Apoyo Sacrificial, Sacrificing Support: Understanding Undocumented Latina/o Parents’ Engagement in Students’ Post-Secondary Planning and Success

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Accessibility
Apoyo Sacrificial, Sacrificing Support: Understanding Undocumented Latina/o Parents’ Engagement in Students’ Post-Secondary Planning and Success

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A Thesis Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Education of Harvard University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Education

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DEDICATION

To my parents.

Whose never-ending love, support, sacrifices, and trust have become my guiding light.

And

To all the undocumented parents who risk everything they are and have to give their children a better lifestyle and open opportunities for them.
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This project is a result of community love, effort, and collective learning. There are no words that could do justice to the immense gratitude I have for all my family, friends, students, mentors, and community members who have made not only this work possible, but have fundamentally impacted whom I have become. I am forever beholden to all of you.

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It truly does take a village. We did it.
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ABSTRACT

Educational research has highlighted the importance of parental engagement in Latina/o students’ post-secondary planning and success; when parents develop their children’s college-going identities early, students are more likely to attend a 4-year institution (Tierney & Auerbach, 2005; Zarate, Saenz, & Oseguera, 2011). Little is known, however, about how Latina/o parents’ immigration status influences their engagement. Existing scholarship has demonstrated that an undocumented status, or parents’ “illegality,” not only limits access to resources, but also adds a layer of distrust, discomfort, and fear of social institutions (De Genova, 2002; Dreby, 2015; Enriquez, 2015; Gonzales 2010, 2011; Yoshikawa, 2011).

This phenomenological qualitative study explores the engagement of 15 undocumented Latina/o parents whose children were successfully admitted and matriculated to Coast University (pseudonym), a prestigious public institution in California. Using in-depth qualitative interview data, this dissertation explores the different stages of parents’ role in their children’s’ post-secondary planning and success and the ways their “illegality” and other factors (i.e. access to resources, connections to social networks, relationships with schools) shape these.

Specifically, this study explores how undocumented Latina/o parents describe and make sense of their sacrificios (sacrifices) and apoyo (support), which I argue are essential components of their role in their children’s post-secondary planning and success. As such, this study shows how undocumented Latina/o parents’ engagement is apoyo sacrificial (sacrificing support), or an engagement that is shaped and bounded by the limitations of their “illegality.” Though bounded by the limitations of their immigration status, undocumented Latina/o parents are intentional about their parenting behaviors—they
engage in parenting practices that support their children’s goals and aspirations despite the limitations they face.

This dissertation makes a unique contribution to education and family engagement literature, as it connects the important, underexplored, and under theorized experiences of Latina/o families and communities to conversations on higher education access and success. This study focuses not only on the political and educational barriers undocumented Latina/o parents face, but also examines the critical and intentional ways in which parents respond to these.
PROLOGUE

Ghosts, Swim Teams, and *Chisme*

“*Pero como no la van a poner en esa clase?*” “But how are you not going to put her in that class?” I heard my mother demand as I sat in the lobby of my elementary school’s main office. This is one of my earliest childhood memories, my mother’s infuriated face as she stormed out of that office. She had just found out I was not placed in the “gifted and talented” second grade class. At 6-years old, I had no idea what that meant. But she insisted on talking to the principal. As I was sitting in the lobby chairs, waiting, I kept looking at my feet; I was wearing my black “Mary Jane” shoes with white-laced socks. My uniform—a navy blue overall dress over a white collared polo shirt—was clean and ironed. My mother always made sure of that. As I sat in a chair that was too big for me, I was uncomfortable and restless; I thought I was in trouble. Thus, as my feet dangled, I kept staring at my shoes to distract myself. But I was listening. Past the thin office doors, I could hear my mother’s voice rising. Following a couple of mums I could not decipher, my mother stormed out of the office, calling my name to follow her. As we walked out, she pulled me by the hand, asking me to walk faster. She wanted to get away from that office as soon as possible. I could see tears building in her eyes as she put on her sunglasses. Later, I realized those were tears of frustration.

Throughout my educational experiences, I have carried my mother’s ghosts with me. In her book, “The Essential Conversation: What Parents and Teachers Can Learn from Each Other,” Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot (2003) uses the metaphor of “ghosts” to explain how our interactions with educational entities are “shaped by [our] own autobiographical stories and by the broader cultural and historical narratives that inform [our] identities, [our] values, and [our] sense of place in the world (p. 3).” These ghosts carry generational echoes
and are “a source of both guidance and distraction, insight and bias (p. 5).” Throughout my K-12 education, my mother was my most fierce advocate. Memories like the one described above shaped my understanding of and experiences with education—that morning she fought to make sure I was placed in the class she believed was best for me. School, then, became both a space of safety and sanctuary, due to my love of learning. But also one of frustration, where it seemed that I, or I should say, my mother, was always fighting to make sure I had access to the best of limited resources. Migrating with my father to the United States from Mexico, although she had no form of formal education in the American sense, she highly valued education. At a very young age, she made sure to tell my two sisters and I that our only job was to make sure we were excelling students. Most importantly, she always told us we were going to go to college. That is why she always made sure I was enrolled in the best classes, with the best teachers.

The schools I attended in Huntington Park, CA, a sub-city of the inner Los Angeles area, were overpopulated and the majority of the staff were more interested in preventing gang activity and substance abuse than creating a “college-going” culture. My mother was very much aware of these realities. As the primary caretaker, she did not work during the majority of my childhood. Consequently, she attended all parent-teacher conferences, open houses, parent information meetings, plays, award ceremonies, and student showcases.

My father, on the other hand, was hardly physically present in schools. Since he was the sole financial provider for our family, he worked Monday through Friday and sometimes Saturdays, over ten hours a day. Being that he was always dedicated to his job, one he truly loved, I never expected him to attend school-time events. Yet, he always managed to surprise me. For example, during my high school swim meets, which took place on Mondays beginning at 2pm, he would show up, in his business suit, loose tie, with folding chair in
arms. He would meet my mother at whatever pool we were swimming in that week, whether it be a home or away swim meet. He stood in the stands, next to my mother, and cheered very loudly as I swam the 200-yard and 500-yard freestyle. “Go Stephany, go!!” Yet, they did not only cheer for my sisters and I, but also for the rest of our team. My father kept track of our personal times in our two events and would offer feedback on technique as necessary, acting as a pseudo coach. My sisters and I swam for the varsity team for all 4 years of high school. Our parents, both mother and father, were present for the majority, if not all, of our swim meets.

Both of my parents insisted on making sure my sisters and I performed well in school and were involved in extracurricular activities, such as swimming. They knew it was important for our futures. Our parents wanted to make sure we not only attended university, but that we attended the best one we were capable of. As a young child and, later, adolescent, I never questioned this; college was always the next logical step after high school. Thus, my parents always made sure I was enrolled in honors and advanced placement (AP) courses, in college-preparatory programs such as Talent Search/TRIO, and in sports. I vividly remember constantly wanting to quit the county swim team my parents enrolled me in (in addition to my high school swim team, I also swam for Los Angeles County, a team I was in since the age of 6). I used the excuse of having too much homework and needing to concentrate on my AP courses, when in reality, I was not as passionate about swimming as my sisters were. Yet, no matter how much I cried, begged, and tried to negotiate myself out of the team, my parents refused to let me quit and would force me to go to swim practice and swim meets. This is something that, until this day, my father does not let me forget—he often mocks me and reminds me of all the skills (e.g. time management, discipline, and healthy competition) I developed because I was part of different swim teams. Without me
knowing, in their own way, my parents were developing and nurturing my college-going identity at a young age.

Although my parents faced barriers and struggles along the way (especially language barriers), the relationships they developed with my schools and swim teams always served as a safety net for me as a student; knowing that my parents had a strong relationship with my teachers, counselors, school administration, and coaches put me at ease. I knew I had access to the best resources my schools had to offer.

Nevertheless, this comfort changed when I began my senior year of high school and started the college application process. Although my parents had engrained in me the idea of going to college, my mother, as the primary caretaker, had no understanding of the American college system. Also, she did not know anyone who had gone through the process and had no other reference points. For the first time in my life I experienced my mother unable to manage an educational system in my favor. Although I was involved in a college access program and they were able to provide me with the information and assistance necessary, my mother was very frustrated with the situation. It made her uncomfortable to be unable to directly help me with the applications, in deciding which colleges and universities to apply to, with the financial aid process, and, finally, to decide which university to attend. Although she learned about the process through me, as I was experiencing it and was translating it to her in ways she understood, I always felt that it was not enough to dismiss her frustration and anxieties. This frustration is a ghost that continues to haunt me.

As a result of my experiences with my parents, especially my mother, when I began working in college access programming as an undergraduate at U.C. Berkeley and later as a college advisor in the Oakland Unified School District, I always made sure my programming and events included a strong parent component. During college fairs, I made sure that the
materials parents received had information that explained the jargon college admissions used. When working with Latina/o Spanish-speaking parents, I made sure that workshop facilitators spoke Spanish and that translations were culturally sensitive. As I was designing these programs, I wondered, what would have my mother and father benefited from? How would they have liked to see the programming take place?

The more I worked with Latina/o parents, the more I began to realize that parent engagement is a critical part of the equation if we are to increase the number of Latina/o students enrolling in and graduation from institutions of higher education. As I developed workshops along with parents in Bay Area secondary schools, including them in the design process, I developed trusting relationships with them. These parents would call our weekly meetings "chisme sessions," or gossip sessions, where we not only discussed college-related information, but we also discussed city politics and celebrity news; they made sure to keep me up to date on the latest novelas. During our sessions together, many began to discuss the different worries they had in regards to helping their children get to college. Most notably, parents were concerned about the high costs of college and how they would pay for it. It was during these conversations that some parents, in a discreet manner, disclosed they were undocumented. Parents expressed a sense of guilt, as they believed they were not fully capable of helping their children get to college because they were limited by their immigration status. Undocumented parents were worried that their immigration status would somehow negatively affect their children’s pursuit of higher education.

I understood these fears. Growing up in the 1990s in a predominantly Latina/o neighborhood and later working professionally in a similar context exposed me to the reality of the broken American immigration system. Spanish-speaking media, which was always playing in my household, always seemed to have a news story about an immigration bill or a
family who had been deported or an immigration raid that took place in a factory near Downtown Los Angeles. Calls, text-messages, and later, Facebook posts, about driving check-points, alerting undocumented people who were driving to avoid those areas, were common. I have family members who are undocumented. When I was in college, my classmates and I, all first-generation Latina/o students, organized fundraisers to raise money to support undocumented students. When Immigration Customs and Enforcement (ICE) detained a peer’s parents, we also fundraised to help pay their bail bonds. One of my best friends’ parents, who were undocumented, were deported to Mexico during my junior year of college. Experiencing this along his side, holding and hugging him as he cried in my arms with desperation, exclaiming that he would never be able to return home to his parents made me feel powerless. Being hyperaware of the necessity of immigration-related vigilance, as I experienced it with my family, friends, and community is another ghost that has always shaped my reality.

I shared all this with the parents I worked with. I understood their fears deeply and personally. But I also understood the American college system. I knew their immigration status would not prevent their children from applying to or being accepted to college. Even if their children were undocumented, I knew they were able to attended college. As I tried to explain this to them, my mother’s ghost reemerged. It would remind me of her frustrations navigating an unknown educational system. It reminded me that no matter how much I told her I would be okay and would be accepted to a good university, I felt she did not always fully believe me. It reminded me of her frustrations of not feeling heard or understood by school staff. At the same time, my conversations with undocumented Latina/o parents also made me reflect on my own experiences. What if my parents had also been worried about being deported? Would my mom have felt comfortable walking into my principal’s office
demanding a class change? Would my father have been allowed to attend my swim meets? What if their frustrations of not feeling heard included a layer of fear of deportation? How would that have shaped their role in my education?

I unapologetically allow these ghosts, these experiences, these questions, to shape the development and design of this dissertation; these ghosts brought me to graduate school. Consequently, this dissertation is framed by my lived experiences—what I witnessed my parents doing throughout my primary, secondary, and post-secondary education; by what my college best friends shared with me; by the community organizing I did with Latina/o parents; by the students and parents I worked with in the Bay Area; by the stories my undergraduate first-generation students have shared with me.

This dissertation explores how undocumented Latina/o parents are engaged in their children’s post-secondary planning and success. Focusing on the experiences of 15 parents living in California, I also explore how their undocumented status, their “illegality,” impacted their parenting behaviors, their dreams and aspirations for their children, and their engagement in their education. I designed this project to center the voices of undocumented Latina/o parents—the voices we as educators, researchers, and policy makers often forget to listen to and learn from. It is my hope that with this dissertation we do not only learn more about the particular experiences, needs, and assets of undocumented Latina/o parents raising college-going first-generation students, but also more broadly about parental engagement in post-secondary planning and success.

While the stories presented here (or “data” and “findings,” as we researchers like to call them) are particular to undocumented, Latina/o parents living in California, there are also universal themes in them. In essence, my own story, my family’s story, like the stories of many of my friends and colleagues, is reflected in the stories presented in this dissertation.
Notions of sacrifice, parents giving things up for themselves for the sake of their children; parents marching into schools, advocating for their children; parents being frustrated with the lack of information they have access to; parents being proud of their children’s accomplishments; and parents acting on their dreams and aspirations for their children are themes that have universal implications. Above all, listening and learning from parents is a motif that should be a priority to all of us.
CHAPTER 1
Exploring the Experiences of Undocumented Latina/o Parents: Theoretical and Methodological Foundations

Latina/o students often face an educational paradox: while their parents hold high academic aspirations, and provide crucial support by shaping their post-secondary goals and aspirations (Auerbach, 2006; Hill & Torres, 2010; Zarate, Saenz, & Oseguera, 2011), their college enrollment and completion rates remain alarmingly low (Hill & Torres, 2010; Zarate, et al., 2011). When considering best practices to support Latina/o student success and college matriculation (see Portes, Salas, Baquedano-López, & Mellom, 2015; Valencia, 2011 for more), one of the relationships that is often overlooked by researchers and practitioners is the role of parents in this process. When first-generation Latina/o college students are asked what motivated them to pursue a college degree, students often respond that their parents shaped their post-secondary goals and aspirations (López, 2009). Since students’ lived experiences and, consequently, their educational aspirations are shaped by their parents’ lives, it is important to consider the circumstances Latina/o immigrant parents face and how these shape their engagement in their children’s education.

Research on parental engagement has found that Latina/o immigrant parents engage in their children’s education by drawing from their personal experiences, thus motivating their children to pursue education (Auerbach, 2006; Tierney & Auerbach, 2005). While this research identifies both the obstacles Latina/o parents face when they attempt to engage in their children’s education and the strengths and assets found within them, it often conflates the experiences of all Latina/o immigrant parents, including those who are undocumented with those who have a legal immigration status.

Existing scholarship shows that an undocumented status constrains immigrants’ access to social services and exposes them to unsafe and undesirable work conditions, and
the consequences of this status are passed down from parents to children in the form of delayed early childhood development outcomes (Yoshikawa, 2011). Scholars have explained that being undocumented is a “master status,” where every aspect of undocumented immigrants’ lives is shaped and influenced by the social and economic limits and emotional toll they experience as a result of their undocumented status; this status overpowers or “masters” other statuses, achievements, and identities (Gonzales, 2015).

Little is known, however, about how parents’ immigration status influences their engagement in their children’s higher education pursuits. When considering the engagement of undocumented Latina/o parents, an additional set of legal and socio-emotional barriers, such as fear of educational entities, compound the road to higher education for their children. In order to begin to address the needs of Latina/o students being raised by undocumented parents, it is important to consider the obstacles and limitations their parents face.

This dissertation explores the engagement of undocumented Latina/o parents in their children’s post-secondary planning and success, paying particular attention to the ways an undocumented immigration status shapes this engagement, assessing the relationship between this “illegality” and educational opportunities. I address this gap in the literature by examining the experiences of 15 undocumented Latina/o parents whose children were successfully admitted and matriculated to Coast University (pseudonym), a prestigious public institution in California.

This chapter establishes the theoretical and methodological groundings of this dissertation. Thus, it is divided in three sections. The first, “Contextual and Theoretical Foundations,” lays out the socio-historical conditions undocumented parents face in California, the study’s conceptual framework, and a presentation of the problem the study
addresses and the relating research questions guiding its design. The second section, “Methodology,” outlines the design of the study, including a description of the study design, the sample, data collection, and data analysis. I also discuss ethical considerations and my researcher positionality. Finally, in the third section, “Additional Study Information,” I discuss the study’s relevance and limitations. I then define and elaborate on important terminology used throughout this study. I close with an overview of the dissertation, explaining what each chapter will cover.

**Contextual and Theoretical Foundations**

**Background Context: Parenting as Undocumented Latina/o Immigrants in California**

In order to understand how undocumented Latina/o parents are engaged in their children’s post-secondary planning and success, I believe it is first important to understand and consider the socio-political context they parent in. Specifically, for the participants in this study, it is important to understand how the academic opportunities their children have access to are shaped by their ethnic/racial identities as Latina/os, in addition to living in the United States as undocumented immigrants. These identities intersect in the particular context of the state of California. In what follows, I provide socio-historical information to contextualize the lives of the undocumented Latina/o parents in this study. Due to the limitations of this dissertation’s scope, this contextualization is purposefully short and simplified. I offer citations as additional references and resources for more detailed and nuanced information.

**Contemporary Latina/o Education Trends.** Over the past decades, Latina/o education has been defined as being under a “crisis;” references of a “Latina/o educational crisis” are common when researching contemporary education trends for this population.
Nationwide, education scholars have documented the different ways Latina/o students academically fall behind when compared to their peers and face inequitable opportunities that impact their lifelong outcomes (Gándara & Contreras, 2009). On average, Latina/o students are more likely to be enrolled below grade level, are less likely than their non-Latina/o counterparts to participate in preschool and after-school programs, attend the nation’s most segregated schools, drop out earlier and at higher rates, and have lower literacy rates (Gándara & Contreras, 2009; The Education Trust, 2018). Latina/o students are sometimes perceived to be less academically capable than their White or Asian peers, are less likely to feel connected with their school environments, and are often tracked away from college-preparatory curriculum (The Education Trust, 2018). When compared to their non-Latina/o peers, they are less likely to complete high school (Gándara & Contreras, 2009; The Education Trust, 2018). Latina/o students with additional needs, such as English learners, migrant, and undocumented students face an additional set of barriers. Recently arrived immigrant Latina/o youth, for example, are even more likely to drop out from high school when compared to their peers (Kohler & Lazarín, 2007). Additionally, Latina/o students are less likely to have a bachelor’s degree; less than one quarter of Latina/o students aged 18 through 24 are enrolled in post-secondary degree-granting institutions (The Education Trust, 2018).

The cause of this “crisis” is not singular. Nor is it simplistic. It is the result of a complex intersection of social, economic, political, and educational conditions—lack of access to adequate social services, an exploitive labor market that makes it difficult to earn a living wage, a broken immigration system, and under resourced schools that are unable to meet students’ most basic needs. Histories of school segregation, where Latina/o, Spanish-speaking students were put in different classrooms from their White counterparts, economic
inequality, racial discrimination in schools, and language suppression and cultural exclusion all shape the contemporary schooling experiences of this student population. The consequences of these circumstances have been additive, increasing the education opportunity gap between Latina/o students and other student populations (for more see Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Portes, et al., 2014; Valencia, 2011).

A close attention and understanding of the “crisis” the population faces is imperative. The under-education of Latina/o students is especially alarming considering the increasing growth of Latina/o students in American classrooms. Almost one in five students across the country is Latina/o. Due to the projected increase of the Latina/o population over time, these numbers are expected to also increase. By 2050, it is projected that one in three students will be Latina/o (Passel and Cohn, 2008).

Specifically in California, Latina/os are the fastest growing ethnic group. In 2014, the Latina/o population under the age of 20 grew to over 50 percent of the population, outnumbering the White population for the first time. Thus, Latina/o students are the majority of the state’s K-12 students: 3.3 million Latina/o students attend California’s K-12 public schools, more than every other state’s total student population except Texas (The Education Trust, 2018). 80 percent of California’s Latina/o children are of Mexican heritage (California Department of Education, 2017). Considering the educational circumstances and opportunities of Latina/o students thus becomes essential, as they are likely to shape a significant portion of the United States’ future workforce.

The urgency of the “crisis” combined with the numerical reality of the increasing student population has drawn research, educators, and policy makers to develop research, policy, curriculum, and programs to support Latina/o students and their families (Portes, et al., 2014). School systems, including teachers and principals, are becoming more aware of the
particular needs of this student population. Schools are working towards not only developing the English language skills of English Language Learner (ELLs), but also encouraging them to maintain and embrace their Spanish language (Garcia, Wiese, & Cuéllar, 2011). Schools are embedding culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogies, centering the Latina/o culture (Irizarry, 2016; Rodriguez, 2014). Additionally, schools are becoming more aware of the different barriers Latina/o parents face, especially immigrant Latina/o parents, and are strategizing ways to develop partnerships with them to improve student outcomes (Hill & Torres, 2010).

In California, outcomes for Latina/o students have improved in recent years. Statewide, the high school dropout rate went from 27 percent in 1994 to 13 percent in 2015 (The Education Trust, 2018). The gaps Latina/o students face in kindergarten readiness and fourth and eighth grade achievement have narrowed. And the number of Latina/os completing Associate and Bachelor degrees has more than doubled in the last 10 years (The Education Trust, 2018). Although these are promising outcomes and improvements, education experts note they are not happening fast enough. As a recent report published by The Education Trust (2017) notes, the “increase in degrees has barely made a dent in the percentage of Latino adults with a Bachelor’s degree or higher over the same period of time. Today, among all ethnic groups, Latino adults are least likely to have a college degree (p. 8).” In a country where a college degree is one of the main requirements for upward social mobility, this is alarming for the Latina/o population.

The undocumented Latina/o parents in this study were embedded within this educational context as they engaged in their children’s education. In other words, they were parenting in a context that, statistically, was not always supportive of their children and their needs as Latina/o students. In addition to their experiences as Latina/os living in California,
their status as undocumented immigrants also shaped their experiences within that context.

The following section offers a quick insight into the lives of undocumented immigrants living in the United States and specifically in California.

**Navigating the United States as Undocumented Immigrants.** Just as their ethnic, racial, and economic social locations shape their interactions with schools, it is important to consider the effects of an undocumented status on these interactions.

Undocumented immigrants live in a constant fear of deportation (Dreby, 2015). The ever-present threat of deportation leads them to live fearful, marginalized, and hyper vigilant lives. (De Genova, 2002; Menjívar, 2011; Sigona, 2012). Undocumented immigrants have very limited access to social services. Even though undocumented parents are eligible for social services, such as health services at local community clinics or legal consultation provided by immigration clinics, they are not likely to take advantage of these for themselves or for their children (Holmes, 2007; Menjívar, 2002; Yoshikawa & Kalil, 2011). Also, overall, due to their social location, they and their social networks may be less familiar with these resources, live in places where they are not located, and confront language barriers. Furthermore, even when they have citizen children who do qualify for services, undocumented parents are often hesitant and unwilling to access these, as they may not know about their children’s eligibility or may fear that by accessing them, they may hurt their children’s future (Shields & Behrman, 2004).

Just as undocumented parents are limited access to other social services, they are also ineligible for government-subsidized housing. They are more likely to live in high-poverty

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1 With the implementation of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) in 1996, access to social services were further restricted to undocumented people—food stamps and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) were banned for most immigrants and limiting access to Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Medicaid, and Child Health Insurance Program (CHIP) (Fix & Zimmerman, 2001).
neighborhoods and to be living with other families in crowded spaces. This, then, has been found to have implications on family dynamics, as crowded spaces and limited privacy can increase parents’ levels of stress and anxiety and slow children’s development (Yoshikawa & Kalil, 2011). Additionally, due to their limited job opportunities, parents are sometimes unable to provide their children what they need in their everyday lives (e.g. appropriate meals, clothing, and school supplies). As a result, children of undocumented immigrants are more likely to experience food insecurity (Kalil & Chen, 2008), have poor health (Kalil & Ziol-Guest, 2009), and live in less than ideal housing (McConnell & Marcelli, 2010; Painter, Gabriel, & Myers, 2001).

A lack of a comprehensive immigration reform in recent years has only augmented the negative repercussions of an undocumented immigration status. Coupled with an increase of anti-immigrant sentiment and racialized nativism, undocumented immigrants are often under attack, are psychologically and physically threatened, and have become scapegoats when the country’s economy takes a dip. Immigrant rights campaigns and advocates have, for decades, been demanding a more humanizing and fair immigration system, one that values immigrants as people, part of families, and not just economic benefits to the country. Yet, there has been inaction from the federal government.

One of the sub-groups of undocumented immigrants who have been the most vocal in demanding immigrant rights have been young people who came to the United States at a young age. Within this sub-group, young people known as the “Dreamers” have received the most public sympathy for their cause—they were brought to the U.S. by their parents at a young age, were integrated into the American public school systems (in Plyer v. Doe in 1982, 2

2 Not all undocumented young people who came to the United States at a young age identify as “Dreamers.” There is now a movement to move beyond this term, as young people and their allies believe it creates narratives of deservingness while stigmatizing and criminalizing undocumented immigrants who do not fit the “ideal student” model often associated with this term.
the Supreme Court of the United States found it unconstitutional to deny public K-12 to undocumented students), they excelled in academics, developed as young adults next to their U.S.-born peers (Gonzales, 2015). Yet, due to their immigration status, they are limited in their post-secondary options after high school (for more see Abrego, 2006 and Gonzales, 2015). Several bills have been introduced to improve the lives of these young immigrants. Different versions of the federal DREAM (Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors) Act, which proposed a path to legal permanent residency and eventually citizenship for young undocumented immigrants who met certain specific requirements, have failed to pass into law.

In 2012, as a response to the inaction from the federal government, President Obama signed the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) executive order. DACA offered young people who qualified temporary protection from deportation, a work permit, a social security number, and the possibility to travel abroad under advance parole (Gonzales & Bautista-Chavez, 2014). To qualify, young people must have:

• Passed background check
• Been born on or after June 16, 1981
• Come to the U.S. before their 16th birthday
• Not have lawful immigration status and be at least 15 years old
• Have lived in the U.S. continuously since June 15, 2007
• Been present in the U.S. on June 15, 2012, and on everyday since Aug. 15, 2012
• Graduated HS or obtained GED, OR must been an honorary discharged veteran of the Coast Guard or armed forces, OR currently attend school on the date application is submitted
• Not have been convicted of felony offense, a significant misdemeanor offense or three or more misdemeanor offenses
• Not posed or pose a threat to national security of public safety (Gonzales & Bautista-Chavez, 2014).

As of June 2015, 681,345 undocumented young people received DACA. While DACA significantly improved the lives of undocumented young people (i.e. access to economic opportunities via jobs, driver's licenses, health insurance, return to school), as an
executive order, it was not a law, it was not permanent, it did not offer young people a legal immigration status, and it was not a pathway to lawful permanent residency status or U.S. citizenship (Gonzales & Bautista-Chavez, 2014).

**Undocumented Immigrants in California.** It is estimated that, in 2014, somewhere between 2.35 and 2.6 million undocumented immigrants live in California (about six percent of the state’s population); about a fourth of the nation’s undocumented immigrant population lives in California (McConville, Hill, Ugo, Hayes, & Johnson, 2015). About 71% of California’s undocumented population is Mexican-born (McConville, et al., 2015). Undocumented immigrants in California predominantly work in agriculture, construction, and manufacturing.

In the 1990s, California voters passed a series of propositions that were considered anti-Latina/o and anti-immigrant. In 1994, Proposition 187 passed, which barred undocumented residents from public services, including education; it was later found unconstitutional. Proposition 209 in 1995 prohibited the use of race in applications for public employment, education, or contracting and Proposition 227 in 1998 prohibited public bilingual education without parent waivers.

The passage of these propositions received critique and pushback from pro-immigrant communities. Since then, the state has progressively worked towards increasing the protection of its undocumented immigrant population; the state has developed different

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3 On September 2017, the Trump administration rescinded DACA, planning to phase out the program and stop accepting new applications. On January 9, 2018, the Federal District Court in the Northern District of California issued a Preliminary Injunction requiring the federal government “to maintain the DACA program on a nationwide basis on the same terms and conditions as were in effect before the rescission on September 5, 2017.”

4 In combination with the 1994 decision to prohibit the use of race in admissions at the University of California system, the passing of Proposition 209 led to a decrease in admission rates for Latina/o and other underrepresented students in the state’s top public universities.

5 Proposition 227 was overturned in 2016 with the passing of Proposition 58, which reinstated bilingual education.
policies aimed to protect undocumented immigrants, especially young undocumented students, from some of the barriers discussed above.

In 2001, Governor Gray Davis signed into law the Assembly Bill 540 (AB540). This bill allowed undocumented students to pay in-state tuition, in so far they met certain requirements including, but not limited to, having attended a California high school for at least three years and attended an accredited institution of public higher education in California. Prior to the passage of AB540, undocumented students had to pay out-of-state tuition fees, which were significantly higher when compared to in-state tuition fees. In 2011, Governor Jerry Brown signed the California DREAM (Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors) Act. Consisting of two separate bills, AB130 and AB131, the law allowed undocumented children brought to the United States under the age of 16, who attended school on a regular basis and otherwise met in-state tuition and grade point average (GPA) requirements, to apply for state financial aid benefits. AB130 allowed students to apply for non-state scholarships while AB131 allowed them apply for state-funded financial aid. Students must have met AB540 criteria to apply to these (The Education Trust, 2018).

In 2013, the Governor Brown passed AB60, which allowed California undocumented immigrants apply for driver’s licenses. The licenses are designed for people who cannot show proof of legal resident status. They are limited for driving purposes and cannot be used to travel by planes or for international travel (Lueders, et al., 2017). Since 2015, when the law went into effect, about 850,000 undocumented Californians have applied for their driver’s licenses (Lueders, et al., 2017). In terms of health care, under “Covered California,” some undocumented immigrants are eligible for Medi-Cal, although the benefits may be limited. They are also able to buy private health care insurance coverage outside of
Covered California. Additionally, certain counties and community clinics offer health care options undocumented immigrants can apply for (McConville, et al., 2015).

While limited in their scope, especially in protecting from deportation, the policies and laws California has in place targeting its undocumented immigrant population have significantly improved the lives of undocumented immigrants living in the state. Consequently, California is seen as being at the forefront of immigrant rights.

**Conceptual Framework**

In order to make sense of how undocumented Latina/o parents are engaged in their children’s post-secondary planning and success, it is important to consider how their context impacts their behaviors. As such, this study’s conceptual framework is based on three premises: 1) parental engagement in student’s education is essential for student academic success; 2) parental engagement is socially constructed; and 3) an undocumented status presents a significant barrier for undocumented immigrants.

**Centrality of Parental Engagement.** Existing literature has overwhelmingly underlined the importance of parental engagement in their children’s education for student wellbeing and success. When schools, families, and communities work together, in partnership to support their students, students do better in school. When parents are engaged in their children’s education, and schools and communities develop opportunities for parents to engage, students are more likely to perform better in tests and earn higher grades, pass their classes and grade levels on time, attend school regularly, have better social

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6 As a response to the anti-immigrant narratives and sentiment of the Trump Administration, in 2017, the state of California passed a package of bills to further protect undocumented immigrants. This included protections for undocumented students and students from mixed-status families in the public K-12 and higher education systems. Bills also included declaring the state “sanctuary,” which limited the assistance of local law enforcements with ICE, making it illegal for landlords to use someone's immigration status against them, and a bill that put moratorium on new or renewed contracts between local governments and corporations that run immigration detention centers.
skills and adapt to school more easily, and graduate from high school and enroll in post-secondary education. This is true no matter the family’s income or background (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013).

Similarly, parental engagement in students’ post-secondary planning and success is essential; throughout the process, the role of parents, specifically in terms of parental encouragement towards higher education, remains consistent and central (Conklin & Dailey, 1981; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999). Chapter 2 will detail this engagement more deeply for Latina/o populations.

**Auerbach’s Theory of Parent Engagement.** Parent engagement theories have traditionally been derived from limited conceptions of cultural and social capital (Bourdieu 1977; Lamont and Lareau, 1988; Lareau, 1989). The sociological literature in this field tends to cite parental education, parental educational aspirations for their children, and parental encouragement for college as the main predictors of students’ college enrollment (Tierney & Auerbach, 2005). These dimensions of the parental role are often described as cultural capital. Cultural capital refers to the general cultural background, knowledge, disposition, and skills passed from one generation to the next (Bourdieu, 1977). Accordingly, families who are unable to pass down to their children these non-financial social assets valued by schools, and who are unable to invest in the academic market, are placed at a disadvantage and their children are less likely to succeed academically (Bourdieu, 1977; MacLeod, 2009; Tierney & Auerbach, 2005). Coleman (1988) further expanded on this set of ideas postulating the importance of social capital to successful educational outcomes. Defining social capital as productive relationships that lead to advantageous behaviors or outcomes within a social system, Coleman reasoned that families who have well-established social networks can better guide their children in educational matters. Using these theories as a
foundation, some parental engagement literature works under the assumption that the more educated parents are, the more likely they are going to be able to support their children in their post-secondary aspirations (Choy, 2002; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; Tierney & Auerbach, 2005).

Expanding on this conception of parental engagement embedded in these traditional understandings of social and cultural capital, Auerbach (2007) introduces Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler’s (1997) concept of “parental role construction” to illuminate factors that lead parents to be actively engaged in their children’s education. Part of their broader four-part model of parental involvement, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler defined parental role construction as parents’ beliefs about what they are supposed to be doing, as parents, to support their children’s education and the behaviors and actions they take in order to support these beliefs. For Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, parental role construction is the most important aspect of parental involvement in their children’s education, followed by a sense of self-efficacy, child’s invitations or demand for involvement, and teacher’s invitations or demand for involvement.

Auerbach proposes that parental roles in education are: “(a) Socially structured by class and race but also (b) culturally mediated by particular cultural schemas and scripts as well as (c) psychosocially enacted according to individual psychosocial resources and relationships within families. (Auerbach, 2007, p. 254)” Further, she argues that parental engagement occurs at the intersection of the aforementioned dimensions, which reflect intersecting systems of structure (a social structure that tends to disadvantage low socioeconomic status (SES)/ minority students and their families, reproducing social inequality), culture (which is to be understood as a system of values and beliefs, and exists in a reality where the parents’ home culture may be at odds with dominant culture norms), and
agency (or parents’ capacity to make change in their lives and their children’s lives). By considering the context, consisting of structure, culture, and agency, in which parents are embedded in and how this context may impact their engagement with their children’s education helps complicate what parental engagement looks like. This framing helps counter the notion that some parents may be more or less equipped to prepare their children for higher education, as it considers factors and dimensions outside parents’ access to traditional understandings of capital and considers how different parents carry their own forms of capital.

Given their legal exclusion from the polity and their tendency to avoid institutions, undocumented parents are at a structural disadvantage accessing various forms of capital. Nevertheless, understanding the nuanced ways in which “illegality” frames their everyday lives becomes central to understanding how they might approach their children’s post-secondary planning and success.

**Experiencing “Illegality.”** A burgeoning line of research has moved away from the study of “illegal subjects” to focus attention on the ways in which immigration laws and practices frame the everyday lives of immigrants living in the shadows. As De Genova (2002) states, “Illegality’ (much like citizenship) is a juridical status that entails a social relation to the state; as such, migrant ‘illegality’ is a preeminently political identity (p.422).” Expanding on Coutin (2000), he goes on to explain that “illegality” is “an erasure of legal personhood—a space of forced invisibility, exclusion, subjugation, and repression that ‘materializes around [the undocumented] wherever they go’ (p.30) in the form of real effects ranging from hunger to unemployment (or more typically, severe exploitation) to violence to death—that is nonetheless always already confounded by their substantive social personhood (p.427).”
While immigration laws in the United States grant access to resources to some groups, they also limit and restrict the movement of others, resulting in a hierarchy of legal immigration categories (Ngai, 2004). Legal status determines who has access to resources, goods, benefits, and rights (Chavez, 2007; De Genova, 2005). Additionally, media portrayals of the “good” and “bad” immigrants (Chavez, 2007) serve to criminalize undocumented immigrants, leading to highly punitive immigration policies, which, in turn, shape immigrants’ lived experiences and lead to systematic patterns of disadvantage (Chavez, 2007; De Genova, 2005). As Dreby (2015) states, “When the immigration system emphasizes enforcement over legalization, legal status becomes the basis for social distinction in ways much like the effects of race, class, and generation on the lives of children and families (p. 16).” In other words, these laws also help determine how immigrants can or cannot access resources, social services, and other socializing agents that enable them to incorporate themselves into U.S. society.

Connecting these theoretical strands together, Auerbach’s conception of parental engagement, in which she centers the importance of structure, culture, and agency, signals the impact parents’ immigration status and “illegality” has on their engagement in their children’s education and access to capital. This is a lens that is often missing in this literature. As such, the centrality of parental engagement, Auerbach’s conception of parental engagement as a social construction, and the notion of “illegality” set up the conceptual framework for this study, guiding its research questions. Given the realities of contemporary migration, there is a growing need to reconceptualize current understandings of parental engagement in students’ post-secondary planning and success by incorporating the particular experiences of undocumented parents into existing theories.

Problem Statement and Research Questions
While existing research has explored the importance of family engagement in students’ academic achievements and has begun to highlight the differential forms of engagement of different populations, scholars and practitioners still lack a clear understanding of the impact undocumented status, or their “illegality,” has on parents’ engagement in students’ post-secondary aspirations. Structurally, these parents are often disadvantaged, as their undocumented status prevents them from accessing services and supports. For undocumented Latina/o parents, their interactions with American social structures is not only shaped by the intersection of factors such as race and class, but also by the marginality and stigma created around an undocumented status (Cuevas, 2016; De Genova, 2002). Due to the significant impact undocumented status has on the everyday lives of parents, it is important to consider the additional barriers and forms of resilience developed by this status and how these may shape their engagement with their children’s post-secondary planning and success. As such, this study is guided by the following research questions: How do undocumented Latina/o parents engage in their children’s post-secondary planning and success? And, how, if at all, do parents perceive their immigration status influencing their engagement?

These questions entail a deep exploration of parents’ implicit beliefs about their role in their children’s education, as well as their perceptions of the impact (or lack of) of their undocumented status. Based on the conceptual framework presented above, in this dissertation I examine the structural, cultural, and psychosocial dynamics that influence parents’ engagement, such as relationships with school personnel, beliefs about the purpose of education, and their communication with their children. Additionally, as I am interested in investigating the influence or impact of an undocumented immigration status on parents’ engagement, I also scrutinize when and how the consequences of this status impact their parenting decisions and their understanding of their roles in their children’s education.
The research questions guiding this study are intentionally broad in order to account for the different processes that entail the accomplishment of students’ post-secondary planning and success. In other words, post-secondary attainment, which in the case of this study is framed as a college degree from a 4-year institution, takes several steps. As the upcoming chapter will detail, these steps begin in early childhood, through the development of a “college-going” mentality, to the college application and selection process, to matriculation, college retention, and college graduation (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Tierney & Auerbach, 2005). In order to more deeply explore how parents understand and experience the different processes and mechanisms that underlie this broader post-secondary process, the following sub-questions guide this project:

1. What are undocumented Latina/o parents’ beliefs, goals, and aspirations for their children’s post-secondary lives?

2. What are the *sacrificios* undocumented Latina/o parents make to support their children’s post-secondary goals and aspirations? And, how, if at all, does their immigration status influence their behaviors?

3. What are the barriers undocumented Latina/o parents face when they engage in their children’s post-secondary aspirations?

4. How do undocumented Latina/o parents describe what they do to support their children’s post-secondary education goals and aspirations? How do they understand, or construct, their role?

5. How do undocumented Latina/o parents experience their children matriculating into higher education?

6. How do undocumented Latina/o parents understand their role once their children have matriculated into higher education? How does this understanding shape their engagement?

**Methodology**

Since the study is primarily concerned with parents’ interpretation of their experiences, or their meaning-making, it calls for in-depth qualitative methods that examine
the “how” and “why” questions that allow the researcher to get at some of the nuances of undocumented Latina/o parents’ experiences, rather than quantitative methods that use discrete variables to examine questions of “what,” “how many,” and “under what conditions” (Merriam, 1988). Specifically, in-depth interviews are ideal to understand how undocumented parents experience their children’s post-secondary planning and trajectories because they allow for an exploration of how participants experienced and understood the phenomena being studied.

In what follows, I present a rationale for the use of in-depth phenomenological interviews to answer my research questions. I also explain the study design, including choice of research site and study participants, as well as methods for data collection and analysis. Additionally, I discuss the effects of research positionality on the development of this research project.

Research Design Rationale

Rationale for Qualitative Design. This study is designed to explore how undocumented Latina/o parents experience their children’s post-secondary planning and success and their role in this process. As such, qualitative methods, which are designed to interpret realities, are ideal for it (Maxwell, 2013). One of the goals of qualitative research is to understand the meaning participants make of events, situations, experiences, and the actions they engage in. Like Maxwell (2013), I use the word “meaning” in a “broad sense, including cognition, affect, intentions, and anything else that can be encompassed in what researchers often refer to as the ‘participants’ perspective’…. These perspectives are part of the reality that [I] am trying to understand (Maxwell, 2013, p. 30).” Qualitative research also underscores the importance of considering participant’s context, or the circumstances that shape people’s lived realities. Additionally, qualitative research seeks to understand the
processes by which events and action occur, not just final outcomes (Maxwell, 2013). Since this study explores how undocumented Latina/o parents experience their children’s post-secondary process, questions of meaning making, the context they face, and different processes they experience are at the center. Consequently, this is a phenomenological qualitative research study, as it explores parents’ perceptions, perspectives, and understandings of a particular phenomenon. The phenomenon being explored in this case is undocumented Latina/o parents engaging in and experiencing their children’s post-secondary planning and success processes.

**Rationale for In-depth Interviews.** In-depth interviews offer the potential to capture a person’s perspective on an event or experiences. They also allow study participants to recall life events and reflect on them (Creswell, 1994; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Or as Seidman (2006) explains, in-depth interviewing allows us to explore “an interest in understanding the lived experiences of other people and the meaning they make of that experience (p.9).” This approach is ideal for this study since I am exploring parents’ behaviors and actions and the different factors that influence these. Additionally, since one of the goals of this study is to center the voices of undocumented Latina/o parents, interviews serve to put their perspectives and voices at the center of the analysis. As Patton (1990) claims, “qualitative interviewing begins with the assumption that the perspective of others is meaningful, knowable, and able to made explicit (p.278).” As such, in the tradition of qualitative research, I believe that the most authentic way to present how people understand their experiences is by capturing their description of these in their own words.

Based on existing literature (see Chapter 2 for more), which proposes the different ways parents are involved in their children’s post-secondary planning and success, this study
assumes that participants were engaged in their children’s post-secondary planning and success and will explore how they were engaged and how they made sense of this engagement. Additionally, I am also seeking to understand how undocumented Latina/o parents make sense, if at all, of the influence their undocumented immigration status had on their engagement in their children’s post-secondary planning and success. By exploring this phenomenon through interviews, I asked participants to reconstruct their own experiences (Seidman, 2006), helping to fill the existing gap in the literature.

