how a high school and its staff, such as teachers and counselors, influence an undocumented student’s college search.

As part of my study I will interview undocumented seniors who are involved in the process of applying to college. Your son/daughter has volunteered to participate in the study and will take part in a 90-minute interview with me. During the interview I will ask questions about his/her college goals, the college search and application process, paying for college, and a bit about your son’s/daughter’s thoughts regarding Deferred Action and the Dream Act. Interviews will take place at the high school. The information shared in the interview will remain confidential as will the identity of the students. Students will be asked to choose an alternate name, which is how I will know them and refer to them throughout the study. I will never know their real name. Participation in this study is completely voluntary and a student can decide to leave the study at any time.

As we will be discussing your son’s/daughter’s undocumented status there are minimal risks involved in participating in this research. However, I have implemented a number of measures to ensure their safety including the use of an alternate name and all interviews will take place in an area of the school that is removed from the general population. Even though there are some risks, the study will allow educators to gain a better understanding of how undocumented students access college and the ways in which high school can support them.

If you have any questions about the study or do not want your son/daughter to take part please contact X (name of college counselor) at X (email address).

Thank you for your time.

Aliza Gilbert

Loyola University Chicago
Estimados Padres / Tutores Legales,

Mi nombre es Aliza Gilbert y yo soy estudiante de posgrado en Loyola University Chicago. Estoy haciendo una investigación académica en X High School sobre los estudiantes indocumentados y acceso a la universidad. Sabemos que los estudiantes indocumentados se enfrentan a muchos desafíos en su búsqueda de una universidad y quiero saber cómo una escuela secundaria y su personal, tales como maestros y consejeros, influyen en la búsqueda de una universidad de un estudiante indocumentado.

Como parte de mi estudio voy a entrevistar a unos estudiantes del 12º grado indocumentados que están involucrados en el proceso de aplicación a la universidad. Su hijo/a se ha ofrecido a participar en el estudio y participará en una entrevista de 90 minutos conmigo. Durante la entrevista le preguntaré acerca de sus metas universitarias, el proceso de búsqueda de universidades y aplicación, su forma de pago, y un poco acerca de sus pensamientos con respecto a la Acción Diferida y el Dream Act. Las entrevistas tendrán lugar en la escuela secundaria. La información que se comparte en la entrevista será confidencial al igual que la identidad de los estudiantes. Se les pedirá a los estudiantes a elegir un nombre falso, y voy a conocerlos y hacer referencia a ellos durante todo el estudio con ese nombre. Nunca sabré su nombre real. La participación en este estudio es completamente voluntaria y el estudiante puede decidir retirarse del estudio en cualquier momento.

Como vamos a discutir el estado indocumentado de su hijo/a hay riesgos mínimos correspondientes en participar en esta investigación. Sin embargo, he implementado una serie de medidas para garantizar su seguridad, incluyendo el uso de un nombre falso y todas las entrevistas tomarán lugar en un área de la escuela que se retira de la población general. A pesar de que existen algunos riesgos, el estudio permitirá a los educadores a obtener una mejor comprensión de cómo los estudiantes indocumentados acceden a la universidad y las formas en que la escuela secundaria puede apoyarlos.

Si usted tiene alguna pregunta sobre el estudio o no desea que su hijo/a participe, por favor comuníquese con la X (nombre de la consejera) en X (correo electrónico).

Gracias por su tiempo.

Aliza Gilbert

Loyola University Chicago
APPENDIX C

HIGH SCHOOL AGENT CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH
**Project Title:** DREAMers and the College Dream: A Case Study Analysis Examining the Influences of High Schools and High School Agents

**Researcher(s):** Aliza Gilbert

**Faculty Sponsor:** Mark Engberg

**Introduction:**
You are being asked to take part in a research study being conducted by Aliza Gilbert for a dissertation under the supervision of Mark Engberg in the College of Education, Department of Higher Education at Loyola University of Chicago.

The school district is the focus of a case study and you are being asked to participate because I am interested in hearing about your experiences and thoughts as a counseling professional regarding undocumented students and their movement through the college search and application process.

Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before deciding whether to participate in the study.

**Purpose:**
The purpose of this study is to examine how high schools and their agents influence undocumented students in the college search.