Although in-depth interviews are ideal for this study, they, like all research methods, are limited in what they can accomplish. Thus, it becomes important to acknowledge the limitations of interviewing as a method for data collection. First, not all participants may be willing to be as open or be equally responsive. This is especially important to consider due to the nature of this study and the sensitivity that may exist when discussing issues of immigration status or parents’ relationships with their children. Second, interviews require the interviewer to be skilled, to know how to read body language, and develop a trusting relationship with the interviewee. Relatedly, interviews are not “neutral tools” for data collection; they are a result of interactions between the interviewer and interviewee located within a particular context and bound by time (Fontana & Frey, 2003; Rubin & Rubin, 2005; Schwandt, 1997). In designing this study, I kept these limitations in mind. In order to address these concerns, I worked towards developing trusting relationships with study participants.

**Research Design**

My research questions drove the overall study design, from the unit of analysis, site selection, and sampling procedures to the data analysis. In order to further develop the field of parental engagement, one that lacks the voices of parents, this study focuses on the
perspectives of undocumented Latina/o parents with children enrolled in Coast University (CU). In-depth semi-structured interviews with 15 undocumented Latina/o parents are the main source of data collection for this study. The following section describes the research site, sampling criteria and sample, methods for data collection, and data analysis strategies.

**Setting: California and Coast University.** This study took place in California. All study participants had children enrolled (at the time of study) in Coast University, a prestigious and selective public institution in the state. Therefore, parents resided in different cities throughout the state.

California is home to the largest population of undocumented immigrants, estimated to be about 2.54 million, or about 6.4 percent of the state’s overall population, with 82 percent being born in Mexico or Central America (Passel & Cohn, 2014; Migration Policy Institute, 2016). The majority has lived in the state for at least 10 years.

As a state, California is seen as a leader on immigrant rights. Undocumented immigrants in California are able to apply for driver’s licenses, health care for undocumented children, in-state tuition and state financial aid to public institutions of higher education, and is home to several sanctuary cities (Gonzales, 2015). While these policies have inarguably improved the lives of undocumented people in the state, their lives are still impacted by the residue of anti-immigrant legislation of the late 1980’s to 1990’s and the racialized negative perceptions of undocumented immigrants in the broader nation in the present, as previously described. Thus, California served as an ideal location for my study, as it allowed me to understand the experiences of undocumented Latina/o parents in a context that can be

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7 All names and organizations are pseudonyms.
8 Sanctuary cities are cities with policies that do not allow municipal funds or resources to be used to enforce federal immigration laws. Typically, this means a separation of police forces from ICE authorities.
considered “friendlier” to their plight, but where they were still influenced by the negative implications of their status.

As a top public institution, Coast University accepts and educates some of California’s top students. CU is one of the most selective institutions in the state, with an acceptance rate ranging between 14 to 18 percent⁹. Latina/o students make up between 13 and 15 percent of undergraduates and about 15 to 18 percent of the total undergraduate student population consists of first-generation college students. Students who matriculate as freshmen have a 73 to 75 percent graduation rate within 4 years and 90 to 91 percent graduation rate within 6 years.

Speaking to parents of students enrolled in CU allowed me to narrow my sample to parents of students who successfully applied, were accepted, and matriculated into the same school. This restricted my sample to have a shared characteristic, which allowed for a deep exploration of the different forms of parental engagement that supported students’ successful trajectory into a top university.

**Sample.** The focus of this study are 15 undocumented Latina/o parents of 11 Coast University students. This sample is large enough to have parents with different backgrounds and experiences, alluding to the diversity that exists within the undocumented Latina/o immigrant population in the United States, but is small enough to go in-depth into these experiences. I used purposeful, criterion-based sampling in order to represent people who have experienced the same phenomena (Merriam, 1988). As Maxwell (2013) explains, this sampling strategy is helpful “to select groups or participants with whom you can establish the most productive relationships, ones that can best enable you to answer research questions (p.98).” As such, my sampling criteria was:

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⁹ Enrollment information about Coast University is intentionally arbitrary in order to maintain the institutions anonymity.
• Participant must be undocumented (i.e. have no form of legal status in the United States).

• Participants must have been born in Mexico, El Salvador, or Guatemala.

• Participants must have children enrolled in Coast University.

• Participants must live in the Bay Area, the Central Valley, or Los Angeles.

I recruited Latina/o parents who were undocumented, whose children were first-generation college students and who were enrolled in Coast University at the start of primary data collection (Summer 2016). Additionally, parents were required to live in the Bay Area, the Central Valley, or Los Angeles, since these are the areas where the majority of Latina/o CU students come from. Recruiting parents who lived in the Central Valley was especially important, as it is a predominantly agricultural area, populated by migrant agricultural workers. Most studies on Latina/o immigrant parents and families take place in metropolitan urban cities like Los Angeles or the Bay Area. I wanted to make sure my sample included the perspectives of parents who lived in agricultural areas.

In developing my sample, I controlled for parents’ immigration status (undocumented), country of origin (Mexico, El Salvador, or Guatemala, since these are the nationalities most prevalent in California), and educational aspirations for their children (completion of a 4-year degree). Additionally, since I wanted to explore within group variation, half of the sample consists of parents of undocumented students (including DACAmented\textsuperscript{10} young people) and the other half of parents of documented students (e.g. lawful permanent resident, U.S. citizen). Having parents with both documented and

\textsuperscript{10} “DACAmented” refers to undocumented young people who have applied and received the benefits of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, which include temporary protection from deportation and work permits (Gonzales & Bautista-Chavez, 2014).
undocumented children in my sample allowed an exploration of how parents’ engagement differs when their children are undocumented, if at all.

Table 1 Participant Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age, country of origin, year of migration</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Highest level of education</th>
<th>Occupation type</th>
<th>Marital status/ No. of children</th>
<th>CU child's name, age, gender, immigration status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elia</td>
<td>41, Mexico, 2000</td>
<td>Bay Area</td>
<td>College graduate (Mexico)</td>
<td>Service (elderly care)</td>
<td>M/ 3</td>
<td>Andrea, 22, F, undocumented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alejandra &amp; Angel</td>
<td>51, Mexico, 1999; 53, Mexico, 1999</td>
<td>Los Angeles</td>
<td>High School (Mexico); Middle School (Mexico)</td>
<td>Service (childcare); service (management)</td>
<td>Sep./ 2</td>
<td>Jessica, 20, F, undocumented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luz &amp; Ricardo</td>
<td>51, El Salvador, 2005; 54, El Salvador, 2003</td>
<td>Los Angeles</td>
<td>College graduate (El Salvador); College graduate (El Salvador)</td>
<td>Not employed outside home; Service (mechanic)</td>
<td>M/ 2</td>
<td>Emiliano, 19, M, undocumented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julie &amp; Mike</td>
<td>52, Mexico, 2002; 56, Mexico, 1986 (back and forth, permanent in 2002)</td>
<td>Bay Area</td>
<td>High School (Mexico); Middle School (Mexico)</td>
<td>Not employed outside home; Service (sales)</td>
<td>M/5</td>
<td>Gabriela, 19, F, undocumented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cynthia &amp; Adrian</td>
<td>41, Mexico, 1994; 46, Mexico, 1998</td>
<td>Los Angeles</td>
<td>High School (Mexico); High School (Mexico)</td>
<td>Service (fast food); Service (maintenance)</td>
<td>M/ 2</td>
<td>Diego, 20, M, U.S. Citizen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diana</td>
<td>44,</td>
<td>Los</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Service (sales)</td>
<td>S/ 3</td>
<td>Elias, 19, M,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Age, Location</td>
<td>Education/Occupation</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yuri</td>
<td>Mexico, 2001</td>
<td>Angeles School High School (Mexico) Service (agriculture)</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Rafael, 21 M</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>43, Mexico, 2005</td>
<td>Central Valley</td>
<td></td>
<td>undocumented</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>Mexico, 1995</td>
<td>Central Valley College graduate (Mexico) Service (domestic worker)</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Carmen, 21 F</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>43, Mexico,</td>
<td>Central Valley</td>
<td></td>
<td>undocumented</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mireya &amp;</td>
<td>52, Mexico, 1992; 55, Mexico, 1992</td>
<td>Los Angeles College graduate (Mexico); Some college (Mexico) Service (domestic worker); Service (maintenance)</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Mateo, 21 M</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Javier</td>
<td>55, Mexico, 1992</td>
<td>Los Angeles</td>
<td></td>
<td>U.S. Citizen</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lily</td>
<td>47, Mexico, 1995</td>
<td>Central Valley College graduate (Mexico) Service (agriculture)</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Enrique &amp; Emmanuel (twins), 20 M</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Martial status: M= married; Sep.= separated; S= single

The final sample is presented in Table 1. The sample of 15 parents included 10 mothers and 5 fathers, representing 10 families total. 13 parents were born in Mexico and 2 were born in El Salvador. Five of the 10 families included both spouses (one couple was separated). In designing this study, I was intentional about also recruiting fathers, as their voices and experiences are often left out of parental engagement literature. Two mothers had re-married (their spouses were not part of the sample) and one was a single mother. Years living in the United States ranged from 11 years to 30 years. Five parents migrated by crossing the U.S.-Mexico border unauthorized and ten overstayed their tourist visas. During the time of the study, none of the parents were involved in a legal process to obtain their permanent residency.
All parents were between the ages of 41 and 56 during the time of the study. Using the Bureau of Labor Statistics measures, all families were considered working-poor\(^{11}\), with the average income being $23,500. Parent educational attainment ranged from the equivalent of middle school or less (2), to the equivalent of some high school (6), to some college or a higher education degree in their countries of origin (7). One mother completed her associate’s degree in the United States. All parents had between 2 and 5 children, ages ranging from 6 to 22 years old during the time of study. Eight of the families were mixed-status families, where at least one of their children was born in the United States. Two families had all undocumented family members. Six families had children whose Coast University student was undocumented. For seven families in the sample, their child attending Coast University was their first child in the family to go to college (one family had a pair of twins and both were enrolled in CU) and two families had older children who attend a university similar to CU.

**Sample Recruitment.** I used a multi-level sampling method for this study. First, to minimize fears of the risks of disclosure of immigration status during recruitment, I recruited parents by first reaching out to CU students. I informed students of my study and asked them to recruit their parents if they met the study’s criteria. Additionally, I had established connections with the Immigrant Student Program (ISP), Puente, and the Centro Estudiantil Latin@ (CEL), three organizations at CU that cater to both undocumented and Latina/o students. These organizations sent out emails on my behalf to their different student list serves and verbally shared information about my study when they met with students one-on-one. They also connected me with students whose parents they believed would be eligible for the study. I also used snowball-sampling methods with these students, asking them to

\(^{11}\) The Bureau of Labor Statistics defines the “working poor” as people who spend at least 27 weeks in a year in the labor force either working or searching for jobs, but whose incomes fall below the poverty level.
connect me with peers whose parents they believed would also be eligible for the study. Once parents expressed interest to be part of the study to their children, students connected me with their parents.

In designing this study, I acknowledged that when recruiting and conducting research with undocumented populations, it is important to consider the development of trust with participants, as disclosing immigration status can be seen as intrusive and stress-provoking (Dreby, 2015; Gonzales, 2015). In order to build rapport with participants and develop a sense of trust, during my invitation conversations with potential participants, I shared my personal experiences being part of a mixed-status family and my professional experiences working with undocumented parents. I also shared my motivation in conducting this study. I told them about my frustrations working as a college advisor in schools that did not value partnerships with parents. I shared my own mother’s struggles with the English language when trying to enroll my sisters and I in advanced placement courses. I invited parents to ask me questions about my own family, my experiences as a first-generation college student, daughter of Mexican immigrants, and any other questions or concerns they may have had about the study itself. These introductory and open conversations allowed me to begin to develop trusting relationships with participants.

**Data Collection.** The main data source for this study are three in-depth semi-structured interviews with each participant; parents who were couples were interviewed together. A semi-structured interview guide was used to cover major themes relevant to the research questions, but it also allowed the flexibility to simulate the flow of an ongoing conversation and allowed participants to bring in new ideas and share stories.

The interview protocol was purposefully open ended to invite parents to share stories and reflections on their goals, beliefs, practices, and knowledge regarding their role in
their children’s education and pathway to college (Auerbach, 2007). Participants were asked to reflect on how they thought their undocumented status influenced their engagement in their children’s post-secondary planning and success. Questions were framed to elicit detailed stories, step-by-step descriptions of processes and experiences, and reflective responses. In order to make them feel more comfortable, I told parents they were the experts in their own lives. They were encouraged to share as much as they wanted; I was there to learn from them. As they talked, I actively listened for emerging concepts and themes (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Interviews were audio-recorded and all took place in Spanish. All participants preferred Spanish interviews; I am fluent in Spanish. Parents were compensated for their participation with a $25 gift card at the end of each interview. Interviews ranged between 45 minutes to a little over 2 hours. In total, I have over 37 hours of interview data.

The first two interviews took place in Summer 2016, approximately two weeks apart from one another. The third interview took place in December 2016 through January 2017. The first interview was framed as a “get to know you” introductory interview, where parents were asked about themselves, their migration trajectories, and their general experiences with their children’s schools. The second interview focused more on parents’ experiences and roles in their children’s post-secondary planning, as their children were applying to colleges. The third and final interview was meant to be “member checks,” where we reviewed themes from previous interviews and I asked clarifying and follow-up questions. Throughout all the interviews, parents were asked to reflect on the impact their immigration status had on their experiences.

There were several steps taken to develop the interview protocols. Initial questions were developed based on an intricate literature review of relevant research. Questions about
parents’ experiences with their children’s schools, about their dreams and aspirations for their children, their understandings of higher education, in addition to questions about their own lives, including their move to the United States and about their family dynamics, were developed. I then translated these questions from English to Spanish. I test-piloted the interview protocol with four Spanish-speaking parents to ensure understanding and comprehension; these pilot parents had characteristics similar to the sample I was recruiting (e.g. they were immigrant parents from Mexico and Guatemala). I wanted to make sure that the translations were appropriate. In this process, I asked the pilot parents to repeat the questions to me, in their own words. I also asked them to tell me when questions were confusing or too wordy. With their responses and feedback, I modified some of the language in the question wording as needed. Additionally, due to the nature of qualitative research, throughout data collection, I also modified and added questions as needed. For example, during initial interviews, I realized parents were also thinking about and discussing their engagement in their children’s post-secondary planning and success past the college acceptance point. Parents discussed their engagement when their children were already in college and how they understood their role in their education in that period of their lives. I added questions to the protocol to address this (Chapter 6 is the result of this). The interactive and reflective nature of qualitative research allowed for this and helped shape the quality of the data.

Most interviews took place in parents’ homes. This allowed me to get to know parents in more intimate settings. It also allowed me to facilitate conversations in spaces parents where comfortable in, as the nature of some of the topics discussed were very personal and private (e.g. fears due to undocumented immigration status, relationships with
family members). In the case of two families, for their own comfort and accessibility, we conducted interviews in a coffee shop and a diner.

Each interview was translated from Spanish to English and transcribed in English. While I utilized transcription services, I personally translated and transcribed six randomly selected interviews. The goal for this was two part: 1) begin to familiarize myself with the themes in the data and 2) familiarize myself with the particular Spanish dialect parents used. Acknowledging that translation often misinterprets meaning, I also made sure to double check translations of transcripts I did not personally translate. I did this by listening to the audio myself and reading the translated transcripts along. Additionally, in order to make sure that my translations and interpretations were consistent, I also consulted with a colleague who is fluent in English and Spanish and is familiar with both Mexican and Salvadoran Spanish dialects. This person listened to half of the interviews while reading the translated transcript. When translation disagreements occurred, we would flag them and discuss the appropriate translation. Sometimes, there was no direct translation for particular terms or words and I left them in Spanish.

During data collection, I also wrote memos after each interview, after listening to interview audio, during translation questions, and when I was revising the interview protocol. I also wrote memos as I was beginning to analyze and code the data. In these memos, I detailed my visits with parents, describing what I saw and what I experienced. I wrote about initial reactions, about questions that would come up for me as the parents talked. I wrote about my own positionality (more below) and how my intersecting identities as a first-generation college student, daughter of Mexican immigrants might influence how I was interpreting the data. I wrote about themes that were emerging from the data. These
memos also served as data sources in this study (Charmaz, 2014; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012).

**Note on Study Context and Timing.** Being that qualitative research underlines the importance of context (Maxwell, 2013), it is important to note the impact the 2016 Presidential Election had on data collection. During data collection, the country’s political climate was very present in my conversations with participants. Parents would implicitly and explicitly allude to the racist, anti-immigrant, and nativist narratives then-Republican Presidential Candidate Donald Trump was campaigning under. Since the first two interviews took place prior to the elections, parents mentioned these narratives, all noting they believed there was no possibility he would win the presidency. The third interview, on the other hand, occurred after the 2016 Presidential Election, which declared Donald Trump as the next president of the United States. Although the election and the election results were not considered during the design of the study and initial interview protocol, due to the election results and the impact they had on the country’s culture, I included questions about it in the third interview. I wanted to know how parents had reacted to these results and how it may have impacted the lives of their families.

Additionally, it was my intention to begin a second wave of study participants in December 2016-January 2017 (meaning that I would begin the interview protocol with them then). Yet, due to the election results, the sample risked being significantly different from the 15 parents I had already spoken with. The election could have had a “chilling effect” on this population. For example, the election may have changed how parents understood and made sense of their undocumented immigration status and how they made meaning of their engagement in their children’s post-secondary planning and success.

**Data Synthesis and Analysis**
**Data Management.** To maximize data security and protect participants’ information, all identifiable data was made anonymous and any participant contact information was disregarded once the data collection was completed. I completely eliminated real names and contact information from any records after all interviews were completed. All data for this study was stored in a password-protected personal computer, and backed up on a password-protected encrypted hard drive stored in a locked cabinet. During data collection, study participants were assigned a random numerical identifier, which corresponded to a pseudonym. The key code that contained the numerical identifiers and the corresponding names of study participants was saved in an encrypted file on the password-protected personal computer and password-protected encrypted hard drive until data collection was complete. At that point, the key code was deleted. Audio recordings created during interviews were initially stored in a password-protected recording device. This recording device was only used for the purposes of this research study. Files on the device were transferred to the password-protected personal computer and backed up on the password-protected hard drive. After transfer to the password-protected personal computer and hard drive, they were deleted from the recording device. After the interview audio was translated and transcribed, the interviews, along with research memos, were uploaded to the qualitative data analysis and research software ATLAS.ti for analysis.

**Data Analysis.** In order to allow the data to “speak for itself” and develop an understanding and theory of how undocumented Latina/o parents engage with their children’s post-secondary planning and success, I used a constructivist grounded theory analytic approach for this study (Charmaz, 2014). A grounded theory analytic approach allows for the development of theories and hypotheses through the engagement between data collection and analysis. Since there is limited theory and understanding of how
undocumented parents are engaged in their children’s post-secondary planning and success, this approach is ideal for this project. Nevertheless, a traditional grounded theory approach tends to stress an impersonal, objective strategy to analyzing data. I, like other scholars, refute this (Given, 2008). While there is a grounded theory approach to my data analysis, I do not claim to be objective. Thus, my strategy more closely aligns with constructivist grounded theory. A constructivist grounded theory approach asserts the importance of the researcher’s “cultivated position,” or informed preconceptions that are useful as “points of departure” to the study. In order to account for researcher subjectivity and my position as a cultural insider (due to my potential shared experiences with my participants), I regularly wrote memos on my own meaning-making and how my own experiences and perceptions intersected with what participants shared with me. These memos served as data in themselves (Charmaz, 2014; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012).

Following the constructivist grounded theory approach, which asserts that coding generates the “bones of analysis” (Charmaz, 2006), I engaged in different coding practices, including open coding, closed coding, and focused coding. The use of these different coding approaches was ideal for this study. I first began with open coding, reading and coding the interview transcripts without any preconceived codes. During this initial stage of data analysis, codes were descriptive, naming and identifying as many ideas and concepts as possible (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Codes such as “experiences with college application process,” “interactions with secondary schools,” and “description of family relationships” were developed. Additionally, I also created in vivo codes, including “sacrificios” (sacrifices) and “por su bien” (for their good). Open coding allowed me to remain open to the different theoretical possibilities. Following this, I honed in on the codes and refined more specific categories and their properties. I grouped similar open codes together and examined each
category in depth. I moved from simply descriptive codes, to codes that implied a relationship. I practiced what is known as “axial coding” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). For example, the code “interactions with secondary schools” was further unpacked and I realized that parents were sharing examples of both positive and negative interactions with teachers and counselors. These became separate codes.

I also used closed coding. Closed coding allows for the consideration of what Charmaz (2010) calls “sensitizing concepts,” or the “background ideas that inform the overall research problem” and “provide starting points for building analysis (p.187).” In order to explore whether what is found in existing literature about parental engagement in students’ post-secondary planning and success also applies to undocumented parents and how it may differ, I developed etic codes. These etic codes were developed from concepts found in the literature (e.g. aspirations development and consejos). Finally, I also used focused coding, which allowed me to narrow down on the most significant aspects of my data (Charmaz, 2006). I organized coded data into broader categories that pertained to the different research questions.

This multi-step coding strategy was an interactive and ongoing process throughout data analysis. The process of analysis was both inductive and deductive. As I was constantly interacting with different participants, I revisited my understanding and definitions of codes. Additionally, in order to account for inter-coder reliability and check my understanding of the data and code definitions, three colleagues coded two randomly selected interview transcripts each in order to test my codes. When discrepancies occurred, we discussed them and reconciled them. The resolving of discrepancies allowed for further clarification of the codes and a stronger analysis (Creswell, 1998).

Ethical Considerations and Researcher Positionality
**Ethical Considerations.** In any research study, it is the ethical consideration of the researcher to keep participants informed about the study and protect their privacy (Berg, 2004; Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Merriam, 1998). During recruitment, I informed potential participants about the purpose of my study and the nature of the conversations we were going to have. Additionally, I informed them that their participation was voluntary, they had the right to refuse to answer any question, and that interviews could be stopped whenever they desired it. They were also assured of their anonymity.

The risks associated with the study included potential loss of confidentiality and invasion of privacy. To minimize these risks, I informed study participants, through oral communication about the research, that at no stage should they feel pressured or obligated to share information they did not wish to share. The questions in the interview protocols were open-ended so study participants could choose what they wanted to discuss about their experiences with their children. At the beginning of interviews, I reminded study participants there were no negative repercussions if they choose not to answer a question. At the same time, I reminded them that they should only share what they felt comfortable sharing. Additionally, I reminded them that there were no right or wrong answers for the questions. Study participants were also informed that I would be using pseudonyms for everyone involved in the research. Harvard University Institutional Review Board (IRB) consent was obtained to conduct this study.

Personally, I also found it my ethical duty to develop a reciprocal relationship with participants. In other words, I wanted to be able to offer parents something in return for their time and them sharing their personal experiences and lives with me. For their time, I compensated them with a $25 gift card after every interview. It was important for me to financially compensate parents since some of them spoke with me after long days of work.
Some even took time off from work, leaving work early, to meet me. Additionally, as a result of the relationship that I developed with participants, I would also help them with random errands during my data collection time. For example, I translated letters, documents, and applications, drove one parent to pick up medicine for her daughter, and explained how graduate school (i.e. law school, medical school, doctorate degrees) worked. Parents knew that I was driving up and down California for data collection. Some asked me to deliver packages for their children when I drove past Coast University. These packages included homemade food and snacks, a duffle bag full of clothes, and even a mini fridge. I saw these minor tasks and asks as minimal favors I could do to give back to the parents who had opened their homes and shared their personal stories with me.

**Researcher Positionality.** As described in the opening of this dissertation, I am personally embedded in the subject matter of this study; I come with my own assumptions, biases, values, and subjectivities based on my own experiences and epistemology. As a Latina researcher, I am committed to producing research that is not only accessible to different audiences (researchers, policy makers, practitioners), but also centers the voices of Latina/o communities, families, and students. Thus, I see my identity as a woman of color (particularly a Latina, daughter of Mexican immigrants) as an asset to my research, which not only influenced how I designed and carried out the study, but also shaped my interactions with participants.

Like the children of some participants, I am the daughter of Mexican immigrants, the first in my family to be born in the United States, and I am the first in my family to attend college (I attended an institution similar to Coast University). I am fluent in Spanish. I have family members who are undocumented. I also grew up in a working poor neighborhood in California. As such, my identity and life experiences afforded me the role of “insider.”
During recruitment and throughout the interviews, I shared with parents my investment in this project, why I wanted to do it. I shared with them my parents’ stories of frustration, attempting to navigate education systems as non-English speakers, for example. I also shared my professional experiences working with Latina/o undocumented parents as a community organizer and as a College Advisor in the Bay Area with them. Sharing these stories allowed parents to feel comfortable with me, allowed them to relate to my experiences and those of my parents. Sharing these also served as great conversation starters.

While I related with the experiences of my participants and their families in different aspects, at the same time, I also had to recognize that I am an “outsider.” I am highly educated, having both a bachelor’s degree and master’s degree, and working on a doctorate degree at Harvard University. I am also a U.S. citizen. I see the ways that I—and as an extension, my family—are similar and different, both an “insider” and “outsider,” to study participants as assets to the study. Combined, these perspectives allowed me to be familiar, critical, nuanced, and open to the data.

Feminist theory contends that all research is conducted from a particular standpoint, shaped by the researcher’s multiple group-based identities. These social locations shape what researchers see and consider important as well as what they fail to see or chose to overlook (Collins, 1997; Peshkin, 1988).

Throughout the development and carrying out of this study, I took different measures to acknowledge my biases and subjectivities and consider how they may have been shaping my interpretation of the data (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997; Peshkin, 1988). For example, I came into this study knowing that at its center where going to be the voices of undocumented Latina/o parents. I chose to do this because I believe that the voices of parents of color, especially low-income, immigrant, and non-English speaking
parents are often left out of conversations, research, and practice. Thus, I did not talk to parents’ children, school staff, and other people parents interacted with who may have shaped or influenced how parents were engaged in their children’s education, specifically their post-secondary planning and success. As Maxwell (2013) asserts, I cannot eliminate the influence of the researcher on the researcher, but I can try to “understand it and to use it productively (p. 92).” As mentioned above, I continuously wrote memos about my interactions and relationships with the data, questioning my own interpretations of it. I also engaged in conversations with colleagues and participants to check my assumptions.

Additional Study Information

Study Relevance and Limitations

When considering the experiences of Latina/os in the United States, immigration status is salient to the experience of immigrant communities. Constant worries of immigration raids and their consequences shape the lives of these communities, as families often live in fear of deportation (Dreby, 2015). Out of the estimated 11.1 million undocumented immigrants living in the U.S., it is estimated that 81 percent, or about 9 million, were born in Latin America (Passel & Cohn, 2009). Furthermore, there are an estimated 16.6 million people living in mixed-status families, or families where at least one parent is undocumented, with an estimated 4.5 million children with at least 1 undocumented parent (Dreby, 2015). This represents about 8 percent of all U.S. children and 91 percent of these children are U.S. citizens (Dreby, 2015). Considering these numbers, the probability of a student being part of a mixed-status family is the same as a student belonging to a divorced household (Dreby, 2015). Thus, understanding and exploring the experiences of undocumented Latina/o parents raising college-bound students becomes essential to research and practice.
This research is necessary for knowing more about the way undocumented status influences parenting decisions and educational engagement, helping us understand the particular needs of undocumented Latina/o parents and to reconsider what engagement means for them. In regards to post-secondary planning, these perspectives and insights can further inform college preparation and programming for Latina/o students, both in and outside school settings. This research also informs Latina/o college student retention and graduation by exploring how parents continue to be involved and engaged in their children’s education.

School institutions are becoming increasingly conscious of the differential needs of undocumented students and students from mixed-status families, thus incorporating the support and engagement of parents in this process is essential. Without understanding the experiences of these families, national college readiness efforts may miss out on opportunities to leverage the important resources provided by families, thus minimizing potential for greater college access and degree attainment for all Americans.

**Study Limitations**

In order to begin building theory and practice, this study explores stories of “success.” What can we learn from the behaviors and practices of parents whose children have already successfully applied to, been accepted, and matriculated in to a prestigious 4-year university? In this study, I not only explore the parenting behaviors and practices that get students to successfully apply to college (in other words, behaviors that make them “college ready”), but also ones that help them be accepted, matriculated, and graduated.

One of the intentions of this study is to explore the ways undocumented parents navigated the barriers they faced, including those caused by their legal status, and how these may have influenced the ways they engaged with their children’s education. Yet, the sample
has successfully overcome these barriers, in one way or another. Thus, a limitation of this study is that I am not able to speak to the ways in which the limitations may have prevented children’s post-secondary enrollment. The perspective of my sample is a particular one that will help us begin to understand how undocumented status shapes parental engagement in students’ post-secondary planning and success. Yet, it is important to acknowledge that this is not the complete story and serves as an invitation for future research. Thus, this study focuses on the experiences and perspectives of undocumented Latina/o parents whose children have all successfully applied to, been accepted, and have matriculated into the same institution of higher education.

**Definition of Important Terms**

In serve to informing research and practice aimed at increasing the number of Latina/o students in higher education, this study asks the broad question: How do undocumented Latina/o parents engage in their children’s post-secondary planning and success? And, how, if at all, do parents perceive their immigration status influencing their engagement? In seeking an answer to this question, this study seeks to explore parental engagement practices that support Latina/o students’ post-secondary access and success. I purposely define “post-secondary planning and success” broadly to encompass the different processes, supports, resources, and networks students encounter during all phases of higher education pursuits, from application, matriculation, and completion. For the purpose of this study, when I use the term “post-secondary goals and aspirations” I specifically refer to the desire to attend and graduate from a 4-year university or college.

Additionally, since this study focuses on what biological parents are doing to support their children, I use the term “parental” engagement to refer to this relationship and dynamic. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that research and practice are now
moving to reframe what at-home engagement entails and have moved to use the term “family engagement,” acknowledging that parents are not the only individuals who support students in their educational trajectories (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). But, due to the specific scope of this study, I use the term parental engagement to look specifically at the parent-child relationship. In particular, I focus on the lived experiences of undocumented Latina/o immigrant parents living in the United States. Latina/os make up the majority of the undocumented population in the United States (Portes, et al., 2014). While the population’s experiences are not representative of all undocumented people, focusing on undocumented Latina/o parents allows us to begin to understand how undocumented status may influence parental engagement. Throughout this study, the terms “undocumented” or “undocumented immigrant” will be used to refer to individuals who are living in the U.S. without any form of legal immigration status (i.e. citizenship, permanent residency, or refugee status).

Finally, I use the United States Census definition of “Latina/o:” any person of “Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin.” I do not use the term “Hispanic” to refer to this population, which some scholarship does, as it typically refers to people whose common language is Spanish. The term “Latinx” has recently emerged as an alternative to “Latina/o.” As explained by The Majority Report (2017),

In Spanish, all nouns have a gender, with masculine nouns ending in the suffix “-o” and feminine ones ending in “-a.” By substituting the gendered suffix with an “-x,” “Latinx” proponents argue that the term allows for gender neutrality. Opponents argue that “Latinx” is linguistically imperialistic, imposing American values onto the Spanish language (p. 3).

I use the term “Latina/o” since “Latinx” is still under debate and many educational research and organizations continue to use “Latina/o.”

**Plan for Dissertation**
Each of the chapters in this dissertation is in service to answering the questions: How do undocumented Latina/o parents engage in their children’s post-secondary planning and success? And, how, if at all, do parents perceive their immigration status influencing their engagement? Chapter 2, “Understanding Undocumented Latina/o Parents’ Engagement in Students’ Post-Secondary Access and Success: A Literature Review,” begins to explore this by reviewing relevant literature on parental engagement in students’ post-secondary planning, exploring how existing models of engagement may or may not be applicable to the experiences of undocumented Latina/o parents. The first empirical chapter, Chapter 3, “‘Con mucho sacrificio, we give them everything we can:’ The Strategic Sacrifices of Undocumented Latina/o Parents,” presents, defines, and describes the notion of sacrificios, or what participants gave up for themselves in order to make sure their children had access to a higher education. This chapter takes a deeper look at the micro level consequences of the macro level process where “illegality” occurs. In other words, it helps the reader understand the context parents parented in and the limitations of their immigration status. Chapter 4, “‘It’s so frustrating:’ Barriers Undocumented Latina/o Parents Face when Engaging with their Children’s Post-Secondary Planning,” presents an overview of the barriers the parents in this study described as they sought to support their children’s pathway to college, including how an undocumented immigration status shaped their experiences and that of their children. An exploration of an undocumented status as a barrier for parental engagement to post-secondary planning is an important contribution to existing literature. Chapter 5, “‘Como le vamos hacer? Apoyo and the Importance of Parental Role Construction,” presents the Apoyo Typology, which illustrates the relationship between how parents perceived their role in their children’s post-secondary planning, parental self-efficacy, and their parenting behaviors. It becomes crucial to understand the different mechanisms that allowed some parents to be
more comfortable in taking ownership of their role in their children’s post-secondary planning. Through the typology, this chapter unpacks these mechanisms and their relevant engagement behaviors. In Chapter 6, “Ley de la Vida: Undocumented Latina/o Parents Understanding of Higher Education and their Shifting Apoyo,” I explore how parents experienced their children matriculating into Coast University. I present the ley de la vida process, which describes how parents were simultaneously depressed and proud when their children left their homes for higher education. Additionally, I show how parents continue to play an important role in their children’s education by shifting the nature of their engagement. Finally, in Chapter 7, “Conclusion: Apoyo Sacrificial and the Reconceptualization of Parental Engagement,” I conclude the dissertation with a discussion of apoyo sacrificial, which describes the particular parental engagement of undocumented Latina/o parents, an engagement that is ultimately shaped by the consequences of their “illegality.” I also present recommendations for practice, policy, and future research based on the findings of this dissertation.

This study makes a unique contribution to family engagement literature, as it reconceptualizes parental engagement research and practice to consider that an undocumented status presents a different and unique lens through which to understand Latina/o immigrant parents’ engagement in their children’s post-secondary pursuits. Additionally, this study focuses not only on the political and educational barriers undocumented Latina/o parents face, but also examines the critical and intentional ways in which parents respond to these. Finally, and most importantly, through this study, I hope to highlight the importance of actively listening to parents.

Demographics in the United States are rapidly changing. This is creating a society that is simultaneously more and less inclusive and accepting of immigrants, especially
undocumented immigrants. If we are to meet the needs of students being raised by undocumented Latina/o parents listening and learning from undocumented Latina/o parents becomes more important than ever before. This dissertation offers an attempt to do this.
CHAPTER 2

Understanding Undocumented Latina/o Parents’ Engagement in Students’ Post-Secondary Access and Success: A Literature Review

Students’ educational aspirations are highly shaped by parental support and encouragement (Auerbach, 2002; Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989; Fann, Jarsky, McDonough, 2009; Hossler, Schmidt, Vesper, 1999; McDonough, 1997). When parents strongly encourage their children to attend college, students are more likely to attend a 4-year institution, compared to students who do not receive that support from their families. Students develop their own expectations for education based on the messaging they hear from their parents and plan their futures according to these (Attinasi, 1989; Auerbach, 2002; Ceja, 2004; Hossler et al., 1999; Tierney & Auerbach, 2005). In short, parental engagement is essential for students’ post-secondary aspirations and goals.

Research on parental engagement in students’ post-secondary planning has found that Latina/o immigrant parents engage in their children’s education in multiple ways, motivating their children to pursue higher education (Auerbach, 2006; Tierney & Auerbach, 2005). While this research identifies both the obstacles and the strengths and assets found within this population, noting that race, ethnicity, class, and immigrant generation shape these interactions, it often conflates the experiences of all Latina/o immigrant parents, including those who are undocumented with those who are. To date, there is little known about how parents’ undocumented status impacts their engagement in their children’s post-secondary planning and success.

When considering the engagement of undocumented Latina/o parents, an additional set of legal and socioemotional barriers compound the road to higher education. In order to begin to address the needs of Latina/o students raised by undocumented parents and
support them in their pursuit of higher education, it is important to consider the obstacles and limitations their parents face.

The goal of this chapter is to explore the applicability of existing parental engagement ideas to the experiences of undocumented Latina/o immigrant parents. Specifically, I review literature relevant to parental engagement in students’ post-secondary planning and success, focusing particularly on the experiences of immigrant families and families of color. Additionally, I examine the sociological literature on immigration, “illegality,” and the daily life experiences of undocumented people to illustrate the unique circumstances of this population.

In order to meet the goals described above, this chapter is guided by the following questions:

1. What types of family engagement practices have been shown to be most effective in promoting Latina/o students’ post-secondary planning and success?

2. What insights can we glean from other bodies of knowledge to help us understand how undocumented status might influence parental engagement practices in Latina/o students’ post-secondary planning and success?

3. What are the practices unique to these families that they might draw on in supporting their children’s post-secondary planning and success?

I begin this chapter with a review of the existing research on parental engagement in students’ post-secondary planning and success. I follow this with a review of how families of color, immigrant families and low-income families experience the post-secondary planning process. I then present literature concerning the particular barriers undocumented parents face due to their status. In this section, I also present literature that begins to reconceptualize parental engagement for undocumented parents. I conclude with a discussion on the need to
reconceptualize parental engagement research and practice to consider that an undocumented status presents a different and unique lens in which to understand immigrant parents’ engagement in their children’s post-secondary planning and success, one that has not been thoroughly explored by existing literature.

**Understanding the Influence of Parental Engagement on Post-Secondary Planning and Success**

**Parental Engagement in Post-Secondary Planning**

Student educational aspirations and patterns of achievement are established very early, prior to middle school, and are heavily influenced by parental motivations (Goldenberg, Gallimore, Reese, & Garnier, 2001; Kiyama, 2010a). According to Paulson (1990) parental *encouragement* is a powerful intervening factor that may be more impactful to student educational outcomes than more absolute variables such as family socioeconomic status (SES) or student ability. Existing literature suggests that college-bound students and their families experience different stages when deciding to pursue college, beginning when students are in the seventh grade and ending with enrollment in an institution of higher education. As in similar models (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Perna, 2006; Terenzini, Cabrera, & Bernal, 2001), Cabrera and La Nasa (2000) propose a 3-stage process consisting of “predispositions,” “search,” and “choice.” In the predisposition stage (grades 7-9), students’ educational aspirations are developed, and early college-going plans are discussed (e.g. deciding what classes to take in high school, considering different extracurricular activities). Parental encouragement is the strongest factor in developing this early consideration of college (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). The search stage (grades 10-12) consists of students developing an understanding of college requirements, interacting with college representatives, visiting college campuses, and creating a list of the institutions to which they
will apply. During this stage, parents continue to encourage their children and are influential in the development of their college list, using their own college knowledge and experiences to help their children (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). Finally, in the choice stage (grades 11-12), students, often along with their parents, take into consideration different factors (e.g. tuition, financial aid options, destination, intended major/career) in order to choose the institution they will attend (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000).

Each of the three stages presented by Cabrera and La Nasa interacts with one another in subtle and intersecting ways, with “particular and affective outcomes” that lead students to make certain decisions about their college education (2000, p. 1). Throughout these stages, the role of parents, specifically in terms of parental encouragement towards higher education remains central (Conklin & Dailey, 1981; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hossler et al., 1999). In this model, like in others, parental encouragement consists of two dimensions: motivational, when parents maintain high educational expectations for their children, and proactive, parents becoming involved in their children’s school matters, discussing college plans with their children, and saving for college.

Studies have found a strong relationship between high parent educational motivation for their children and high student achievement, aspirations, and college enrollment (Catsambis, 1998; Conklin & Dailey, 1981; Hossler et al., 1999; Paulsen, 1990). Studies have also found that students whose parents talked to them about college and future goals and encouraged them to meet their goals are more likely to enroll in college (Perna & Titus, 2005; Rowan-Kenyon, Bell, & Perna, 2008; Savitz- Romer & Bouffard, 2012; Tierney & Auerbach, 2005). The relationship between student motivations and aspirations towards higher education is “proportionally related to the frequency and consistency parents provide encouragement (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000, p.8).” For example, in their longitudinal study of
5,000 white and Black students in Indiana, Hossler and colleagues (1999) found that 64 percent of students with “strong encouragement” from their parents enrolled in four-year colleges after high school, while only 39 percent of those with just “encouragement” did. Similarly, Plank and Jordan (2001) found that “early and sustained discussions” about college with parents prior to senior year advantaged students to take the SAT exam or fill out college applications.

Parents’ ability to be proactive in their children’s post-secondary planning process is closely linked to parental and familial social and cultural capital. In order to help their children reach higher education institutions, many parents depend on their own experiences, social networks, or pay for post-secondary planning services to guide their children (Tierney & Auerbach, 2005). High SES parents are more likely to be involved in ways that can be considered more “hands-on,” or proactive, by managing the process, including making sure their children are enrolled in the required high school courses, helping them select competitive colleges to apply to, or developing savings plans for college. Hossler and colleagues (1999) propose a model of parents’ role in the college enrollment processes consisting of parent influence, parent encouragement, and parent support. This model centers on parents’ knowledge about the college process and their ability to talk to their children about this process: parent influence sends signals of parents’ educational expectations for their children at an early age; parent verbal encouragement of college is important throughout high school for student achievement; and tangible parent support or action for college, such as saving money or visiting school is most important in late high school, as it sends signals to students about the importance of college (Hossler et al., 1999).

Closely tied to parental SES status, throughout this literature, parents’ ability to be engaged in their children’s post-secondary planning is based on the assumption that the
more educated parents are, the more likely they are going to be able to support their children in their college endeavors. In other words, having college-educated parents advantages students not only through access to a higher family income and student academic aspirations and expectations, but through college-specific encouragement, direct help with the college application process, SAT/ACT preparation, and college visits (Choy, 2002).

In the literature discussed so far, parents’ ability to engage in their children’s post-secondary planning is closely related to traditional understandings of cultural and social capital. Like other exchanges with schools, studies have documented different barriers low-income families, families of color, and immigrant families face when they attempt to engage in their children’s post-secondary planning (Auerbach, 2006/2007; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Gándara, 1995; Hill & Torres, 2010; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; López, 2001; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Perna, & Titus 2005; Savitz-Romer, 2012; Tierney & Auerbach, 2005; Zarate et al., 2011). These populations are also ones who are less likely to be college educated in the United States, and this is often seen as lacking the appropriate capital to support their children. Since undocumented Latina/o parents are likely to share characteristics with low-income parents, other parents of color, and immigrant parents, exploring the experiences of these parents and families may begin to shed light on how undocumented Latina/o parents engage with their children’s post-secondary planning and success. The following section explores some of the barriers the aforementioned populations face and navigate when supporting their children in their post-secondary planning.

The Parental Engagement of Low-Income Parents, Parents of Color, and Immigrant Parents: A Story of Barriers & Assets

Barriers to Engagement for Low-Income Parents, Parents of Color, and Immigrant Parents
Across the literature, marginalized parents\textsuperscript{12} note that the primary barrier for their engagement in their children’s post-secondary planning is a lack of access to resources and information. Despite having high academic aspirations for their children, parents have limited resources and tools to help them understand the post-secondary planning process (Oliva, 2008; Tornatzky, Cutler, & Lee, 2002; Torres, 2004). When parents did not attend college, they lack the personal experience their college-educated peers heavily depend on to support their children—parents are often unfamiliar with the requirements needed to apply to college, including high school courses and required examinations such as the SAT and ACT, and are unfamiliar with financial aid options, which may lead them to over or underestimate college costs (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). Additionally, parents are unaware about the differences between different higher education systems and institutions, the different requirements they each have, and how financial aid may vary between them (McDonough, 1997; Oliva, 2008; Tornatzky et al., 2002; Torrez, 2004; Zarate & Pachón, 2006). This lack of information not only prevents parents from knowing how to proactively support their children throughout the processes outlined above, including the filling out the actual application, but may also create tensions in parent-children relationships and interactions; children may grow frustrated with their parents’ perceived lack of understanding of the process (Perna & Titus, 2005; Zarate et al., 2011).

Parents who did not attend college or are unfamiliar with the application process often depend on K-12 schools to support their children throughout their post-secondary planning process (Perna & Titus, 2005). Yet, these families are also more likely to attend underresourced schools with limited access to scarce resources, including a shortage of

\textsuperscript{12} This research is often described as pertaining “marginalized populations” and my intention to move away from such deficit framing. Only when referencing literature that uses this term to discuss these populations as a whole, the term will be used in order to avoid a misrepresentation of the data.
academic and college counselors. Counselors often play an important brokering role for first-generation college students, as they are able to provide students and their families the college knowledge necessary to apply and enroll (Holcomb-McCoy, 2010; Savitz-Romer, 2012). When students attend schools where there is a shortage of such supports, they are placed at a disadvantage. Additionally, schools often lack the “organizational focus and knowledge” about how to develop relationships with parents—teachers and counselors may not know how to create culturally sensitive and appropriate programming to involve their diverse family populations (Noguera, 2003; Oliva, 2008; Zarate, 2007).

Studies have also found that the perceptions teachers and counselors have of students and their families impact students’ access to in-school resources. For example, in his review of what he calls the “Mexican Americans don’t value education” myth, Valencia (2002) found that when working with Mexican-origin students and families, educators have low academic expectations of them, limiting the support they provide to them. Valencia describes this as “deficit thinking,” or the idea that students, particularly low-SES students and students of color, do not perform well academically because their families have internal deficits that disrupt and/or impede the learning process (Valencia, 1997). Deficit thinking shapes low expectations of students and their families, which also translates into a lack of access to necessary college preparatory courses (Kimura-Walsh, Yamamura, Griffin, & Allen, 2009) and resources that provide the necessary college knowledge. Studies have also documented how deficit perceptions of students and their families also influence how school personnel interact with parents, creating situations where even when parents reach out to the school for support for their children’s post-secondary planning, they may face unwelcoming, indifferent, or even hostile environments (Fordham, 1996; Gándara, 1995; Zarate et al., 2011).
Immigrant families face their own unique set of barriers. First generation immigrant parents often have to negotiate between the customs and values of their countries of origin and those of the American society. Besides getting used to a new way of life when they migrate, they have to renegotiate their relationships with their children’s schools and the education system more generally, as there are often mismatches between parents and schools on values and role expectations (Hill & Torres, 2010; López, 2001; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008; Valencia, 2011). For example, within the Latina/o culture, the value of respeto (respect) presumes that teachers are never to be questioned, are experts in their careers, and therefore, the academic upbringing of students is their responsibility (Hill & Torres, 2010). Teachers, on the other hand, may see the academic development of students as teamwork between families and themselves. As a result of miscommunication or misunderstanding of roles, parents may not feel entitled or comfortable asking questions or may not know what questions to ask (Tornatzky et al., 2002). Furthermore, language barriers and work schedules add an additional layer of complexity for immigrant parents, as miscommunications between them and schools often occur or parents are unable to attend scheduled events due to their demanding work schedules (Tornatzky et al., 2002). In their interactions with schools, immigrant parents are also often seen through a deficit lens, where teachers and schools staff sometimes perceive their culture as “backward,” influencing how they interact with them (Valencia, 2011).

Similar to the parents of first-generation college-bound students13, if immigrant parents did not complete their schooling in the United States and are not familiar with college requirements, the college application and school selection process may be intimidating and overwhelming (Zarate et al., 2011). This lack of information, then, creates a

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13 “First-generation college-bound students” refers to students who will be the first generation in their family to attend college in the United States.
process of misinformation where misperceived challenges and costs mystify the idea of higher education for parents and their children. Studies have found that this may lead immigrant families to disproportionately miscalculate higher costs of attending college than white families (Levine & Nidiffer, 1996; Olson & Rosenfeld, 1984; Tseng, 2004; Zarate et al., 2011). Additionally, family responsibilities and financial necessities often lead parents to question whether college is the right choice for their children, noting that they would prefer them to work in order to help support the family (Tseng, 2004). Taken all together, immigrant families’ lack of information about college and the college application process may prevent them from proactively supporting their students throughout their post-secondary planning process.

The barriers marginalized parents face as a consequence of school structures, unequal access to educational resources, and cultures that value white-middle class ways of parenting significantly impact their ability to engage in their children’s post-secondary planning process. Yet, this does not necessarily imply that they do not engage in their children’s education in the motivational and proactive ways described above—the barriers they face make it more difficult for them to do so. Even while facing these barriers, parents still manage to successfully support their children, using their lived experiences to motivate and encourage their children to pursue a higher education.

**Navigating Barriers: Family Assets and Redefining Parental Engagement**

Scholarship has pointed out that traditional sociological understandings of cultural and social capital may be limited in their ability to fully capture the experiences of low-income, immigrant, and families of color. Scholars are now moving away from implied deficit models of families who lack high-status forms of capital and re-framing the meanings of capital in the context of these families while highlighting their assets (Auerbach, 2001;
Diamond & Gomez, 2004; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Moll, et al., 1992; Yosso, 2006). Just as the K-12 family engagement literature has, as a whole, expanded to consider the differential forms of parental and family engagement in education of low-income families, families of color, and immigrant families (for more examples see DeCastro & Catsambis, 2009; Epstein, et al., 2009; Moll, et al., 1992), the literature specific on parents’ role in post-secondary planning has begun to do the same. While parents may not necessarily have the college knowledge required to help their children apply to college, they support them by discussing the importance of education and using their own lived experiences and stories of struggle to motivate their children. Within these populations, parents’ role in developing their children’s dreams and aspiration and providing moral support for their post-secondary goals has been found essential for student success (Auerbach, 2006, 2007; Delgado-Gaitan, 1994; López, 2001; Tierney & Auerbach, 2005; Zarate et al., 2011).

In order to capture the variety of responses from marginalized parents as they attempt to support their children’s pathway to college, Auerbach (2007) presents a typology of parental approaches from her research on parents of first-generation college bound students: moral supporters, ambivalent companions, and struggling advocates. *Moral supporters* are parents who offer emotional and moral support to their children for college. They do this, for example, by discussing the value of education and hard work with them. While they allow their children to plot their own educational pathways, they are not passive—they create conditions that allow children room and space to be students. *Ambivalent companions* are parents who have a better understanding of the American educational system but know less about the post-secondary planning process. They also offer emotional support, close communication, and occasional tangible help (indirect and home-based). While they are more assimilated to dominant American culture, they are also
more likely to see college as a threat (risk changing the family dynamics) and they may struggle to let go of children. Finally, *struggling advocates* are parents who offer more direct support to their children, monitoring at home, and being advocates at school. They are also more likely to have college knowledge and familiarity with the college application process due to the networks they belong to. While they are more informed than the other parents about the specifics of the process, they still face obstacles caused by their marginalized status (Auerbach, 2007).

As Auerbach’s typology exemplifies, low-income, parents of color, and immigrant parents who may not have themselves experienced college or may not have the requisite college knowledge to support their children with the logistics of the post-secondary planning process, engage with their children in ways that help them accomplish their post-secondary goals. When parents are unable to personally help their children with the application process and figuring out requirements, they seek resources that will support their children. Parents reach out to schools and encourage their children to join college access programs (Tierney & Auerbach, 2005). For example, Ceja (2004) found that the Latina students in his study first went to their parents for post-secondary planning support and advice on decisions. When their parents were unable to help them, the parents told their daughters to make sure they found someone in their schools who could answer their questions. This, Ceja argues, is parental engagement.

Parents also engage in practices such as talking to their children about their future, sharing their own educational experiences or personal struggles, and helping them develop their student identities (Tierney & Auerbach, 2005). Parents also motivate their children by telling them stories of successful first-generation college students, who were in similar positions as them, and who defied the odds and attended college. Parents hear these stories
from extended family members, friends, or co-workers; parents’ social networks help them support their children’s post-secondary aspirations (Kiyama, 2010b; Knight, Norton, Bentley, & Dixon, 2004). Parents may also implicitly engage in their children’s post-secondary goals by reinforcing the importance of earning good grades (even when they cannot directly help them with homework), offering them the time and space to study (e.g. assigning less chores, making study spaces, facilitating study time), scaffolding self-regulation skills (e.g. focusing, planning, organizing, and reflecting) and monitoring their school and personal behavior (Savitz-Romer & Bouffard, 2012).

In her work with Mexican-American families, Kiyama (2010a; 2010b) notes that parents develop “funds of knowledge” in their children. Funds of knowledge are “bodies of knowledge and skills in a household that have accumulated over time” that support the development of positive college ideologies in their children (Kiyama, 2010a, p.25). For example, one of the fathers in her study shared that he began having conversations about college with his daughter after they watched college football games on television. During commercials, universities show images and videos of their campuses. His daughter fell in love with the University of Michigan and told him she wanted to go to that school. After the football game was over, they looked up the school online. Kiyama considers this the development of college-bound funds of knowledge, where the father took what he knew (college football) and used it to develop a college-going identity in his daughter.

In the case of immigrant parents, studies have found that parents may use their lived experiences and stories of migration to shape their children’s educational aspirations (Auerbach, 2006, 2007; Delgado-Gaitan, 1994; López, 2001; Zarate et al., 2011). Parents convey to their children that they want something better for them than to struggle to sustain a family with a minimum wage job. Parents view education as a way to prevent this from
happening (López, 2001). In a more indirect manner, the experiences of immigrant parents can be a motivator for their children to pursue a higher education in the absence of explicit communication—students interpret their parents’ struggles as motivation and empowerment to their own lives, as they begin to realize they have access to opportunities their parents never had (Ceja, 2004; Hernandez, 2000; López, 2001).

Moreover, both immigrant parents and their children have been found to develop a specific form of consciousness that allows them to shape their environments to deal with outside pressures successfully (Ceja, 2004; Yosso, 2005). In other words, using their lived experiences, immigrant families have developed mechanisms that allow them to navigate and succeed in American society while still maintaining aspects of their home and cultural identities. For example, when looking at the parenting practices of Latina/o parents, Delgado-Gaitan (1994) found that parents rely on consejos to teach their children lessons based on their life experiences. Parents’ consejos are a mechanism families use to navigate relationships with schools. Parents also set high academic expectations for their children based on these experiences by inculcating in them the importance of education, explicitly telling their children that they must do well in school in order to prevent having to experience their life struggles and barriers (Delgado-Gaitan, 1994; López, 2001). Parents also couple this with the promotion of having a good educación, which revolves personal characteristics of being moral, responsible, respectful, and well behaved (Hill & Torres, 2010). Thus, through their use of explicit recommendations, parents are able to cultivate a promoting environment for their children, helping develop their resilience and life and educational aspirations.

14 There is no direct English translation for consejos. Loosely translated, consejos are lessons learned through lived experiences that may be passed down generations; they are advice-giving narratives (Kiyama, 2010b).
Immigrant parents may also intentionally share their stories and experiences with their children as mechanisms of engagement. For example, when exploring the parental engagement in Mexican migrant families working in California, López (2001) found that parents were intentional about the personal anecdotes they shared with their children. The parents in his study wanted to convey the importance of both hard work and education to their children, in efforts to inspire them to pursue higher education. Similarly, Treviño (2000) found that Mexican migrant parents developed high academic standards for their children by expecting them to graduate from high school and college. While they made their education their priority, these parents “taught their children to tap into their survival strategies of outthinking and outworking to achieve success” and they imparted in them the moral foundations of *respeto* (respect), pride, and faith (Treviño, 2000).

The kind of motivation and support López and Treviño observe is especially present in low-income and working class immigrant families who migrated to the United States seeking economic and social mobility. These are the parents who are more likely to share with their children how their lives were in their countries of origin, the difficulties they experienced migrating, and the marginalization they sometimes experience as immigrants in the U.S. Suárez-Orozco (1989) explains that first-generation immigrant parents have a “dual frame of reference,” or an ability to position their previous life before migration in relation to their current life. Through this perspective, immigrant parents are able to encourage their children to take advantage of the opportunities available to them in their new nation.

Due to similarities in social positions undocumented Latina/o parents share with immigrant parents and other parents of color, it can be hypothesized that they are engaged in their children’s education in similar ways. Yet, the lack of immigration status is a particular
barrier that must be taken into consideration separately, as it is highly determinative of the forms of capital undocumented immigrants have access to.

**The Parental Engagement of Undocumented Parents: An Unfinished Portrait**

**Understanding ‘Illegality’ in Everyday Life**

When considering the barriers Latina/o immigrant parents face when engaging in their children’s education, immigration status plays a significant role. To date, however, research on parental engagement as it relates to post-secondary planning has not integrated a discussion of the impact of immigrant parents’ status. As Auerbach (2007) states, “Similar to students, parents come to schools with unequal resources for pursuing educational goals and with complex raced/classed/gendered identities, cultural scripts, and family histories or dynamics that shape their relations with institutions (p.276).” Just as their racial/ethnic and economic social locations shape their interactions with schools, it is important to consider the effects of an undocumented status on these interactions.

Undocumented immigrants live in a constant fear of deportation (Dreby, 2015). The ever-present threat of deportation leads them to live fearful, marginalized, and hyper vigilant lives. They may live in fear of being sent back to their home country, of being separated from their families, and of losing a financial contributor to their family unit (De Genova, 2002; Menjívar, 2011; Sigona, 2012). Due to the limitations they face as a consequence of their immigration status, undocumented parents experience and navigate structures, such as schools, differently from their documented peers, often having to limit their interactions with schools due to fears of being asked for identification documents (Dreby, 2015).
Undocumented immigrants have very limited access to social services. Even though undocumented parents are eligible for social services, such as health services at local community clinics or legal consultation provided by immigration clinics, they are not likely to take advantage of these for themselves or for their children (Holmes, 2007; Menjívar, 2002; Yoshikawa & Kalil, 2011). For example, Ortega and colleagues (2007) found lower rates of health care use and regular medical care among undocumented immigrants when compared to their documented peers. From their California study, undocumented Latina/o immigrants had 2.1 fewer physician visits per year when compared to their citizen counterparts. Also, overall, due to their social location, they and their social networks may be less familiar with these resources, live in places where they are not located, and confront language barriers. Furthermore, even when they have citizen children who do qualify for services, undocumented parents are often hesitant and unwilling to access these, as they may not know about their children’s eligibility or may fear that by accessing them, they may hurt their children’s future (Shields & Behrman, 2004).

Just as undocumented parents are limited to other social services, they are also ineligible for government-subsidized housing. They are more likely to live in high-poverty neighborhoods and to be living with other families in crowded spaces. This, then, has been found to have implications on family dynamics, as crowded spaces and limited privacy can increase parents’ levels of stress and anxiety and slow children’s development (Yoshikawa & Kalil, 2011). Studies have found that crowded housing can lead to students’ lower academic achievement, raise their blood pressure, and increase their likelihood of behavioral problems.

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15 With the implementation of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) in 1996, access to social services were further restricted to undocumented people—food stamps and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) were banned for most immigrants and limiting access to Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Medicaid, and Child Health Insurance Program (CHIP) (Fix & Zimmerman, 2001).
at school (Evans, Lepore, Shejwal, & Palsane, 1998; Yoshikawa & Kalil, 2011). Additionally, due to their limited job opportunities, parents are sometimes unable to provide their children what they need in their everyday lives (e.g. appropriate meals, clothing, and school supplies). As a result, children of undocumented immigrants are more likely to experience food insecurity (Kalil & Chen, 2008), to have poor health (Kalil & Ziol-Guest, 2009), and to live in less than ideal housing (McConnell & Marcelli, 2010; Painter et al., 2001).

Besides limited access to critical services, parents’ undocumented status also limits their ability to enhance their children’s social and cultural capital (Enriquez, 2015). Due to their fears of being apprehended by police and facing deportation, undocumented parents are also less likely to travel beyond their home-work-school perimeters. Access to driver’s licenses for undocumented immigrants vary by state. Since they often feel restricted in the places they can travel to, undocumented parents are unable to provide their children access to developmental experiences some of their documented peers participate in such as traveling to different historical sites and learning from different museums. Traffic checkpoints also pose a barrier for undocumented parents. For example, Enriquez (2015) found that undocumented parents in her study were fearful of traveling from Los Angeles to San Diego, due to the city’s close perimeter to the U.S.-Mexico border. The heavy immigration vigilance in the area in the form of Immigration Customs and Enforcement (ICE) checkpoints and an increased possibility of DUI stops were additional stressors. In Enriquez’s study, parents resented that their status limited access to new experiences and learning for their children.

In addition to the barriers undocumented parents face, studies have found that stress and anxiety can also be passed on to their children (Enriquez, 2015; Yoshikawa & Kholoptseva, 2013). Regardless of their immigration status, children with at least one
undocumented parent must also learn to navigate this status. Parents often have conversations with their children about the possibilities of deportation and the implications this would have on their family dynamics (Dreby, 2015; Enriquez, 2015). In her study of undocumented parents with citizen children, Enriquez (2015) found that parents openly talked to their children about the threat of deportation in order to have a plan set for what needed to occur in case this happened. Having these conversations also eased anxieties, theirs and their children’s. Furthermore, parents also reported that their children sometimes stated they were willing to “self-deport” with their parents if needed, even though they themselves were citizens. Self-deporting would further jeopardized children’s wellbeing, as they would, in theory, experience the instability of moving to a whole new country (Enriquez, 2015).

When one or both parents are deported, the consequences are often disastrous for all parties involved. Since 1997, more than 4 million undocumented immigrants have been deported (Golash-Boza & Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2013). When parents are taken away from their families, children experience negative psychosocial effects, such as depression, anxiety, and social isolation (Yoshikawa & Kholoptseva, 2013). Their physical health also suffers, as changes in eating and sleeping patterns occur and the physical toll of stress become apparent in their appearance (Brabeck & Xu, 2010; Chaudry et al., 2010; Dreby, 2012). Furthermore, children may also begin to deny their immigrant background, associating guilt and shame with the actions of their parents. This may lead to further tensions in parent-children relationships (Abrego, 2014; Enriquez, 2015).

Understanding how “illegality” plays out in the everyday lives of undocumented parents is important to understand how this status impacts them as they attempt to engage in their children’s post-secondary planning. As previously mentioned, to date, there is limited
research on undocumented parent’s engagement in students’ post-secondary planning. Yet, as the following section shows, there is some literature that begins to explore undocumented parents’ navigation of barriers, a navigation that may be helpful for students’ post-secondary planning.

**Reconceptualizing Parental Engagement in Students’ Post-Secondary Planning and Success to Consider Parents’ Immigration Status: Responses to Barriers**

Similar to the circumstance of other populations (Dika & Singh, 2002; Jun and Colyar, 2002; Lamont & Lareau, 1998), undocumented parents may be disadvantaged in providing their children the forms of capital necessary to navigate educational systems. While the barriers undocumented parents face are significant and, as shown in the previous section, have implications for their children’s educational outcomes, undocumented parents do support their children’s education in important ways. Undocumented parents, like other populations, do, indeed, engage in practices that positively support their children’s development.

Through their differential life experiences and expectations, a consequence of their immigration status, undocumented parents may instill in their children important values and habits that support them in their pursuit of higher education. There is a small body of literature that begins to discuss the assets and strengths developed within mixed-status families, where parents are undocumented, which may support students’ post-secondary aspirations. For example in his three year study of undocumented Dominican, Mexican, and Chinese families, Yoshikawa (2011) found that some undocumented parents in his sample were able to develop their children’s social and cultural capital with the assistance of their communities—when families migrated to close-knit communities, or ethnic enclaves, that were well connected with community resources (including organizations that advocated for
immigrant rights) and multigenerational networks, they were able to find alternative venues to resources for their children.

Gallo and Link (2015) expand our current understanding of “funds of knowledge” by proposing that children in mixed-status families also develop **politcized** funds of knowledge. Defining politicized funds of knowledge as “the real-world experiences, knowledges, and skills that young people deploy and develop across contexts of learning that are often positioned as taboo or unsafe to incorporate into classroom learning (Gallo & Link, 2015, p. 361),” the authors explain that for children with undocumented parents, learning to navigate their parents’ undocumented status becomes a fundamental asset. In their ethnographic study of a mixed-status family living Pennsylvania, Gallo and Link found that the mother’s engagement in community organizing and protest after her husband was apprehended by ICE helped to instill a political consciousness in her son. The authors argue that his school was not nourishing the skills and knowledge he developed in this situation, but rather they were developed within his family unit.

Academic scholarship has been slow in understanding the way immigration status influences parents’ engagement in their children’s education. Yet, given demographic changes, including the growing numbers of children growing up in the United States with at least one undocumented parent, this type of research endeavor is critical for understanding both contemporary immigration and contemporary parental engagement. Additionally, immigration enforcement has accelerated to unprecedented levels in this current period, increasing public awareness of the number of undocumented people living in the United States and their plight. Although not specific to post-secondary planning, the findings in the Yoshikawa and Gallo and Link studies begin to allude to the ways undocumented parents develop their own forms of capital as a consequence of their status to support their
Conclusion

When considering how undocumented Latina/o parents are engaged in their children’s post-secondary planning and success it is important to understand how context—often determined by structure, culture, and agency—shapes these interactions (Auerbach, 2007). In order to respond to and account for the differential forms of engagement non-traditional, or marginalized, parents practice, parental engagement scholarship has had to redefine its theories and frameworks to account for differential experiences. Today, as this chapter has highlighted, there is a need for further reconceptualization of the field in order to account for the experiences of undocumented parents.

When taken together, the literature reviewed above allows us to hypothesize how undocumented Latina/o parents are engaged in their children’s post-secondary planning and success. Structurally, these parents are often disadvantaged, as their undocumented status prevents them from accessing services and supports while also undercutting opportunities to belong in American society. For undocumented Latina/o parents, their interactions with American social structures is not only shaped by the intersection of factors such as race and class, but also by the marginality and stigma created around an undocumented status. This becomes extremely important to consider in modern times as narratives of immigration are often racialized and conversations of immigration are often equated with undocumented Latina/o (often Mexican) immigration. This creates an exclusionary society and culture, where Latina/o immigrants are presumed to be “illegal” and underserving of a place in American society. Thus, undocumented parents must often develop parental practices in response to this culture of marginality, parental practices that reflect their own values, beliefs, and assets. This constant negotiation is also likely to influence their ability to make
change in their children’s lives. Considering these dynamics, it can be hypothesized that the parental engagement practices of undocumented Latina/o parents are fundamentally shaped by the consequences of their immigration status.

Here, I am not arguing that undocumented Latina/o parents are not already engaged in ways described in existent literature. Instead, I suggest that due to the significant impact undocumented status has on the everyday lives of parents, it is important to consider the additional barriers developed by this status and how these may shape their engagement. While research has explored the importance of family engagement in students’ academic achievements and has begun to highlight the differential forms of engagement of different populations, scholars and practitioners still lack a clear understanding of the impact undocumented status has on engagement in students’ higher education aspirations. By highlighting this gap, this chapter supports further empirical research attending to the experiences of undocumented parents as their children pursue higher education, highlighting their resiliency and resourcefulness. More importantly, this new research will highlight the ways in which these families are resilient and resourceful, which is an essential counter narrative to our current understanding of undocumented Latina/o parents and their families. There is a necessity to move beyond an exploration of the barriers these families face and highlight the assets and strength found in them. The following chapters in this dissertation intend to do precisely this.
CHAPTER 3

“Con mucho sacrificio, we give them everything we can:” The Strategic Sacrifices of Undocumented Latina/o Parents

“If it’s not one thing, it’s another. But one always has to be aware and do what is necessary for the children. … es como estar viviendo en sacrificio [It is like living in sacrifice].” - Ricardo

In both fiction and academic scholarship, immigrant parents’ acts of sacrifice are treated with almost mystical reverence. Dyadic images cast immigrant parents as either superheroes or martyrs. Superhero parents give everything up for their children while somehow always managing to save the day. Freighted with religious symbolism, martyr parents, on the other hand, are self-deprecating, passively submitting to unfortunate circumstances and giving up their own desires because they have no other choice. These images are not mutually exclusive. Sociologist Leisy Abrego (2014) eloquently employs and interrogates these narratives and understandings in her book Sacrificing Families: Navigating Laws, Labor, and Love Across Borders, describing the difficult but necessary decisions Salvadoran parents made by leaving their families behind in order to migrate to the United States for better life opportunities for themselves and their families.

Additionally, the different parenting techniques of parents of color have similarly demonstrated that, when compared to their white counterparts, there are additional barriers these parents face. As Patricia Hill Collins (1994) argues:

For Native American, African-American, Hispanic, and Asian-American women, motherhood cannot be analyzed in isolation from its context. Motherhood occurs in specific historical situations framed by interlocking structures of race, class, and gender, where the sons and daughters of white mothers have “every opportunity and protection,” and the “colored” daughters and sons of racial ethnic mothers “know not their fate (p. 371).”

Although speaking directly about the experiences of mothers of color, this notion of intersectionality, or the intersecting nature of different identities, also applies to the
experiences of fathers of color. Educational research and theory has widely documented how parents of color have had to constantly sacrifice for the sake of their children.

Nevertheless, Latina/o immigrant parents' sacrifices are under-theorized in education scholarship. There is neither consensus nor nuanced understanding of what sacrifices (or, the term I use interchangeably, sacrificios) actually entail for this population and how they affect the lives of parents and their children.

In this chapter, I present the concept of sacrificios as a lens through which to understand undocumented Latina/o parents’ participation and engagement in their children’s educational success. I define sacrificios as the conscious decisions and investments these parents make to support their children’s educational attainment, which come at a very high personal cost due to constraints they face as undocumented immigrants. These sacrificios vary by context and by their children’s developmental stages. I am particularly interested in the intersection between parents’ racialized identity (as Latina/os) and their undocumented immigration status.

It is parents’ “illegality” that leads them to “live in sacrifice,” (viviendo en sacrificio) to use Ricardo’s words opening this chapter. Sacrificios are therefore not individual acts for these parents but a process and a way of being in the world. As discussed in Chapter 2, due to their “illegality,” undocumented Latina/o parents are confined by a nation-state that perpetuates social and political inequalities (De Genova, 2002; Dreby, 2015; Enriquez, 2015; Gonzales, 2015). This social and political status of “undocumented” influences parents’ interactions with social structures, their negotiations with and between cultures, and their sense of self-efficacy (Dreby, 2015; Enriquez, 2015; Gonzales, 2015). Undocumented parents’ “illegality” frames how they engage with their children’s schooling and education (De Genova, 2002; Dreby, 2015; Yoshikawa, 2011).
The undocumented Latina/o parents I spoke with migrated to the United States because they wanted a better life for their families, especially their children. Parents believed their children would have better educational opportunities in the United States than in their countries of origin. These hopes, dreams, and aspirations served as the motivation factors for their sacrificios. Migration to the United States, then, was parents’ first sacrifice, as they left behind their lives, families, careers, and other established networks. I call this a migration sacrificio. Additionally, because it took place in the context of political deadlock around immigration reform, all parents eventually became undocumented immigrants. The consequences of this status shift entailed two other forms of sacrifice, which I call emotional sacrificio, the emotional and psychological tolls parents face, and day-to-day sacrificio, or parents’ quotidian sacrifices of money, effort, and time.

As such, this chapter is guided by the following research questions:

• What are undocumented Latina/o parents’ beliefs, goals, and aspirations for their children’s post-secondary lives?

• What are the sacrificios undocumented Latina/o parents make to support their children’s post-secondary goals and aspirations? And, how, if at all, does their immigration status influence their behaviors?

In this chapter, I reveal how undocumented Latina/o parents make conscious investments in their children’s educational attainment, behaviors that are similar to ones the literature identifies as strategies belonging only to upper and middle-class White and Black U.S. citizens. But because of the constraints they face as undocumented immigrants, these investments come at a very personal cost, making them sacrificios. I show that while these investments require multiple conscious decisions, as parents exercise their bounded agency, seemingly discrete decisions are in fact part of an ongoing process. This process begins for
parents at the moment of migration and moves through daily life as undocumented in the United States – making sacrificios not just a parenting style but a full way of life, viviendo en sacrificio. Thus, when considering their engagement in their children’s post-secondary aspirations specifically, I propose that undocumented Latina/o parents who, like my participants, are intentional about involving their children in activities that foster their growth and educational opportunities and do so while navigating barriers created by their “illegality” and deportability are engaged in concerted sacrificios.

This chapter begins with an exploration of current understandings of sacrificios in existing scholarships on Latina/o education. This is followed by the definition and conceptualization of sacrificios in the context of this study and the role of parents’ dreams and aspirations for their children, or their motivating factors, had in shaping their sacrificios. The different types of sacrificios undocumented Latina/o parents faced (migration sacrificios, emotional sacrificios, and day-to-day sacrificios) are then presented in order to further understand them. Finally, this chapter concludes with a discussion of concerted sacrificios as particular forms of parental engagement for undocumented Latina/o parents.

Deeply exploring what undocumented Latina/o parents give up, what they gain, and the conditions that created the context for parents to find themselves having to “live in sacrifice” helps us further understand the dense intertwining of agency and constraint involved in raising the college-bound sons and daughters of undocumented Latina/o parents.

Current Understandings of Sacrificios in Latina/o Education

Latina/o Undergraduate Students Describe Parents’ Sacrifices

When first-generation Latina/o college students are asked what motivated them to pursue a college degree, students often respond that their parents’ sacrifices shaped their
post-secondary goals and aspirations (López, 2009). Studies have found that parents use their lived experiences and stories of migration to shape their children’s educational aspirations (Auerbach, 2006, 2007; Delgado-Gaitan, 1994; López, 2001; Zarate et al., 2011). Parents convey to their children that they want something better for them than to struggle to sustain a family with a minimum wage job. Parents often view education as a way out of this struggle, and students see college as a way of bringing honor to their families (López, 2001). Immigrant parents’ sacrifices can be motivators for their children to pursue higher education even in the absence of explicit communication—students interpret their parents’ struggles as motivation and empowerment in their own lives as they realize they have access to opportunities their parents never had (Ceja, 2004; López, 2001).

**Latina/o Parents Describing Sacrificios in K-12 Education**

The majority of the scholarship uses Latina/o college students as the unit of analysis. While these studies establish the meaning students attributed to parental sacrifice to their educational experiences, the perspective of parents is limited. Because students’ lived experiences are shaped by their parents’ involvement, it is important to consider the sacrifices Latina/o immigrant parents make, the conditions that lead them to make them, as well as how they make decisions regarding which sacrifices to make.

A valuable contribution to our understanding of parents is Ramos’ (2014) interview-based research on the parenting techniques of Latina immigrant mothers with preschool-aged children living in the Washington, D.C. area. Ramos offers an explicit definition of sacrificios from the parent perspective as the “mental state of struggle and sacrifice in the interest of enhancing or supporting children’s education and learning (Ramos, 2014, p.3).” In her study, Ramos found that mothers placed their children’s educational and developmental needs above their own. For example, mothers reported “delight” in the idea
that their *sacrificios* would serve as motivations for their children’s future (Ramos, 2014).

Ramos explains that Latina/o immigrant parents’ cultural beliefs and values from their home countries often shape the way they understand education and their role in it. Additionally, Ramos suggests that mothers’ understandings and discussions of *sacrificios* seemed to be embedded in their cultural beliefs about gender norms, especially “marianismo.”

Marianismo\(^{16}\) defines Latina women’s traditional social role as self-sacrificing, passive, and submissive to masculine authority (Gil & Vazques, 1996). The mothers in Ramos’ study did not mind placing their children’s needs above their own, so long as their actions supported their children’s development and future outcomes.

Though the mothers in Ramos’ study experienced their sacrifices as hardships, they also discussed these actions with great pride and with hope for their children’s futures. Moreover, mothers’ *sacrificios* were often directed towards their children’s educational success. Ramos states that mothers sacrificed themselves for their children with the expectation that the child would do well in school. Doing well in school, according to the parents, was the child’s way of showing appreciation for their parents’ sacrifices (Ramos, 2014). Sociologists Rob Smith (2006) and Vivian Louie (2012) have called this phenomenon the “immigrant bargain.”

Ramos’ study is important because it operationalizes *sacrificios* in relation to Latina/o education, but its insights are limited because the sample only included mothers—a limitation that is common in the family engagement literature in general. Studies that only include mothers can inadvertently lead to the misconception that only mothers are engaged in their children’s education, and can also dismiss or demean the roles of fathers and other

\(^{16}\) Just as machismo explains how men should behave, marianismo describes the role of women; the two terms are often used as opposites of one another (Gil & Vazques, 1996).
male relatives. Though gender and gendered expectations indeed shape Latina/o immigrant parents’ engagement in their children’s education (Cabrera & Coll, 2004; Gallo, 2017; Mirandé, 1991), an understanding of *sacrificios* that relies on the lens of marianismo/machismo risks missing alternative factors that shape, influence, or impact the nature of parental engagement.

Additionally, Ramos’ definition of *sacrificios* as a “mental state of struggle and sacrifice,” while an accurate depiction of what many parents experience, does not fully capture parents’ agency. By ignoring parents’ intentional choice making, Ramos does not provide an opportunity to delve into questions around how parents make sense of their decisions to sacrifice, the motivation behind them, and how they sacrifice. It also misses the variations in types of sacrifice, and the different contexts in which parents make these sacrifices.

Beginning with one participant’s experience, to fill these gaps, in the following section, I borrow from the literature on “self-sacrifice” from the fields of theology and subjective anthropology to conceptualize *sacrificios*. This allows me to put the experiences of my participants in conversation with existing theorization of self-sacrifice. Through this, I not only contextualize undocumented Latina/o parents’ *sacrificios*, but also unravel the complexities of these sacrifices.

**Conceptualizing Sacrificios with the Experiences of Undocumented Latina/o Parents**

When Ricardo migrated to Texas from El Salvador in 2003, he did not plan to stay. Like many immigrant parents, Ricardo planned to work for one or two years, sending money back to El Salvador twice a month to his wife and two sons. He intended to return home when he had saved enough to open his own business: “I wanted to open a restaurant in the
developing tourist area. People love pupusas! [laughs] Not only can I cook, but I knew that I was good at managing a business. I had done that before.”

But over the course of those first two years in the United States, Ricardo’s dream of returning to his home country faded. In Texas, Ricardo worked in construction, earning enough money to support his family. Ricardo believed that the U.S. would provide better educational opportunities for his two sons, Anthony and Emiliano. And his wife Luz had reasons to leave El Salvador as well: “I would talk to my wife and she would tell me that life in El Salvador was not good,” Ricardo said. “There was a lot of violence and fear. And she was worried about the boys. It was hard for her to not have me there. And I missed them too.” After two years of separation, Ricardo and Luz decided to reunite the family in the U.S. instead of El Salvador.

Luz, Anthony, and Emiliano arrived in the United States in 2005, flying in from San Salvador with tourist visas. Ricardo felt the demands of fatherhood even more acutely than before: “It was a different experience having them back with me. I felt more responsibility to them. It’s hard to explain. It was like I needed to make sure they had everything they needed. The move had to be worth it.” By the time his family arrived, Ricardo’s tourist visa had expired, and he began to experience the limitations of being undocumented. When the family moved from Texas to Southern California to be closer to Luz’s family, he had to drive instead of flying: “We just didn’t want to risk it, flying. I could not get caught and be deported.” The family eventually settled in Los Angeles where Ricardo found jobs as a mechanic and as a construction worker. The workdays were physically exhausting, lasting up to 15 hours, but he felt he needed to persist to provide his family, especially his sons, the best opportunities possible. “If it’s not one thing, it’s another,” Ricardo said. “But one
always has to be aware and do what is necessary for the children. … es como estar viviendo en sacrificio [It is like living in sacrifice].”

**Conceptualizing Sacrificios**

Ricardo’s story illustrates some of the various sacrificios undocumented Latina/o parents make. Ricardo migrated to the United States by himself. He experienced loneliness when he left his family behind in El Salvador. After his wife and sons joined him in the United States, he took on the risk of deportation during their move from Texas to California. He worked physically demanding jobs with long hours that exhausted him. Yet as Ricardo clearly stated, each of these sacrificios was an intentional decision made for the sake of his family, especially his sons’ futures.

*Sacrificios* are the conscious decisions and investments undocumented Latina/o parents make to support their children’s educational attainment, which come at a very personal cost due to constraints they face as undocumented immigrants. The act of sacrifice entails giving up something for the sake of a perceived benefit. Parents’ sacrificios, then, are deliberate actions taken by parents in which they give up something for themselves for the sake of their children’s future (Ramos, 2014). Yet, sacrificios are not about self-deprivation, self-sabotage, or self-denial. They are rooted in the parent-child relationship and are acts of love (Meszaros, 2013). For the undocumented Latina/o parents in this study, their sacrificios were interconnected with their hopes, their dreams and aspirations, for their children, they were responses to the socio-political context they faced, and, consequently, were how they were able to practice their bounded agency.

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17 Due to the scope of this study, the words “parent-child relationship” are used. Yet, it is important to acknowledge that biological parents are not the only individuals that support students in their educational trajectories (Henderson & Mapp, 2002) and therefore are not the only family members who may engage in sacrificios.
Sacrificios are Interconnected with Parents’ Dreams and Aspirations for Children. Parents’ dreams and aspirations for their children are manifestations of their love for their children. As such, their own aspirations may also be embedded in their dreams for their children. Thus, parents’ sacrificios and the dreams and aspirations they have for their children’s future often go hand in hand. The dreams they have for their children motivate them to withstand their sacrifices. And the fulfillment of these dreams makes their sacrifices and struggles worthwhile. For the parents in this study, a college diploma and the perceived upward mobility they attached to this degree were their dreams and aspirations for their children. The immigrant bargain justified their sacrificios.

Sacrificios as Responses to Socio-Political Context. Undocumented Latina/o parents’ sacrificios do not happen in a vacuum—they are decisions and actions taken in the socio-political contexts parents and their children face (Menjivar, 2011). For example, Cynthia’s sacrificios were made in an economic and political context where her undocumented status limited her options for employment. For her children, she was willing to endure difficult work:

Did I like my job? Maybe there was no other choice. [pauses] I am undocumented. That made it harder for me to get a stable job. And when I did not have a [driver’s] license, I did not feel safe driving my kids around and all that. But I had to do what I had to do to give my children what they needed. Not only food and a roof on top of their heads, but also books and soccer cleats and all that. Because I knew it would pay off, even if I broke my back picking vegetables in the hot-ass sun or in the cold winter afternoons. I did it for them. [pauses] For us.

In her conceptualization of self-sacrifice, Meszaros (2013) explains that self-sacrifice is dependent on the resources and capacities of the person doing the self-sacrifice and on the demands of the conditions of the recipient. In other words, parents’ sacrifices are shaped by what parents are able to provide and what they perceive their children to need. Factors such as “illegality,” poverty, under-resourced schools, in addition to parents’ self-efficacy and
access to resources (including their human capital and community cultural wealth) determine the sacrifices parents make.

**Parents Express Bounded Agency Through *Sacrificios***. Parents’ *sacrificios* are intentional responses to the circumstances and obstacles they face; parents exert agency through their *sacrificios*. Agency is the power people have to think for themselves and act in ways that shape their experiences and life trajectories (Cole, 2017). Parents’ exertion of agency allows them to navigate systems and institutions that may not be designed to meet their needs (De Genova, 2002; Menjívar, 2011; Ngai, 2004; Sigona, 2012). Agency is central to the definition of *sacrificios* for undocumented Latina/o parents. Because their social status intersects their identities as people of color and undocumented immigrants, among other identities, many assume that they are passive victims of the nation-state. Indeed, because individuals do not exist in isolation from their social surroundings and their interactions with others, undocumented Latina/o parents’ ability to exercise agency is shaped and limited by their social status. But social structures enter into a dynamic interplay with individual efforts and group-based strategies to produce what Shanahan and Hood (2000) call “bounded agency.” Bounded agency describes individual’s ability to act, but act within social and historical parameters that manifest in constraints and opportunities to make choices and take actions; individuals’ agency is bounded but not fully dictated by these constraints (Shanahan & Hood, 2000). Undocumented Latina/o parents exert bounded agency in deciding to make *sacrificios* in relation to the institutional and social constraints they face in the United States because of their immigration status.

Because their social context presents constant barriers and limitations, undocumented Latina/o parents were *viviendo en sacrificio*. Just like Ricardo, whose wife and two sons joined him in California after growing concerns about their safety in El Salvador,
undocumented Latina/o parents constantly made sacrifices for their children. Sacrificios, then, are not individual acts but rather are part of ongoing processes that change and shift depending on the context parents and their children are in. Sacrificios are also not self-deprecating actions because parents’ well-being is interconnected with the well-being of their children. To live in sacrifice does not mean that parents belittle themselves; rather, as Ricardo stated, “If they are okay, I am okay.” Thus, for the parents in this study, their sacrificios were interconnected with their dreams and aspirations for their children and were agentic responses to their direct contexts. In the following section, I build on this conceptualization by more deeply exploring some of the factors that motivated parents to sacrifice for their children’s sake, including their dreams and aspirations for their children.

Motivating Factors for Sacrificios: Parents’ Dreams and Aspirations for their Children

During our interviews, undocumented Latina/o parents shared many stories of struggle, marginalization, and frustration. They sometimes questioned whether they made the right decision in migrating to the United States, given their frustration with language barriers, their moral disagreements with American values, and the limitations they experienced due to their immigration status. As Lily, a Mexican mother of U.S.-born twins, explained, “Sometimes I wonder why I came [to the United States]. I mean, I know why I came, but sometimes I just get so tired. So tired of all of it. Literally tired because my body aches from having to be kneeling all day. But mostly emotionally. I get tired of always having to fight.” When I asked Lily what motivated her to withstand this frustration and work beyond it, she replied, “Well, for my family. For my children’s future.” Like Lily, other participants equated life in the United States with better opportunities for their families, especially their children. The following section describes parents’ motivating factors for their
For nearly every parent I spoke to, it was precisely their dreams of better lives for their children that motivated them to withstand the myriad obstacles, struggles, and frustrations they experienced; parents’ dreams for their children were attached to educational opportunities. The acts it took to withstand and navigate these obstacles were part of parents’ sacrificios; these describe how parents sacrificed. As Diana exemplified, the fulfillment of parents’ dreams for their children made their sacrifices and struggles worthwhile:

My dreams are to see him fulfilled, to see him prepared, to see that he can with the dream that he’s had to finish a career, to graduate. That is my great dream, to see him fulfilled, prepared. To one day see him as an attorney, as a doctor, as a politician. His dream was to be a senator, to visit the White House, to help those who are undocumented, to change the world, to help sick people, to help people in need. His dream is my dream. It might cost us a few more years, it’s going to take more costs, more time, more sleeplessness. But I think it will be worth it. To see him graduated from his university, one of the best universities. And that is my goal. To see him one day, being a man, fulfilled, well prepared, with a good job, with his home, with his car. That is my dream. To see that all the work he’s done, that it was worth it.