**Procedures:**
If you agree to be in the study, you will be asked to:

- Participate in one 60-minute one-on-one interview with the researcher. The interview will take place in person and will be conducted at your high school. The interview will be scheduled at a time that is convenient for you. Notes will be taken during the interview and the interview will be recorded and transcribed. Interview questions will be provided to you ahead of time. Following the interview, you will receive a written summary of the interview in order for you to review and provide feedback and/or comments.

- Permit researcher to contact you by email after the interview with any follow up questions.

**Risks/Benefits:**
There are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in this research beyond those experienced in everyday life. Although there are no direct benefits to participation, you may benefit from the opportunity to reflect on your interactions with undocumented students and the role you play in their college search and application process. The results from this study will be included as part of the researcher’s dissertation. The potential benefits to the field of education is a better understanding of how undocumented students access postsecondary education and the ways in which high school professionals can support them throughout the process.
Confidentiality:
Names or other identifying information will not be recorded in interview notes. Pseudonyms will be used in all publications in order to maintain confidentiality. The identity of your district and your school will also remain confidential. The interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Data from individual interviews will not be shared with anyone other than the faculty advisor and the transcriber who will sign a confidentiality agreement. Transfer of data between the researcher and the transcriber will take place using password protected Dropbox account. Participants will receive a written summary of the interview for review, and will also have the opportunity to provide feedback. Field notes, transcriptions and original interview recordings will be stored in a locked file cabinet/password protected computer throughout the duration of the study and destroyed within three months after the researcher successfully defends her dissertation.

Voluntary Participation:
Participation in this study is voluntary. If you do not want to be in this study, you do not have to participate. Even if you decide to participate, you are free not to answer any question or to withdraw from participation at any time without penalty.

Contacts and Questions:
If you have questions about this research study, please feel free to contact Aliza Gilbert at 847/452-3891 or alizagilbert@yahoo.com or Dr. Mark Engberg mengber@luc.edu or 312/915-7401.

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Loyola University Office of Research Services at (773) 508-2689.

Statement of Consent:
Your signature below indicates that you have read the information provided above, have had an opportunity to ask questions, and agree to participate in this research study. You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

____________________________________________   __________________
Participant’s Signature                                                   Date

____________________________________________  ___________________
Researcher’s Signature                                                  Date
APPENDIX D

ORAL SCRIPT FOR STUDENT ASSENT/CONSENT TO

PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH
My name is Aliza Gilbert and I am conducting a research study on undocumented students and college access. The study is for my dissertation in higher education at Loyola University Chicago. The purpose of this study is to examine how high schools and their agents, such as teachers and counselors, influence undocumented students in the college search. I am interested in hearing about your experiences as an undocumented student moving through the college search and application process.

If you agree to be in the study, you will be asked to:

• Participate in a 90-minute one-on-one interview with me at the high school. Interview questions will be provided to you ahead of time. Notes will be taken during the interview and the interview will be recorded and transcribed.
• Give permission to your college counselor to provide the researcher with a copy of your high school transcript and ACT score. All personal and identifying information will be removed.

There are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in this research beyond those experienced in everyday life. Although there are no direct benefits to participation, you may benefit from the opportunity to reflect on your own experiences. The results from this study will be included as part of my dissertation. The potential benefit to the field of education is a better understanding of how undocumented students access postsecondary education and the ways in which high school professionals can support them throughout the process.

Names or other identifying information will not be recorded in interview notes. A pseudonym chosen by you will be used in all publications in order to maintain confidentiality. The identity of your district and your school will also remain confidential. Your interview will be recorded and transcribed. Data from individual interviews will not be shared with anyone other than the faculty advisor and the transcriber who will sign a confidentiality agreement. Transference of data between the researcher and the transcriber will take place using password protected Dropbox account. Field notes, written transcriptions and original interview recordings will be stored in a locked file cabinet/password protected computer throughout the duration of the study and destroyed within three months after I successfully defend my dissertation.

Participation in this study is voluntary. If you do not want to be in this study, you do not have to participate. Even if you decide to participate, you are free not to answer any question or to withdraw from participation at any time without penalty.

If you have questions about this research study, please contact your college counselor. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Loyola University Office of Research Services at (773) 508-2689.

Thank you.
APPENDIX E

DOCUMENT REVIEW PROTOCOL
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Format of Document</th>
<th>Intended recipient</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>____ Printed ____ Internet ____</td>
<td>____ Parent ____ Student ____ Counselor ____ Teacher</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Identified Stage of College Process**

| ____ Predisposition ____ Search ____ Choice |

**Purpose/Topic of document:**

**College knowledge addressed:**

**Evidence:**

Specific relevance for undocumented students: YES NO BOTH

**Evidence:**

**Summary statement:**
APPENDIX F

HIGH SCHOOL OBSERVATION GUIDE
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<thead>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name of Program</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose/Focus of observation</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alias for people involved (if used):</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aspect of research questions addressed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage identified: predisposition, search, or choice</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Physical setting:**
Goal: To examine the physical resources, which support a college going culture.

Observe the high school’s common areas (cafeteria, library, computer labs, etc.) and hallways (bulletin boards) looking for evidence of a college going culture.
Describe the resources and physical set up of the Guidance Resource Center
Highlight any physical resources that speak specifically to the undocumented student

**College Programs:**
Goal: To explore what college knowledge is shared with students and parents through college programs.

What is the topic of the program?
Who is the intended audience? Is the program well attended?
Summarize the information shared
In what language was the program conducted? If English, were there translating devices?
Describe how the information was shared (presentation, lecture, small group, interactive)
Which high school agents are present? What interactions take place between these agents and students and/or parents?
What information, if any, was relevant specifically to the undocumented student?
Mock script pre-interview:

Interviewers: (Make basic introductions—hello, names, etc.). Read Oral Script for Assent and Consent.

Your College Counselor told me that you have picked the pseudonym or false name of ______________, which is how I will refer to you in any future communications with your college counselor and throughout my dissertation. No one will know your real name or even the name of your school.

You should have received a copy of the questions a few days ago from the College Counselor to help familiarize yourself with what I would like to discuss today. If at any time you would like to pass on a question, come back to a question, ask for clarification or repetition, do not hesitate to let me know. There are no specific ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ answers for what we will be discussing, so please feel free to elaborate as much as you like. If you are ready, we can begin.

General background information

1. Since you and I have just met, tell me a little bit about yourself. What classes are you taking this year? What clubs, if any are you involved in? If you have a job, tell me about that also.

2. Now, we are going to shift gears a bit. Where were you born? How old were you when you came to the U.S.?
   a. Who else from your immediate and extended family is in the U.S.?
   b. Do you remember the trip here? If yes, tell me about it.
   c. Do you have any memories of when you first arrived?
   d. Describe some of the challenges you face in everyday life or at school as a result of your undocumented status?

3. Let’s talk about your academic experiences.
   a. Share with me some of your thoughts and feelings about school when you were younger. Probe if positive -- Tell me about a favorite memory from elementary or middle school. Probe if negative -- Tell me about a specific challenge you faced in elementary or middle school.
   b. Share with me your feelings and thoughts about school now.
   c. In what ways, if any, do you think your academic experiences differ from students in your birth country?
   d. In what ways, if any, do you think your academic experiences have differed from U.S. born students?
College Aspirations

4. Tell me about the experiences that led you to pursue college.
   a. Do you remember when you first decided that you wanted to go to college?

5. Tell me about the influences that led you to pursue college.
   a. Did you speak with anyone about your desire to go to college? If yes, do any specific conversations stand out in your mind?
   b. Tell me about the role, if any, your parents have played in your desire to go to college. Probe for parents’ level of education.

6. Tell me a bit about your closest high school friends.
   a. What are their post-high school plans? If college, probe for more info about their college plans. If not college, probe about why not.
   b. In what ways, if any, have your friends influenced your desire to attend college?

7. Tell me about your relationships with other undocumented students in the high school.
   a. Are they also planning to go to college? If yes, probe more about their college plans.
   b. If not, tell me about a student who isn’t going. Why is he/she not planning on going?
   c. Are your undocumented peers supportive of your desire to go to college?