In this excerpt, Diana articulated what other parents also expressed: her son’s dreams became her own. Parents used their dreams of educational attainment for their children as further motivation to withstand the sacrifices they made.

Similar to Diana, Cynthia’s dreams and aspirations for her son and daughter motivated her sacrifices. Describing herself as a shy person, Cynthia explained that when it came to supporting her children’s education, she would do whatever it took – even if it meant making herself uncomfortable. She always “knew” her children were going to go to college. In her mind, it was something that seemed “natural.” At the same time, she also recognized there was a lot about the processes she did not know. Like other parents, Cynthia
did not feel comfortable talking to her son’s teachers because her English was very limited.

Yet, she knew that teachers had the information she and her son needed:

But if you as a parent see the dreams that a child has and the dreams that you couldn’t realize, that’s when you have to motivate yourself and say, “it won’t be possible that way, but we’ll be able to do it this way.” And that’s why I got involved with teachers. A lot of them knew what I didn’t. Because my husband wasn’t going to tell me, my mother-in-law wasn’t going to tell me. No one had gone to college. But the teachers had gone to college. So we had to listen to them.

For Cynthia, her desire to see her children reach college was greater than her discomfort with language barriers and her shyness.

**Desire For Better Lives Than Theirs**

As in others studies on Latina/o immigrant families (Auerbach, 2006, 2007; Delgado-Gaitan, 1994; López, 2001; Zarate et al., 2011), the parents in this study wanted their children to have better lives than the ones they had; they did not want their children to work as hard as they did, and they wanted them to have better job opportunities. Parents saw a college education as a way to achieve these goals. Parents dreamt of seeing their children graduate from college. Specifically, they wanted their children to earn college degrees so they could find jobs that were fulfilling, and ones that were not physically demanding. As Alejandra shared:

I want [my daughters] to have a career so they have a different life than ours. I think that with a university career, a lot of doors open for you and you have more opportunities for jobs that are more relaxing and better paid, with more money. I don’t want them to go through [pauses] not that the jobs are bad [pauses] but for them to have something better than us, so they work in things that they like and get paid well. And above all, so they can be at peace, that they [pauses] yes, that they work in what they like, that they don’t work themselves to death so much. That’s what I want for them.

Additionally, it is important to note that parents in this study explicitly stated they wanted their children to earn a college degree so they could enjoy their adulthood. They did not have any expectations that their children were going to help support the family unit. Parents
sacrificed their own fulfillment in service of their children’s. This defies research on modal patterns of support in immigrant families, where support is shown to flow from children to parents because immigrant parents expect their children to give back to the family in the form of financial support (Gonzales, 2015; Hill & Torres, 2010; Rumbaut & Komaei, 2010; Tseng, 2004). This discrepancy indicates to a mismatch between parents’ desires for their children and the reality of their material conditions that necessitate financial support from their children. In other words, parents may not want their children to feel obliged to support them financially once they are done with their college education, but the reality of their financial need may require them to welcome this aid. This discrepancy between aspiration and reality is a result of the fact that many undocumented Latina/o families live in poverty (Gonzales, 2015; Rumbaut & Komaei, 2010; Tseng, 2004).

**Ability to Leave Children an Herencia (Inheritance)**

Parents’ dreams to see their children go to college were impaired by their unfamiliarity with the post-secondary planning process. Nevertheless, they believed they could support their children by providing them with the opportunity to access educational resources that would benefit their futures. As Angel stated:

The only thing one can do for them is their studies. And so they can work in something lighter and they don’t have to work as hard as one does. That is, so they can work in things that, no, it’s not that the jobs [I work in] are bad, but for them to have a better job. It’s the inheritance I am actually able to leave them.

Like Angel, many parents linked their desire for their children to receive a college education to their ideas of what they could pass down to their children. Because parents did not have access to financial resources to secure their children’s future when they were no longer physically with them (e.g., homes, life insurance policies, retirement plans, pensions), they perceived of education as an “herencia” (inheritance) that they could leave their children. Prior research has documented the idea of herencia in Latina/o families to represent non-material
capital parents pass to their children (Hill & Torres, 2010). Parents acted on their dreams and aspirations for their children by making sure they had access to educational opportunities even when they could not directly help them.

Parents’ dreams and aspirations for better lives for their children motivated their sacrificios. Parents noted that their children had access to good educational opportunities in the United States, which would give them access to promising futures. Parents were willing to sacrifice themselves for these opportunities for their children. Additionally, while they acknowledged they faced several barriers in helping them access educational resources and opportunities, they believed that sacrificing to leave them a buena educación was worthwhile. Yet, they also described how their immigration status impacted and shaped the nature of these sacrifices. The following section more deeply explores this by further unpacking the notion of sacrificios.

**Sacrificios: How the Salience of “Illegality” Shapes Undocumented Parents’ Decisions and Actions**

My participants’ dreams and aspirations were intrinsically connected to the dreams and aspirations of and for their children; parents chose to vivir en sacrificio, to live in sacrifice, in hopes of seeing their children graduate from institutions of higher education. In order to achieve this, parents were willing to risk their own physical safety, emotional well-being, financial stability, and mental health. To better understand how living in sacrifice involved multiple dimensions, I categorize my participants’ experiences into migration sacrificios, emotional sacrificios, and day-to-day sacrificios.

Parents’ first sacrifice is their migration to the United States, or their migration sacrificios. They migrated because they wanted better lives for their families, which they understood in part in terms of opportunities for higher education. Because it took place in
the context of political deadlock around immigration reform (as discussed in Chapter 1 in more detail), their decision to migrate entailed the consequence of becoming undocumented immigrants. Subsequently, the social and political status of “illegality” significantly shaped both their emotional sacrificios, the emotional and psychological tolls parents face as they seek better educational opportunities for their children, and their day-to-day sacrificios, parents’ quotidian sacrifices of money, effort, time, and safety made in the hope of supporting their children’s academic success. Additionally, the barriers parents’ immigration status created intersected with the barriers other immigrant parents and parents of color face, such as racial and ethnic discrimination, language barriers, and negative interactions with overworked teachers.

**Migration Sacrificios**

Parents in this study decided to migrate to the United States for various reasons. Some migrated for financial reasons. They found it difficult to make ends meet in their countries of origin and believed that they would have access to better work opportunities in the United States. Others were physically unsafe in their home countries because of abusive relationships with partners, tenuous relationships with extended families, or systemic state-sanctioned violence. Despite these different motivations, all participants shared the belief that migrating to the United States would be beneficial for their families, especially their children. They believed that in the United States, their children would have better life opportunities. These opportunities were worth leaving behind their own lives, families, connections, and networks.

*Migration sacrificios* describe parents’ decision to migrate to the United States and the immediate risks of migration. As one of my participants described it, these were the “cost I paid” to seek a better future for her family. These sacrifices included leaving their countries
of origin, saying goodbye to extended family members, friends, and careers, facing physical
danger when crossing the U.S.-Mexico border, and separation from spouses and children for
leading migrants. Their migration sacrificio also led to their undocumented immigration status,
their “illegality,” and deportability, which inevitably shaped the rest of their experiences in
the United States. Thus, migration sacrificios functioned at two levels: 1) loss of home and 2)
entering an undocumented immigration status.

**Life-Threatening Dangers During Border Crossing.** For parents who migrated
to the United States via an unauthorized border crossing, their migration sacrificio entailed
putting their bodies in physical danger from coyote\(^18\) scams, border agents, and natural threats
in the border terrain. Diana, a single mother of three U.S.-born children, crossed the border
while she was four months pregnant with her oldest son, Elias. “It was all a blur, really,” she
recalled when I asked how she came to the United States. “A blur, but a really scary and
panicked blur. All I can remember is being scared for my life. So I remember the feelings of
fear mostly. And being very thirsty, because it was hot. All I knew was that I had to do what
I was told. I didn’t know what else to do.”

Diana had contracted a coyote who charged her $10,000 to help her cross the border.
When she negotiated the deal through the phone, she did not tell the man she was pregnant
because she was afraid he would refuse to help her. Once she was with the coyotes and the
other people who were going to cross with her, she realized she was one of only two women
in the group of seven. This heightened her fears, as she had heard stories of rape and
kidnapping of women as they crossed. Trying to remain calm for the sake of the child
growing inside her, Diana kept to herself as the group of immigrants was being smuggled in
the back of a trailer, hidden behind boxes of tomatoes. “I remember the smell very

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\(^{18}\) Coyote, or coyotes, is a Spanish colloquial term used to identify smugglers hired by unauthorized immigrants to help them across international borders.
distinctly. It took me a while to be able to eat one,” she noted of the tomato cargo. Though the truck made a few stops at checkpoints, luckily for Diana, police or immigration officers never inspected the load in the back during the drive from Tecate, Baja California to Tecate, California. She told me, “I crossed. And was alive. And my baby was still kicking. Then, that’s all I cared about.”

Different from Diana’s experience, Yuri’s migration sacrificio put not only her own life at risk as she crossed the border but also that of her son, Rafael. Rafael was eleven years-old when Yuri migrated to the United States to reunite with her husband in California’s Central Valley. To enter the county, Yuri had to physically cross the Rio Grande with her son in her arms:

Because when we were coming, crossing the border, we came through a river with black water. And that current was really strong and Rafael had a fever. Other guys that were with us crossed the river, and they told the other man with us to cross on the other side because it was easier and so, the guy told me that if I was okay with it, that he would carry my boy and we would cross that way, because that way it was easier. And I told him, “No, you are so skinny and my boy [pauses] no. The water is going to take you with my son. No.”

Yuri refused to separate from her son. Eventually, the group of other immigrants and coyotes she was with were able to find a clearing.

And we took advantage of that to run, but my son could not run because he was hurting from his legs because of the water and he couldn’t run. I stayed behind with him. One of the other immigrants didn’t leave us. And when Rafael finally could run, after his legs warmed up, once he started running, then we advanced faster.

Yuri felt relieved after they crossed the water and joined the rest of the group, even though she was in great physical pain. One of the men told her that she did well in not separating from her son because parents and children can lose one another on the migration journey. Yuri could not imagine going through all she had to end up separated from Rafael. “Do you hear that noise of the water?” The man asked her. “Yes,” she responded. “Well, the river is mad. You got away from it and la migra.” “It was bad for us,” she reflected in our interview.
“But blessed be God, we got here fine. He didn’t have fever anymore. He arrived fine. I was so scared. But it was worth it. It was worth it.”

**Loss of Home and Changes in Family Dynamics.** In addition to the physical dangers of migrating, *migration sacrificios* entail moving away from familiar places, with established networks and lifestyles, to an unknown America. For Lily, a mother of U.S.-born twin sons, the most difficult thing about deciding to permanently migrate to the United States was leaving her home, family, friends, and promising career as a teacher. Her life in Chihuahua, Mexico gave her a sense of comfort and safety, and when she left in 1995, she did not want to leave behind everything she knew and loved. But Lily had just learned that she was pregnant, and since her twin sons’ father refused responsibility, she would be a single mother. Neighbors in her small pueblo in the mountains of Chihuahua told her she could earn more money in the United States than she was making as a teacher. She decided to migrate. A family friend who lived and worked in California’s Central Valley agreed to house her and connect her with jobs.

When Lily arrived in California, the family friend realized that Lily was pregnant and would not be able to work in agriculture. The woman refused to help Lily. Instead, she physically abused her and kicked her out of the house. Homeless and jobless, Lily moved from shelter to shelter, looking for a job to make enough money to return home to Mexico. But pregnancy complications related to the stress and abuse she endured forced her into bed rest for the last 6 months of her pregnancy. After Lily gave birth to her sons in California, she decided to return to her family in Mexico. She did not like life in the United States.

After living in Mexico for four years, one of her twins grew dangerously ill with a congenital autoimmune disease. Lily realized that she and her sons needed to return to the United States for the best chance of a full recovery. Even though she hated *el norte*, which
left a “bitter and disgusting” taste in her mouth, she knew that migrating would provide her U.S.-citizen sons with access to superior health care:

And so from there, I told my dad, “I’m gonna go back because I need my son to get better. I am killing myself here, trying to make ends meet. I don’t have anyone here to help and you can only help me by taking care of the kids. So I’m gonna go and see.” So I went to the capital [of Chihuahua] to work in the maquila and from there, I went to [the United States].

For the sake of her son’s health, Lily chose to migrate once more, this time making the move permanent, leaving behind a place of comfort and safety for something distant and unpleasant.

Lily first went to work in maquilas in order to make enough money to pay for a coyote to help her cross the border. She initially left without her two sons to make sure she had secured housing and a job before their move. “I just wanted to get a job, and I knew that I may have some struggles and I never wanted anyone to look at my kids the wrong way,” she shared. But this separation was devastating for Lily. She hated not being able to see her boys every day, hated having to depend on phone calls three times a week just to hear their voices. She constantly worried that her sons would forget her. She recalled, “I lived in a constant state of depression during that time. Being away from them was one of the hardest things I have done. I knew that it was worth the sacrifice, but my heart was constantly breaking.”

Like other immigrant parents, especially single mothers, Lily was separated from her children for a prolonged period of time; being away from her sons was a difficult sacrifice but one she was willing to make because she believed it would benefit the family in the long run.

As a result of her migration sacrificio, Lily engaged in “transnational mothering” for a period of six months. Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila (1997) use the term “transnational

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19 Maquilas, or maquiladoras, are factories located in Mexico that import materials and equipment on a duty-free and tariff-free basis for assembly or manufacturing and then re-exports the assembled product to the United States.
motherhood” to describe Latina women who work and live in the United States while their children remain in their countries of origin. Building from the claim that motherhood is not biologically predetermined, Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila argue that motherhood is instead socially and historically constructed; transnational mothers redefine what motherhood looks like. Motherhood, in this case, means providing for children's sustenance, protecting their current well-being, and preparing them for a better future, even if doing so requires long-term physical separation (for more, also see Abrego, 2014 and Dreby, 2015).

Elia was another single mother who cared for her daughters through a transnational separation. Elia was a licensed social worker in Mexico, but it was still difficult to find work that paid enough to support her family. She decided to move to the United States to work. Her move was only supposed to be temporary, two years at most, enough time to save money and return to Mexico. But after she migrated, Elia needed to extend her stay because she could only find temporary positions that paid too little to build her savings. When she did find stable positions, they were live-in caretaker jobs that required lengthy commitments. During one of these jobs, Elia fell in love and married in the United States.

Elia felt guilty for leaving her daughters in Mexico, but she sustained an injury that prevented her from traveling back home. She knew that her mother was taking good care of the girls, but she felt like she was losing a part of herself by not being with them. She told me, “I knew that everything I was doing was for them, that it was worth it. But I didn’t want them thinking that I made a new life without them. I wanted them to remember that I was their mother, that I loved them.” As Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila state, “Transnational mothers worry about some of the negative effects on their children, but they also experience the absence of domestic family life as a deeply personal loss” (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997, p. 562). The deeply personal loss and guilt Elia was experiencing became too much for
her to bear, and four years after leaving, she decided to send for them, so her daughters could move to the United States as their permanent home.

Though she was excited to reunite with her daughters, Elia’s guilt over the four-year separation did not subside:

And then my husband and I just went to Los Angeles to pick them up. I couldn’t recognize them to be honest [laughs]. And my husband laughs at me because he tells me, “Your daughters are there,” and I’m like, “You know what? You greet them because I can’t recognize them. It’s not the same to see them in pictures than to see them in person.” And he’s like, “I can’t believe that!” And I know it sounds crazy and bad because they’re my daughters, but I can’t recognize them. But yeah, it was an experience for me that [crying]. It is sad and bad that you can’t even recognize your own daughters in person. Because the little one, I left her when she was two. It wasn’t that much physical change because she didn’t have a lot of change, Andrea either. But it’s not the same when you stop seeing them. They are small changes but still. From two years old to seeing her again at six years old. Their little bodies change.

Scholars have documented the damage to parent-child relationships stemming from family separation due to a parent migrating (Abrego, 2014; Dreby, 2015; Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997). Children left behind in countries of origin to be raised by grandparents or aunts may grow resentful towards their parents or experience depression and difficulty focusing in school. When parents and children reunite, their initial relationship may be distant: since they were away from each other for so long, they do not know each others’ personalities, needs, or desires. Parents may not know their children’s favorite foods, what they are allergic to, or what their learning needs are (Abrego, 2014; Dreby, 2015; Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997). Lily and Elia were aware that these consequences might occur in their relationships with their children. But they believed that in the long run, their sacrifices would be worthwhile.

Ricardo also worried about how his two-year absence would affect his relationship with his two sons:
I wanted to believe that they knew why I was not there. As their father, it was my responsibility to make sure they were financially taken care of, that they had everything they needed. But I missed them. And I did not want them to grow up without a father. So I also knew they needed me. I needed to be both here [in the U.S.] and there [in El Salvador]. Here for the money, there for them. I missed them and that really messed me up. All I wanted to do was work and drink so I could not think about it.

As he shared this, he broke down in tears. Immigrant men like Ricardo experienced heavy emotional consequences of family separation, though their emotions are under-explored in the immigration literature as compared to women. Indeed, scholars more often discuss the immigrant experiences of Latino men in terms of their economic contributions and their often-exploitive work conditions. We know very little about how men describe the emotional toll of family separation. Ricardo’s words serve as an initiation for future studies to continue this line of questioning.

For all participants, their migration sacrifice meant putting their lives (and sometimes their children’s) at risk when they migrated, leaving behind their families and networks, and experiencing temporary family separation. Their migration also resulted in their “illegality.” Although some entered without authorization and others entered with visas, at some point after migrating to the U.S., all my participants had to navigate their new country as undocumented immigrants. Because they chose to make a migration sacrificio for the sake of their families’ wellbeing, parents’ “illegality” and deportability unintentionally and sometimes unknowingly also shaped their parenting behaviors. In the next sections, I illustrate how the repercussions of their initial migration sacrificio shaped other sacrifices, emotional sacrificios and day-to-day sacrificios, and their engagement in their children’s post-secondary pursuits.

**Emotional Sacrificios**

*Emotional sacrificios* entail the emotional stress parents face as they seek better educational opportunities for their children. These include parents’ feelings of inferiority
when engaging with their children’s schools, clashing relationships between parents, the
development of deportation plans, and the longing and depression parents felt due to their
separation from their extended families. While other parent populations may experience
similar emotional stress, the undocumented Latina/o parents in this study experienced these
sacrificios in part due to the limitations they faced as a result of their undocumented
immigration status. This is highlighted in Alejandra’s difficulty describing her everyday life in
the United States: “It’s not that it’s hard, physical work. But it’s something else. [Long pause]
I don’t know the right words. But I feel that I put my soul or dignity at risk sometimes
because I don’t have papers. Like it is something emotional. Yes, like an emotional sacrifice.”

Feelings of Inferiority when Engaging with Children’s Schools. For some
parents in this study, emotional sacrificios took form in feelings of inferiority and seclusion
when engaging with their children’s schools. Alejandra hated going to her daughters’ school
events. It was not that she did not care about their education. In fact, she said she was always
monitoring their academics, making sure they only earned the best grades. But for Alejandra,
schools represented the American government. As an undocumented mother, she did not
feel comfortable going. For instance, she recalled the first time she had to step into an
American school, to enroll her daughters. Having migrated to the United States when they
were three and five years old, Alejandra knew that her daughters had access and right to
attend public education even if they were not residents or U.S. citizens (having learned this
from a family friend who had migrated two years before her family). Yet, the night before
going to enroll them, she had a panic attack:

It was overwhelming. I had to show that they were my daughters, that they had all
their vaccines, all that. That they had some sort of papers. How was I expected to
walk in there [the school] and demand that they gave my daughters access to things?
Even the thought of being demanding as an undocumented person made my
stomach turn. Would they know I was undocumented? That the girls were
undocumented? Would they call ICE if they asked for a birth certificate and theirs
said “Mexico” on top? All these thoughts came to my mind. And they made me fear schools. In the back of my mind I knew that it was crazy, that it did not make sense. But, to me, schools represented the United States. So the night before enrolling them, I prayed and I prayed that everything went okay they next day. I could not sleep. I couldn’t breathe right. It took a lot out of me, emotionally. It was very stressful.

Eventually, Alejandra was able to enroll her daughters in school without a problem. The school never asked for proof of citizenship and even offered to include the girls in English tutoring afterschool, in order to have them learn the language faster. Alejandra was thankful for this. But she noted that she was never truly able to “shake off” her negative feelings about being physically present in schools. In addition to associating them with U.S. government officials, Alejandra also noted that she “detested” the way schools made her feel dumb: “Como una pendeja. (Like a dumbass.) Like I knew nothing.” When asked what the schools did explicitly to make her feel that way, Alejandra said she did not know, she could not put her finger on it:

It’s not like the school people were standing there, at the door, telling me to not come. The opposite, there were some great teachers that always invited us [her and husband] and wanted to know us. But freaking English! I never got along with that language. Even when I lived in Mexico, they tried to teach me but no [laughs] so when it was time to go to the schools, I never wanted to go. But I would go. For them. But I hated it.

Even though the language barriers she faced when engaging with her children’s schools left her feeling inferior, for the sake of her daughters’ education, she made that sacrifice.

Withstanding Clashing Relationships with Partners. While Alejandra’s emotional sacrificios occurred in her interactions with schools, Yuri’s emotional sacrificios occurred in her relationship with her husband. Yuri explained that she did not always have the best relationship with him. “We are both stubborn,” she admitted. She called him a “machista” by nature, as he always wanted to be in charge and make the final decision. During our interviews, Yuri disclosed that she often thought about leaving her husband—she did not
like the nature of their relationship. He was always trying to control her. But for her sons, college-aged Rafael and 10-year-old Beto, she was willing to endure and stay with him. Most importantly, Yuri noted that she could not financially sustain her household as a single mother—as an undocumented worker, she did not make enough money to be able to separate from him. Because she was undocumented, Yuri felt that she needed to stay with her husband, even when it was emotionally exhausting.

Yuri and her husband held views that often clashed, especially in regards to the education of their sons. Her husband felt that Americans were “too liberal,” and, as a result, Yuri believed that he was too hard on their son Rafael. For example, Yuri’s husband always wanted to know where Rafael was and accused him of being a cholo (gangster) if he was not at home outside of school hours. Yuri’s husband also restricted Rafael’s friendships.

Existing research has documented that immigrant parents often have to negotiate between the customs and values of their home country and those of the American society. Besides getting used to a new way of life, many migrants have to renegotiate their relationships with their children’s schools and the education system more generally, as there are often mismatches between parents and schools on values and role expectations (Hill & Torres, 2010; López, 2001; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008; Valencia, 2011). Yuri believed that she was more open-minded about her sons’ schooling experiences in the United States than her husband. As a result, Yuri’s husband had a strained relationship with Rafael. For Yuri, the emotional sacrificio entailed staying in a relationship with her husband, even if it was sometimes emotionally abusive, for the sake of her children.

Yuri and her husband often argued about Rafael’s upbringing. Yuri recalled one fight between her husband and Rafael when Rafael did not go home immediately after school.
Yuri explained to her husband that Rafael was in an after-school college preparatory
program. While Yuri wholeheartedly trusted her son, her husband did not believe him:

He kicked him out of the house. And he asked me if I was going to do more for
Rafael than for my husband. And I told him, “Yes, a hundred percent yes. For me,
my sons come first. And I have to thank you for them, but I am not going to do
more for you than for them. And more knowing that you don’t have the reason to
tell them what you are telling them.” My cousin lives close by and Rafael went there.
But I told him that something better not happen to him. “I will leave, because it is
not possible for you to behave this way.” And I went out to look for him [Rafael].
But yeah, sometimes he [her husband] made me live through some really bad times.

Yuri explained that slowly, her husband began to change his attitude towards Rafael. Though
arguing with her husband caused her stress, Yuri was glad that she stood up to him on behalf
of her son. Yuri stated, “I know that it’s bad to fight with him. And I know that is should
not be like that. We are married. But I don’t know how to explain it. For Rafael I am willing
to fight with him. Even if it does something to me, like make me sad or tired. But for my
son, I will.” Like Alejandra, Yuri saw the heavy emotional toll arguing with her husband
caus ed as worth experiencing in order to create conditions that were going to be beneficial
for Rafael’s future.

**Development of Deportation Plans.** Parents also experienced *emotional sacrificios as*
they developed deportation plans for their families—feelings of fear and insecurity overtook
them as they considered this worst-case scenario. Six of the ten families I spoke with
mentioned having conversations about possible deportations and having some sort of plan
in case it were to happen. Even though they despised thinking about what might happen to
their families, especially their children, they knew they had to be prepared in case their worst
fears came true. As Cynthia explained, she developed a plan, “just in case something
happened to me, my children were not going to go down with me.” She explained that if she
were to be deported, she wanted to make sure that her children were going to be able to
remain in the United States:
You know what I found? I found a family that I would tell [my children] if I get deported they stay there, with them. Because their future is here [in the United States]. Their future is not in Mexico, what am I going to give them? They’re just getting started. So I even wanted to give them up for adoption if it was necessary. Like in Washington, I looked for people because there were raids. And they would come and take people from their homes. I spoke to a family and told them to be responsible for my children so that they could stay in the United States, so that they could become someone. Because I was afraid of being deported, you don’t have papers so you’re always afraid. You don’t know when it will be your turn. Driving. And one of the reasons I left California was because of that too. Because there were a lot of checkpoints. If you didn’t have your license, you would get arrested. If you got arrested, you would be deported. So I would feel more vulnerable driving without a license than driving with a license. So I did have a lot of fear. I was afraid to leave them, to lose them. I didn’t want to be an obstacle in their future, because you always want the best for them since they’re born. You imagine that they’re going to school, that they’re going to grow up, that they’re going to do their own lives [pauses] that you’re going to be a grandmother. You dream that they’re going to be better than what you are. So I was really afraid about it.

Cynthia’s fear of deportation was in tension with her dreams of her children growing up in the United States and having the opportunities to pursue higher education.

Similar to Enriquez’s (2015) study of undocumented parents with citizen children, some parents in this study openly talked to their children about the threat of deportation not only to develop a practical plan but also to ease their own and their children’s anxieties. Cynthia, like other parents in this study who had arranged similar plans in case of their deportation, was willing to sacrifice being away from her children in order for them to continue benefiting from her initial migration sacrificio. The ever-present threat of deportation and having to prepare for it took an emotional toll on parents, one that manifested itself physically as stress and anxiety. For Cynthia, this meant that every time she would think about who her children would go to if she were deported, she would have two or three restless nights, haunted by dreams of being detained by ICE.

**Experiencing Longing and Depression.** Participants’ “illegality” also impacted their mental health. Parents discussed the deep sadness they experienced because they were unable to return to their countries of origin and visit their families. For Maria, this was
especially difficult. She did not have any family in the United States. When her mother passed away in Mexico, she entered a deep depression because she was not able to say goodbye. Like other parents, Maria also felt frustrated with her immigration status. Maria had a degree in social work in Mexico and an Associate’s Degree in early childhood development in the United States. Yet she was not able to apply her education in skilled jobs. Instead, Maria found herself cleaning houses to earn money:

I know I can’t do things and that upsets me a bit because I have met people that know I like doing things in my children’s schools. I have met people that have good positions in [the] schools and have asked why I don’t work there. And I have told some people, “I can’t.” They tell me to tell them when I can so they could refer me and give me a letter of recommendation. It upsets me that I can’t do anything. There are times that I am working and there are houses that are good. I have seen houses, really dirty houses. I feel bad because it’s like, ‘How can I be doing that work?’ But it is like that. But then I say, “Thank God.” I try to think positively. I’m very, I’m not the one to be at church all the time, but I believe a lot in God. And He knows why. I motivate myself after doing a good job [cleaning houses]. But it leads me to think that I could be doing so many other things. One day I am going to be able to and change what I am doing.

When I asked Maria to elaborate on her belief in God, she shared that she believed that God only gave her challenges she could handle. Like Alejandra and Yuri, she said that the frustration and limitations she experienced as a result of her immigration status were worthwhile if she was able to give her children the opportunity to grow up accessing the resources and opportunities available to them in the United States. In this way, the different forms of sacrificio were connected as emotional sacrificios emerged in the challenges of day-to-day sacrificios that parents took on as a consequence of their migration sacrificios.

Day-to-day Sacrificios

Day-to-day sacrificios describe parents’ quotidian sacrifices of money, effort, time, and safety made in the hope of supporting their children’s academic success. This kind of sacrificio includes prioritizing their children’s expenses above their own, missing work to attend school events, and risking deportation to drive their children to extracurricular activities.
While these behaviors are similar to those of other parent populations, what makes them *sacrificios* for undocumented Latina/o parents is that they entail a greater cost to the parent. Some parents gave up needed medicines to buy their children school supplies, others put their job security in jeopardy by attending a school open house, and others risked being detained by ICE at a driving checkpoint. For undocumented parents, everyday activities carry risks. These risks constitute a daily sacrifice.

**Financially Prioritizing Children’s Needs.** Financial sacrifices are one of the ways parents made *day-to-day sacrificios* for their children. Because they were undocumented immigrants, the parents in my sample had very limited access to jobs that paid a decent wage. Studies have found that due to limited job opportunities, undocumented parents are sometimes unable to provide their children what they need in their everyday lives (e.g., appropriate meals, clothing, and school supplies) (Kalil & Chen, 2008; Kalil & Ziol-Guest, 2009; McConnell & Marcelli, 2010; Painter et al., 2001). Parents in the sample would deprive themselves of material things, such as cable television, clothes, and even medicine in order to make sure their children were not deprived of the material things they needed to be successful in school. Mike, a self-proclaimed baseball lover, shared that “it hurt” to give up cable television because he loved having access to baseball games. Yet when his oldest daughter started high school and he realized how much her soccer participation would cost, he decided to cut the cable bill to pay for team enrollment, uniforms, and travel expenses. “Even though it was not baseball, I guess I was still able to watch some sort of sport [laughs],” he joked. Mike gave up small material pleasures for the benefit if his daughter.

For other parents, the material things they gave up were not optional luxuries, but were everyday essentials. Luz, who migrated from El Salvador to join Ricardo, cut the clothing budget for herself and her husband. As the stay-at-home parent, Luz was not only
responsible for the primary care of her sons, but also for managing the family expenses. As such, she was always stressed about money, worried that even with her husband’s two jobs, they would not be able to afford their rent, food expenses, and utilities. This worry came every month. When I asked her about financing her sons’ schooling, she said that was always a priority; even when she was worried about not being able to pay rent, she made sure that her sons always had what they needed. She recalled when Emiliano asked her for a book he needed for English class:

They [sons] couldn’t tell me that they didn’t do their homework because they didn’t have the book. I would always think that if I didn’t buy them the book, they wouldn’t do the homework and have an excuse as to why they didn’t do it. And so I couldn’t leave that excuse. But I have bought myself five-dollar shoes, five-dollar shirts or three-dollars. But if they would tell me “I need a book,” it would be eleven dollars or twelve dollars. I would buy it. There was money for that. What was the most important thing was that they have the things necessary to keep studying.

Like Luz, other parents prioritized their children’s financial needs over their own. Elia recalled paying for her daughter’s SAT preparation course and books with the money she allocated every month for her blood pressure medicine. “I never told her where I got that money. I guess she never asked [laughs]! But what I did is that for a month I would only take half a pill a day, I cut my use in half. It took my body a couple of days to get used to it, but I felt okay. It was worth it, too! Look! She got into [Coast University]!” In Elia’s case, even though her financial day-to-day sacrificio put her health at risk, she felt she had no other choice: she wanted to make sure her daughter had the best chance at a top university. The money she made taking care of an elder man was no enough to cover both her own medicine and her daughter’s test preparation materials.

Exposure to Deportation Risks During Daily Tasks. Day-to-day sacrificios also entail daily tasks like driving. California did not introduce driver’s licenses for undocumented immigrants until 2015. As such, the majority of the parents in the study spent most of their
children’s K-12 schooling driving without licenses. For parents, this caused great stress and anxiety. This stress, as other studies have found, physically manifested itself in chronic headaches, ulcers, and insomnia (Brabeck & Xu, 2010; Chaudry et al., 2010; Dreby, 2012; Gonzales 2011, 2015). For instance, Julie explained that she often feared that her husband, Mike, who was also undocumented and who drove without a license, would be stopped on his way home from work: “I did not sleep until I saw him walk in. I was always nervous. If he didn’t answer his phone, for example, I thought that maybe the migra picked him up. Especially when he was driving the girls around. It was no way to live.”

Parents’ undocumented status often limited their ability to move beyond their home-work-school perimeters. Traffic checkpoints or being stopped by police pose risks of detention and deportation (Enriquez, 2015). This fear elevated when driving without a driver’s license. Yet Mike and other parents deliberately risked their safety to provide extracurricular opportunities to their children. Mike said, “Was I scared? Of course! But if I didn’t do it, who was? I had to drive the girls around, from school to meetings to scholarship events, all that stuff. With me at least they were safe. I was scared but I had to do it for them.”

As with money, parents also gave up time to support their children’s different academic and extracurricular activities. Day-to-day sacrificios entailed taking time off from work to attend a sports event and spending the hours after work driving children to activities even, when parents were exhausted from physically demanding labor or working multiple jobs. Parents chose to spend their time on their children because they believed that being involved in extracurricular activities would be beneficial to their children’s future educational attainment.
Javier described coordinating his work schedule with his wife Miraya’s in accordance with their two children’s school, sports, and other extracurricular needs as a “logistical nightmare.” Javier and Miraya had to take turns driving the family’s only car between their two jobs and to take their children, Erica and Mateo, to their various extracurricular activities. Daily, they drove Erica to Glee Club and Mateo to soccer practice, and every other day, they had to return two hours later to pick up Erica and drive her to her folkloric dance rehearsals. “And in between all that,” Javier shared, “they also did a lot of community service all over [Los Angeles]. So we had to figure out how to get them to and from there too.”

Even though the locations of these activities and Javier’s and Miraya’s jobs were only a few miles apart, the unpredictable Los Angeles traffic led to a lot of stress within the family. The parents constantly worried about being late to work or making their children late to their activities. When Javier and Miraya were occasionally late to work, they worried that they might lose their jobs, noting that for undocumented immigrants, good, stable jobs were hard to find. “It was crazy. It felt like we were always running around, running late somewhere. And I was late to work too. I would get in trouble, but it was all for the kids,” Miraya stated as she described her calculated risk.

**Concerted Sacrificios.** Javier and Miraya’s intentional actions to coordinate their own work with their children’s various activities were very similar to the middle-class parenting style that Annette Lareau (2003) calls “concerted cultivation” in her seminal book *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life.* According to Lareau, middle-class parenting is marked by attempts to foster their children’s talents by engaging them in different organized activities. By contrast, Lareau found that the working-class and poor parents she studied were more likely to engage in what Lareau calls “the logic of natural growth,” a less structured style where children create their own activities to occupy themselves. She argued
that this style does not cultivate the behaviors that are most advantageous to structured settings like schools.

However, the actions described by Javier and Miraya, as well as other undocumented Latina/o parents I spoke to, pose a challenge to Lareau’s conception of concerted cultivation as a parenting style embraced only by the middle-class. Participants in my study who were mostly working-poor employed a similar style of engaging with their children’s education: they enrolled their children in extracurricular activities, they kept their children involved during their waking hours outside of school, and they shuttled them from activity to activity. Their narratives highlight their belief that their children’s involvement in extracurricular activities was important to their futures.

Javier described his determination to make sure his son and daughter remained involved in so many different activities even though it seemed like such a hassle to coordinate in this way:

Well, because we knew it was going to be good for them. It was good to keep them busy, out of the streets. And it was not only about keeping them busy doing whatever, because we could have kept them locked up at home watching TV [laughs], but it was about having them do something that was going to be good for their futures. We heard somewhere that colleges looked for students to be involved in different things. They wanted students who were not just ratones de biblioteca [library nerds] but also ones that could do other things. We needed to have them involved so they could have the opportunities to go to good schools.

Similarly, Maria, who had her four children involved in at least two sports teams at a time, noted that she was intentional about her decision to put them in sports at a very early age. She shared:

I knew that it was going to benefit them in the long run. They were going to grow up and be healthy. You know how they scared us with all the childhood obesity stuff [laughs]. But really, my husband and I knew that we had to do what we could to make sure they were doing things outside of school. This was going to help them make friends, develop people skills, but also help them when they applied to college. Did you know that? They ask them to list all their activities. So we could help them with that part.
Miraya, Javier, Maria, and other participants were intentional about cultivating their children’s talents.

Nevertheless, while their engagement was similar to the parents Lareau described in her work, the context in which undocumented Latina/o parents do the work of parenting is meaningfully different. The everyday barriers and struggles undocumented Latina/o parents face are different from those of middle-class parents. This does not mean that the parents in Lareau’s study did not have to make sacrifices for their children’s future. But considering the context undocumented Latina/o parents found themselves in, these took on a different form. Parents in my sample engaged in concerted cultivation behaviors in addition to long work hours in multiple jobs and in doing so, they risked deportation by exposing themselves to potential encounters with police officers or ICE agents.

I propose that undocumented Latina/o parents who, like my participants, are intentional about involving their children in activities that foster their growth and educational opportunities and do so while navigating barriers created by their “illegality” and deportability as engaged in concerted sacrificios. Concerted sacrificios are a by-product of their migration sacrificios (i.e., becoming undocumented as a result of their migration) and their day-to-day sacrificios. These concerted sacrificios demonstrate how students from vulnerable families are successful despite their parents’ deficiencies. I argue that their undocumented parents played a critical role in their success by engaging in very intentional parenting decisions and behaviors with a college education as their ultimate goal. Acknowledging the intentionality of these concerted sacrificios allows us to understand the interplay between structure and agency—concerted sacrificios are the result of undocumented Latina/o parents practicing their bounded agency.

**Discussion**
This chapter describes the meaning of sacrificios in the lives of undocumented Latina/o parents who desire a college education for their children. I show how undocumented Latina/o parents experience emotional and material consequences in response to their efforts to support their children’s educational attainment that may be lesser or even nonexistent for their documented peers. Undocumented Latina/o parenting thus involves an ongoing process of self-sacrifice that takes varied forms.

Illustrating how their initial migration sacrificio leads to emotional sacrificios and day-to-day sacrificios that parents consciously make in order to see their children go to college, I contend that the sacrificios of participants in this study are a particular form of parental engagement in their children’s education. Though parents’ engagement is limited by their social and political contexts, they employ a unique set of strategies that are within their abilities to engage in behaviors that support their children’s post-secondary pursuits. This engagement is similar to parenting styles Annette Lareau described as characteristic of more privileged parents, but it entailed greater costs to these parents given their undocumented status. The concept concerted sacrificios therefore helps us understand the particular sacrificios that undocumented Latina/o parents choose make for their children’s education, not in spite of but because of their “illegality.” By showing how parents in this study also intentionally invest in their children’s education by enrolling them in different extracurricular activities, I illustrate how their parenting behaviors are similar to that of other parents. Yet, due to the consequences and risks posed by their immigration status, these seemingly everyday actions constitute everyday risks for these parents. Undocumented Latina/o parents face additional barriers to their parenting. Again, I am not claiming that other parents do not also make sacrifices. But the notion of sacrificios, as conceptualized in this chapter, and particularly concerted sacrificios, illustrates how their parenting identities intersect with their immigration status. Thus,
sacrificios are not just investments in children; they are also responses to the social-political context. Additionally, the definition of sacrificios presented here also allows us to understand why parents sacrifice (dreams and aspirations for their children) and how they do so, through the interplay of migration sacrificios, emotional sacrificios, and day-to-day sacrificios. This is a much-needed theoretical contribution to immigration and family engagement literature.

It is important to understand why undocumented Latina/o parents make the particular sacrifices they do in order to understand the systems, conditions, and factors that force them to give up something for themselves. Understanding and addressing these is essential to support and improve the educational experiences of Latina/o children with undocumented parents.
CHAPTER 4

“It’s so frustrating:” Barriers Undocumented Latina/o Parents Face when Engaging with their Children’s Post-Secondary Planning

For immigrant parents, the primary barrier to their engagement in their children’s post-secondary planning is a lack of access to the resources and information, or capital, on which their higher SES and non-immigrant peers depend (Hill & Torres, 2010; López, 2001; Valencia, 2011). When parents did not attend higher education in the United States or are unfamiliar with the different higher education system and requirements, the post-secondary planning process may feel foreign, overwhelming, and confusing (Zarate et al., 2011).

To date, however, research on parental engagement as it relates to post-secondary access and success has not integrated a discussion of the impact of parents’ immigration status. As described in previous chapters, undocumented immigrants live in constant fear of deportation (Dreby, 2015). The ever-present threat of deportation leads them to live fearful, marginalized, and hyper-vigilant lives. As a result of limitations they face as a consequence of their immigration status, undocumented parents experience and navigate structures, such as schools, differently from their documented peers, often having to limit their interactions with schools due to fears of being asked for identification documents (Dreby, 2015).

Today, however, there is limited understanding of how these barriers and limitations translate to their engagement in their children’s post-secondary planning. In order to address this gap in the literature, this chapter is guided by the following research question: What are the barriers undocumented Latina/o parents face when they engage in their children’s post-secondary goals and aspirations? In what follows, I present the barriers parents described during our interviews. Some, including negative interactions with schools, lack of college knowledge, and fears of college costs, confirm what we already know from existing literature. Yet, most pressing for this particular population is the barrier an undocumented status creates. I
present how the consequences and limitations of an undocumented status impacted how parents were engaged in their children’s post-secondary access and success. Finally, I close with a brief discussion of the implications of identifying and understanding these barriers.

**Unwelcoming Schools**

According to existing literature, parents who did not attend college or are unfamiliar with the application process often depend on K-12 schools to support their children throughout their college choice process (Perna & Titus 2005). Yet, as research has noted, schools typically marginalize low-income, immigrant parents, and parents of color by failing to accommodate their needs, validate their culture, or create an inclusive, welcoming climate (Auerbach, 2006). These families are also more likely to attend schools that are under-resourced, including a shortage of academic and college counselors (Valencia, 2011). For the parents in this study, tenuous relationships with their children’s schools shaped how parents interacted with administrators, teachers and counselors; parents described not feeling welcomed by teachers, counselors, administration, and other school staff.

**Relationships with School Personnel**

While some parents reported having strong and trusting relationships with their children’s teachers, most parents shared they had experienced at least one negative interaction with school personnel as they tried to support their children’s college aspirations. Parents described how school-based individuals, such as teachers and counselors, were gatekeepers of important information and resources. For example, Maria recalled how her daughter Carmen’s high school counselor was never available to meet with her or her daughter. Maria was constantly going to the high school, requesting meetings with the counselor. She knew that counselor was the person to go to for her specific questions, including changing her daughter’s classes or requesting information about programs that
could help her apply for college. Maria wanted the information necessary to help her daughter get to college. Yet, the counselor never seemed to be invested in Carmen. This frustrated Maria—if the counselor would personally not help her daughter, she could at least give her the information so she could do it herself:

They [counselors] could be giving us all that information since they [students] were in high school. So that way they could start recognizing what was offered. And I don’t know how other counselors were, but Carmen didn’t have that support. If us, as parents, can orient them, why don’t we have that information? We [parents] trust the school to inform us and help us, but then you realize that the person isn’t even going to help, they aren’t giving us the information. It’s so frustrating.