8. Tell me a bit about your experiences with adults in the building like your teachers, school counselor or college counselor.
   a. Probe about the relationship -- Were you comfortable sharing your status with these people? Why or why not?
   b. If something suggests that they talked about college plans -- tell me about some conversations you have had with them about your college goals. If not -- I am wondering why you have never talked with them about your college plans.

9. In what ways, if any, has your undocumented status influenced your thoughts about attending college or your college search?
   a. If highlight something negative -- How did you overcome this?

College Choice/Application Process

10. What colleges did you apply to?
    a. What factors were important to you in developing this list?
    b. Who helped you develop this list? How did they help you?
    c. In what ways, if any, did your undocumented status play a role in developing this list? If yes, how?
    d. Who, if anyone, helped you complete your applications?
11. Tell me about the role, if any, your family has played in your college search.

12. If this has not already been talked about -- Did you meet with a school counselor or college counselor? Tell me about the meeting.

13. If this has not already been talked about -- Did you talk with a teacher? Tell me about the conversation.

14. Who, if anyone, was most influential in helping you develop your list, who would it be and why? Describe how he/she was helpful.

15. What other resources, if any, beside people did you use in developing this list?
   a. Did you attend any of the college programs offered by the high school?
   b. If yes, which ones and did you find them helpful? How?
   c. If you didn't attend any programs, why not?
   d. Tell me about other resources (books, handouts, Naviance)
   e. To what extent, if any, did the resources help you with some of the unique challenges you face being undocumented?

16. What types of challenges, if any, you have faced in your college search as a result of your undocumented status?

17. To what extent, if any, are the different professionals in your school (teacher, counselors and administrators) aware of the challenges that undocumented students face in very day life? In the college search? Explain.

18. To what extent, if any, did the high school supported you in college search?
   a. If yes, how? Provide some examples and then probe for “adequacy”
   b. If not, what do you wish the school had done? Describe the gaps.

19. If you have already chosen a college (or are already enrolled) how did you decide upon your college?
   a. What people, if any, were the most influential in your decision to attend your college?

20. (If student is enrolled in college) Are you planning on continuing at your college next semester?
   a. What factors contribute to you wanting (not wanting) to stay?
   b. Do you have any concerns about continuing at your college?

Financing College
21. Is cost an important factor in your college process?
   a. How do you plan to pay for college?
   b. Have you talked with your parents about college costs?
c. Will your parents or other family members contribute? How much can they contribute?

d. Do you work? Will you work?

e. Did you apply for scholarships? Describe some of the scholarships you applied for.

f. Where did you look for scholarships? (Project Greenlight, IACAC website, High school website, Naviance, etc.)

g. Did you apply for the IL Dream Fund Scholarship?

h. (If enrolled) Tell me about any financial aid or scholarships you have received and describe how you are paying for college.

Future Plans

22. What do you plan to study? Career goals?

23. Do you have aspirations to earn a higher degree (a master’s degree, law degree, etc.)?

Policy Awareness

24. Have you applied for DACA? In what way, if any, has DACAC impacted your college plans?

25. Tell me what you know about Illinois’ tuition equity legislation.

26. Tell me what you know about the federal Dream Act.

27. Tell me what you know about the IL Dream Act.

Final thoughts

28. In retrospect, would you change anything about your high school experience or do anything differently?

29. Please share one or two pieces of advice for other undocumented students.

30. Please share one or two pieces of advice for teachers or counselors to help them in their future work with undocumented students.

31. One final question, I plan to interview some teachers and would love to interview a teacher who has influenced your college plans (positively or negatively). Can you recommend a few who I can talk to? I am happy to share with you the questions I will ask. They are very general and I will not talk about you specifically.

Interviewer: Thank you so much for sharing your thoughts with me. I know you have a busy schedule and I really appreciate your time.
Teacher Interview Protocol

Mock script pre-interview:

**Interviewers:** (Make basic introductions—hello, names, etc.). Thank you so much for agreeing to talk with me today. I am pleased to meet you and very much appreciate your time. I believe the College Counselor has shared with you that I am pursuing my PhD at Loyola University Chicago in the field of higher education. My dissertation is looking at how undocumented students access postsecondary education. I have drafted an IRB form—(IRB stands for Institutional Review board, which is a governing body meant to protect the privacy and rights of people who agree to participate in research)—that states that I will keep your identity completely confidential. No one will know your name or the name of your school. Your specific rights to privacy and anonymity are outlined in this IRB form, so please take all the time you need to read it. If you feel 100% comfortable with what the form states, please sign it. By signing it, you are agreeing to participate in my study and in this interview. If you would rather not participate, there is no pressure to sign, and I would understand your decision completely. Also, please let me know if you would like any additional explanation regarding the form and/or IRB.

*[If the high school agent signs the form...then say:]*

Okay, great, thank you. Now we can get started with the interview. You should have received a copy of the questions that I emailed ahead of time to familiarize yourself with what I would like to discuss today. If at any time you would like to pass on a question, come back to a question, ask for clarification or repetition, do not hesitate to let me know. There are no specific ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ answers for what we will be discussing, so please feel free to elaborate as much as you like. If you are ready, we can begin.

**Background Information**

1. Tell me a little about yourself.
   a. How long have you been a teacher? How did you get into the profession?
   b. How long have you worked at this school?
   c. What is your favorite thing about being a teacher? Least favorite?

**Professional Role**

2. Tell me a bit about the classes you teach – types, levels

3. To what extent, if any, do you talk with students about their college aspirations?
   a. If you do, tell me about one such conversation. What did you talk about?
   b. What role do you think teachers can/should play in building college aspirations?

4. Have you written letters of recommendation for college applications?
   a. If yes, for students in which classes? What do you typically highlight in your letters of recommendation?

5. Have you ever talked with a school or college counselor about a student and his/her college plans?
a. If yes, describe the situation that led you to do so, and share some of the things you talked about.

**Student Body, Counseling Department and College Counseling**

6. This high school has a very diverse student body. In your opinion, describe what life is like at this school for a student from a lower socio economic, underrepresented or immigrant background.

7. In what ways, if any, does the school encourage college and support college access for families and/or students who are new to the college admissions processes, such as first generation college students or immigrant students/families?

8. What are your impressions of the counseling staff?
   a. What do you see as their role in supporting college access?

9. Do you think the school/counseling department does enough to help students with their college search? If not, what else should be done?

**Undocumented Students**

10. Tell me a bit about the undocumented student population at this high school.
    a. In what ways, if any, do you think their experiences differ from U.S. born/permanent resident students?
    b. What sorts of unique challenges, if any, do you believe they face?
       i. In navigating K-12?
       ii. In pursuing higher education?
    c. Does the school support undocumented students differently? If yes, how? If no, should they? And if yes, how?

**Undocumented Students and the College Process**

11. Have you ever had an undocumented student in your class?
    a. Tell me a bit about the student and your relationship with him/her.
    b. How did you know he/she was undocumented?
    c. Did you ever talk with this student specifically about his/her college dreams or plans? If yes, tell me about your conversation.

12. To what extent, if any, have you ever talked about issues surrounding undocumented students at a department or faculty meeting or even just with colleagues?

13. What challenges, if any, do you think undocumented students face in their daily lives?

14. What challenges, if any, do you think they face at school?

15. What are the college options for undocumented students?
a. What are the obstacles, if any, you think they will face in the college search? Do you believe they are fully aware of these obstacles?
b. What would say is the number one challenge facing undocumented students in their pursuit of higher education?
c. How should these students be supported in light of these challenges?

16. What, if any, knowledge do you consider essential for teachers to possess to support undocumented students on their path to college?
   a. How does the district/school ensure that teachers have this knowledge?
   b. What do you feel you don’t know regarding working with undocumented students?

Policy Knowledge
17. What, if anything, do you know about Illinois’ tuition equity legislation?

18. What, if anything, do you know about DACA?

19. What, if anything, do you know about the federal DREAM Act?
   a. Would you propose changes or modifications to it?

20. What, if anything, do you know about the IL Dream Act?
   a. If aware of the scholarship, do you think that the Dream Fund scholarship will help students get to college?
   b. What are your thoughts about mandating training for all high school and college admission professionals regarding college options for undocumented students?