The role of counselors is essential for first-generation students. Counselors are able to play a mediating role between students and families and unfamiliar higher education systems by translating college knowledge information for their students and families (Holcomb-McCoy, 2010; Savitz-Romer, 2012). Yet, the high school counselor Maria had to work with did not play this role. When I asked her if she had an idea of why the counselor was so dismissive of her, Maria shook her head. “I didn’t do anything to her. She was always like that with us. It always felt she treated us differently because of where we were from.” By “where we were from,” Maria was alluding both to her geographical location and her ethnicity/race. Maria and her family lived in the poorer area of her city in the Central Valley. During our interviews, she described how the city was very diverse in terms of socioeconomic status and how the income lines were very explicit based on where families lived. “You know who has money based on what side of town they live in. And, well, us, we live on the less fortunate side,” she explained. Additionally, Maria also believed Carmen’s counselor did not help her because she was Mexican. Noting that this was a contradiction because the counselor herself phenotypically presented as Latina, Maria felt that the counselor, like the school, thought less of Mexican and Latina/o students and their families. Studies have found that teachers and counselors tend to have lower academic expectations
for the Latina/o and Black students when compared to White and Asian peers (Valencia, 2011). These negative perceptions translate into limited access to educational resources (i.e. afterschool tutoring, college-preparatory extracurricular activities, enrollment in honors and advanced placement courses), overrepresentation in remedial courses, and underrepresentation in college-going tracks (Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Valencia, 2011).

Additionally, these deficit perceptions also shape how teachers and counselors interact with parents, creating situations where even when parents reach out to the school for support for their children’s post-secondary planning, like Maria did, they face unwelcoming, indifferent, or even hostile environments (Fordham, 1996; Gándara, 1995; Valencia, 2002; Zarate et al., 2011).

Language Barriers

Parents also noted they did not feel comfortable reaching out to schools for support due to language barriers. For some parents, this language barrier was the main reason why they physically stayed out of schools or only attended when they had to (i.e. parent-teacher conferences, open houses). Yet, for other parents, even when they did attend school-based events, their inability to fully communicate with school personnel in their native Spanish language prevented many parents from asking for help. For instance, Cynthia attended all the college informational workshops she could in hopes of learning how to support her son throughout the process. But as she noted, her limitations with the English language stopped her from asking for help:

Since I don’t speak English very well, I was embarrassed to raise my hand and ask the question because I wasn’t going to ask it right. I would be intimidated that I wasn’t going to ask it correctly. I would think, “Are they going to laugh or say something? Or are they going to criticize?” So I would say to my son, “I want to ask this and that” And he would say to ask. I would be like, “No, I’m embarrassed.”
Even schools that offered translation services were limited in their ability to welcome and support parents. When asked if she would reach out to her daughter’s school for assistance in helping her daughter apply to college, Julie said she did not. Julie did not speak English and often felt, as she put it, “out of place,” in school settings:

No, the thing is that you come from another system where you feel good because you understand everything. So here [in the United States], you go because you have to go and sometimes you don’t feel satisfied with what the translator tells you because the translator also doesn’t know. Because the translators that they have here only know the basics. But if you come out with another word or another question they can’t answer it, then the interpreter has to go to the book to see what you said. So you don’t even feel good. Because sometimes you yourself are telling the interpreter, “It’s something like this, so you understand. Because it’s not what you said.” The interpreters that they hire are not good. They’re not good. So, it’s kind of a waste of time. Like they say they’re interpreters. But they just answer the basics. But if you ask a deeper question, they can’t ask it [for you] because they don’t even know.

After several negative experiences with teachers, counselors, and translators due to miscommunications and the frustrations that these caused, Julie decided to stop reaching out to schools for information and help. She shared that she knew this was not the right way to behave and engage with schools. Yet, she was also disappointed in the way schools failed to consider her language limitations. Even though she wanted to communicate with them more, she told her self that if she did not, it was okay because her daughter was doing well. In retrospect, she noted that this mindset was not the best—while she knew her daughter was doing well in school, being misinformed left her feeling in the dark. “Sometimes not knowing the details, even if she [daughter] was doing great in school, was more stress-producing than being overwhelmed with information. I just wish I would have been given that option,” she shared. For Julia, like other parents, not having strong and communicative relationships with her daughter’s schools caused great tension and resentment.

Unfamiliarity with American Higher Education

Lack of “College Knowledge”
All parents in the study were unfamiliar with the American education system when they arrived to the United States. With the exception of Maria, who attended community college, the parents in this study did not complete their schooling in the United States and were not familiar with the college requirements, the college application, and the school selection process. In other words, parents in this study were limited in their “college knowledge.” As a consequence, while they wanted to help their children get to college, the process of getting them there was intimidating and overwhelming.

Since the parents did not have the personal experiences of having gone to college or the “college knowledge” necessary to feel comfortable in helping their children get there, they shared that they often felt incompetent. Parents wanted to be able to help their children. Yet, they did not know the necessary and particular steps. For example, Javier shared he did not know that college campus visits prior to his children applying to college were important for their post-secondary planning:

I had heard about people who take their kids to see schools before, and we never gave them that chance. We just didn’t know that was a thing or that it was important. We didn’t know how they were going to go to college. We knew they were smart but we figured they were going to start little by little. Maybe they were going to go to a community college and from there go on, because we couldn’t pay a university. But it’s like we didn’t know how to capture all of it, we didn’t know how big it was, all the help there was. Maybe going to those schools before would have helped.

Javier acknowledged that there is information missed when parents and their children do not go on campus visits. Not only do they miss the opportunity to deconstruct myths about college (e.g. high costs, lack of financial support) and ask questions, but they also miss the opportunity to “feel” what college will be like for their children. In other words, campus visits can help parents imagine their children attending college, which could then reinforce the types of motivation and support they offer their children. This parental motivation, then, further signals support to students for this important and difficult transition.
Unfamiliarity with College Campus Climates

Not only did parents want more information about college requirements and the application process, but also more information about what college entailed once their children matriculated. Parents wanted to learn about the types of services their children would have access to, such as health care and academic supports. They also wanted to know more about the college student lifestyle, wondering about safety on college campuses. Additionally, parents wanted to know more information about college campus climates, including the social and political environment in which their children would be living and interacting. This was particularly pressing for Alejandra and Angel, whose daughter, Jessica, was undocumented. Due to the political climate during the time of interviews (Summer 2016), in which undocumented immigrants were constantly attacked in the media, they were worried about their daughter’s physical and psychological safety. For example, they shared that Jessica was very proud of being Mexican and often wore the Mexican flag in her backpack or in other visible attire. This worried her parents. Angel shared:

Because there are schools and universities, that, independently, don’t like Latinos, yes? Like right now [Coast University], where Jess is, she says that there is racism, and all that. But before, when Jess was applying, that is what I would have liked to know. What kind of school has a higher percentage of racism, more or less. Why? Well, because racism is what mostly harms people.

When I asked Angel if he knew what his daughter meant by racism at Coast University, he informed me that Jessica shared a range of events that occurred on campus. She told him about discrimination she witnessed in the classroom, where Black and Latina/o students experienced microaggressions from a White professor. She also shared wider campus events, such as Donald Trump supporters, who was the Republican presidential candidate at this time, building a metaphorical wall in the campus main student lobby and chanting “Make America Great Again! Build the wall!” to represent their support for Trump’s anti-
immigrant, xenophobic, and racist attitudes. Angel shared that if he had known that such 
racism was allowed at Coast University, he might have reconsidered allowing her to apply 
and attend there.

Yuri, another mother, shared similar questions and concerns about college campus 
climates, but specifically regarding homophobia. While she was proud that her son, Rafael, 
was comfortable with his gay identity, she often worried about him. Similar to Jessica, Rafael 
wore gay pride pins on his backpack and attended demonstrations in support of LGBTQ 
rights. “I think he is fine at Coast University. But I would have liked to known about that 
beforehand. Maybe knowing that it was nice to gays before he even applied would have 
helped me feel better about him leaving. I wish I would have had that information before.”
She explained that when her son was considering what college to attend, knowing that he 
was going to move away from home, she used to have nightmares about her son being 
physically molested or violently attacked due to his queer identity. For Alejandra, Angel, and 
Yuri, lack of familiarity with different college campuses, their college campus climates, and 
the supports that exist for students (in this case undocumented and queer students) also 
served as a barrier for these parents; this was a specific form of college knowledge to which 
they did not have access to.

**College Costs**

All parents in this study discussed being uninformed or misinformed about college 
costs as a barrier. They were all concerned about how their children were going to pay for 
college. Although this worry played out differently for each one of them, they all believed, in 
one way or another, that it was their responsibility to make sure their children were 
financially able to attend college. Figuring out how to do this was their responsibility. They
worried their inability to provide this support would prevent their children from going to college.

When Luz told Javier that their son wanted to go to college and that they were going to do everything in their power to support him, Javier was initially very hesitant. He knew college was expensive. He did not think that with his job as maintenance worker he would be able to support his child in this goal. When he learned that community colleges were less costly, he advocated for this option. Due to this, the couple often got into arguments: Luz wanted her son to attend a 4-year institution, no matter the cost, because that is what he wanted, what he had been working so hard for. Javier, on the other hand, stated that he did want his son to go to college, but he wanted to make sure that he would be able to afford it. Lack of information about college costs risks the miscalculation of higher costs of attending college (Levine & Nidiffer, 1996; Olson & Rosenfeld, 1984; Tseng, 2004; Zarate et al., 2011). This, then, can shape perceptions as to who is able to attend college. As Javier stated:

When he [son] was talking about the university, for me, I thought that it was just for people who had a lot of money. Those were the people who went to college. People who didn’t have a lot of money couldn’t go. To myself, that’s what I thought.

Like other parents in this study, Javier was not only misinformed about college costs, noting that he had overestimated the cost of tuition, but also he did not know about financial aid and other supports. When his wife and son finally broke down the numbers for him, he realized that he was wrong. Even though the family would have to be on a stricter budget, the idea of helping his son attend college seemed plausible. If they had not presented these calculations for him, Javier may not have allowed his son to apply for a 4-year institution.

Like the experiences of other Latina/o immigrant parents, tenuous or frustrating relationships with schools, language barriers, and unfamiliarity with the American education system created barriers for the parents in this study. These barriers influenced parents’
engagement and their parenting behaviors. Yet, as the notion of “illegality” reminds us, their undocumented immigration status often serves as a “master status,” which in itself creates its own barriers. These are further explored in the following section.

**Undocumented Immigration Status as a Barrier**

**Parents’ Undocumented Status Impacting Children’s Post-Secondary Goals and Aspirations**

When asked if they had been worried that their own immigration status would be a barrier for their children’s college matriculation, parents’ answers varied. Some parents responded that it only worried them in regards to the financial aid process. Like Cynthia, whose children were born in the United States, parents worried that throughout the Free Application for Federal and State Aid (FAFSA) application process, their children would be negatively implicated due to the parents’ lack of social security numbers. Cynthia shared:

I told my son, “Son if I don’t have a social they’re not going to give it [financial aid] to you.” And he was like, “No, give me your ITIN number.” Because I’ve always done my taxes. What if they don’t accept it? Because I am undocumented. Or what if I get deported? Because students start applying to things through the government and they’re going to say, “This one instead of giving us money, they’re asking us for money. Her son is going to take away money for aid.” So I was afraid that immigration would be involved because you never know what they’re involved in. And then I would say [to my son], “If they’re involved, then let it be. It [deportation] is going to happen to me, not you.” So yes, I was afraid that I didn’t have a social security number to be able to enter and to be able to help him more. Because even though my resources were low and they [financial aid] helped him a lot, because we’re low-income, I still felt bad that I couldn’t help him more. Like if I had a social it would have been better.

Cynthia knew her son had access to federal financial aid resources due to his student profile—he had the minimum grade requirements for grants and was from a low-income household; she was limited on the financial resources she could provide her son due to her low-paying job in a fast food restaurant. Yet, she worried that by her son applying for financial aid, her lack of a social security number was going flag her undocumented
immigration status to the U.S. government. She worried that this would implicate his aid or, worse, lead to her deportation.

Unlike Cynthia, other parents with U.S. born citizen children did not worry about their undocumented immigration status negatively impacting their children’s post-secondary goals. In fact, these parents, like Diana and Lily, encouraged their children to seek out all the resources they could. These mothers would tell their children that as undocumented tax-paying immigrants, they could not personally benefit from the taxes they paid. Therefore, they wanted to make sure their children made up for this. As Lily stated, “I told them [sons] to sign up for all those college programs, the ones the government pays for to get kids from here [Central Valley] into college. And the tutoring. And the field trips. Everything! If I could not access my money, my babies were sure going to! [laughs].”

**Parenting Undocumented Children**

Compared to parents with U.S.-born citizen children, parents whose children were also undocumented faced additional barriers. Besides worrying about their own immigration status, these parents also had to keep in mind how “illegality” impacted their children’s ability to access college. Some of these parents were just as concerned as the parents with citizen children about figuring out ways to pay for college. Others initially believed their children’s undocumented status would prevent them from going to college.

Parents with undocumented children had early conversations with their children about what this immigration status, or lack of, meant for them. Julie, for instance, very explicitly asked her two undocumented daughters to keep their immigration status a secret from everyone, including school personnel:

It was something I always told them, maybe it was bad, but I always told them that being undocumented was the best kept secret because no one could know because you don’t know who will betray you. And in schools more. In schools there is always bullying. If you surpass someone and they have papers, then you get *la migra* called
on you because you don’t [have papers]. That has happened a lot. That’s why I told Gabby that that was the best kept secret. “Don’t tell anyone you are undocumented, because in school you can’t be saying that.” And so, I have known about people who have gotten la migra called on them because of that, because they are smart. And there are people who are not okay with that. They think they [undocumented students] are taking away the resources and the rights. And then they say, “Why if you don’t even have papers? Why are you here [using academic resources]?” We told them just to be quiet.

Upon sharing this, Julie reflected whether ingraining the importance of secrecy in her daughters impacted their access to academic resources. She wondered if by asking her daughters to keep the information to themselves, she had prevented them from accessing college-going resources specifically for undocumented students.

Immigration status differences within the same family also created a barrier for parents. Parents in families in which children had different immigration status noted they had to give their undocumented children different messaging about schooling when compared to their U.S.-born children. Existing research describes this as a “pecking order” that exists between siblings who have different immigration statuses, which often leads to tension within family units (Abrego, 2016; Dreby, 2015; Yoshikawa, 2011). Maria, whose eldest daughter, Carmen, was the only one of her four children who was undocumented, noted that she often had to tell her daughter to work extra hard in school. She need to make sure she received scholarships, as they were the only way she was going to be able to afford college. She shared:

She started to work really hard. My second oldest daughter would ask why Carmen was working so hard. She would always ask that. I would tell her that she knew she had to work hard work because of her situation [being undocumented]. “She needs to work harder than you because you were born here. Your situation is in a way a little easier.” And she would ask me why. Like, she didn’t really comprehend what it meant. Yeah. I would tell her, “You were born here, you can apply for loans and stuff that she [Carmen] knew she couldn’t.”
As she shared this, Maria began to cry. She noted that these conversations caused her sorrow. She did not like differentiating between her children. To her, they were all the same and loved them equally. Crying, she continued:

It has always caused me great pain. I blame myself a bit. Like why didn’t I have my daughter here to give her the same opportunity as her siblings? Because I know that it has affected Carmen. It frustrates me that because of a piece of paper I have to pretend they are somewhat different, like Carmen is not as worthy as the rest.

Additionally, Maria also worried that Carmen would grow resentful towards her younger siblings since they did not have to work as hard in school as she did. Maria’s younger daughters always noted that Carmen was “boring” because all she wanted to do was study. Although Maria knew that Carmen was a good person and that she would never truly resent or grow to hate her siblings, the possibility of this actually happening, worried and constantly stressed Maria.

“Illegality” Impacting Post-Secondary Planning with Undocumented Students

Stress about paying for college was especially exacerbated for parents whose children were also undocumented. Parents of undocumented children knew that their children were not eligible for most forms of financial aid. As such, they worried their children would not be able to attend college. Yet, for Luz, whose two sons were undocumented, her worries were not about being able to afford her sons’ college, but about the possible implications of them applying to the schools themselves:

I was afraid that they [sons] would not be able to go to school. Not because of the money. Like I told you, I was planning on asking someone for money. Any of my sisters or a bank or anything, in any way. But my fear was that they wouldn’t accept them for being undocumented. That was it. I thought, “The day they fill out paperwork and they see that they’re undocumented, is it possible that they’re going to take them out of the country?” I would start with the negativity, “They can deport them. If they deport them, they won’t be able to go to college.” I was very afraid.
Unlike Cynthia who feared that her son filling out the FAFSA form would have implications on her, Luz worried about the possibility of deportation for her sons when they applied for college.

For parents, their children’s undocumented status limited the range of colleges they felt comfortable having them attend. When they were selecting colleges to apply to, parents of undocumented children noted that their children were geographically limited. Parents wanted to make sure their children attended an institution where they would be physically safe and was in a community that was welcoming of immigrants. Even though they acknowledged they were limited in their college knowledge, they wanted their children to attend institutions with these minimum requirements. All parents with undocumented children wanted their children to stay in California. Elia, for example, shared that she learned that undocumented students had a right to in-state financial aid and in-state tuition fees in California as long as they met certain requirements. When her daughter, Andrea, was choosing schools to apply to, she told her she should only apply to California schools. Andrea’s dreams were to attend college in New York or Texas. “I felt like I was crushing her dreams, but I had to protect her;” she shared.

Similar to Elia, Julie and Mike recalled conversations with their daughter about the geographical limitations of her college choices. As Julie shared:

When Gabriela was beginning to choose her schools, she would go on the internet and see what schools were good. She didn’t pick schools that were far because we worried about traveling. And then she would say that we wouldn’t be able to travel. We decided that she would stay in California, apply to the closest ones. My husband and I, because we didn’t know, we couldn’t help her. We wanted her to go to the best school, but we also wanted her to be safe. We couldn’t risk any possibility of ICE being involved.

Adding to his wife’s comments, Mike noted they secretly hoped Gabriela would be accepted to Coast University, since it was very close to their home. One of the reasons Mike and Julie
wanted their daughter to be geographically close to them was that if something were ever to happen to any of them in interactions with immigration and ICE agents, they would be close by. Although they believed the possibility of this happening was very small, for Mike and Julie, having their daughter a 30-minute drive away felt comforting. “La migra, they are everywhere. I’ve seen them in the park nearby, working out. You never know what is going to happen,” Julie shared.

The possible and continuous risk of deportation not only lurked and influenced how parents supported their children throughout their college pathway, but for parents with undocumented children, it influenced the kind of messaging they gave their children. The implications of an undocumented immigration status on both parents and children create a unique barrier for college attainment for this particular population.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

Many of the barriers to engagement the parents in this study described are ones established research has illuminated: negative interactions with school personnel, language barriers, lack of college knowledge, worries and misinformation about college costs. While not surprising, it is alarming that the participants in this study described these. This demonstrates that we, as researchers and educators, have not successfully managed to address and overcome them.

In addition to these known barriers, as the experiences shared in this chapter show, for undocumented parents, their immigration status creates additional barriers that intersect with these. Not only did they worry about the implications of their “illegality” and “deportability” on themselves, as they worried that their own status would negatively incriminate them or prevent their children from receiving financial aid, but also how it would impact their children. When their children were also undocumented, parents had to take into
consideration how the consequences and risks of this status would implicate their children’s post-secondary planning.

For undocumented Latina/o parents, their interactions with American social structures are not only shaped by the intersection of factors such as race and class, but also by the marginality and stigma experienced by being undocumented. These compromised experiences become extremely important to consider in contemporary times as narratives of immigration are often racialized and conversations of immigration are often equated with undocumented Latina/o (often Mexican) immigration. This creates an exclusionary society and culture, where Latina/o immigrants are presumed to be “illegal” and underserving of a place in American society.

A deeper understanding of the barriers undocumented Latina/o parents face while they engage in their children’s post-secondary planning and a reconceptualization of parental engagement theories more broadly is necessary for three reasons. First and foremost, it helps complicate our current understanding of Latino/a parents. Knowing more about the way undocumented status influences Latina/o parenting decisions and educational engagement helps us understand the particular barriers this population faces and reconsider what engagement means for them. We need to reconsider how their “illegality” shapes their engagement.

Not only do we need to gain more insight about their particular barriers, but also about the assets and strengths they develop in their children. Doing so, then, may help improve family-school relationships. When teachers and other school staff make the effort to get to know parents’ personal stories and experiences and both parties allow themselves to find commonalities in these (e.g. college dreams and aspirations for students), relational trust develops. These partnerships ultimately benefit the educational outcomes of students,
including post-secondary outcomes, as students see a direct connection between what their parents and teachers expect from them.

Second, in regards to post-secondary planning and success, these perspectives and insights can further inform college readiness programming, both in and outside school settings. School institutions are becoming increasingly conscious of the differential needs of undocumented students. Similarly, they should also take into consideration the needs of undocumented parents; incorporating undocumented parents’ support and engagement in this process is essential. Additionally, schools and other out-of-school educational settings need to consider whether and how their programming may unintentionally be marginalizing this parent population. For instance, asking parents to show identification cards when entering a school building for a college knowledge workshop may push undocumented parents away. Educational leaders need to rethink how to restructure their programs and cultures to be more inclusive of undocumented parents.

Third, identifying and understanding the different barriers undocumented Latina/o parents face also helps educators understand the different mechanisms that shape parents’ understandings of higher education and their role in helping their children achieve it. Moreover, it is not only about understanding the obstacles undocumented parents face and helping them overcome these, it is also about tapping into their strengths and funds of knowledge, which allows educators to learn from them. Like all parents, undocumented parents want what is best for their children. How do we partner with undocumented parents to accomplish this? As future chapters in this dissertation will demonstrate, there is a necessity to move beyond an exploration of the barriers these families face and highlight the assets and strength found in them.
CHAPTER 5

“Como le vamos hacer?” Apoyo and The Importance of Parental Role Construction

As Chapter 2 presented, there is an established consensus on the importance of parental engagement in students’ education (Henderson & Mapp, 2002); parental engagement has been found to be a powerful intervening factor in students’ educational outcomes that may be more impactful than absolute factors such as family socioeconomic status (SES) or student ability (Paulsen, 1990). Throughout students’ post-secondary planning, the role of parents, specifically in terms of parental encouragement towards higher education, remains consistent and central (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999). Parents play a significant role by motivating students to pursue higher education, by monitoring their academics to make sure they are on the college track, and by helping them choose what colleges or universities to apply to (Perna & Titus, 2005; Rowan-Kenyon, Bell, & Perna, 2008; Savitz- Romer & Bouffard, 2012; Tierney & Auerbach, 2005). Put differently, parents continue to be engaged in their children’s post-secondary planning in different ways.

Due to the barriers and limitations low-income, immigrants, and families of color face when trying to engage in their children’s pathway to college, secondary schools and out-of-school programs have sought ways to incorporate parents in this process, sharing college-knowledge information with them. While the nature and success of these efforts vary—ranging from mailing parents information pamphlets or newsletters to sitting down with parents and explaining the college application process in their native language—educators

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20 “Post-secondary planning” is broadly meant to encompass the different processes, supports, aspirations, and networks students encounter during their college-bound post-secondary pursuits.
are constantly trying to figure out what their relationships with parents and families should be.

If schools, both K-12 and higher education, are serious about developing relationships with parents and partnering with them in order to improve the numbers of underrepresented students enrolled in institutions of higher education, it is of utmost importance to consider how parents conceive of college, how they get their information, what they think their role should be, what behaviors they engage in, and how schools and other systems support or hinder these behaviors. In other words, it is important to explore how parents construct their role in their children’s post-secondary planning and how they provide *apoyo* (support). In this study, I use the term *apoyo* to describe the supportive behaviors undocumented Latina/o parents provided their children throughout their post-secondary planning.

In this chapter, I describe and interpret undocumented Latina/o parents’ understandings of their role in helping their children prepare for college. By applying Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler’s (1997) conceptualization of “parental role construction,” defined as parents’ beliefs about what they should do to support their children’s education, and the behaviors and actions they take in order to support these beliefs, I underscore the importance of considering how parents understand (or construct) their role in their children’s pathway to higher education. For Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, parental role construction is the most important aspect of parental involvement in their children’s education because parents’ understanding of their role in their children’s education and their expectations to fulfill this role shapes their actual practices. Thus, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler’s understanding of parental involvement offers a helpful, albeit not perfect, framework to begin to understand how parents conceive of their role in their children’s
post-secondary planning. Additionally, I contend that it is also crucial to understand the different mechanisms that shape parents’ role construction and their *apoyo* in their children’s post-secondary planning, as they impact parental self-efficacy and engagement behaviors.

This chapter begins with a discussion of Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler’s understanding of parental role construction and self-efficacy, followed by a brief summary of how existing literature has described Latina/o immigrant parents’ support, or what I call *apoyo*. I then lay out a typology I developed of different types of support—*motivational supporters, confident partners*, and, *uncertain spectators*—to illustrate the complex relationship between parental role construction, self-efficacy, and the lived experiences of *apoyo*. This typology both compliments and expands our current understanding of parental engagement in students’ post-secondary planning. Understanding the similarities and differences amongst the categories and the different factors that shape undocumented Latina/o parents’ role construction highlights the unique needs of this population. While this typology is based on the experiences of my sample, it also informs our understanding of other families with similar experiences. I close this chapter with a discussion of the factors and conditions that shaped how parents understood their role in their children’s post-secondary planning and in turn, how their *apoyo* played out.

**Understanding Parental Role Construction and Self-Efficacy**

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995, 1997) theorize that why and how parents become involved in their children’s education depends on how they understand their role to be, or how they construct their role. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler define parental role construction as “parents’ beliefs about the actions they should undertake for and with their children, developed as a function of their membership in varied family, community, and school groups (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997, p.11).” Put simply, parents’
understanding of their role in their children’s education shapes how they are going to be engaged in their children’s education; the stronger parents’ role construction, the more likely they are to feel confident in supporting their children’s education. Part of their broader four-part model of parental involvement, these researchers argue that parental role construction is the most important aspect of parental involvement in their children’s education, followed by a sense of self-efficacy, child’s invitations or demand for involvement, and teacher’s invitations or demand for involvement.

Self-efficacy is defined as the “beliefs in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the course of action required to manage prospective situations (Bandura, 1995, p.2). Social psychologist Bandura (1977) explains that self-efficacy has two components: the expectation that an action will bring a desired outcome and the expectation that one is or is not able to influence that outcome. Thus, parents may choose to engage in (or not engage in) certain behaviors depending on their calculation of their chances of being successful in the given situation. According to Bandura, self-efficacy beliefs are influenced by four sources: 1) the individual’s mastery of experience, 2) vicarious experience of observing others perform tasks, 3) social persuasion, or someone telling saying they can perform a task, and 4) somatic and emotional states, or physical and emotional reactions (Bandura, 1995). In terms of parental engagement in post-secondary planning, parents’ self-efficacy can thus be shaped by 1) parents having mastered the post-secondary planning process in the past (i.e. with older children), 2) observing other parents going through the process, 3) being told they should be part of the post-secondary planning process by others, which signals their importance in the process and 4) parents’ positive feelings of satisfaction when they are able to help their children make college decisions.
For Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, parents’ sense of self-efficacy is the link between beliefs and action: self-efficacy “fundamentally predisposes a parent to choose (or not to choose, in the case of low efficacy) an active involvement role in the child’s education (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997, p.27).” Thus, they propose that high self-efficacy allows parents to persist in their efforts, despite obstacles. Parents with strong role construction and strong sense of self-efficacy are more likely to pursue “high involvement” behaviors, regardless of school or child factors (e.g. welcoming/ unwelcoming schools, student academic performance). Parents with weaker role construction and low self-efficacy, on the other hand, are less likely to be involved. These are parents who are more likely to benefit from school-initiated efforts to involve them, in which schools invite parents to be involved in different ways in their children’s education.

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler’s model of parental involvement has moved parental involvement literature (and consequently, practice) forward by centering parents’ own perspectives and beliefs about their role in their children’s education. This is in contrast to presubscribed roles projected by and expected by educators on to parents, which can often be deficit in nature (See Chapter 2 for more). Nevertheless, as Auerbach (2001) notes, it is important to problematize and reconsider what we mean by role constructions, efficacy, and involvement practices—as Chapter 2 noted, traditionally, parental involvement and engagement practices have centered along middle-class norms. It is important to reconceptualize Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler’s model to be inclusive of the experiences of working class parents of color. “By terming parents’ actions ‘choices,’ they imply that parent involvement is a series of freely made, conscious, rational selection under full control of the parent. This discounts the ways that parents’ social locations and resources shape the choices they have (Auerbach, 2001, p. 61).” It becomes important, then, to not narrowly construct
“high involvement” parental behaviors. Doing so risks perpetuating the notion that some parental involvement behaviors and practices are superior to others. As literature has shown, Latina/o immigrant parents engaged in behaviors that support their children’s education, behaviors that are unknown to, or “invisible,” school settings, but are as worthy of praise as more “traditional” behaviors. The following section offers a quick overview of these involvement and engagement practices.

**Apoyo: Latina/o Immigrant Parental Engagement in Students’ Post-Secondary Planning**

Existing literature has documented the different ways parents support their children’s post-secondary planning, often dichotomizing these as “motivational” or “proactive” approaches. Motivational support occurs when parents maintain high educational expectations for their children, and proactive support is practiced when parents become involved in their children’s school matters, discussing college plans with their children and saving for college (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). In order to help their children reach higher education institutions, many parents depend on their own experiences and social networks, or pay for college access services to guide their children (Tierney & Auerbach, 2005). High SES and college-educated parents are more likely to be involved in ways that can be considered more “hands-on,” or proactive. For example, they might manage the process by making sure their children are enrolled in the required high school courses, helping them select competitive colleges to apply to, or developing savings plans for college. On the other hand, low SES parents, including those who may not have attended college in the US, often face different barriers that may not allow them to be engaged in their children’s college readiness in these same ways (See Chapter 4 for more). As a consequence, the research has
often separated these strategies, arguing that marginalized parents\textsuperscript{21} often lack access to the kind of capital required to be proactively involved and, therefore, depend on motivational approaches (Auerbach, 2006, 2007; Delgado-Gaitan, 1994; López, 2001; Tierney & Auerbach, 2005; Zarate et al., 2011). “Like the working class White parents in Lareau’s (1989) class study of parent involvement, most Latino immigrant parents lack the requisite economic, social, and cultural capital for directly helping their children in school (Auerbach, 2006, p. 277).”

Due to the barriers Latina/o immigrant parents face, researchers postulate that Latina/o immigrant parents have a different way of being engaged in their children’s education, ways that literature has deemed as “invisible” or what Delgado-Bernal (2001) calls “pedagogies of the home.” Pedagogies of the home are communication, practices, and learning that occur in the home and community, which are often not visible to school personnel (Auerbach, 2006, 2007; Delgado-Gaitan, 1994; López, 2001; Tierney & Auerbach, 2005; Zarate et al., 2011). For example, when Latina/o immigrant parents are unable to personally help their children navigate the application process and requirements, they seek resources that will support them. Parents reach out to schools and encourage their children to join college access programs (Tierney & Auerbach, 2005). Latina/o immigrant parents also engage in practices such as talking to their children about their future, sharing their own educational experiences or personal struggles, or consejos,\textsuperscript{22} and helping them develop their student identities (Ceja, 2004; Delgado-Gaitan , 1994, López, 2001; Tierney & Auerbach, 2005). Parents also implicitly engage in their children’s college readiness by reinforcing the

\textsuperscript{21}This research is often described as pertaining “marginalized populations” and my intention is to move away from such deficit framing. Only when referencing literature that uses this term to discuss these populations as a whole, the term will be used in order to avoid a misrepresentation of the data.

\textsuperscript{22}There is no direct English translation for consejos. It means something along the lines of lessons learned through lived experiences that may be passed down generations.
importance of earning good grades (even when they cannot directly help them with homework), offering them the time and space to study (e.g. assigning less chores, making study spaces), scaffolding self-regulation skills (e.g. focusing, planning, organizing, and reflecting), and monitoring their school and personal behavior (Savitz-Romer & Bouffard, 2012).

Additionally, researchers have found this culturally specific parent engagement rooted in traditional Latina/o cultural models. For example, in Latina/o immigrant families, there is high value placed on the cultural schema of educación. Scholars have noted that for Latina/o communities, educación or buena educación mean more than their direct translations, education or good education, entail. A buena educación involves the development of good moral values. Additionally, education and academic preparation is highly valued and is seen to be source of upward mobility. If parents are unable to help their children with their school work, the cultural schema of educación proposes that parents are engaged in their children’s education as motivators and encouragers, developing their morality throughout (Auerbach, 2006).

**Apoyo: How Undocumented Latina/o Parents Describe Support**

Similar to Auerbach’s (2006; 2007) work on working class parents of color engagement in their children’s college access, where she found that Latina/o immigrant parents had a broader understanding of their supportive roles, parents in this study described their roles in their children’s post-secondary planning as providing apoyo. Auerbach (2007) defines Latina/o immigrant parents’ apoyo as a broad form of support with multiple meanings ranging from “positive approval of the child’s desire to go to college to specific forms of instrumental help (p. 258).” Similarly, in this study I use the term apoyo to describe

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23 Cultural schemas are native interpretive systems, which can function as goals or “mater motives” for how people think or act (D’Andrade, 1992).
the supportive behaviors undocumented Latina/o parents provided their children throughout their post-secondary planning; apoyo is how parents were engaged in their children’s post-secondary planning.

To build on Auerbach’s work and to expand existing understandings of Latina/o parents’ engagement in their children’s post-secondary planning beyond proactive and motivational approaches, I apply Malecki and Demaray’s (2003) categorization of social supports to undocumented Latina/o parents’ apoyo. In their exploration of the different types of support adolescent students perceive, Malecki and Demaray note that limiting analysis to “global social support” does not allow for an examination of specific forms of support. Based on the work of House (1981), they propose categorizing social support into emotional support, instrumental support, informational support, and appraisal support (House, 1981; Malecki & Demaray, 2003). Connecting this framework to existing understandings of Latina/o parental support in post-secondary planning (as shown on Table 2), emotional support describes the motivational and moral support parents provide for their children; or what has been defined above as “motivational support.” Instrumental support describes providing task-oriented resources such as spending time with children or providing them with materials or money; instrumental support provides students what they need in order to be able to literally apply to college (i.e. money for applications). Informational support entails parents providing their children information or advice about their post-secondary planning. This is not limited to college knowledge, but can also entail the consejos and life advice parents provide that help students conceptualize of themselves as college-going students. Finally, appraisal support describes parents providing evaluative feedback to their children. In the case of Latina/o parents’ support for their children’s post-secondary planning, this apoyo
takes shape in setting high academic expectations, developing strong moral characters, and helping students weigh the pros and cons of college decisions.

**Table 2: Categorization of Social Supports in Terms of *Apoyo* for Post-Secondary Planning**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Support Type</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Support</td>
<td>Motivational and moral support parents provide to their children.</td>
<td>Early messaging about the value of education; sharing educational experiences, personal struggles, or stories of migration; Motivate students when they are struggling or disillusioned (i.e. “si se puede” [yes you can] attitude)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrumental Support</td>
<td>Task-oriented resources parents provide to their children.</td>
<td>Advocating for college-preparatory classes; offering children the time and space to study (e.g. assigning less chores, making study spaces, facilitating study time); driving children to SAT/ACT exams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informational Support</td>
<td>Post-secondary planning information or advice parents provide to their children.</td>
<td>Conversations about what colleges and universities to apply to and attend; encouraging children seek out resources (i.e. teachers, counselors, after school college access programs); monitoring college application submissions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appraisal Support</td>
<td>Evaluative feedback parents provide to their children.</td>
<td>Setting high academic expectations; providing feedback on college applications (i.e. personal statement); providing opinion about best college to attend</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this study, differences in parenting and behaviors varied by how parents made sense of their role, specifically, how parents constructed their role in their child’s post-
secondary planning. Some parents were more assertive about the centrality of their role in their children’s academic success. Others were more hesitant to accept any attribution at all. The next section presents the Apoyo Typology. Based on my field work, interview data, and existing literature, this typology explores the relationship between parental role construction, parents’ understanding of their role in their child’s post-secondary planning, and parents’ *apoyo*, the behaviors parents engaged in to support their children.

**Apoyo Typology: Undocumented Latina/o Parental Role Construction in their Children’s Post-Secondary Planning**

Across my conversations with undocumented Latina/o parents, parents described the different ways they provided *apoyo* to their children as they were considering and applying to college. Some explained how they coordinated driving between college information sessions and their jobs or from their jobs to SAT test locations. Others had conversations with their children about college during dinnertime, reminding them about the daily physical struggles they personally experienced in their low-paying jobs; they wanted better for their children. Though the specifics of their behaviors varied, all parents engaged in behaviors that supported their children’s post-secondary goals and aspirations—all parents described emotional support, or motivational and moral support. In existing literature, the kind of emotional support parents described has been found to be key for student success. Studies have found a strong relationship between high parent educational motivation for their children and high student achievement, aspirations, and college enrollment (Catsambis, 1998; Conklin & Dailey, 1981; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; Paulsen, 1990). The different forms of *apoyo* parents described, the literature shows, support students’ pathway to college; through their *apoyo*, parents were engaged in their children’s post-secondary goals.
Yet, the ways parents understood the significance and impact of their *apoyo* varied across my sample. The *Apoyo Typology*, presented in Table 3, illustrates the relationship between how parents perceive their role in their children’s post-secondary planning, their parenting behaviors (*apoyo*), and parental self-efficacy. *Motivational supporters* were parents who saw their role in supporting their children get to college as providing emotional support and motivation but not really having much of a role in providing instrumental, informational, or appraisal support throughout college application process. These parents were more likely to engage in what I call “informed” emotional support approaches. *Confident partners*, on the other hand, were parents who very firmly believed they had an important role in their children getting into college. In addition to emotionally supporting their children, they were also engaged in ways that existing literature has found to more likely to be present in white and high SES families. These include instrumental, informative, and appraisal supports. Finally, *uncertain spectators* were parents who explicitly stated they had no role in helping their children get to college. While their behaviors were similar to the behaviors of motivational supporters, in providing emotional support, these parents denied any role in their children’s success.

Parental understanding of their role in their children’s education shapes their engagement behaviors (Auerbach, 2001, 2005, 2006; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Thus, it is important to understand how parents construct their roles—what are the factors that shape the role construction of undocumented Latina/o parents? By matching on parents’ engagement behaviors to the way they perceived their role and sense of self-efficacy, the *Apoyo Typology* unpacks some of these factors, which include parents’ relationships with

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24 Parents within the same family can have different typology types.
schools and school personnel, their access to college knowledge, gendered expectations, and the impact of an undocumented immigration status.

Table 3: Apoyo Typology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example quote</th>
<th>Motivational Supporters</th>
<th>Confident Partners</th>
<th>Uncertain Spectators</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“They were the ones that were doing it. I was just the one to support them. If they needed something, I would help.”</td>
<td>“So, the only thing that one does as a parent, I think, at least for me, is just being there with them. Already, if in any case that they have any doubts or something, they know that you are there with him or her and that they can ask you whenever they want.”</td>
<td>“And honestly I don’t consider that I helped her… I just think that everything that she has done it’s by herself. I don’t know why.”</td>
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| Definition | Motivational supporters were parents who described their role in helping their children apply to and get in to college as providing emotional support; motivational supporters were parents who saw themselves as their children’s cheerleaders and supporters. | Confident partners were parents who very firmly stated they had an important role in helping their children apply to and get in to college. This role involved providing emotional support in addition to some instrumental, informational, appraisal support. | Uncertain spectators were parents who explicitly stated they had no role in helping their children apply to and get in to college; parents stated that their children were the ones who got there by themselves, and/or with the help of teachers and counselors. |

<table>
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<th>Parents in study</th>
<th>Julie</th>
<th>Mike</th>
<th>Diana</th>
<th>Mireya*</th>
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Motivational Supporters

Motivational supporters were parents who acknowledged they had a role in their children successfully applying to, being accepted by, and matriculating in to Coast University. These parents described their role as providing emotional support—they would always stress the importance of education to their children, they demanded good grades, and would use their life experiences to motivate their children to pursue a higher education—since they were unsure about the instrumental and informational support they had to provide. Since motivational supporters were unfamiliar with the American higher education system, they were often unable to help their children with the college application process. Yet, they acknowledged that their role was to provide *apoyo* in the form of moral support, motivation, and encouragement to their children. In essence, motivational supporters were parents who saw themselves as their children’s cheerleaders and supporters, supporting them from the sidelines.

Mike and his wife Julie, both motivational supporters, proudly announced that they were their children’s biggest fans. Charismatic and engaging, Mike proclaimed he helped his two undocumented daughters get into college using his charisma and his wits. During our interviews, he often joked about how the life skills he developed in his different jobs in his
rancho in Mexico—fixing old trucks, taking care of cattle, and managing a milk factory—helped him be resourceful when he migrated to the United States. “I always had to get creative with things. It’s a gift. Because you never know what life is going to throw at you,” Mike noted. When his oldest daughter, Sonia, who was an undocumented student and at the time was not eligible for in-state or federal financial aid, needed money to complete her tuition down payment at Coast University, Mike and Julie hosted a taquiza. The taquiza, a fundraiser, featured his delicious tacos, aguas frescas, music, and a fun environment. At the time, Mike, with the help of Julie, had a food business and had an established reputation amongst his clientele as selling some of the best tacos in the East Bay. For the taquiza, Mike and Julie invited everyone they knew—family members, friends, neighbors, their daughters’ teachers. This strategy proved to be so successful, that when the two girls needed to come up with money to pay for their Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) applications, a program that, amongst other benefits, deferred deportation and provided a work permit for eligible undocumented young people, Mike did not hesitate to host another event:

It was a family affair. Everyone would come out, and eat, and support our girls. When we realized that we had met our goals, I was happy. It was nice to see that I could help them with their college dreams.

College was always an expectation for Mike’s younger children, his two daughters and his youngest son. Although his two oldest sons had not gone to college, as they migrated to the United States in their late teens and preferred to work rather than continue with school, he wanted his youngest children to experience the benefits of an American education. Mike wanted to make sure his daughters always felt supported and that their parents were willing to do anything in their power to help them get to college. His support included hosting taquizas, having conversations with his children about their future,
highlighting the importance of good grades, and communicating with his wife about their children’s academic progress. When his daughters needed to be driven to different scholarship interviews or college information session, Mike arranged his work schedule to accommodate for this.

During our conversations, Mike noted that he truly believed he played an important role in his daughters’ educational success. He joked about demanding Gabby, his youngest daughter, give him credit for helping her during her final project for her photography class during her junior year of high school. “I drove her to the mountains in the early, early morning to make sure she got nice shots. I even let her borrow my baby [youngest son] to be a model. I would guide her on the vision and she would take the shots. When she told me she got an A, I told her, ‘No WE got an A!’ It was also MY A [laughs]!” Like other motivational supporters, Mike shared this and other stories of supporting his children throughout their education, engaging in behaviors such as homework support (not homework help, as he explained that he was not able to actually edit the photographs). Mike believed this support to be a key component to his children’s academic success.

When I asked Mike to describe his role in his daughters attending college, specifically, he stated:

But I tell you, I myself, much, much did not help. I’m being honest. I was with them, yes, in the process and everything. But, no, what could I bring? I did not know much about the whole process. So I kept asking her, “What do I have to do to help you?” Or “What do I do?” So that's why I'm telling you, all I did was to be there with them. Supporting them. And that's it. [Laughs] And I think I did not help them much.