21. Is there anything you wish to add to anything we have already talked about or something we didn’t address?

Interviewer: Thank you so much for sharing your thoughts with me. I know you have a busy schedule and I really appreciate your time. I will be in touch with notes from the interview so you can review them, and if you wish you could provide comments. Also, as stated in the IRB form, I may contact you with a few follow-up questions if I need clarification.
Mock script pre-interview:

Interviewers: (Make basic introductions—hello, names, etc.). Thank you so much for agreeing to talk with me today. I am pleased to meet you and very much appreciate your time. As you know, I am pursuing my PhD at Loyola University Chicago in the field of higher education. My dissertation is looking at how undocumented students access postsecondary education. I have drafted an IRB form—(IRB stands for Institutional Review board, which is a governing body meant to protect the privacy and rights of people who agree to participate in research)—that states that I will keep your identity completely anonymous. No one will know your name or the name of your school. Your specific rights to privacy and anonymity are outlined in this IRB form, so please take all the time you need to read it. If you feel 100% comfortable with what the form states, please sign it. By signing it, you are agreeing to participate in my study and in this interview. If you would rather not participate, there is no pressure to sign, and I would understand your decision completely. Also, please let me know if you would like any additional explanation regarding the form and/or IRB.

[If the high school agent signs the form...then say:]
Okay, great, thank you. Now we can get started with the interview. You should have received a copy of the questions that I emailed ahead of time to familiarize yourself with what I would like to discuss today. If at any time you would like to pass on a question, come back to a question, ask for clarification or repetition, do not hesitate to let me know. There are no specific ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ answers for what we will be discussing, so please feel free to elaborate as much as you like. If you are ready, we can begin.

Background Information
1. Tell me a little about yourself.
   a. How long have you been a school counselor/college counselor? How did you get into the profession? How long have you worked at this school?
   b. What would you say is the primary goal of the counseling department?
   c. What is the primary goal of your job?
   d. In what way, if any, do you see your role as different from that of a school counselor/college counselor?

Professional Role
2. Describe your role in college counseling.
   a. In what way, if any, do you interact with the school counselor/college counselor?
   b. In what way, if any, do you participate in college programs/meetings for students and parents?
   c. In what way, if any, do you interface with students on their college search?
d. Have you ever talked with students as early as freshman year about their college aspirations and/or plans? If yes, tell me about one such conversation. What did you talk about?

**Student Body**

3. This high school has a very diverse student body. In your opinion, what is life like at this school for a student from a lower SES, underrepresented or immigrant background?
   a. In what ways, if any, does the school encourage college and support college access for families and/or students who are new to the college admissions processes, such as first gen students or immigrant students/families?
   b. Have you ever had a teacher approach you about a student’s college plans? If yes, tell me about the conversation.
   c. Do you think the school/counseling department does enough? If not, what else could they do?

**Undocumented Students**

4. Tell me a bit about the undocumented student population at this high school.
   a. In what ways, if any, do you think their experiences different from U.S. born/permanent resident students?
   b. What sorts of unique challenges, if any, do you believe they face?
      i. In navigating K-12?
      ii. In pursuing higher education?
   c. Does the school support undocumented students differently? If yes, how? If no, should they? And if yes, how?

**Undocumented Students and the College Process**

5. Have you ever counseled an undocumented student in the college process? If no, skip to e.
   a. Tell me about your relationship with the student.
   b. How did you know he/she was undocumented?
   c. What role did their parents play in the process?
   d. What role did you/would you play in their college search process?
   e. What, if any, different counseling strategies did you/would you implement with undocumented students?
   f. Did you/would you talk with them specifically about financial aid? If yes, tell me about some of the things you did/would discuss.
   g. What are the obstacles you think they will face? Do you believe they are fully aware of these obstacles?
   h. What would you say is the number one challenge facing undocumented students in their pursuit of higher education?
   i. How should these students be supported in light of these challenges?
6. Have you had a “success” story, where an undocumented student continued on to a 4 yr. school? If yes, tell me about the role you played in making this happen.
7. To what extent, if any, have you ever talked about issues surrounding undocumented students at a department or faculty meeting or even just with colleagues?

8. What, if any, knowledge do you consider essential for counselors to possess to effectively guide an undocumented student through the process of applying to college?