Motivational supporters, like Mike, stated they were unable to provide any kind of informational or appraisal support (what Mike described as “help”) during the application process (besides providing FAFSA information and paying for application, for example),
motivational supporters believed their support, motivation, and constant reminder to *echarle las ganas*, were part of the reasons why their children enrolled in college.

Motivational supporters considered their overall engagement and monitoring throughout their children’s K-12 education and their way of raising their children, con *educación*, as an important support that helped their children reach their higher education goals. When their children were in grades K-12, these parents attended open houses and parent-teacher conferences as needed. Yet, these parents were less likely to be involved in parent leadership or parent workshops. But they were engaged in “less visible” ways by motivating their children to get good grades, monitoring their schooling and peer relationships (Auerbach, 2007; Tierney & Auerbach, 2005; Savitz-Romer & Bouffard, 2012).

Motivational supporters believed they were responsible for setting high academic expectations at home. For example, Mireya noted that she would always make sure to ask her children what they learned in school during dinner. Starting these conversations since they were in pre-kindergarten, Mireya noted that she wanted her children to develop a love of learning. “I think that was a good foundation since the beginning. So that, if you start telling them, they like it.”

While Mireya had daily conversations with her children about what they were learning, it was her oldest daughter, Erica, who began explicit conversations about college with her mother. While motivational supporters were less likely to begin discussions about college with their children when compared to confident partners, who were more likely to begin explicit conversations with their children about college, it is important to note that the desire and idea of their children going to college had always been present. As Julie, Mike’s wife, noted:

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There is no direct translation for the term “echarle las ganas”. Loosely translated it means “don’t give up.”
I always had it in mind that my daughters would get to attend university. That is, like I would always...I planned that for them, in one way or another. I always told them, “If you can work, you can study.” So, for me, it was not an impossible thing. I never... that is, I never imagined that my daughters wouldn’t go to university. It just seemed like the norm, that it had to happen.

The desire to see their children go to college was very present for motivational supporters. Yet, several of these parents pointed out that they just did not know how to “logistically” support their children throughout this process (i.e. provide instrumental, informational, or appraisal support), so they focused on providing emotional support.

The *apoyo* motivational supporters provided echoes existing research on engagement of Latina/o immigrant communities, presented in Chapter 2 (Auerbach, 2006, 2007; Delgado-Gaitan, 1994; López, 2001; Hill & Torres, 2010; Zarate, et al., 2011). Motivational supporters learned about the college pathway process through conversations with their children, conversations with teachers or extended family members, or by information provided in school workshops. While motivational supporters had some understanding of the post-secondary planning process, especially the college application process (to varying degrees), they were unable to explicitly help their children throughout it. As a result, they relied on what they did know what to do, which was to motivate their children to perform well in school and emotionally support their children throughout the college application process.

Motivational supporters engaged in different parenting strategies they hoped would motivate and encourage their children to pursue a higher education degree. Lily, for example, used her job as a farmworker to motivate her children. A short woman with a strong presence, Lily took her twin sons to work with her to show them what she had to do everyday:

I didn’t take them to [do] work. But to look and to see what I did. They would get home from school, eat, and I would take them around to see the ranch. I would take
some scissors. “Let’s prune some grapes. I will teach you how to prune one, then you are going to prune one.” I would prune one and I would give them scissors. “This isn’t for us mom.” [Laughing] “Well, if you don’t study, I am going to see you here, in the field. Working like I work. And how your dad works.” If they don’t try in school…. They were in middle school. “No, we don’t want your scissors. That’s why we are studying.” [Laughing] “Ok then son, study, go to college. Success isn’t for the lazy, it is for the ones that put their effort in.”

Showing their children the physical difficulty of agricultural labor and having them personally experience it has been found to be a form of parental engagement in their children’s education, particularly for Latina/o immigrant communities (López, 2001). By having her sons work in the fields with her, Lily not only taught her children the value of hard work, but also motivated them to pursue a higher education.

Other motivational supporters sought to encourage their children to pursue college by intentionally engaging in actions that were directly related to developing their children’s college-going identities (Tierney & Auerbach, 2005). When Diana visited college campuses with her son, Elias, she bought him college apparel. She believed that by purchasing sweaters, pillows, socks, pencils, and other gear with her son’s dream university logo, he would be more motivated to attend. Diana wanted Elias to picture himself at that university, and she noted that purchasing all the apparel was her way of motivating him to do so.

Mireya, on the other hand, motivated her daughter, Erica, to go to college by encouraging her to save money specifically for college. For her fifteenth birthday, Mireya gifted her daughter with a piggy bank and told her to save as much as she could for college (the piggy bank eventually turned into a bank account). Mireya believed that if her daughter realized that her savings would add up, college costs would not be so looming and she would not be discouraged from applying. Both Diana and Mireya engaged in ways that motivated their children to envision themselves as being able to attend college.
Besides providing motivation to their children to pursue higher education, motivational supporters also provided moral support throughout the college application process. Parents encouraged their children to apply to schools out of their comfort zone (what researchers call “reach schools”). They provided consejos by having explicit conversations about the difficulties of manual work and discussing how a college degree may help them find more fulfilling jobs and careers. Motivational supporters also suggested their children sought out all the resources available to help them with their college applications, and, like Mike discussed earlier, drove them to informational sessions or workshops.

Parents also financially supported their children throughout the college application process by paying for the applications; financial support is a form of instrumental support. Lily noted:

I had to give them money to apply. [Laughing] But I would tell them if they weren’t going to go there and they were charging them a lot for the applications, why apply? But they told me that they had to apply to a lot of them because they did not know who was going to take them. They applied to 6 colleges each. Some program at school paid 3 of them, but the other 3 I had to pay for them and it was 6. 3 each. I would tell them, you already applied to 3, just pick another one and I will pay that one. “No mom. We have to apply to all of them.”

Parents also morally supported their children by lifting their spirits when needed. Besides paying for the applications, Julie also supported her daughter’s college application through fun rituals, which she referred to as “family magic.” After submitting each application, Julie and her daughter, Gabby, would stand in front of the computer. They would then cross their fingers, and do a choreographed dance they created amongst themselves. This became a routine for them, a stress reliever. Noting that she did not really believe in this “magic,” Julie wanted her daughter to keep her hopes up about being accepted and believed this post-application routine provided that for her. Similarly, motivational supporters also provided emotional support when their children were waiting to hear back
from universities. Diana recalled having conversations with her son, reassuring him that things would be okay, reminding him of all the work he had not only put in to his application, but throughout his all his schooling. Like Julie and Diana, motivational supporters saw themselves as their children’s best cheerleaders.

Motivational supporters described their role in their children’s college pathway as limited by their knowledge of college systems and the application process. Yet, these parents, when compared to uncertain spectators, had a vague understanding of the process. They knew there were certain classes their children had to take during high school, they were aware of the importance of the SAT and ACT exams and of the personal statement essay, and the necessity of applying to more than just one institution. Parents credited this knowledge, though limited, in part to the relationships they had with their children. All motivational supporters believed they had open and communicative relationships with their children; they would often have conversations about college and the college application process with them. These conversations ranged from broader conversations about college, such as the importance of going to college, what their dreams and aspirations were, to more specific ones, such as what campuses they were considering applying to and how they were going to pay for it.

Motivational supporters noted that these conversations, in addition to information they received from schools, facilitated their understanding of the process and what college entailed. This, then, informed how they chose to parent; parents noted that they had the language to be able to motivate their children, specifically on college application process. Thus, their apo yo consisted of informed emotional support. For example, just as Mireya told her daughter to save money specifically for college, she was unsure about the exact cost of college tuition, but she had a vague understanding that it was high. But she knew saving was
important from conversations she had had with her daughter’s high school math teacher. This is a critical finding, as it extends existing literature on the engagement of Latina/o immigrant parents (Auerbach, 2006). While limited, motivational supporter parents had an understanding of how the general college application process worked.

Motivational supporters understood their apoyo to be essential to their children’s pathway to college. At the same time, parents expressed a frustration about not knowing how to provide informational and assertive support to their children in addition to their emotional support. Motivational supporters wanted more information, more concrete, actionable steps from schools and other resources to help them support their children.

As their children were applying to college, motivational supporters’ apoyo consisted of informed emotional support—these were parents who were somewhat familiar with the college application process and were able to use this limited information to motivate and encourage their children throughout the process. They reminded their children about the importance of studying for and performing well in the SAT, they instructed their children to save money for college, and they had explicit conversations with them about the financial benefits of obtaining a college degree. Yet, motivational supporters wanted to be able to do more than just be their children’s cheerleaders—they wanted to be able to help them throughout their process.

Motivational supporters’ explicit frustration with their limited college knowledge shows the mismatch that exists between providing parents college knowledge and information and their ability to act on this information. In other words, one could say that these parents had access to college knowledge and information via their conversations with their children or those with school personnel. Yet, they did not know what to do with the information, how to respond to the barriers their children may have faced. As such,
motivational supporters had medium self-efficacy in regards to their role in their children’s college pathway—they knew they had a role in it, but it was a role limited to emotional support.

**Confident Partners**

Like motivational supporters, confident partners acknowledged that they played an important role in helping their children achieve their post-secondary goals. Yet, this acknowledgement was much more assured, more certain. For Luz, she noted that when her sons graduated from high school, she also graduated from high school. When they were accepted to college, she was also accepted to college. Like Luz, confident parents, like motivational supporters, also engaged in emotional support, always encouraging their children to perform well in school and pursue a higher education degree. Yet, unlike motivational supporters, confident partners were also able to provide instrumental, informational, and appraisal support as their children considered and applied to college; they had access to more through college knowledge and information. Consequently, confident partners advocated for their children to have access to college-prep courses in high school, they were able to help their children choose colleges to apply to, and they helped them outline the contents of the personal statement, for example. The ability to engage in these kinds of behaviors developed a strong sense of self-efficacy in parents—confident partners saw themselves as partners with their children and their schools, learning the post-secondary planning process alongside their children.

Even though her sons were undocumented and she knew it was going to be harder for them to attend college, Luz noted that she always “felt” they belonged in a prestigious, 4-year institution. Since she migrated to the United States, Luz was heavily involved in her sons’ education, monitoring it to make sure they had access to the best resources their
schools had to offer. She attended school-based parent involvement events such as parenting workshops, volunteered to cook for fundraisers, and was part of parent leadership teams. It was easy for Luz to be very involved in her sons’ schools since she stayed at home with the children while her husband worked, financially supporting the family. Additionally, she had the support of her sisters, who migrated to the United States years before she did. She counted on them to help her chose the best schools for her sons, to get information about free summer programs for them, and they were her fellow “fan girls,” as she called them, always attending the boys’ music recitals or sports events with her.

Luz, who was initially shy during our interviews, came to life when she described the different things she was involved in her children’s schools. She began going to school events when she realized that there were a lot of things about the American school system she did not understand. Laughing, she recalled her first interactions with American schools, “We got to the school and matriculated them on Friday and I’ll never forget Martin Luther King, because they told us that Monday there would be no school because of Martin Luther King, and well we didn’t even know what that was. We thought it was a joke!” Consequently, she signed up for all the programs she learned about, from pajama parties that promoted early literacy, to parent volunteer opportunities, cooking over 100 pupusas one time, to Cafecito con el Principal (or coffee with the principal). And even though the English language was a limitation for her, she forced herself to step out of her comfort zone, modeling to her sons, who were non-English speakers as well, the importance of learning the language.

Luz’s sons always pointed out how involved she was in their schools and how she always seemed to know everyone there. Luz took great pride in this. After all, she had to take up to three buses, sometimes traveling over three hours (since she did not know how to drive) to make it to her sons’ schools. Noting that her sons were probably a little
embarrassed by her constant presence, she wanted them to see her so they knew she cared about their education, that she was invested in it. “You have to make your children feel like they can count on you. You have to make them feel the security that you’re always going to be there. That you will be there. That they count with you. That they count with parents.” For Luz, it was very important that her sons physically saw her in their schools. Plus, since she was always present at their schools, she took lunch to her sons, freshly made avocado salads or turkey sandwiches made to order, something they never rejected.

As result of her in-school involvement26, Luz had established relationships with front desk staff, teachers, counselors, and principals. Consequently, she always felt comfortable advocating for her sons’ needs, no matter how small (such as requesting dairy-free meals, since her oldest son was lactose intolerant) or absurd they sounded. For example, when her oldest son was in middle school, Luz marched into the counselor’s office and demanded that the counselor write, “This student will go to college” on her sons’ personal record file. “I don’t know where I heard it from. But it made sense in my head. I wanted the school to know that my sons were going to go to college and we had the responsibility to make that happen.” Luz’s use of “we” is very characteristic of confident partners—she saw herself as part of a team, which included teachers and counselors, who were responsible of making sure her sons accomplished their higher education goals.

Like Luz, all confident partners were involved in parent groups and parent leadership positions in their children’s K-12 schools; for these parents, in-school engagement did not end at the elementary level, but rather it continued throughout the middle and high school years. Confident partners were intentional about choosing the schools their children were going to attend. Like Luz, these parents did their research about the best educational

26 I intentionally use the word “involvement” here to signal to parental behaviors that take place in school settings.
opportunities in their area. Some were willing to have their children travel via bus to magnet schools outside their neighborhoods, even though this made them a little nervous due to safety concerns. For Cynthia, choosing the best schools for her son and daughter meant using a friend’s address to have them attend schools in neighboring city, one that had better financial resources. Due to their active in-school engagement, these parents had strong relationships with their children’s teachers and mentors and felt comfortable going to schools to advocate for them when needed.

As a result of their involvement, confident partners learned how the college pathway process worked and felt comfortable asking questions when they did not know the answers; they were more likely to attend college knowledge informational workshops or seminars intended for parents. For example, Cynthia relied on her son’s history teacher, Mr. Diaz, for guidance in the college application process. When she realized there was a lot of information she did not know and that no one in her family or other social networks had gone to college, she decided to ask a teacher, someone who had attended and graduated college, for help. Not only did Mr. Diaz speak Spanish, but he knew there were parents like Cynthia who were thirsty for college knowledge. As a result, he hosted open office hours and mini-workshops afterschool, to support parents and students. Cynthia shared:

He was of great help. He was great help because he would say, “We’re going to talk about this so that your parents can come.” And we would go. We would talk about when we could apply, how to apply, when the deadline were, what forms to fill out. And he would tell us to bring the forms so he could help us fill them out and he would. Yes, and look over it before we submitted it. It was also thanks to him that Diego was able to enroll.

While the U.S. educational system remained unfamiliar to them, confident partners were determined to learn the process with their children so as to help their children make decisions; they wanted an active role in their decision-making. Consequently, confident partners not only provided emotional support to their children like the motivational
supporters did (i.e. in the form of *consejos*, advice, celebrations), but also provided their children informational and appraisal support, to varying degrees, in the different components of the post-secondary planning.

The emotional support behaviors of confident partners were similar to those of motivational supporters and, to a certain extent, uncertain spectators. Confident partners constantly reminded their children of the importance of working hard and getting good grades and had conversations with them about their futures; parents engaged in behaviors that encouraged their children to pursue a higher education. Compared to motivational supporters and uncertain spectators, some of the motivational behaviors confident partners provided were very specific to the college application process. When their children were stressed out about the personal statement and college applications, confident partners motivated their children to persevere through. For example, Elia, a mother of two undocumented daughters and a citizen son, recalled the many nights she stayed up with her eldest daughter, Andrea, while she worked on the personal statements and scholarship essays. When Andrea was very stressed out, Elia encouraged her to go to sleep and wake up very early in the morning to continue working. She would tell her,

> Everything happens, you get frustrated and you're not going to do anything anyway, things are not going to go well. So what is the point? Jump, leave that for a while, or start reading, if reading relaxes you. Start reading something. Or write something that is not what you're doing. Or go to sleep and wake up early. Relax your mind.

Like other confident partners, Elia offered her daughter moral support when she needed it most.

Confident partners were always sure their children were going to go to college. Furthermore, they noted that their role as parents was to create the conditions that allowed their children, from a very young age, believe they were going to attend college. Luz explained that even though her children were undocumented, she was determined to see
them go to college. She had conversations with her sons about their immigration status and
engrained in them that despite this barrier, they were going to go to college:

So that’s being able to tell your child from a young age, “You’re going to college,
you’re going to college.” And not letting other people tell them that they’re not going
to do it. Because that also happens. Not letting yourself get negative energy from
people. I’m undocumented. My children are undocumented. Now they have DACA
but before I would always tell them, “You are undocumented.” And that was always
an affliction. And that’s what my husband would tell me, “How can he go to college
if he doesn’t have papers? How can he go to college if we have no money?” I was
like, “I don’t know how we’re going to do it. But we are going to do it.”

Luz believed her sons never felt as though their immigration status or financial insecurity
would prevent them from going to college. Even though she often had difficult
conversations with her husband about their sons going to college, she always made sure that
she reassured the boys that they were going to go. This kind of early messaging and early
college-going identity development is a form of appraisal support. Studies have found that
when parents are intentional about having early conversations about college with their
children, like Luz and other confident partners did, they are more likely to apply to college,
matriculate, and graduate (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Hossler et al., 1999; Plank & Jordan,
2001; Tierney & Auerbach, 2005).

Besides intentionally developing a college-going identity early, confident partners
were also more likely to begin explicit conversations about the college application process
with their children during high school. These included conversations about applications,
what colleges they were going to apply to, how they were going to pay for it, the content of
their personal statements, and what they were going to major in. For example, Maria helped
her daughter, Carmen, construct the narrative of her personal statement. Even though she
did not speak English well, she asked her daughter to translate what she had written and
offered her feedback. Throughout, she reminded Carmen that the statement had to be about
her, that it had to reflect her accomplishments and qualifications. “She was making it too
much about her and me [laughs]. I was flattered, but that is not what the colleges were looking for. So we sat down and reconstructed her story, to have it focus on her.”

Confident partners sat down with their children and, together, developed college lists. For Elia and Maria, this was especially important because their daughters were undocumented and they wanted to make sure they were applying to universities that were supportive to this student population. Confident partners were also more likely than other parents to visit college campuses with their children, after learning about the importance of these from the college information workshops they attended in their children’s schools. Confident partners also monitored the submission of college and scholarship applications, reminding their children of deadlines and making sure that they were submitted on time. Elia noted, “I know she probably thought I was nagging her, but we needed to make sure that those applications were submitted on time, even early. They [the school] had told us about times when the system crashed. I didn’t want my daughter to not go to college because she waited too long to submit. Nope. I was there to make sure that didn’t happen!”

The behaviors confident partners engaged in, the management of their students’ careers, have been found to be the hallmark of higher SES parents’ role in education is the (Auerbach, 2006; Baker & Stevenson, 1986; Lareau, 1989; McDonough, 1997). In these families, college attendance is a given rather than something that is optional for students. Parents support their children with instrumental strategies, which require both college knowledge and contact with institutions. These parents choose college preparatory classes for their children and know about the importance of visiting campuses (Auerbach, 2009). Students in higher SES families rely on their parents as role models of college-going and for help in every step of the college planning (McDonough, 1997). The confident partners in my study challenge existing understandings of engagement. These parents describe being
engaged in their children’s post-secondary planning in ways that are similar to those of higher SES parents. While they may not have access to the same forms of social and cultural capital higher SES parents rely on, confident partners illustrate undocumented Latina/o parents’ ability to be engaged through informative and appraisal support in their children’s post-secondary planning and have the self-efficacy to name their role as essential. Thus, it becomes important to understand the mechanisms that help confident partners navigate the barriers they face and help them confidently support their children’s post-secondary planning. Similarly, it is important to understand these in order to support motivational partners to become confident partners.

Confident partners’ involvement in their children’s schools armed them with the self-efficacy to support their children throughout their college application process; confident partners were very sure of the importance of their role in their children’s academic success. Often developing their college knowledge through their involvement in their children’s schools, confident partners felt entitled to ask questions when they did not know the answers or did not know how to support their children throughout the application process. Thus, their apoyo consisted not only of emotional support, but they were also able to provide instrumental, informational, and appraisal support, by monitoring their process, helping them make decisions, such as what colleges to apply to or what college to choose, and encouraging them to seek out resources (i.e. after school college access programs). Compared to other parents in the sample, confident partners had high self-efficacy in regards to their role in their children’s college pathway. Their behaviors allowed them to feel important, to be part of the process with their children.

Uncertain Spectators
Unlike motivational supporters and confident partners, who noted they played a role in helping their children achieve their post-secondary aspirations (to varying degrees), uncertain spectators were parents who explicitly stated they had no role in their children’s higher education accomplishments. While they described engaging in behaviors that provided emotional support, similar to those of other parents in the study, uncertain spectators denied any role in their children’s academic success. They profoundly and repeatedly denied any role because they were unable to provide them with informational and appraisal support. For some of these uncertain spectators, their inability to provide direct help with the college application process framed their understanding of their role, or lack of, in their children’s pathway to college. Other uncertain spectators consisted of fathers who stated that their wives had been responsible for getting their children into college. All uncertain spectators projected their children’s accomplishments to other individuals.

When I asked them to describe their family, Alejandra and Angel both looked at each other and laughed. “Strange. Different,” Alejandra finally said, cracking a mischievous smile. The pair, who had migrated from Mexico with their two daughters, Jessica and Ana, in 1999, had been separated for a few years. “It was something that was long time coming. And it was something that the girls understood. They knew that mom and dad were not together anymore, even if we were living together…because of our situation…but we don’t think it affected them. At least, I don’t think so. They knew and understood that it was better that way… that we were separated,” noted Angel. The “situation” Angel referred to was the family’s undocumented immigration status. In terms of financial resources and peace of mind, even though Alejandra and Angel no longer considered themselves husband and wife, it was more convenient to continue living together. “Plus, it helps with the raising of the
We are still co-parenting them and they have to listen to two of us...even when he spoils them and they charm him, they know that both parents care for them.”

Due to their living arrangement, Alejandra and Angel often communicated amongst each other about their daughters. Since Alejandra’s job as a nanny gave her more flexibility than Angel’s position a manager in an ice cream shop, she was the one that had been at home when their daughters arrived from school. She talked to them about school, learned what classes were difficult, asked about upcoming exams, and monitored their homework as well. At night, she relayed this information to Angel, who in turn used it to ask questions or bring up concerns with the girls when he drove them to school in the morning. “We had a good system going,” noted Alejandra, proudly, “we are truly a parenting team.”

Even though language barriers kept Alejandra from being involved in her daughters’ schools, both her and Angel always monitored their grades, expecting only A’s from them. After all, they wanted their daughters to go to college and they knew they needed excellent grades for this, especially since they were undocumented students. They also made sure the girls were involved in extracurricular activities, including soccer, basketball, and folkloric dance. “We were always there, cheering them on. Maybe embarrassing them a little bit too. I could get loud when they played [laughs]... And when they wanted to give up, we would also be there for them, telling them that they could do it,” noted Alejandra.

Both Alejandra and Angel agreed that they were constantly monitoring and motivating their daughters’ education because they wanted a bright future for them, a future that included a college degree. When Jessica began talking about her college application, Alejandra and Angel were proud; their dreams and aspirations for their eldest daughter were coming true. When I asked the parents what their role was in getting her to that point, in helping her achieve this goal, Alejandra, very firmly stated:
I personally feel, that wherever she is, she’s achieved on her own. For me, I don’t believe I helped her. That is, I’ve always felt that. That is, because I wasn’t always there, like helping her with her homework. Or when she was applying to college, I didn’t help her fill out forms or anything like that. To me, that girl has achieved to be where she is, all on her own. Because me, I say, I don’t think I helped her. Me? No.

Since she was not able to provide her daughter with informative or appraisal support, including helping her with homework and later her college applications, Alejandra believed she did not have a role in her daughter a successful student. When I asked her if she did not consider all the actions she had previously shared as essential for her daughter’s success, she feverishly shook her head. “That was me just doing my job as a parent. I had nothing to do with her success.” Angel nodded in agreement.

Like Alejandra and Angel, uncertain spectators rejected any attribution of their children’s post-secondary success to themselves, yet their behaviors were comparable to those of other parents in this study. The K-12 engagement of these parents was similar to that of motivational supporters. They attended open houses and parent-teacher conferences as needed, motivated students to get good grades, and monitored grades and peer relationships. Yet, uncertain spectators attributed these actions to their responsibilities as parents, as opposed to them being purposeful about educación (Auerbach, 2006; Hill & Torres, 2010).

Like motivational supporters and confident partners, all uncertain spectators wanted their children to go to college. Like motivational supporters and confident partners, they constantly motivated and encouraged their children to do well in school. They had conversations with their children about the importance of college, often telling them that they wanted them to have better lives than they did. They drove their children to college information sessions and scholarship interviews. “Whenever he had an interview, I made sure he was wearing his best shirt. I know how people think, and I wanted to make sure he
had the best chance he could get. And then I would drive him there, talking to him about
handshakes and eye contact, all that stuff,” recalled Adrian, who shared that he learned more
about the Los Angeles area by driving his children around for scholarship interviews than in
his eighteen years living there. Adrian did this because he wanted his son to afford to go to
college. Similarly, Alejandra and Angel, upon learning about DACA, collected all the
documents necessary for their daughters to apply to it. They also paid for their applications.
They saw DACA as an opportunity to enhance their daughters’ ability to go to college (Lee
& Gonzales, 2018). As previously mentioned, existing research has identified these kinds of
supportive behaviors Adrian, Alejandra and Angel, and other uncertain spectators described
doing as essential parental engagement for student post-secondary planning (Auerbach,

While some uncertain spectators provided apoyo in ways similar to motivational
supporters (i.e. providing emotional support, setting high academic expectations, offering
consejos, and encouraging their children to seek help), any support they provided to their
children they considered part of their duties as parents. Uncertain spectators “took a hands-
off approach,” trusting their children to do well in school and to find out what they needed
to do to get to university (Auerbach, 2006, p. 280). As a result, uncertain spectators were very
hesitant to give themselves any credit for any success or positive academic outcomes their
behaviors may have produced. Instead, they credited and praised their children, framing their
successes in terms of individual merits or due to the support of teachers and counselors.
Similar to Alejandra’s words, Yuri also denied having any role in her son’s academic success.

When asked why she thought this, she answered:

Well it’s because practically, he has done it by himself. When he told us he wanted to
go to university, we asked him how we were going to do it. Because one doesn’t
know anything. One doesn’t know where to begin and he opened doors by himself.
He just told us, “I’m going to do this, I’m going to do this other thing.” “Yeah,
however you think.” And yeah, we didn’t really butt in too much. Because well he used to say, “I’m going to do this, I’m going to do this, I’m going to do this,” and well he by himself. And when he needed help, more than anything, he would go to the counselors because us, what were we going to advise him? We don’t know anything.

Yuri, like other uncertain spectators, associated being unable to help her son with the college application process as a determinant aspect of her understanding of her role in her son’s post-secondary planning. In other words, uncertain spectators’ role construction was related to and shaped by their perception of not being able to directly help their children with their schoolwork, including their college applications. They did not consider the motivational and moral support they provided as a key component for their children’s success. Thus, uncertain spectators had low self-efficacy, which impacted their sense of agency and relationships with their children’s educators and others involved in their post-secondary planning.

**Uncertain Paternal Spectators.** In addition to uncertain spectators, there were fathers in my sample who also denied a role in their children’ post-secondary planning. Unlike Alejandra, Angel, and Yuri, whose role construction was shaped by their perceived inability to provide their children informational and appraisal support, Ricardo and Adrian’s was shaped by their inability to be more physically present in their children’s lives. These fathers attributed their children’s post-secondary success to their wives, Luz and Cynthia, both confident partners.

Ricardo was his family’s sole financial provider. Not only did he financially provide for his wife and two sons, but he often sent money back to El Salvador to help support his extended family. As a result, he worked multiple jobs, working up 15 hours a day. This schedule made it difficult for him to be present in his sons’ schools.
Ricardo tried his best to support his wife in the raising of their sons. Whenever he was home and the whole family was gathered together, he asked his sons about school and talked to them about their future plans. His wife always kept him informed about their sons’ education, making sure he knew what was going on. But he felt that this was not enough:

It’s something that has always hurt me. I wanted to be there [in the schools]. But I was working. And yes, you can say that money was necessary, that I NEEDED to work in order for them to be able to be successful. And it can be said that this was my contribution, my support. But I don’t think so. There is something more than the material support and the casual asking about grades and school. My wife did that work. She was the one that got them there. And them [sons] too, because they worked hard. I wish I could have been more involved, been more present. Because I wasn’t and that’s my harsh reality.

For Ricardo, “that work” entailed talking to his sons about specific college-related topics such as what campuses they were applying to or what majors they were considering, being informed about what the application process entailed, and helping them make decisions, being part of those conversations. Since Ricardo was not present for these conversations and did not know about the college application process and scholarship opportunities for undocumented students, there often were miscommunications with his wife. Ricardo and Luz argued because he thought community college was the better option for them. “Ultimately, she won,” he reflected, “She was right. I had no business giving my opinions, I had no information. I needed to just shut up and go work.”

Adrian, on the other hand, believed he did not have a role in his children’s academic successes, including college acceptance, because he and his wife, Cynthia, were separated for 7 years. In that time period, Cynthia moved with her children out of their home in Southern California and moved between California and Washington. During that time, Adrian had limited contact with his children—phone calls every couple of weeks and some short weekend visits sprinkled throughout the seven years. Eventually, Adrian and Cynthia decided to give their marriage another chance and got back together. But things were not the same.
Cynthia had taken care of their children’s upbringing by herself. During our interview, Adrian shared:

Why don’t I think I had a role? Because I didn’t. When they came back to California, I realized that she had raised them her way. And even though they respected me as their father, I couldn’t ask them to do things my way. And I used to tell her, “You are responsible for them.” It was true for both the good and the bad. Good thing it has been good so far [Laughs]. They are successful because of her. I just gave them money. She did everything because I was not there.

When Adrian said this, Cynthia, who was also present, laughed, shook her head, and winked at me.

While both Ricardo and Adrian denied having a role in their children’s success and attributed it to their wives, some of their behaviors were similar to fathers in the motivational supporters’ category. Both fathers mentioned having conversations with their children about college. While these were less detailed than the conversations their wives had with their children, the fathers made sure their children knew that college was important for them. Ricardo and Adrian remained informed about their children’s education by having conversations with their wives. Both fathers remained informed about their children’s college application, college choices, and final decision by communicating with their wives. And their children knew their parents were talking to each other about them. Through this signaling, fathers relayed the importance of college to their children. Finally, both Ricardo and Adrian financially supported their children’s education; they both paid for college applications. Like other uncertain spectators, these fathers were engaged in their children’s education but their particular situations and context made them believe they were not.

Certain aspects of uncertain spectators’ apoyo resembled that of motivational supporters and confident partners, specifically in terms of emotional support. Uncertain spectators wanted their children to go to college, encouraged them to get good grades, and purposefully enrolled them in extracurricular activities. Yet, due to their lack of college
knowledge, which prevented them from assisting their children with their application, or their absence from their children's lives, they believed they had no role in their children’s success. Thus, when compared to motivational supporters and confident partners, uncertain spectators had low self-efficacy in regards to their role in their children’s college pathway.

**Discussion: What Shapes Undocumented Latina/o Parents’ Different Understandings of their *Apoyo***?

The *apoyo* typology shows the relationship between parents’ role construction, parental self-efficacy, and their engagement behaviors in their children’s post-secondary planning. Parents who were more involved in their children’s schools—parents who had strong relationships with teachers and counselors—were more confident in their role in helping their children throughout their post-secondary planning. These were also the parents who saw themselves as having a crucial role in their children’s post-secondary planning. Parents who, on the other hand, had very little confidence in their ability to assist their children were ones who were not very involved in schools or had tenuous relationships with them. Although these parents were engaged in non-traditional or “invisible” ways, they did not conceive of these behaviors as relevant. Although individual factors, such as personality and personal preferences, surely impacted the way parents were engaged in their children’s education, it is important to understand the mechanisms that allowed confident partners to construct such an understanding of their role and the ones that prevented uncertain spectators from doing so. In what follows, I discuss how relationships with schools, unfamiliarity with post-secondary planning, and gendered expectations shaped the engagement of the parents in this study.

**Relationships with Schools**

The relationships parents have with their child’s school shape how parents construct their roles in their children’s education. While it is important to acknowledge that there are
different ways parents are involved in their children’s education, both traditional and non-traditional engagement (Auerbach, 2006; Hill & Torres, 2010; Zarate, et al., 2011), it is equally true that schools have the ability to shape how parents understand their role. Schools are in a position to provide parents with the information, knowledge, and resources they need in order to support their children, influencing their understanding of their role; schools who see their students’ parents as partners and invite them to the college-application process have the ability to impact what parents think their role should be. Schools can serve both as a limiting and empowering spaces for undocumented Latina/o parents, depending on the value they place on partnering and working with parents (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

The experiences of the parents in this study demonstrate a relationship between general K-12 engagement and how they engaged in their children’s post-secondary planning. Parents who only visited schools when they had to (e.g. to attend open houses or parent-teacher conferences), were less confident in their ability to support their children in the college application process and, as a result, depended more on their ability to provide emotional support. Parents who were more involved in K-12 spaces, who were involved in parent groups and leadership positions, had higher self-efficacy. These parents were more likely to feel confident in helping their children with the college application process, providing informational and appraisal support.

Schools also have the ability to foster parents’ self-efficacy in the context of post-secondary support. Confident partners were more likely to ask the questions and seek help when compared to other parents. When parents feel welcomed by schools, they are more likely to be engaged with them and benefit from the resources available to them. Research has documented the importance of developing strong partnerships between schools and families (see Henderson & Mapp, 2002 for more). While this is important for overall student
academic achievement, it also plays an important role in students’ post-secondary planning. Therefore, schools need to value the significant role of parents in their students’ education; schools must value school-family partnership (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). In order to help uncertain spectators become motivational supporters, schools must first see parents as engaged and as assets to their children’s development. Schools then can develop their self-efficacy, helping parents understand the importance of their role through, to use Bandura’s language, social persuasion. For example, school counselors or college advisors can host parent/ family nights. In interactive workshop settings, they can explicitly walk through the college application processes with parents, highlighting the key moments and actionable steps parents can take to support their children through this process.

**Unfamiliarity with Post-Secondary Planning**

All of the parents in this study reported being unfamiliar with the American higher education system. Parents wanted to be able to better support their children through their post-secondary planning, specifically in the college application and decision process, yet too often, they did not have the information and tools to do so.

Confident parents, who were more likely to be involved in college preparatory programming, had a better understanding of the college application and admissions process when compared to other parents. Some learned about it through school presentation or workshops, in conversations with children, or as their older children applied to college. Due to this, they were able to take a more active role in supporting their children’s post-secondary planning; they felt more comfortable supporting their children throughout the actual application and choice processes.

Yet, simply making information about the college application and admissions process available is not enough. Parents had a desire to understand what they should do with that
information. Since having their children apply to college was a new experience for them, they wanted specific action steps and behaviors to be modeled for them. This is why parents who had older children who had previously gone through the college application process, when compared to parents who did not, were engaged differently with the process of their younger children.

**Paternal Engagement and Gendered Expectations**

When compared to the engagement of their wives, the engagement of the fathers in this study looked differently. All the fathers were the primary financial supporters for their families. As a result, they worked long hours and/or multiple jobs. While this prevented most of them from being physically present at their children’s schools, all five of them were similarly engaged in their children’s education and specifically, their post-secondary planning. In addition to financially supporting their children (including paying for their college applications), they had conversations about the importance of education and college with their children, they monitored their education through communication with their wives, and provided support throughout the process (e.g. rides to scholarship interviews).

While Angel, Mike, and Javier understood the limitations of their ability to be engaged with their children’s post-secondary planning, they constructed their role around these limitations and admitted to being engaged in ways they were able to. Yet, for Ricardo and Adrian, the limitations that their job and life circumstances (in the case of Adrian, being separated from his wife) created did not allow them to understand their engagement as engagement. These fathers linked their understanding of their role, or lack or role, in their children’s post-secondary planning to their gender identities. Ricardo was the head of his household and understood his role in his family as the primary financial caretaker. As the “man of the house” it was his responsibility to make sure that his family was financially
taken care of. Since he created the conditions that allowed his wife, Luz, to stay at home, he trusted her to take care of the upbringing of the children. For Adrian, on the other hand, his self-perception as a “missing father” for a couple of years made him feel he did not have a right to claim a role in his children’s academic success and like Ricardo, credited his wife for his children’s success. Being that their engagement looked differently, these fathers did not understand their behaviors as being essential to their children’s academic success.

Gendered expectations often subtly and overtly shape how Latino fathers are engaged in their children’s education and how they understand of their roles in it (Gallo, 2017). In Latina/o families, it is regularly assumed that men are the primary financial providers who have limited education and are unable to help their children academically. Additionally, the stereotype of “machismo,” which pictures Latino fathers as home tyrants who force respect through fear tactics, overshadows the reality that more Latino fathers are caring and nurturing (Cabrera & Coll, 2004; Gallo, 2017; Paz, 1961). Latino fathers’ perceived lack of involvement is oftentimes limited by these dominant tropes. This is an issue particularly when schools and educators, then, assume that fathers are not involved in their children’s upbringing, thus failing to create spaces or opportunities for them to be engaged. Schools need to be aware of the dangers of implicitly and explicitly applying gender norms to their expectations of parental engagement and need be more intentional about actively engaging with fathers in students’ post-secondary planning. For example, teachers and counselors can request to meet with both mothers and fathers, inviting both of them to post-secondary planning conversations. When fathers have no explicit invitations to engagement, in addition to being unable to engage in traditional ways, they may believe they do not have a role in their children’s post-secondary planning, as was the case with Ricardo and Adrian.
Conclusion

The *Apoyo Typology* allows us to understand 1) the different ways undocumented Latina/o parents support their children’s post-secondary planning and 2) how they understand their role in it. This relationship is mediated by the degree of self-efficacy parents feel. In order to better support parents support their children, it is essential to develop parental self-efficacy. The experiences of the parents I spoke to highlight the impact of the barriers they face, barriers that have been previously identified by extant literature, and how these shape parents’ self-perceptions and behaviors.
CHAPTER 6

La Ley de la Vida: Parents’ Understanding of Higher Education and their Shifting Apoyo

While the number of Latina/o students attending institutions of higher education and earning degrees has increased over the past 10 years, Latina/os continue to be underrepresented among undergraduate students and bachelor degree recipients relative to their representation in the traditional college-age population (Hill & Torres, 2010; Perna, 2000; Zarate, et al., 2011); only 15 percent of Latina/os ages 25-29 have earned a bachelor's degree or higher27(Krogstad, 2015).

Existing research offers different explanations for why first-generation Latina/o undergraduate students struggle in institutions of higher education, especially when they attend predominantly white institutions (PWIs). Barriers include learning to navigate new educational structures, demands for different study habits, and facing microagressions in the classroom (see Pérez & Ceja, 2015 and Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009 for more). As a response, some colleges and universities have attempted to address these barriers by creating spaces and resources specifically catering to the needs of first-generation, low-income, underrepresented students. These include peer-support groups, affinity groups, and culturally responsive academic counseling in student affairs offices (Delgado Bernal, Alemán, & Garavito, 2009; Hernandez & Lopez, 2004; Llamas & Ramos-Sanchez, 2013).

Additionally, moving away from a “student-as-problem” narrative and taking on an asset-based perspective, existing research and practice has foregrounded the notion that first-generation Latina/o students bring assets with them in to institutions of higher education. Research shows that these strengths must also be considered when working towards making

27 This proportion is significantly lower than for other ethnic groups, compared with 20% of African Americans, 40% of whites, and 60% of Asian Americans in the same age group (Krogstad, 2015).
college campuses more inclusive for diverse student populations, including first-generation Latina/o students. Tapping into their different assets and support systems, or what Tara Yosso (2005) calls “Community Cultural Wealth,” students develop coping and support mechanisms that allow them to be successful and thrive in spaces where they often feel marginalized.

There is general consensus in the literature that in addition to on-campus and peer supports, first-generation Latina/o undergraduate students have identified their families, specifically their parents, as a major source of support and encouragement throughout their undergraduate trajectories (Arellano & Padilla, 1996; Borrero, 2011; Hernandez, 2000). To date, however, there is a dearth of research that explores how Latina/o parents are engaged in students’ educational aspirations once they matriculate into institutions of higher education. This gap in knowledge further limits our understanding of the undergraduate experiences of first-generation Latina/o students and the reproduction of inequality in college by ignoring the very source of support that students identify themselves. The vital role of parents in this process is one of the relationships and resources that are often overlooked by higher education practitioners and researchers. Since Latina/o students’ experiences in higher education are shaped by their parents, it is equally important to consider how Latina/o immigrant parents continue to be involved and engaged in their children’s education. Doing so is imperative for the retention and graduation of this student population.

Latina/o students do not experience education as compartmentalized, individual, students. In my description of undocumented Latina/o parents’ sacrificios and apoyo in Chapters 3 and 5, respectively, I illustrate how undocumented Latina/o parents play an important and significant role in developing, shaping, and influencing the educational
aspirations and opportunities of Latina/o students. Through this, I dismiss the notion that students from vulnerable families are successful despite their parents’ deficiencies. Instead, I argue that their undocumented parents played an active role in their success despite the limitations of their undocumented immigration status. This continues to be the case as students make their way through their higher education trajectories.

As previous chapters have shown, the engagement of undocumented Latina/o parents takes many forms; research has widely documented the importance of parental engagement in students’ education (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). However, when discussing parental engagement in education, it is often strictly limited to K-12 educational settings. This may be partially due to the developmental needs of students—as students develop from adolescents to young adults, there is an assumption that parental engagement should decrease in order to promote independence and autonomy. At the same time, adolescents and young adults seek autonomy and independence (Savitz-Romer & Bouffard, 2012). However, studies have shown that parental engagement does not and should not necessarily decrease as students get older. Instead, the nature of this engagement changes, especially as parents take into account students’ developmental needs (Chao & Hill, 2009). Considering the importance of transition periods in students’ lives, these studies have noted that parental engagement practices shift from “hands-on” behaviors (e.g. homework help, in-school volunteering) to behaviors that are more monitoring and scaffolding of responsibilities (e.g. encouraging children to join extracurricular activities, monitoring their grades). As students move from elementary school to middle school to high school, monitoring behaviors have been found to be more beneficial for students.

Just as the nature of engagement shifts as students transition from middle school to high school, it is equally important to also consider the shift in parental engagement as
students move from high school to college. The transition from high school to college is another pivotal transitional moment in the educational experiences of Latina/o students and their families. The impact of this transition on family dynamics, especially on parents’ understanding of higher education and parent-student relationships, is often overlooked (Chao & Hill, 2009).

In order to address these concerns, this chapter is guided by the following research questions:

How do undocumented Latina/o parents experience their children matriculating into higher education?

How do undocumented Latina/o parents understand their role once their children have matriculated into higher education? How does this understanding shape their engagement?

In what follows, I discuss how the undocumented Latina/o parents in this study made sense of their children being accepted and matriculating into Coast University. Specifically, I unpack a process parents call the “ley de la vida,” or the law of life, which describes the mourning and acceptance parents experienced after their children left their homes to enter institutions of higher education. Additionally, I also present how parents reshaped their understanding of their engagement in their children’s education; as their children assumed their college student identities, parents also redefined their roles, changing what their sacrifice and support looked like. As such, in this chapter, I argue that we should reframe our understanding of family engagement to include parental influence in higher education, truly making it a K-16 pipeline for Latina/o students.