9. Do you feel that most members of the high school faculty (counselors and teachers) are aware of the challenges and options specific to undocumented student in the college search?
   a. How does the district/school ensure that teachers and counselors have this knowledge?
   b. What do you feel you don’t know regarding working with undocumented students?

**Policy Knowledge**

10. What, if anything, do you know about Illinois’ tuition equity legislation?

11. What, if anything, do you know about DACA?

12. What, if anything, do you know about the federal DREAM Act?
   a. Would you propose changes or modifications to it?

13. What do you know about the Illinois Dream Act?
   a. If aware of the scholarship, do you think that the Dream Fund scholarship will help students get to college?
   b. What are your thoughts about mandating training for all high school and college admission professionals regarding college options for undocumented students?

14. Is there anything you wish to add to anything we have already talked about or something we didn’t address?

**Interviewer:** Thank you so much for sharing your thoughts with me. I know you have a busy schedule and I really appreciate your time. I will be in touch with notes from the interview so you can review them, and if you wish, you can provide comments. Also, as stated in the IRB form, I may contact you with a few follow-up questions if I need clarification.
APPENDIX H

TRANSCRIBER’S AGREEMENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY
It is understood and agreed to that the below identified discloser of confidential information may provide certain information that is confidential and shall be kept confidential by the transcriber. To ensure the protection of such information, and to preserve any confidentiality, it is agreed that

1. The Confidential Information to be disclosed can be described as: all information recorded and/or transcribed.

2. The Recipient agrees not to disclose the confidential information obtained from the discloser to anyone other than the discloser unless required to do so by law. The transcriber also agrees to take all reasonable steps to safeguard the electronic information given her by disclosed.

3. This Agreement states the entire agreement between the parties concerning the disclosure of Confidential Information. Any addition or modification to this Agreement must be made in writing and signed by the parties.

4. If any of the provisions of this Agreement are found to be unenforceable, the remainder shall be enforced as fully as possible and the unenforceable provision(s) shall be deemed modified to the limited extent required to permit enforcement of the Agreement as a whole.

WHEREFORE, the parties acknowledge that they have read and understand this Agreement and voluntarily accept the duties and obligations set forth herein.

Recipient of Confidential Information:

Name (Print or Type):

Signature:

Date:

Discloser of Confidential Information:

Name (Print or Type):

Signature:

Date:


Leticia A vs. Board of Regents of the University of California, I, No. 588982-4, slip op. at 2.


National Education Association. (2013, June 5). *Artist illustrates her support for DREAMers and their educator advocates.* Retrieved from National Education Association website http://educationvotes.nea.org/2013/06/05/artist-illustrates-her-support-of-dreamers-educator-advocates/


VITA

Aliza Gilbert is a College Counselor at Highland Park High School in Highland Park, IL. Prior to her position at Highland Park she was Associate Director of Admissions at Lake Forest College. Gilbert earned a Bachelor of Arts in Elementary Education with a concentration in Mathematics from the University of Illinois at Chicago and a Master of Education in College Student Personnel from Loyola University Chicago. Gilbert completed the requirements for school counseling certification at Loyola University Chicago and earned a Certificate of Advanced Study in Educational Administration at National Louis University. Gilbert currently holds a Professional Educator License in the state of Illinois with endorsements in Elementary Education, Guidance, and General Administrative.

Gilbert is a nationally recognized expert on undocumented students and the college choice process. She presents locally and nationally on the topic of undocumented students and college access. While at Loyola, Gilbert also took part in a variety of research projects that examined the role of a high school’s counseling department in supporting college access.

Gilbert presently serves on the Outreach Advisory Committee for the Common Application and the Counselor Advisory Board for the University of Illinois. Aliza is a member of the Illinois Association for College Admission Counseling (IACAC) and has held multiple positions on the IACAC Executive Board. She is also a member of the National Association for College Admissions Counseling (NACAC) and is a past Chair
of the NACAC Committee on Inclusion, Access, and Success. Gilbert was named a Community and Global Stewards Fellows at Loyola University Chicago in 2011. Gilbert is a recipient of the NACAC Human Relations Award and the City of Highland Park Humanitarian Award. Currently, Gilbert resides in Evanston, IL where she continues to advocate for undocumented students in their pursuit of a college degree.