I first begin by giving an overview of what we already know about Latina/o familism and the role of parents in the undergraduate experiences of first-generation Latina/o students. This is followed by an exploration of ley de la vida, which describes the process parents in this study experienced after their children left their homes for college. This
process consisted of three distinct stages or states of mind: 1) *tristeza*, or the deep sadness parents experienced caused by the idea of not seeing their children daily and their fear of their children’s acculturation; 2) *por su bien*, or the pride parents’ felt for their children’s academic accomplishments and their hope for the possibilities of a college education; and 3) *valió la pena*, or parents’ sense of accomplishment and satisfaction upon reflecting that their children were enrolled in Cost University. An exploration of how parents’ *apoyo* shifted and changed as students made their way through their higher education trajectories then follows.

As parents experienced the *ley de la vida* process, they reconstructed how they should engage with their children’s academic goals. Finally, I close with a discussion about the importance of considering this shift in engagement, highlighting that parent engagement continues to be pivotal in the experiences of Latina/o students throughout higher education.

**Familism and Role of Latina/o Parents in First-Generation Undergraduate Students’ Educational Experiences**

Existing research on parents’ engagement in undergraduate students’ education is often limited to the experiences of middle and upper class families (Catsambis, 1998; Conklin & Dailey, 1981; Daniel & Scott, 2001; Hossler et al., 1999; Paulsen, 1990). This literature describes how parents who attended college themselves use this frame of reference to continue to guide their children throughout their undergraduate education and beyond. Similarly, narratives of “helicopter parents,” or parents who project their own experiences and expectations of college on to their children, are used to describe parent behavior. Like their K-12 counterparts, these helicopter parents are described as being too involved in their children’s education. For example, their behavior includes calling college dormitories, emailing professors to inquire about grades, and often seeking to control their children’s college experiences by demanding that their children study a specific major or join particular
social organizations (Daniel & Scott, 2001; Jacobs & Hyman, 2013). These kinds of behaviors are considered detrimental to the development of young adults. College resource guides, non-academic “how to” guides, similarly often frame parents as consumers, whose role is limited to paying for college. These guides encourage parents to “let go” of their children, entrusting them to institutions of higher education, where they will develop into adults. Due to its presumption that the parents of college students have attended college themselves, this literature does not apply to the engagement of parents of first-generation Latina/o college students. More so, similar to what has been reported in previous chapters, this literature does not account for the experiences of Latina/o students being raised by undocumented parents.

To date, there is limited research that speaks to how Latina/o immigrant parents experience their children’s transition from high school to college. While restricted, studies on Latina/o first-generation college students present a glimpse into how their parents are engaged in their education. Again, this literature is from the student perspective, in which students report (primarily through qualitative interviews) that their parents continue to provide motivation, emotional security, and support throughout their undergraduate experiences; students credit their parents’ struggles, life experiences, consejos, and deep belief in the importance of education as sources of perseverance (Arellano & Padilla, 1996; Ceballo, 2004; Hernandez, 2000).

Research on the undergraduate experiences of Latina/o students is often framed along the lines of familism. Traditionally, Latina/o culture is defined as family-oriented, as Latina/o populations tend to maintain strong family ties (Rendon & Taylor, 1990). When compared to families of European decent, Latina/o families tend to place more value on family support and responsibility to the family (Sabogal, Marin, Otero-Sabogal, & Marin,
Familism is defined as behavioral manifestations of Latina/os that reflect a strong emotional and value commitment to family life (Valdes, 1996; Vega, 1995). Familism includes a strong sense of interconnectedness and unity within the family unit, reciprocity in relationships, and a belief in familial honor (Cause & Comenech-Rodríguez, 2002; Valenzuela & Dornbusch, 1994; Zinn, 1995).

Due to their strong commitment to their families, Latina/o college students often experience anxiety when they enter spaces of higher education, attempting to balance family responsibilities and college demands. Studies have found that Latina/o college students face stressors related to acculturation, which can negatively influence their psychological adjustment to college (Quintana, Vogel, & Ybarra, 1991). Acculturation describes the process individuals go through of learning about and adopting White American cultural norms while negotiating how much of their own heritage cultural groups’ norms to maintain (Berry, 1998). Institutions of higher education tend to value and promote values of individual merit, often demanding that students from non-white cultures adopt these in order to be academically successful (Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009). This contrasts values found within Latina/o cultures and families. For Latina/o students, studies have found that the acculturation process can have a negative influence on their well-being; cultural clashes between their family and American values and norms may cause family conflict (Castillo, Conoley, & Brossart, 2004).

Immigrant parents tend to acculturate to white American culture at slower rates than their children. Their children, on the other hand, have been raised within this culture. As a consequence, they adopt some of its values and norms their immigrant parents disagree with.

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28 Family is broadly defined to include different household arrangement, including single-parent households, combinations of households, and/or all extended relatives.
such as prioritizing social events with friends over time with family. These cultural differences may lead to family conflict (Lee, Cho, Kim, & Ngo, 2000). These decisions may lead to family conflict (Lee, Cho, Kim, & Ngo, 2000). Conflict within families may also occur when parents expect their children to continue following their heritage culture’s values and traditions (Lee & Liu, 2001). While limited, studies on this topic have found that conflict within racial/ethnic minority families has detrimental psychological effects on acculturating individuals (Lee & Liu, 2001). For example, Castillo et al. (2008) found that family conflict was a statistically significant source of acculturative stress for Latina/o college students attending a PWI. For first-generation Latina/o college students, children of immigrants, conflict between family and educational aspirations may decrease the likelihood of academic persistence (Gloria, Castellanos, & Orozco, 2005).

While the stressors of acculturation caused by family responsibilities can be detrimental to Latina/o undergraduate students, studies have also found that students reshape their family responsibilities as sources of support. Latina/o college students learn to balance their family responsibilities and values with the values of their college environment; education scholars have referred to this as “code-switching” or “navigational capital” (for more see Yosso, 2006). Students learn to calculate between prioritizing their family responsibilities and their schoolwork (Fuligni et al., 1999; Phinney, Ong, & Madden, 2000; Saunders & Serna, 2004). Additionally, studies have also reported that valuing family obligations can serve to reinforce educational ambitions and academic motivation (Fuligni et al. 1999; Phinney, Dennis, & Osorio, 2006; Phinney et al., 2000). When Latina/o families pressure students to perform academically well, often unintentionally, students interpret their families’ messages and expectations as motivation; dropping out is not an option (Hernandez, 2000). Students report decoding this pressure to graduate from colleges as a
responsibility to their parents’ struggles—they “owed a debt” to their parents and their college diploma was “their contribution” to the family, especially when factoring the financial opportunities afforded to them with a college degree (Hernandez, 2000). While these responsibilities, perceived by students or verbalized by parents themselves, did add unwanted pressure and stress to students, Hernandez (20000) found that these also reinforced Latina/o students’ academic motivation and determination while positively influencing their optimistic outlook. With a college degree, students were able to imagine better lives for themselves and their families. Using these findings, Hernandez (20000) suggests that Latina/o families can serve as effective retention mechanisms for college students. He proposes that college educators and support staff should develop programs to familiarize parents with U.S. higher education and help them become comfortable with it. By doing this, institutions can partner with families to support students, tapping into values of familism (Hernandez, 2000).

While this research shows that parents continue to be present in the lives of Latina/o undergraduate students, it presents parents’ engagement very broadly and does not provide much detail about how, specifically, parents are engaged. What are the conversations they have with their children, if any? Do student-parent relationships change? If so, how? Additionally, as previously mentioned, it does not include the perspectives of parents, whether they are intentional about their actions, what their understandings of their children’s college experiences are, how they personally experience their children’s transition from high school to college, and how does this shape how they see their role. The following section begins to fill this gap in the literature by describing how undocumented Latina/o parents experienced their children’s transition into higher education and how they understood and described their role.
La Ley de La Vida: Parents Experiencing Student Transitions to College

Throughout our interviews, there was no doubt the parents I spoke with were proud of their children attending Coast University. Parents understood that CU is a prestigious and selective institution. During my visits, there were several CU paraphilia in their homes—Mireya and Javier had a clock with the CU logo hung in the middle of their small living room, several flags with the school mascot were plastered throughout the insides of Elia’s small trailer, and Maria’s minivan was always parked outside her apartment with both a sticker and license plate frame that read “Coast University Mom.” During two of our three interviews, Julie greeted me wearing a Coast University t-shirt or hooded sweater, while her husband, Mike, always wore a CU baseball hat.

For these parents, having their children attend Coast University was remarkable. For Angel, for example, “it was everything.” Like other parents, it was the fulfillment of his dreams and aspirations for his daughter, Jessica. Not only was her acceptance to Coast University a validation to her own academic efforts and work, but it also represented a tremendous achievement for her parents. For Angel, as for his wife Alejandra, it helped them realize that all their struggles navigating her schools, frustrations with language barriers, and long drives to basketball tournaments, all their sacrificios, were worthwhile. For parents in this study, their children’s acceptance and matriculation to Coast University represented the simultaneous achievements of the child, parents, and the multifaceted sacrifices that were made.

While parents were extremely proud that their children had achieved their goals of attending a top university, when asked to describe their experiences helping their children move into the new campus, they shared a plethora of conflicting feelings—parents described the excitement of helping their children move in to their dormitories and apartments,
helping them arrange their closets and mini-fridges, and stopping at the local Target and Costco to stock them with snacks. They described their first impressions of Coast University, noting that they were initially concerned with the homeless population that surrounded the college campus. When we shifted the conversation to the aftermath of the move in, or in the case of Yuri, whose son drove himself, after parents realized their children were not going to return home with them, tears came. Parents, both mothers and fathers, described the great feelings of anguish and sadness they experienced during the initial months after their children started their education at Coast University. They described what I am calling the *ley de la vida*\(^{29}\) process. Using their words, this term describes the process that parents experienced after their children left their homes for college. *Ley de la vida* is a contradictory process—one hand, parents were extremely proud of their children for going to college, noting that it was a fulfillment of their dreams and aspirations for them, the “recompensa”\(^{30}\) of their *sacrificios*. On the other hand, parents also experienced great sadness and depression when they had to “let go” of their children. Though not always linear in nature, this process can be understood through stages or different states of mind: 1) *tristeza*, 2) *por su bien*, and 3) *valió la pena*. Even though they knew their children had to leave their homes in order for them to accomplish their dreams and aspirations, their conflicting feelings initially overwhelmed them. Eventually, parents became accustomed to having their children away from them, embracing the promises of the benefits of a college degree. Yet, as all parents described, they knew that their family dynamics were never going to be the same. Accepting this new reality was another sacrifice parents made.

**Tristeza**

\(^{29}\) There is no direct translation to this term that captures the essence of what parents in this study describe. The closest translation there is the law of life, similar to the concept of “circle of life”.

\(^{30}\) There is no direct translation to the term “recompensa”. The closest translation there is “reward”.
As their children left their homes and transitioned into life as college students, parents initially experienced a sense of loss, grief, and mourning. Similar to what psychologists call “empty nest syndrome,” parents described the deep “tristeza” (sadness) they experienced when their children left for Coast University. Empty nest syndrome refers to the period of transition experienced by parents or caregivers, after children leave their childhood home, and they experience feelings of depression, sadness, or grief (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Tristeza not only describes the sadness caused by the idea of not seeing their children daily, but it also includes parents’ fears of “loosing” their children to the American value system. In other words, the parents in this study feared the consequences of acculturation, fearing that their children would replace their family values with individualistic ones; parents feared that going to college would cause their children to loosen their moral values. Thus, parents mourned their conception of their children as they had known them, how they were when they dropped them off in college.

Adrian, whose eldest son attended Coast University, was initially very quiet during our interviews. Noting that he was often late to our interviews because he rushed to meet his wife, Cynthia, and me after work, driving during afternoon rush hour (which in Los Angeles started around 1pm and ended around 8pm), he always seemed a little scattered. By the time he joined us, Cynthia and I had already been together anywhere between 10 to 20 minutes, often killing time chatting about novelas, the latest celebrity gossip discussed in the television show El Gordo y La Flaca, or about my life at Harvard. Once he settled and he warmed up to me, Adrian was an open book. He was open and honest about mistakes he done in his marriage—he regretted allowing his wife to leave him in the past, which caused a separation with his children. He noted that this changed family dynamics. While his children knew that he loved them, he was not present every day to see them develop during crucial years of
their childhood. When they returned to California and Cynthia and he decided to give their marriage another try, he promised himself that he was going to be the best father he could. He wanted his children to have the best opportunities available to them. Thus, he supported their decisions to go to college.

Initially, Adrian did not understand why his son chose to move away from home to attend Coast University. In his mind, he could have easily stayed at home and attended the local community college, saving money. “I was misinformed, you know? I didn’t know about rankings and all that stuff, I just knew that college was college. But, oh boy, they sure did teach me differently!” He explained that his children and wife had to sit him down and explain to him the prestige of Coast University and how being accepted to it was a reward for all the work his son had put into his schooling:

"Once it clicked, I didn’t know I could be any prouder. I mean, I was already proud of my son, because he had really carried on the family and took care of his mom and sister when I was not there. But to understand that he was going to one of the best colleges in the world? I was speechless. I was proud. I was more than proud. I don’t know if there is a word that can capture this.

When Adrian realized the importance and significance of his son attending Coast University, he “was all in.” Along with his wife, Cynthia, the family decided to make Diego’s move-in day to the university a family trip. They both took the weekends off from work, booked a hotel near the university, and were excited to help their son settle into his college dormitory. They used family savings to pay for this trip. Once they arrived to the college campus, they helped him settle in, unpacked his clothes and drove to the local Target to buy some cleaning essentials. “I was nervous because it was going to be his first time washing his clothes. He didn’t even know what kind of detergent to pick!” commented Cynthia, laughing. After Diego had settled in, the family did some sightseeing around the campus and had dinner together at a local pizzeria. When they finally dropped off Diego in his
dormitory, Adrian realized that he was not going to drive back home with them the following morning:

Cynthia started bawling on the way to the hotel. I don’t know if they [Cynthia and his daughter] saw me, but I was crying silently too. I didn’t want to cry out loud because I didn’t want to make Cynthia sadder, but it was really devastating. I guess I had not thought about it until I left him there and we got in the car and he was not in the back seat. The car, the family felt different, incomplete.

Like other parents, Adrian described the difficult drive back home, after having dropped off his son at CU. “I know it sounds kind of cheesy, but as I was driving, I was all in my head and it was like a movie of his life was playing—seeing his first steps, going to his kinder graduation, his prom date, all of that. I just didn’t know it was going to be so sad.”

Besides the sadness they experienced during the initial drop off, parents also described how difficult the first weeks and months without their children at home were. Several parents used the word “depression” to describe what they were feeling. Adrian shared:

It was really starting to affect me in ways that I did not even understand. Like at work, my co-workers would ask me if I was okay because I was not my usual self. And what could I tell them? That I missed my son? No, they would laugh at me! I was the one going around, showing off to them how my son was going to Coast University and all that. And now I was so sad and depressed because he was gone? No! But they could see it in my actions, I was not the same for those first few months. It was difficult to come home and only see my girls [wife and daughter]. I love them, but it was an incomplete picture. One of my friends at work started calling me “el triste” [the sad one]. You know, after that José, José song. She knew I was sad about my son. And she was trying to cheer me up, I guess. So she would sing to me, “El triste todos dicen que soy. Que siempre estoy hablando de ti. No saben que pensando en tú amor, En tú amor he podido ayudarme a vivir. He podido ayudar a vivir.” It was annoying at first, but then I thought that it was true, I was sad. Very sad. So I embraced that nickname and became “el triste” [laughs].

When I asked Cynthia if she had experienced similar feelings of loss and sadness when Diego moved away, crying, she said yes:

31 “El Triste” is a song performed and made popular by Mexican singer José José. The translation to the quoted verse is “The sad one they all say I am/ That I am always talking about you/ No, they don’t know that thinking of your love/ Of your love has helped me love/ Has helped me live.”
The entire first month. I was sad and crying every day [voice breaks]. And he [Diego] was happy, having the time of his life. And me at home crying as if he had died. Like my husband said, “He didn’t die, he’s there. He’s close.” He [Diego] made a jug of lemonade without sugar the night before we drove to move him in. The jug of lemonade was there in the refrigerator for like two weeks and then he [Adrian] would say, “throw that out.” “No, because my son made that.” [cries] And that’s when he was like, “You’re going to get sick, you have another child, you have to take care of her. She’s going to feel bad that you just keep crying and crying for Diego.” I had never separated for such a long time from him. For like a few weeks, he had gone camping and with family and all that. But not like that.

The deep sense of loss parents felt when their children left their homes for college was very apparent throughout my interviews with them. Like Adrian and Cynthia, most, if not all, parents began crying when they described having to leave their children in their college dormitories or apartments. This was true across all families, no matter how far the driving distance was between their homes and the CU campus.

In the following quote, Maria, whose eldest daughter, Carmen, chose to attend Coast University since it offered her a great scholarship opportunity as an undocumented student, highlights some of the elements of the empty nest syndrome:

When my oldest, Carmen left, I cried so much, and lost so much weight. All because I felt, I don’t know if all the moms are like that, but I feel that I gave a lot, with love, but when they leave, now what? She left, now what am I going to do, she left. The time I spent taking her to practice and all that, where is that? It’s not there anymore.

Here, she is describing the toll her physical and mental health took when Carmen left. As a diabetic, she noted that the significant weight loss her depression caused was hard on her body and dangerous to her overall health. Additionally, she pointed to the emptiness parents experienced when the individuals whom they had invested so much love, time, energy, and financial resources left. Even though the majority of the parents in my sample had younger children to look after, their identities as parents were altered after their older children left for college.
The tristeza, or the sadness and depression, parents experienced when their children left were not only due to them missing their children. Upon reflection, some parents noted their children leaving reminded them of when they left their homes permanently in order to migrate to the United States. Yuri shared:

When he drove away, I just stood there, looking at the long, long road. I don’t think that in the beginning it really hit me that he was gone for college necessarily. It just felt like a very determined move, like he was determined to not come back. Although I knew he was, that is what it felt like. It was a determination to leave home that reminded me of when I left Mexico. When I left, I knew I could not go back because I don’t have any papers. I knew that it was a permanent move. And as I watched my son drive away, I wondered if his was a permanent move. In a way, it kind of was. And that made me miss my family even more. I wondered if my own parents had felt that way when I left. Did they know it was forever? Thinking this made me even sadder.

For Yuri, Rafael leaving also prompted the feelings and trauma she endured having to leave her own family behind in Mexico. In addition to the sadness experienced by family separation, there was the added layer created by the fact that she might never see them again. Thus, her migration experiences, her “illegality,” the consequences of her undocumented status, were also intertwined with her experience of tristeza. This political identity also shaped how she experienced her son leaving home for college.

In addition to the sense of loss and depression parents experienced when their children left their childhood home, their tristeza also consisted of worry or fear of “losing their children to liberal values.” In other words, parents feared their children’s acculturation. As Chapter 3 described, the undocumented Latina/o parents I spoke with had all migrated to the United States for better opportunities for them and their families. At the same time, they worried that their children were going to adapt American cultural values and norms they did not necessarily agree with. Some of these norms and behaviors included forgetting about the family (i.e. not going home for holidays, loosening of communication channels), prioritizing social life over academics, and excessively drinking alcohol and taking drugs.
while in college. Since parents were making these assumptions when their children first moved away from home to college, the tristeza state does not imply that their children were actually engaging in this behavior. Instead, it signals to parents’ initial perceptions of the American college lifestyle, one that could corrupt their children morally.

This sentiment, the tension caused by fears of acculturation and perceived clashing between family and at-home culture and values and those of American college systems, shaped parents’ tristeza. In addition to the sense of loss and depression she experienced when Carmen left, Maria was very aware that she was also stressing herself out because she was worried about the life Carmen could have at Coast University. She admitted that Carmen never gave her reason to believe that she was going to forget about her family or that she was going to start underage drinking. Maria still worried. When I asked her about what were some of her initial worries after Carmen first left, she responded:

There were things that, sometimes, from what we have learned in Mexico or how we were educated there, with different customs, I didn’t like it, the [American college] system. But I knew I needed to stop comparing my times with her times. We [she and her husband] were trying to give her a lot of trust and respect in her decisions. I knew there is more liberty here [in the US] and I knew I could not be there all the time, seeing how she was doing or what she was doing. But I wanted to trust her decisions. She just needed to take care of herself, as long as she didn’t leave her priorities. She wanted to go to college. And I was always grateful that she had the opportunity. I just asked her not to go bad because of experimenting. That’s the only thing I asked. Not to get lost in the liberty there was [in college]. And I just asked God that she made good decisions.

Like other parents, Maria’s cultural values and norms, in her case, Mexican cultural values, clashed with her conception of American college systems. In the quote above, Maria noted that she did not want Carmen to “go bad” or lose her priorities. She was worried that she was going to lose the fruits of her labor, she was worried that her sacrifices were done in vain.
Parents’ *tristeza* when their children first left to Coast University described their sense of loss and worry. To these parents, this was the first time they not only had direct contact with the American higher education system, but it was also the first time their children were living away from them. The sadness, the longing, coupled with fears of safety shaped their initial perceptions of Coast University and the lives their children had there. Yet, at the same time, they also realized that their children were going to benefit by leaving home. The following section more deeply explores these sentiments.

**Por Su Bien**

In addition to their *tristeza*, parents also described an awareness of the importance of their children leaving for college. In other words, parents noted that they knew their children had to leave their homes and their care; their children needed to develop into young adults. Besides the academic, social, and financial benefits of a college education, parents described how they hoped their children’s college experience would help further develop them into responsible contributors to society. *Por su bien*, loosely translating to “for their well-being,” describes parents’ state of acceptance and realization that their children had to leave their homes for Coast University. This term entails the positive feelings parents had in regard to their children leaving—it embodies the pride they felt and their hope for the possibilities of a college education. While feelings of sadness, emptiness, and fear remained, parents also realized they had to “let go” of their children, that they were growing up, and that they had to scaffold independence and responsibilities to them. Parents experienced the contradictory feelings of mourning and acceptance, of *tristeza* and *por su bien*, simultaneously. These were two sides of the same coin.

Elia felt strongly about her struggles with her daughter’s transition in to college. Like her two oldest daughters, Elia was proud of being undocumented—she noted that she knew
her value to society and that her lack of a “miserable piece of paper” did not mean she was less of a citizen. She worked very hard to develop this mindset in her daughters. Thus, when Andrea, her oldest, was accepted to Coast University and the mother and daughter realized that the university was offering significant financial aid, she made sure to encourage her daughter to select that institution. When Andrea announced that she was going to attend Coast University, Elia was relieved—the school was not too far from their home and she would be able to see her more often than expected. Yet, this did not prevent her from having what she describes as an “emotional breakdown” the night before they were supposed to drive her to her dormitory:

The girls were not home. They went to the store to buy some last-minute things. And that was when it hit me. The trailer was so quiet and calm. You could not hear the girls [daughters] screaming at one another. My son was at soccer practice and my husband was at work. The TV was off. It was just me by myself. And I broke down in tears. I thought, “This is what it is going to end up to.” I was in the middle of my sad, sad pity party [laughs] when I looked up, at the fridge. There, I saw the magnet Andrea had bought me from Coast University. I cried some more. But those were happy tears, they were tears of pride! My daughter, my oldest baby, had actually done it. She was going to be leaving me yes, but she was going to one of the best schools, she was going to grow up to become someone. It was for her own good. Yes, it was all the feelings.

Elia’s “emotional breakdown” consisted of an overlap of feelings. She was both sad and proud. When I asked her what helped her cope with the sadness, she, like other parents, shared that she knew her daughter needed to leave for her well-being. Similar to the nostalgia experienced by Yuri when Rafael left her home described in the previous section, where she was reminded of her own leaving and inability to return to Mexico, when Andrea left, Elia was reminded of her migration to the United States. Experiencing her daughter leave her home helped her understand her own mother’s feelings and behaviors. She called this the “ley de la vida,” the law of life:

If [one’s children] leave for whatever reason, if they go to [higher education] schools, they must also make the effort, because it is the law of life. Just as we were with our
parents and we left them, so are our children going to leave us. Then, if it is for their sake [pauses]. I do not say that one stops caring about them completely, because one does not. One does try, at least, to make sure that they are well and that the distance and separation is for the sake of themselves. There is no other way to help them develop.

Here, Elia is not only comparing her daughter leaving to her own experiences with her mother, signaling to the acceptance of her daughter leaving her childhood home, but she is also alluding to the importance of her daughter leaving for her own personal development. This is something that Elia personally experienced as a result of her leaving her home and migrating to the United States.

Like Elia, parents recognized the value in their children leaving their homes specifically for college. Parents shared that when their children initially left, they were excited about seeing them develop into young adults. This excitement ranged from everyday actions, like having their children cook for themselves and doing their own laundry or paying for their own cellphone bills, to more long term effects, such as a growing appreciation for their extended families, independence to make own decisions, and the development of romantic relationships. When their children first left the home, parents reported using these positive changes as mechanisms to help them cope with the sadness they were experiencing.

When they were describing their fears and pride, parents also referenced the notion that their entire family unit was transitioning. Parents noted how they witnessed changes in their younger children, noting that they missed their older siblings. Depending on the age of the children who remained at home, parents realized that their relationships were going to be different. Parents attempted to facilitate this transition. For example, Lily, whose twin sons, Enrique and Emmanuel, both left for Coast University, made sure that her youngest son Beto, who was only 6-years old when his brothers started college, knew that his brothers loved him. “I would tell him every night that they loved and missed him. I did not want him
to feel abandoned, like they had forgotten about him.” In order to facilitate the transition for Beto, she asked her twins to schedule FaceTime calls every other day with Beto so he could share what was going on at school and church with them and the twins could tell him about college. “I wanted Beto to be proud of them. To understand why they had suddenly left.”

Lily understood that the relationship amongst her sons would change and how they engaged with one another needed to change as well. Serving as a type of broker between them, Lily fostered the relationship between the twins and Beto. Using a *por su bien* mentality, she focused on the positive aspects of their leaving. At the same time, she was also developing Beto’s understanding of college at a young age.

Parents also acknowledged that when their college-aged children left, they were simultaneously aware that their children were about to begin experiencing their own personal transitions, with their own fears and anxieties. Alejandra, like other parents, was also depressed when her oldest daughter, Jessica, left for college. In addition to being proud of everything she had accomplished, Alejandra also pointed out that she understood that her daughter was going to be experiencing her own transition. From Alejandra’s point of view, the transition Jessica was going to experience seemed more abrupt, more difficult, as she was going to be charting onto unknown territory:

> It’s because it’s not only a change for you [the parent], it is a change for the family. And it’s more difficult for students. For example, she [Jessica] left her bedroom, she left her family. We, in some manner, continue co-living with her aunts, her nephews and nieces. It’s much more difficult for [students] because everything is new. Everything is new, making new friendships, look for classes by themselves. All new.

Here, Alejandra is alluding to the fact that her daughter, like other first-generation Latina/o college students experienced their own version of *sacrificios* (sacrifices) by being away from their families. Similar to Alejandra, Diana noted that when she would begin getting sad after
Elias first left, she would remind herself that her sadness and pain were probably not as strong as the fear and confusion her son was experiencing at Coast University:

And I would tell myself, “Imagine what he is going through, not knowing anyone.” I realized that he did not know anyone. That he would have to study like crazy, like he had not done before. There was a lot of stress coming his way. Everything was new for him. I, at least, came back home and to the feeling of home. He didn’t.

By considering the sacrifices their children had to make, being away from their families and learning how to navigate a new and different education setting, as they were making sense as to why their children had to leave their homes, parents further reaffirmed their idea that it was for their best interest, or *por su bien*.

Similarly, Cynthia was also worried about her son Diego’s transition to Coast University. Cynthia knew Diego often worried about her immigration status. He shared nightmares with her about waking up and realizing that ICE arrested his mother. Cynthia worried that these nightmares and thoughts continued as he moved to Coast University. She did not want this worry to get in the way of his studies. Consequently, she often reassured him that she was going to be okay because they lived in California, where she was somewhat protected. Cynthia noted that she sometimes felt she was lying to him, she knew she was never truly safe from deportation. Yet, she told him this in order to help him focus in school, it was for his well-being. This made her feel better.

Parents’ *por su bien* mentality helped them re-frame their feelings of sadness and longing by focusing on the positive aspects of their children leaving to Coast University. Parents’ pride is encapsulated by this mentality. Not only were their children becoming more independent and responsible, but they were also learning to express their feelings of appreciation for their family, holding onto values of familism. Through such realizations, parents began to “reap the fruits of their labor.” Parents began to realize that their struggles
and sacrifices were worthwhile. The consequences of these feelings are described in the following section.

**Valio la Pena**

*Valio la pena* describes the sense of accomplishment and satisfaction parents experienced upon reflecting on their actions and on the fact that their children were enrolled in Cost University. *Valio la pena* occurred when parents realized that their *sacrificios* were worth it. Additionally, parents’ actions and *sacrificios* were further validated by their children’s expressions of gratitude towards them. As parents reconciled the conflicting feelings caused by their *tristeza* and *por su bien*, they merged into a state of *valio la pena*, choosing to accept that their children left their home and began to explore different ways to continue to support them throughout their higher education trajectory.

Luz was very much aware of the importance of her role in her sons’ education. As described in Chapter 5, she, as a confident partner, was always reaffirming her position in her sons’ education. As her youngest, Emiliano, prepared to move to Coast University, she noted that she was often coaching herself to not cry or feel too sad about him leaving. Even though her oldest son, Anthony, had also attended college, he commuted to a university close to their home. Anthony, like Emiliano, was an undocumented student and at the time he started college, there was limited financial aid for undocumented students and DACA had not been introduced. This limited his options. Emiliano, on the other hand, had more options. By the time he applied and was accepted to colleges, California had passed in-state financial aid for undocumented students and DACA had passed, giving him more options when compared to his older brother. He chose to move to Coast University, electing to live in the dorms as well.
Experiencing Emiliano leave to Coast University was difficult for Luz. Even though her eldest son had gone to college, he did not physically leave the household. Like other parents, she experienced the *tristeza* and *por su bien* states of mind. She was often negotiating with herself the importance of letting her son go. “And I would remind myself that he was going to come back. At least for the holidays and other breaks, he was going to come back. That is how I made myself feel better. And remembering that it was for his own good,” she recalled.

Eventually, Luz got used to not having her son around the house. Like other parents, she noted that the pain was eventually more tolerable:

That it is the thing with time, it does heal. I don’t think the sadness ever really goes away. Which makes sense because they are your babies, you are always going to love them and miss them and want them with you. Well maybe not all the time [laughs]. But time gives you perspective. It allows you to reflect on why it is that they are gone and why you feel the way that you feel. It really comes down to love. You love them. So you miss them. And once you are okay with missing them, with the sadness, it hurts less. That’s how I felt when Emiliano left. Very sad and lonely. But when I realized that it was for the best, look at where he is. One feels, you know, the work that one has done. And you keep doing it, because when your son grows, he keeps being your son. It was all worth it.

In addition to reflecting and realizing that their struggles and sacrifices were worth it, parents also described how their children explicitly expressed gratitude towards them, further validating their decisions. This gratitude came to parents through conversations with their children on the phone or in person the first time they returned home, or through text messages. Luz noted that it was difficult for Emiliano to verbally express his emotions, so she appreciated his “thank you” texts. For Diana, her son Elias expressed his appreciation for everything she had done whenever he had the opportunity to do so. He thanked her when she dropped him off in his dorm at Coast University, when he would call her to catch up, and when he returned home the first Thanksgiving holiday. As Diana shared these
different interactions with me, tears fell from her eyes. She made sure to tell me that those
were tears of joy:

I mean, he has done and said so many things. “Mom, thanks to all that trust, to all
that support, that you believed in me, now I am where I am.” See, it’s so good to
hear those words. I remember that the day of he came back for turkey
[Thanksgiving] the first year, during the family dinner, he dedicated a speech to me.
It was something very nice. I felt like the supermom. Because in his speech, he
thanked me for all the work I’ve done, thanked me for all the work I did as both
mother and father. And so that really has motivated me to continue to be there for
him. For whatever he needs. I see that he has learned to value me more, more than
he already values me now. He has learned to be more mature; he feels more mature;
I see him more mature. And what better way to repay me for everything than to see
him prepared [with a college education]?

While Elias verbally and explicitly expressed his appreciation to his mother, Maria
noted that her daughter, Carmen, did so through her actions. During the first week of
classes, Coast University, like other college campuses, hosts an event where most of the
student organizations on campus set up tables to introduce who they are and try to recruit
new members. When Carmen told Maria about this event, Maria quickly assumed her
daughter had not attended. Carmen was always a shy girl, who often avoided social situations
that were new and unknown to her. To Maria’s surprise, Carmen had attended the event and
had signed up for four organizations and clubs. Baffled, Maria congratulated her daughter
for stepping out of her comfort zone. To that, Carmen responded that she, Maria, had been
the one who inspired and motivated her to attend the event and sign up for clubs. “She told
me that seeing me involved in her schools, always going and attending, motivated her to also
get involved in her new school.” With bright eyes and a big smile on her face, she continued,
“and that was when I realized that it was all worth it. I didn’t know that she was watching me
so closely. I inspired her without knowing. And that is one of the best feelings I was proud
of everything I, everything we, my family and I, did.”
Valio la pena, as its literal translation of “it was worth it” suggests, allowed parents to reflect on their actions—it allowed them to not only accept that their children were gone from the home, allowed them to embrace their sadness and longing, or tristeza, and their hopes and aspirations for their futures, por su bien, but to also realize they had a role in it. In other words, valio la pena also allowed parents, via their children’s different forms of gratitude, to realize their sacrifices and struggles were worth it. Additionally, as the following section describes, it also allowed parents to reconstruct and renegotiate their role in their children’s education at a different stage of their lives, higher education. Through the ley de la vida process, parents were able to imagine better futures for their children, as promised by a higher education degree. Parents, then, shifted their apoyo to help them fulfill this goal.

Shifts in Apoyo

As time passed, parents described settling into the valio la pena state of mind. On average, parents reported feeling less depressed about their children leaving their home after three months, which coincided with the time students returned home for the Thanksgiving break. As parents experienced the ley de la vida process and began to accept that their children left their homes for their well-being and development, parental notions of what it means to be a college student in the United States developed and/or shifted. Whereas some parents in this study completed some level of post-secondary education in their countries of origin, they did not attend college in the United States, with the exception of Maria, who attended community college and earned an Associate’s Degree32. Thus, in our conversations, parents

32 While Maria did attend a community college and eventually earned her Associate’s Degree in Early Childhood Development she explicitly shared that this experience did not prepare her support her daughter in college. It took her approximately five years to complete her degree, as she was in and out of school and taking one or two classes per semester; she finished her degree two years after Carmen started at Coast University. She acknowledged that her own experience in higher education was easier than her daughter’s because she was only taking one or two classes per semester. Additionally, she noted that while these were difficult for her due to language barriers, the level of intensity was not similar when compared to the classes her daughter described at
noted that they initially did not know what their children were going to experience at Coast University. They noted that all they could offer them was general advice, or consejos, such as being aware of their surroundings when they were going to library at night, to eat healthy, and to not take drinks (alcoholic or not) from strangers or in open containers when out in social events.

Parents also noted that they attempted to communicate with their children as much as possible, trying to find a balance between not overwhelming them and their desire to know more about what they were experiencing. Naturally, they missed their children and wanted to know as much as they could about their lives. Parents developed different ways to remain in touch with their children. Some asked their children to schedule phone calls with them as they were walking between classes or FaceTime sessions at night. Some parents noted they learned how to send text messages to facilitate communication. For example, Lily shared that her twin sons were always on their phones and she knew it would be easier to communicate with them via texts. Others resorted to social media, creating Facebook, Instagram, and Snap Chat accounts. For all parents, maintaining communication with their children was vital to their own mental health and coping mechanisms; the expectations of the levels and consistency of this communication varied across the sample.

As their children were transitioning into life at Coast University, learning how to be college students, their parents were learning vicariously through them. As reported above, existing research shows that for first-generation Latina/o college students, this transition can be difficult. Through their communication with their children, parents developed their own understanding of what their children were experiencing. Consequently, parents’ understanding of their role as parents shifted. Parents reconstructed their role to that of
parents of college students, which influenced the nature of their sacrificios and apoyo. The following section illustrates how parents developed their understanding of their children as college students, making them aware, to a certain extent, of some of the barriers their children experienced and how they responded to these, with support.

**Learning What It Means To Be a College Student**

When their children first started at Coast University, parents used their own frames of reference to hypothesize the kinds of experiences their children would have in college. Some parents had older children who had already attended other 4-year universities and were somewhat familiar with the lifestyle of a college student. For example, Luz and Ricardo’s oldest son, Anthony, and Julie and Mike’s oldest daughter, Sonia, both had attended 4-year universities similar to Coast University. But, since both Anthony and Sonia were undocumented students and started college before California passed the Dream Act (which offered in-state financial aid to undocumented students) and DACA had not been established, they attended universities close to home and commuted. Thus, while Luz, Ricardo, Julie, and Mike had some experience with their children attending college, they noted that when Emiliano and Gabriela, respectively, moved out to attend Coast University, it was a new and different experience.

Parents also constructed their initial perceptions of a college student from conversations with family, friends, and coworkers. Through the experiences of other adults around them, who also had children who were the first in their families to go to college, parents learned that the academic demands of a college student were significantly different from the demands students experienced in high school. For example, Lily recalled having conversations with other mothers in her church:

At first, I thought that these mothers were showing off [laughs]. Because they would talk about their kids, that they went to such and such school. But when I started
listening, they were saying how crazy their schedules were, how they hardly had any
time to come home. So when my sons left and they were not really calling me, I
remembered those women. Listening to them helped me kind of understand what
my sons were experiencing.

In addition to gathering second hand information, Lily noted she also used her own post-
secondary experience to guess what her sons were experiencing. Lily went to college in
Mexico, where she graduated with a teaching credential; she was a licensed preschool teacher
for indigenous populations in Mexico. Noting that college was probably very different in the
United States when compared to college in Mexico, she was able to relate to her sons’
excitement of being in a new learning environment and empathized with their heavy
academic workload.

Elia, who had also attended college in Mexico, earning a social worker degree, shared
that she had a limited idea of what her daughter, Andrea, was experiencing:

I had a bit of an idea. A bit of an idea because Mexico is still very different from here
[in the United States]. In Mexico, it is the same, you have your schedule set and it is
what it is. But here no, the class schedule is the class schedule. And then there are
other things, like reviews and labs. Sometimes the professors, they have it at a crazy
time. They may have it at five or seven at night. That was new to me.

What Elia referred to as “a crazy time,” was 5pm or 7pm, which were not typical K-12
school hours Elia was accustomed to. Like other parents, it took some time for Elia to
understand the fluidity of her daughters’ schedule and the time demands her classes posed.

When I asked her how she realized the difference in demands, she stated that it was through
conversations with her daughter:

Because sometimes it was two or three days that she didn’t call. I asked her and she
was like, “Mami, I’ve just been so busy.” “But you don’t have two or three minutes
so you can call me?” I did yell at her sometimes because I would see that she was on
Facebook. And I was like, “Those 5 or 10 seconds that you go on Facebook you can
take those to call me. Say, ‘Mom I’m okay.’ That’s all.” She would tell me she was at
the library most of the time. I asked her, “Why do you go so late [to the library]?
What do you do during the day?” “Mami, it’s just that I have a lot of homework.
There’s some days that I don’t have enough time,” she said. She messed up a little bit
on her first semester and for her it was hard because she was used to getting all As.
She says, “Mom! I got a C.” And I’m like, “What happened with you? Didn’t you study?” “No mom, it’s just really hard.” “Okay then but buckle down and if you have to study, study.” I did believe she was studying. But it was a change, a difficult change.

Through conversations with her daughter, Elia realized that Andrea had to implement different study strategies, as she was facing different and more demanding academic expectations. Elia also noted that she would ask her daughter about her new friends, eventually meeting them when she visited her at Coast University. She wanted to get to know whom her daughter was surrounding herself with:

Also, I would ask a lot about her friends. Knowing what kind of people surround her was helpful. Because I do not think, I mean, I still want to believe that not all of them are going to be bad but she has to keep taking care and opening her eyes. So, as I say, you have to keep being involved. I think I will never end worrying about her.

Through such experiences and conversations with her daughter, Elia, like other parents, began to glimpse at her daughter’s new life while continuing to monitor them from a distance.

**New Forms of Providing *Apoyo***

Just as they did when their children were going through the college application process, parents constructed an understanding of what their role, as parents, should be in order to provide *apoyo* (support) to their children after they matriculated into Coast University. Due to the shift in context, parents’ engagement in their children’s post-secondary schooling looked differently than their K-12 engagement. For parents, their role took on a different meaning—they wanted to continue supporting their children and be present in their lives, but they also understood that they needed to allow their children to grow up into young adults. This second understanding stemmed from the fact that their children moved out of their childhood homes and had to learn how to take care of themselves.
Unlike the stark differences between motivational supporters, confident partners, and uncertain spectators presented in the *Apoyo* Typology in Chapter 5, parents self-described engagement post-CU matriculation had less intragroup differences. In other words, parents across the sample described similar behaviors—they motivated their children during final exams, reminding them of the hard work that got them to where they were, they cooked for them their favorite dishes, and they provided financial support when they could. The similarities between behaviors may be explained by the fact that parents were now parenting in a different context, a context that was very much the same for all of them—their children were first-generation Latina/o students at Coast University, who had moved away from home to attend the institution. Although their children, at the time of the study, were in different years and were studying different majors, they still shared a similar characteristic—their undocumented Latina/o parents, parents who were unfamiliar with the American college system, were providing *apoyo* in hopes of helping them successfully graduate from the institution.

**Financial Support.** Aware that college was expensive, the parents in the sample provided their children financial support. Even though most parents noted that they were often struggling financially, living paycheck to paycheck, they tried to send money to their children as often as they could. Through conversations with their children, parents realized that the financial aid students received was not enough; their children often worried about finances. The area where Coast University is located has a high cost of living. College books are expensive. In an attempt to ease their children’s worries, parents sent them money when they could. Monthly cash transactions into their children’s bank accounts ranged from $50 for food to over $500 to help cover their rent.
After her son, Elias, started at Coast University, Diana, who had her own business making tamales and selling them in the street, was intentional about making sure that she added an extra batch of tamales to her load. She did this because she wanted to make sure that she would have additional money to send to her son every two-weeks. She knew college was expensive and this was a way she could support him. She shared:

So then I’m there vigilant and maybe I don’t know 100 percent of how a university works. He explains to me so many things. And I say, “Well, at least so he can feel supported, when it comes to the finances, I am there.” He cannot count on anyone else because we have no one else. But he is counting 100 percent on me. And I think that helps him a lot because he doesn’t stress that way. Because there are, you know, a lot of things to cover [financially]: books, classes, a lot of things, food, rent, and outings, which are expensive. So all of that, but because of that, I try to support him how I can.

Since she was a single parent, she believed that Elias solely depended on her. Noting she did not know much about how universities work and could not help him navigate that experience, she counted on what she could actually do, which was to send him an allowance of at least $100 every two-weeks. Like other parents, one of the ways Diana showed her apoyo to her son was through financial support.

Besides transferring money into their accounts, some parents financially supported their children by purchasing living essentials for them, such as groceries and cleaning supplies. Some parents bought these when their children went home for breaks and had them take them back when they returned to Coast University. Others would drive to the campus, visit them, and run shopping errands with them. Alejandra and Angel tried to visit Jessica at least once every semester, preferably during the beginning of the semester. As Alejandra stated, “When we go, if she needs something we go to the stores so she has the necessities. That way she doesn’t have to go alone, in the bus, getting her things. And we pay for them. But that’s the way I support her.” Like Alejandra and Angel, and Diana, parents knew they were supporting their children through their financial contributions.
In addition to purchasing groceries, parents also showed their support for their children by cooking, helping them clean their apartments when they visited, and helping them with laundry. Parents wanted to ease some of the day-to-day chores their children had in order to help them focus on their studies. Lily, who lived about a 4-hour drive from Coast University, visited her sons, Enrique and Emmanuel, often. In fact, during our second interview, she called me to apologize for being an hour late since she was driving back home from visiting her sons. When I asked her what her visits consisted of, she shared:

When I go, I go to take them food or make them food and I just stay out there throughout the day. I make food, clean their room, their bathroom. I think it is support, I see them differently. Like they are happy because I am there. And they don’t have that worry. Like they don’t have to worry about doing those things. I get there, I make food, and then lunch and then dinner and before I come back, I make something for them and leave it there. And while I make things, I don’t wash their clothes because I don’t know where the machines are [laughs], but I clean their bathroom, vacuum, clean what is there.

For Lily, like other parents, cooking and cleaning for her children was how she showed her apooya. That was how she knew how to show her love and support.

Here, it is important to note that not all parents felt comfortable visiting their children at Coast University due to their undocumented status. While all parents had visited the college campus at least once, some parents reported feelings of anxiety when they did. Driving anywhere between two and seven hours was unsettling for them. For Javier, the six-hour drive was exhausting. Yet, he noted that he would rather drive than take a bus. Although taking a bus would be less expensive and more comfortable, he had heard of stories of busses being stopped by police and asking passengers for their papers. While he did not know how true those stories were, he preferred to drive, “At least in a car, you can be extra careful and make sure you don’t do anything illegal that could get you stopped [by police].” Even when parents drove and they had driver’s licenses, they worried about immigration checkpoints or being racially profiled. Additionally, for parents who had to
drive from or through the Central Valley, there was an additional layer of fear due to the
racism and xenophobia. Parents described how “Farmers for Trump” and “Make America
Great Again” billboards and signs were plastered all along the highways they had to drive
through. Due to the political climate during the time of interviews, where anti-immigrant
sentiment was explicitly and sometimes violently expressed, these made parents feel unsafe
and not want to drive to see their children. Thus, it is also important to consider how
parents “illegality” and “deportability” influenced how they engaged with their children
education and the limitations they faced to do so.

Motivational and Emotional Support. In addition to cooking their favorite meals
when they went home for breaks or traveling to Coast University and cooking for them
there, parents also supported their children by providing motivation—when their children
were stressed out, frustrated, overwhelmed with their academics, jobs, and other social
responsibilities, parents shared they could tell these tensions when they talked to them. As
Maria shared about her daughter, Carmen, “I know her. I can tell when she is stressed. Even
over the phone. Even when she tells me that she is fine, I know she is not. It’s my mother
superpower. I know my daughter.” Maria recalled one instance when Carmen told her that
she was okay over the phone. Using her “mother superpower,” Maria felt that her daughter
was lying to her because she did not want to worry her. Maria asked proving questions,
eventually having her daughter admit that she was stressed out about a statistics midterm and
a term paper for her American Studies class. In that situation, Maria was able to calm her
daughter’s anxiety over the phone by telling her she was capable of doing well on both
assignments. She reminded her daughter that all she could do was try her best and that was
good enough.
When students disclosed to their parents that they were overwhelmed with schoolwork and other responsibilities, parents’ responses were to motivate their children to keep going. All parents, like Maria above, believed that providing motivational support, or “ganas,” to their children while they were in college was their number one job. As Miraya noted:

So I tell him, when he’s tired, he says, “I’m so tired.” And I say, “I know you’re tired, but you know you’re going to get through this. Remember when you finished your marathons. You felt super tired and you felt like you weren’t going to finish and then you would finish. And that’s how it is. And it’s part of your life, you need to keep going.”

“We have to remind them about why they are where they are,” shared Javier, Miraya’s husband, about his and his wife’s role in supporting his children throughout their Coast University trajectories. Thus, not only did parents motivate their children to look forward towards the future, but also critically recalled what it took to get them to their present.

**Scaffolding Independence.** Parents also emotionally supported their children by motivating them to be more responsible for themselves. In other words, parents shared with me how they implicitly and explicitly were scaffolding their children’s independence, complementing their development as young adults; by scaffolding I mean that parents were providing their children with different forms of support while they were transitioning into young adulthood. For Lily, this meant encouraging one of her twin sons, who had a serious health condition, to take initiative and responsibility for his health. She reminded him that she was not always going to be there for him, making sure he was eating healthy, taking his medicine, and checking his anemia levels. She wanted him to be responsible for himself. One semester, he got really sick and he was sent to the emergency room where he was eventually quarantined. When she drove to see him, and after he was better, she reminded him that if he did not take care of himself, those were the consequences of his actions. “I didn’t want to
punish or scowl him. But I wanted him to realize that his actions have consequences and that he needed to be responsible for himself. I see that as also being part of my role as mother, to help him develop into an adult.”

For Elia, scaffolding her daughter’s independence played out when she helped her figure out a discrepancy in her tuition bill. When Andrea received an email from the financial aid office charging her a significant portion of her tuition, she panicked. She did not have the money to pay the bill and had limited financial aid opportunities since she was an undocumented student. When she called her mother, Elia told her to calm down and think about her options:

I mean, first I give her options, that she looks for help for herself. But even then, I am here thinking, “Where will I get money?” And looking for the way to not leave her dealing with the situation by herself, with only with what she can do. I told her, "Okay, try to figure this out first and let me see if I can get this." I mean, I try to get her to find solutions by herself. That she opens the doors for herself, not to depend on anyone. That she does not wait for the aid to arrive to her. She has to go get help, she has to go to open doors, she has to go and knock. That she goes look for her, not to wait for the help to come to her. So I always try to push her. Although I know she does it. She does not remain silent anymore. She does not wait. She looks for ways to do things. And now my role with her is to tell her, "Okay, do not despair, go, hurry, ask for help".

Elia not only told Andrea to consider her different options, but she also encouraged her to reach out to people and seek resources on her own. Meanwhile, Elia was also calling her family, friends, and comadres to figure out whom she could borrow money from, just in case Andrea needed it. Ultimately, Andrea was able to talk to someone in financial aid and, after explaining her situation, was able to get most of the fee waived. Elia noted that the best thing to come out of that situation, and other similar ones she faced with Andrea, was that Andrea was beginning to take on the initiative to solve problems for herself. Elia demonstrated her apoyo, and her parental engagement, by encouraging her daughter to seek other resources to help her with her college trajectory.
The longer their children were in Coast University, parents better understood and became more accustomed to the life of college students. Admitting they would never truly know and understand everything their children were experiencing or were going to experience, the insight that they did have allowed them to modify their *apoyo*. And this made parents happy. They wanted to be able to support their children, they wanted to continue to be involved and engaged in their education. Even though they were at times frustrated by not knowing what their children were experiencing, they also understood they needed to allow them to grow up. This allowed parents to develop their understanding of their new role. Just as they had done when their children were in primary and secondary school, they just wanted what was best for their children. And they were open to learning to adapt to the new familial configuration and were willing to provide *apoyo* and make *sacrificios* if necessary once more.

**Discussion: Reconsidering the Potential of Parental Involvement and Engagement in Higher Education**

By highlighting how the undocumented Latina/o parents in this study experienced their children leaving their homes and matriculating to Coast University, I begin to address Hernandez’s (2000) call to action. Unpacking the impact families, particularly parents, have on the undergraduate experiences of first-generation college students, he asks researchers and educators alike to consider how education systems (both K-12 and higher education institutions) utilize Latina/o students’ families and home environments as effective retention tools. How can institutions of higher education invite Latina/o parents to improve student retention? What are the possibilities of partnership?

To address these questions, we need to begin by understanding how parents experience their children’s transition into higher education. This means considering their key
de la vida process. This will give us insight into how parents come to understand higher education. What shapes their understanding of higher education? What are the gaps not being addressed? What is the danger of not addressing these? What might help ameliorate the mourning process that parents seem to be undergoing through the tristeza stage? What is prompting this? What is the role of the institution of education in helping parents feel that their children will be safe? Importantly for the parents in this study, how does their “illegality,” or their undocumented status impact their understandings and experiences with higher education?

Additionally, we must not only understand how parents continue to be involved and engaged in their children’s education, but also validate these behaviors, acknowledging how they may be different from mainstream perceptions of “helicopter parents.” Finally, we must consider how an increased understanding and awareness of higher education may influence how parents are involved and engaged in their children’s education, how it may ease some of their worries of acculturation and individualism, and how this may serve as a retention mechanism for first-generation Latina/o undergraduate students.

Parents Constructing Their Understanding of Higher Education

Similar to their experiences when they supported their children apply to college (as presented in Chapter 5), parents in this study reported limited knowledge about how higher education works. In other words, they knew very little about the experiences their children were going to have once they entered Coast University. This lack of knowledge frustrated parents. Not knowing much about the workings of higher education led some parents to imagine dangerous scenarios in their minds, often worrying about what their children were doing while they were away from home. Parents worried about the influence of their children’s new peer groups, the parties they attended and the alcohol and drugs present in
these, and that they would lose interest in their studies due to all the “freedom” and “liberties” they were given. This fear of acculturation, of their children adopting negative values and morals that contrasted with their own, distressed parents. Additionally, some parents reported wondering about campus climate and access to health services. Parents noted that not knowing what their children were going to experience or what services they had access to sometimes discouraged them from encouraging their children to apply to or attend certain institutions. This lack of information or misinformation has crucial implications for institutions’ yield efforts. Institutions (both K-12 and higher education) continuously misinform and uninform marginalized populations (e.g. communities of color, immigrant populations, low-income populations) thereby further driving these people to not trust and feel unsafe sending their children off to college. If institutions want to recruit more Latina/o students, they should also take into consideration how students’ parents perceive them; they need to do a better job of connecting with parents.

In order to cope with the frustration they experienced due to their lack of knowledge about higher education, parents constructed their own understandings of Coast University and of the life of students who attended the institution. Parents used their own experiences in higher education, conversations with their college-aged children, family, and friends, and visits to the institution to develop these understandings. Though limited, this construction allowed parents to not only realize that their children were transitioning into a new phase of their lives, but it also encouraged them re-think their role in their lives. To a certain extent, parents vicariously experienced higher education along with their children.

**Changes in Parents’ Apoyo**

Extant literature frames parental involvement and engagement in higher education as marginal (Daniel & Scott, 2001; Jacobs & Hyman, 2013). Parents are often seen as spectators
who should stand in the sidelines and allow their children to develop into responsible young adults (Daniel & Scott, 2001). Values of individualism imply that there should be a separation between the student and their family. Yet, such rhetoric fails to acknowledge the experiences of parents in this study who continue thinking of their children as part of their families. This study demonstrates that values of familism continue throughout students’ post-secondary studies. As this study illustrates, parents continue being parents who want what is best for their children. Thus, as parents develop their understanding of higher education and of the lifestyle of college students, they also change the way they show their apoño, intentionally adapting to their children’s new needs.

Parents use their constructed perception of higher education and their lived experiences to provide apoño to their college-aged children. For example, even though some parents did not attend college, neither in their countries of origin nor in the United States, they used what they call “life experiences” to offer their children consejos, or advice. Parents advised their children to be careful when going out to parties, knowing there were dangers such as date-rape drugs, because they had seen these instances first hand or had heard about them from friends or media stories. These consejos had a survival instinct component to them, which also recalled parents’ worry of safety described in the previous section. Similarly, when parents understood that the academic demands of college were at a different level when compared to the ones in high school, they motivated their children to continue studying. Parents did this by reminding their children of all the work and effort that allowed them to achieve matriculation into higher education.

Due to their social location—undocumented, low-income, non-English speakers, and lack of knowledge of the American college system—it could easily be assumed that the parents in this study had limited opportunities to be engaged in their children’s college
education. Yet, as the parents shared, they were engaged in different ways—offering different kinds of support. Parents provided their children moral support by motivating them when they were stressed, they provided financial support, and supported their children’s development by encouraging them to build networks of support, amongst other actions. Additionally, due to their undocumented status, parents took risks visiting their children at Coast University.

These behaviors challenge several notions of parental engagement in higher education. First, parents continue to be engaged in their children’s lives—they continue caring about them and show this care through different supportive behaviors, both explicitly and implicitly. Second, although all the parents in the sample were considered working-poor, they still managed to find ways to financially support their children. Essentially, this challenges the notion that parents from poor families are unable to support their children’s higher education pursuits. Instead, this shows that parents continue to provide essential apoyo to their children. This finding complements what has been documented in research on first-generation Latina/o undergraduate students, where they report the importance of their parents’ support and motivation. The actions and behaviors of apoyo described by participants derail from what is known as “helicopter parents.” Instead of demanding access to and control to their children’s college lives, the parents I spoke with just wanted to be better informed, wanted to know how to best support their children.

**Apoyo and Student Retention and Success**

In light of the finding that undocumented Latina/o parents continue to be involved and engaged in their children’s education, higher education institutions should employ strategies that partner with parents to support Latina/o students’ retention and success. Education systems need to do a better job in supporting parents of first-generation college
students understand how higher education works (Hernandez, 2000). Since the parents in this study did not attend college in the United States, they were unfamiliar with the different academic requirements, the importance of balancing academic work with service work, and the social importance of student organizations (i.e. affinity groups, Greek organizations, pre-service organizations). Without a basic understanding of how higher education works, parents risk developing a misconstrued notion of what their children are doing in college. As the parents in my study reported, they wanted to know what their children were experiencing. And when this did not happen, they would grow worried or frustrated. This, then, may lead to tensions and miscommunication between parents and children, where parents feel marginalized out of their children’s lives and to children who can feel overwhelmed by the stressors of family responsibilities in addition to academic demands (Lee, et al., 2000).

To prevent the tensions created by misinformation, or at least alleviate some of the stressors between parents and children as they transition from high school to college, schools can inform parents about the workings of higher education. This can happen at the high school or college level. Similar to college information workshops, where high school staff explain the different college systems and requirements to parents, schools can also develop these kinds of meetings once students receive their admissions letters. Schools can host guest speaker panels, inviting current college students and their parents to share their experiences. Through this, parents can have a second-hand understanding of what college entails and ask preliminary questions. At the higher education institutional level, colleges and universities might revise their parent orientation sessions to be more personalized. Specifically, for the parents of first-generation Latina/o students, colleges and universities should hold orientations sessions that are culturally relevant and linguistically appropriate.
(Hernandez, 2000; Hernandez & Lopez, 2004). Doing so will allow parents to develop more informed understandings and constructions of higher education.

The Continued Impact of “Illegality”

As the parents in this study described, their “illegality” continued to impact how they experienced their children leaving for college. For some parents, their children leaving their childhood homes triggered the trauma of leaving their countries of origin indefinitely. This added another layer of longing and sadness to their tristeza. For other parents, the risk of deportation prevented them from visiting their children at Coast University as often as they would have liked. The worry of being stopped, arrested, and deported while driving to visit their children, especially considering the nativist political climate they were living in, was numbing for parents. While they wanted to support their children, this fear caused them to be more careful and not visit as often, limiting their ability to provide apoyo as they would have liked. Additionally, parents also worried and feared their children did not focus on their studies because they were concerned about their parent’s deportability and safety.

The fears and barriers an undocumented status creates for parents of Latina/o students must be considered when reconsidering parental engagement in higher education. How can institutions be mindful of these barriers as they develop programming to support Latina/o families? First, they must realize that not all parents may be able to travel to the university for orientation or student drop-off. College and university can use their resources to have information sessions in cities closer to parents, where they do not have to travel as much. Second, institutions can publically declare themselves as “sanctuary” or undocufriendly33 campuses. This means that they publically declare they are welcoming to

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33 “Undocufriendly” college and university campuses are ones where the institutions demonstrate a proactive investment in their undocumented student population. This includes awareness of the particular barriers undocumented students face and the assets they bring with them to the campus (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015).
undocumented immigrants. Not only will this signal to the parents that they are welcomed at the institution, but, if they have undocumented children, it may also ease some of their concerns for their children’s safety. Third, higher education institutions should train their faculty and staff on the needs of mixed-status families, exposing them to the experiences of undocumented immigrants in the United States. Just as schools should consider how parents’ “illegality” shapes parents engagement with their children’s post-secondary schooling, they should also take into account the impact it may have on their students. In other words, in their recruitment and retention efforts, schools must also consider the additional stress, worries, and anxieties children of undocumented parents have and how it may impact their academics. Declaring a campus as “sanctuary” or undocufriendly is not enough. Schools must be proactive in assuring that their faculty and staff are aware about the experiences of undocumented Latina/o parents, as some of their students may be raised by them.

**Conclusion**

As first-generation Latina/o undergraduate students develop their understandings of higher education, experiencing firsthand the requirements, demands, and benefits promised by this feat, their parents also, vicariously, develop their own understandings. Immigrant parents of first-generation Latina/o undergraduate students, while often unfamiliar with the American higher education system, use limited glimpses, or windows, to develop their understanding of higher education. Parents use their own experiences in higher education in their countries of origin, experiences with older children, stories from extended family members or friends, or their conversations with their college-aged children to construct their understanding.

When their children leave their childhood homes for higher education, parents
negotiate their feelings of loss and pride. As this chapter presented, the *ley de la vida* process explains how parents experienced their children leaving their childhood homes for college. This process, though not necessarily linear, is contradictory in nature—while parents were extremely proud of their children for achieving their dreams and aspirations and enrolling in a prestigious university such as Coast University, they also mourned that their children left their homes. These sentiments were expressed by the stages, or states of mind, of tristeza, por su bien, and valio la pena.

As parents processed *ley de la vida*, they developed their understandings of higher education and what it meant to be a college student. When parents arrived at the valio la pena state, they came to terms with the fact that their children were growing up. As such, they also re-constructed their roles in their children’s lives, and specifically, their educational experiences. In doing so, parents altered their apoyo from those described in the Apoyo Typology in Chapter 5 to one that was less hands-on and more appropriate to their children’s developmental needs as developing young adults.
CHAPTER 7

Conclusion: *Apoyo Sacrificial* and the Reconceptualization of Parental Engagement

In an attempt to conclude this dissertation, considering how to tie together all the stories and themes that parents shared with me, I return to memories of my childhood. Specifically, I kept thinking about the Farmer John’s factory in Southern California, a staple landmark in my childhood. Just two miles away from my home, my family often drove past it on the way to the 5 Highway. I remember sitting in the back of my parents’ car after long swim meets, exhausted, sunburned, and hungry. Looking out the window, I knew we were about 5 minutes from home when we drove past the factory, past the murals of happy pigs being chased by farmers in massive, green farms. I always found it ironic that the pigs looked so happy, soaking in mud and eating corn, when the factory was their death scene. When my dad drove me to Roosevelt High School in East Los Angeles to take the SAT exam at 7 in the morning as a junior, I saw men walking from the bus stop or McDonalds across the street, coffees and lunch boxes in their hands, hard helmets on their heads, ready to start their work shifts at the factory. I remember noticing they were always all Latino and Black men.

I also remember community meetings about the factory. Parents from neighboring cities were concerned about the health effects that the chemicals coming out of the factory had on their children. For years, parents had been demanding L.A. County to hold the factory accountable for improving the quality of the chemicals they used. Nothing ever changed. Parents knew the air we were breathing was not good for us. To this day, the asthma and bronchitis rates in surrounding neighborhoods are alarmingly high; I have had life-long sinusitis issues. Most of the time, I would forget about the dangers of the factory

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34 Farmer John’s is a brand of pork products that is widely known for being the sausages the world famous “Dodger Dogs” use at Dodgers Stadium.
fumes. Until Tuesdays. Tuesdays were the days the factory slaughtered the pigs. We knew this because of the pungent, overwhelming smell. The smell reached my home. It literally hurt to breathe. The smell was so bad that when I was in high school, on Tuesdays, we were not allowed to have physical education classes outside. It was not safe for us. The Tuesday smell was a reminder that we were breathing toxic air.

When I returned to California for data collection during the winter of 2016, I stayed with my parents. I was on my third and final round of interviews with participants and I was running late to meet with Luz and Ricardo. As I stepped out of my childhood home, coffee and pan dulce in hand, a strong smell caught me off-guard, burning my nostrils. “Oh, it’s Tuesday!” I thought to myself, remembering the Farmer John factory. In that moment, I wondered how that smell, how the chemicals from the factory were impacting my father’s sinuses. For almost two weeks, my father’s sinusitis had been really bad, giving him nosebleeds almost every day and a couple of migraines. But I was running late. I had to drive a couple of miles out and wanted to beat the L.A. morning traffic. I got into the car and drove to the interview without thinking much more about the smell or my father.

I arrived to Luz and Ricardo’s home on time. As always, Ricardo had sliced mango with lime and tajín, a chili seasoning powder, and coffee ready for me. After catching up, sharing stories about the holidays, we began our third interview. At this point, these parents were very comfortable with me and were very honest about their experiences as Salvadoran immigrants living in Los Angeles. They asked me questions about what I had found out so far, about what other parents shared. As I told them some of the themes and preliminary findings, about the frustrations other undocumented parents described, Luz suddenly stopped me. “You know what?” she began, gritting her teeth:

This whole being illegal thing is like the pollution here in Los Angeles. You don’t always see it. You don’t always feel it. But you know it’s not good for you, you know
that it is hurting you and your kids. Slowly. And then there are days where you can actually see it. You see the thick layers of smog and fog. It is so bad that you can’t see when you drive. It becomes even more dangerous then. That is what being undocumented is like. You don’t always see how it affects you but you know that it’s there. That you can be deported any time. Sometimes you can ignore it. And sometimes you can’t. But you are living in it, getting sick from it. You hope that one day it’s going to get better, that it goes away and you get clean air. But part of you fears that will not happen. So you try to live in a toxic environment. You try to make it work.

As Luz shared these words with me, I immediately recalled the overwhelming smell from the Farmer John factory and felt a little uneasiness in my stomach.

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Luz’s words on my last visit to their home capture an overall theme that repeatedly emerged throughout this study. For the parents I spoke with, all undocumented Latina/os living in California, their immigration status was like the pollution that Luz described or my experiences with the Farmer John factory. Participants knew they were undocumented, they knew their status limited them in different ways, but their hyper awareness of these limitations varied by context. As Maria shared, “Sometimes, I am so busy running around from soccer game to work to the market to the doctor with the youngest and all that I forget I am undocumented.” Yet, the risk of being “caught,” of being deported, was always present. “But then, I am driving back home at the end of the day and if a police car stops behind me at a red light, my sugar levels rise. Even though I did nothing wrong, I remember I am undocumented and I can’t do anything to draw attention to myself,” shared Maria.

Parents learned to live with the fear and anxiety Maria described, almost normalizing it. They learned to navigate life in the United States. After their migration to the United States, they became somewhat integrated into American life: they worked, they made friends, they enrolled their children in school, they monitored their children’s academics, they joined
parent groups; they developed dreams and aspirations for their children, dreams of a better life for them.

In Chapter 1, I presented a conceptual framework that centered the importance of context in understanding the parental engagement of undocumented Latina/o parents. Based on the premise that parental engagement in education is essential for student wellbeing and academic success and that “illegality” significantly impacts the lives of undocumented immigrants, following Auberach’s (2007) work, I proposed that structure, culture, and agency intersect to frame undocumented Latina/o parents’ engagement in their children’s post-secondary planning and success. Based on this, this dissertation sought to answer the following questions: How do undocumented Latina/o parents engage in their children’s post-secondary planning and success? And, how, if at all, do parents perceive their immigration status influencing their engagement?

The answers to these questions are not simple. Each of the chapters in this dissertation has shown the ways the undocumented Latina/o parents in the study were similar to parents with some form of legal status. They wanted what was best for their children, they got frustrated when school systems discriminated against their children, and they were willing to give things up for themselves for the sake of their children’s wellbeing. Like other parents, their experiences with their children’s education were shaped by different factors: their relationships with teachers and counselors, their comfort speaking English in public, their relationships with their children, and their self-efficacy.

Yet, like the smog described by Luz and the anxiety that returned to Maria while driving, undocumented Latina/o parents’ “illegality” was also always present. As parents sought to support their children’s post-secondary goals and aspiration, their undocumented status created additional barriers for them and their children. In addition to facing the
barriers other immigrant and parents of colors face (i.e. unfamiliarity with American education system, language barriers, underresourced schools), the parents in this study were also constantly worried about keeping their immigration status a secret. Like Julie shared in Chapter 4, being undocumented was her family’s best kept secret—no one was to know. Similar to Julie and her family, other parents in this study lived hyper-vigilant lives. Their anxiety over their deportability hurt their physical and mental health, limited where they could travel, and limited their interactions with schools. Additionally, when their children were also undocumented, parents also worried about their safety and their ability to attend college.

The findings of this dissertation complement and expand existing knowledge of the ways an undocumented status becomes a “master status” for undocumented parents (Gonzales, 2015). In this dissertation, I show how this status specifically frames parents’ engagement with their children’s post-secondary planning and success. From the sacrificios parents made, including migrating to the United States for better lives for their children to driving them to extracurricular activities without a license, to geographically limiting their undocumented children’s college options, the limitations of this political status emerged in explicit and subtle ways.

Yet, these barriers, these sacrifices, were only one part of parents’ stories. Parents were determined to have their children fulfill their dreams and aspirations. One of the reasons why they migrated to the United States, leaving everything they knew—their families, careers, and resources—behind was so their families could have better life opportunities. For their children, this meant having access to a good education, including a post-secondary degree. Parents were willing to sacrifice for themselves in order to have their children accomplish this.
In this concluding chapter, I discuss the need to further reconceptualize family engagement in education research and practice to consider how “illegality” shapes the lived realities of undocumented Latina/o parents and the children they raise. Based on this study’s key findings, I propose that undocumented parental engagement is *apoyo sacrificial* (sacrificing support), or an engagement in schooling that is bounded by the politics of “illegality.” When reconceptualizing parental engagement to consider immigration status, *apoyo sacrificial* must be considered.

In what follows, I review key findings, followed by a discussion of *apoyo sacrificial* and how its conception further informs the field of parental and family engagement. I then offer practice, policy, and research recommendations based on these findings. Finally, I close with final thoughts on this project and its implications.

**Summary of Key Findings**

This dissertation, through the stories of 15 undocumented Latina/o parents whose children had successfully matriculated to the same prestigious institution of higher education in California, expands our understandings of the educational experiences of Latina/o populations and addresses three important gaps in educational literature.

First, this study centers on the experiences of *undocumented* Latina/o parents, addressing the question: How do parents’ immigration status impact their engagement in their children’s post-secondary planning and success? By paying particular attention to the consequences of parents’ undocumented status, this study demonstrates how “illegality,” as a master status, impacted the post-secondary trajectory of Latina/o students being raised by undocumented parents. Parents had to make different *sacrificios* when engaging in their children’s education.
Second, the experiences of participants demonstrate that undocumented Latina/o parents are not only engaged in their children’s K-12 education in different ways, but they also continue to be engaged in their children’s education beyond high school. As their children developed into their identities as college students, parents also developed their own understandings of and relationships with higher education. Parents also transitioned into their identities as parents of college students. This is a process I call *ley de la vida*.

Third, this study demonstrates that the ways in which the existing literature identifies the barriers both immigrant parents and parents of color face has not been enough to address them in practice. The parents in this study expressed a frustration in not having information to support their children as they were planning for college and once they matriculated. This shaped the kind of *apoyo* they provided and their self-efficacy. Additionally, their undocumented status created an additional and significant barrier, which must also be considered in parental engagement research and practice.

Using Auerbach’s (2007) conception of parental engagement, in what follows, I summarize the study’s key findings divided into the subcategories of structure, culture, and agency. While it is helpful to disentangle them by these categories, as Auerbach states, these three dynamics interact with one another to shape how parents are engaged in their children’s education.

“*Illegality*” Shapes the Social Structure Parents Face

Immigration laws create a social structure of belonging—laws determine who has access and is entitled to resources, and who can be considered a citizen of the nation-state. Most importantly for the participants in this study, immigration laws determine who is not a citizen and thus not deserving of rights and resources (Coutin, 2000; De Genova, 2002). This leads to a social structure that marginalizes, dehumanizes, and discriminates against
undocumented immigrants (De Genova, 2002). The participants in this study parented within and were bound by such a social structure.

For the participants in this study, their undocumented immigration created an additional barrier to everyday living. Parents’ decision to migrate to the United States led them to *vivir en sacrificio* (live in sacrifice). Due to context of their initial *migration sacrificio* (i.e. migrating with no permanent legal form of status and a broken immigration system), participants eventually became undocumented in the United States. As a result, they entered a political identity that became their “master status” (Gonzales, 2015). The consequences of this immigration status led them to live lives where, in order to accomplish their dreams and aspirations for their children, they continuously gave things up for themselves. As such, when engaging in their children’s education, they also engaged in *emotional sacrificios*—including feelings of inferiority when engaging with schools, clashing relationships with partners, the development of deportation plans, and depression—and *day-to-day sacrificios*—or prioritizing children’s expenses over their own, missing work to attend school events, and risking deportation while driving.

While parents’ immigration status limited undocumented parents’ engagement, the data also demonstrated that parents were intentional about the *sacrificios* they made; parents acted strategically within the limits the nation-state created. Parents engaged in *concerted sacrificios*, as they were intentional about involving their children in activities that fostered their growth and educational opportunities while navigating barriers created by their “illegality.”

In addition to creating every day barriers for undocumented parents, ones that parents learned to navigate, this study also shows the impact immigration-based polices, or the lack of, have on the lives of undocumented Latina/o parents. Changes in policies have
been found to have huge impacts on the lives of undocumented immigrants and their families (Abrego, 2018). For example, the parents in this study shared that being able to apply for a driver’s license significantly improved their lives—they were no longer driving to work or to pick up their children from school in fear. Similarly, parents reported how DACA improved the lives of their undocumented children. Small structural changes, small reliefs from the possibilities of deportation, significantly improved the lives of participants and their families.

**School Cultures Shape Parental Engagement**

Broadly defined, culture is a system of values and beliefs. As outlined throughout this dissertation, the culture in American schools is often foreign to Latina/o immigrant parents—when parents do not understand the cultures of schools, they have trouble navigating them. Additionally, when school professionals do not value the participation of Latina/o parents, do not develop relationships or partnerships with them, or think less of them and their children, parents feel a sense of animosity. The lack of communication and relationships between school personnel and parents creates situations where these professionals assume that parents are not engaged in their children’s education and parents think teachers and counselors do not care about their children.

As the experiences of the parents in this study show, there were different ways undocumented Latina/o parents were engaged in their children’s post-secondary planning and success. In other words, parents showed their apoyo to their children in different ways. During students’ post-secondary planning, when their children were considering and applying to college, all parents provided emotional support. Parents talked to their children about their post-secondary options and motivated them when they were taking the SAT or ACT exams. Some parents also provided instrumental support (i.e. money for applications,
drove children to SAT exams or scholarship interviews), informational support (i.e. advice about post-secondary planning, consejos, life advice) appraisal support (i.e. setting high academic expectations, helping students weigh the pros and cons of college decisions).

In this study, parents' understanding of their role in their children’s post-secondary planning was very much determined by the kind of support they believed they provided their children. As the Apoyo Typology showed, parents' ability to consider their support as essential varied. Their sense of self-efficacy, their relationships with their children’s schools, and their understanding of the American higher education system shaped differences between motivational supporters, confident partners, and uncertain spectators. Parents who reported having stronger relationships with schools (confident partners) were also the parents who felt more confident in their ability to help their children in school and their role in their children getting into college.

When their children matriculated into Coast University, the participants in this study had to recalibrate their role in their children’s education. As their children left their homes and matriculated into Coast University, parents made different sacrifices, which changed the nature of their apoyo. When their children started Coast University, their dreams and aspirations for them had come true. This was both a painful and rewarding, contradicting, emotional roller coaster. Parents experienced what I call the ley de la vida process: tristeza, por su bien, and valió la pena.

These findings demonstrate that not only are parents engaged in their children’s post-secondary planning and success, but that they also modify their engagement as needed. Thus, it becomes important for educational spaces (both K-12 and higher education institutions) to acknowledge, validate, and invest in this engagement. These findings show a need to change the culture of schools to be more inclusive of Latina/o families. In other
words, schools need to rethink the way they engage and partner with Latina/o parents and value the different ways they are engaged in their children’s education. Additionally, the experiences of the parents in this study showed that we also need to rethink of parental engagement as a K-16 endeavor between families and educators. Parents experience education alongside their children and continue to be engaged in their education beyond high school.

**Parental Frustration with Limited Agency**

Parents in this study reported feeling frustrated with not knowing how to support their children in their post-secondary goals and aspirations. When their children were applying to college and choosing an institution to attend, parents felt limited in their ability to help them throughout this process. This limitation impacted their parental role construction and self-efficacy. Parents with more understanding of the college process (confident partners) were more likely to be more confident in their ability to help their children. Parents with limited knowledge of the process (uncertain spectators) were less confident in their role.

The undocumented Latina/o parents in this study, like other parents of first-generation college-bound students, wanted more concrete and personalized information about post-secondary opportunities in the United States. Additionally, they wanted more information and clarification about the impact their undocumented immigration status would have on these opportunities. This was true for both the planning and selection process and what their children were going to experience once they attended Coast University. Parents wanted information about the difference between higher education systems, the different requirements they each have, the different tests their children had to take, and the importance of personal statement essays and financial aid packages. They
wanted to know more about the opportunities available for undocumented children. Some parents wished they were able to do a cross benefit analysis between the different institutions their children had been accepted to. They desired the information necessary to be able to have these conversations with their children and help them make decisions.

Similarly, parents reported being frustrated with their lack of understanding of what higher education in the United States entailed—they did not know about the lifestyle of college students. Parents wanted to know more about what their children were going to experience at Coast University, the kind of resources and supports they had access to, especially if their children were undocumented, and about general campus safety. Parents wanted this information in order to be able to better support their children in this new phase of their lives. Additionally, parents reported that having this information would have made their children’s transition out of their home less emotionally overwhelming.

### Apoyo Sacrificial: Reconceptualizing Parental Engagement

Taken together, the findings of this dissertation suggest that as a result of their immigration status, undocumented Latina/o parents have a particular and unique way of engaging in their children’s education: as a consequence of their *migration sacrificio*, undocumented Latina/o parents are in a social political position where their engagement is marked by their “illegality.” Thus, in addition to facing the barriers other Latina/o, low-income immigrant parents face, their experiences are further marked by the limitations of their immigration status; the nature of the sacrifices undocumented Latina/o parents make are shaped by this marginal status.

Thus, I contend that an additional form of support is missing when describing Latina/o parents’ engagement in their children’s education—*apoyo sacrificial*, or sacrificing support. *Apoyo sacrificial* are the engagement practices of undocumented Latina/o parents,
which are shaped by the limitations of their “illegality.” Though bounded by the nation-state, as the experiences of the parents in this study demonstrated, undocumented Latina/o parents were intentional about their sacrificios—they engaged in parenting practices that supported their children’s goals and aspirations. For example, apoyo sacrificial is related to the concept of concerted sacrificios presented in Chapter 3 in so far that concerted sacrificios are an example of how “illegality” frames parents’ desires and intentional decisions to have their children engaged in different extracurricular activities with the purpose of helping them in their post-secondary goals. Thus, concerted sacrificios are a form of apoyo sacrificial.

Just as parental engagement literature has shifted to reconsider and validate the particular ways parents of color, immigrant parents, and low-income parents are engaged in their children education, there is a need reconceptualize our existing understandings and models to consider the apoyo sacrificial of undocumented parents. The consequences and limitations of parents’ “illegality” not only shape their engagement with their children’s post-secondary planning and success, but it also shapes how they live their everyday lives. Apoyo sacrificial considers how the intersection of structure, culture, and agency determine the engagement of undocumented Latina/o parents.

Based on the findings presented above, the following section proposes recommendations for practice, policy, and research. These recommendations take into consideration the notion of apoyo sacrificial as essential in understanding how undocumented Latina/o parents engage in their children’s education, including their post-secondary planning and success.

**Recommendations**

This study offers many important lessons to educators, researchers and others committed to ensuring Latina/os realize their full potential in the United States. Specifically,
this study highlights the importance of considering the experiences of undocumented Latina/o parents raising Latina/o students. As such, my first recommendation is to actively listen to parents. I intentionally designed this dissertation to center the voices of undocumented Latina/o parents. From my personal and professional experiences, I have witnessed how parents’ voices are often marginalized or not taken into consideration when discussing students’ post-secondary planning and success. I witnessed my mother’s frustration when school counselors would not consider my summer swimming schedule as they enrolled me in summer courses. The parents I worked with in Oakland told me that the vice principal slammed his office door on them when they requested college workshops. Parents’ frustrations became my own. Additionally, even in parental engagement research, literature that proves the importance of parents’ engagement in their children’s post-secondary planning and success, parents are talked about rather than spoken with. Their role in their children’s education is deemed necessary, but the research that asks them about their opinions and desires for supporting their children in their post-secondary aspirations is limited. By actively listening to parents, engaging them in deep conversations about their dreams and aspirations for their children and how they see their role helping them accomplish this, we learn the intricacies of their engagement behaviors, the barriers they face, and their unique needs.

My second recommendation is to consider the significant impact an undocumented immigration status has on parental engagement. As existing research has shown, and the experiences of the parents in this dissertation have illustrated, the barriers that this immigration status creates have real life implications for undocumented immigrants and their families. These implications move beyond simply having or not having papers. This study has shown how these implications bleed into parents’ engagement in their children’s post-
secondary planning and success. If we are to be inclusive of the needs of all our students, then the needs of undocumented parents need to also be considered.

By considering *apoyo sacrificial*, these two recommendations—listen to parents and consider how their immigration status may impact their engagement—should prompt educators, practitioners, and researchers to do justice in supporting undocumented Latina/o parents and the children they raise. In the following section, I present more detailed recommendations on how to consider undocumented Latina/o parents’ *apoyo sacrificial* in their children’s post-secondary planning and success, translating the findings of this dissertation into actionable implications.

**Recommendations for Practice**

*Have Asset-Based Mindsets of Latina/os.* K-12 schools need to see parents as essential partners in supporting the education of Latina/o students, including their higher education aspirations. Similarly, schools need to believe that their Latina/o students are able to successfully apply to, matriculate into, and graduate from college. Thus, schools need to do a self-assessment of what their teachers, counselors, principals, and other school staff think of their Latina/o students and their families. If school personnel do not see Latina/o parents as caring for their children and validate the different ways they are engaged in their education (ways that may include out-of-school engagement behaviors), then superficial ways of attempting to engage them will not be successful and could potentially reinforced a narrow, fixed notion of Latina/o families educational interests.

Similarly, institutions of higher education should think of parental engagement in students’ higher education as a tool for student retention. As first-generation Latina/o students have shared in existing literature, their parents continue to motivate them during their college years. Schools should take this into consideration and move away from the
“parents-as-problems” or “helicopter parents” narratives. As higher education institutions work to develop programming and support for first-generation Latina/o students, they should consider inviting their relationships with their parents into these conversations.

*Make Schools Welcoming for Undocumented Latina/o Parents.* K-12 schools have the responsibility of making Latina/o parents feel welcomed in their schools. This entails considering parents’ language barriers, their limited understanding of how the educational system works in the United States, and their cultural values and norms. For Spanish-speaking parents, language barriers prevent them from attending school events. Sometimes, translators and interpreters are not enough. As Julie’s experiences show, her frustration with translators stemmed from their inability to fully translate for her. Instead of helping her during her parent-teacher conferences, she grew frustrated by knowing that she was not getting her points and questions across. Similarly, Alejandra felt dumb when engaging with a translator. Negative interactions with translators and language barriers, overall, kept these mothers from attending other school events. One way to address this is schools doing a better job in hiring translators—they can make sure that translators are not only fluent in Spanish, but are also familiar with the cultures of the different Latina/o populations in schools. Additionally, schools can also be intentional about hiring Latina/o, Spanish speaking teachers, counselors, and staff. This way, parents can relate to the staff they engage with, making them feel more comfortable attending schools.

*Increase Self-Efficacy in Post-Secondary Planning.* Schools have the opportunity to increase parental self-efficacy by helping parents understand and navigate American educational systems. As Bandura explains, there are different ways to influence self-efficacy: 1) mastery of experience, 2) vicarious experience, 3) social persuasion, and 4) somatic and emotional states (1995). Schools can invite parents who have already gone through the process to share their
experiences with other parents. Additionally, they can seek out these parents to not only assist other parents, but remind them that if they have already gone through this experience with one child, they are able to do it with their next kin. This is both mastery of experience and vicarious learning. Related to creating welcoming schools, schools should create and promote school cultures and environments where parents feel comfortable asking questions. This includes hosting forums about post-secondary opportunities. Schools can host college knowledge sessions, where they not only explain to parents and other family members the difference between higher education systems and the different requirements, but also invite parents to ask questions. Most importantly, schools need to explicitly remind parents that they are a key player in helping their children get into college (social persuasion). To build self-efficacy in this regard, schools should present parents with concrete action steps they can take to support their children’s post-secondary planning. This includes but is not limited to opening a savings account for them, talking to them about their personal statements and college lists, and monitoring their grades.

**Familiarize Latina/o Parents with College Culture.** The parents in this study were frustrated with not knowing what their children were going to experience at Coast University or about the resources they had available to them. Parents were especially concerned with their children’s safety on the college campus. Parents noted that this lack of information may have prevented them from encouraging their children to apply or attend certain institutions. Thus, parents’ lack of information or misinformation has crucial implications for the yield efforts of colleges and universities. College campuses have the responsibility of informing the parents of prospective students about their campuses—they should familiarize parents with resources available to their children on campus. Similar to the recommendations for K-12 schools, colleges and universities should be mindful that not all parents are likely to attend
orientations or move-in week events. Colleges and universities need to intentionally reach out to Latina/o families in culturally and linguistically appropriate ways. During open houses and orientations, colleges and universities should have Spanish-speaking Latina/o faculty, staff, and current students present to Spanish-speaking Latina/o parents. Additionally, schools can invite parents of current students to share their experiences and speak to parents in a parent-to-parent capacity.

*Be Visible Allies for Undocumented Immigrants.* Both K-12 schools and institutions of higher education need to inform themselves about the particular needs, barriers, and assets of undocumented immigrants. Schools need to train their staff to understand they may be working with students who are undocumented or who are part of mixed-status families. Professional development sessions and trainings informing staff about the circumstances undocumented immigrants face and how they impact their relationships with schools are essential. Parent engagement programming should take into consideration the limitations and barriers an undocumented states creates.

Additionally, schools (K-12 and higher education institutions) need to show they are allies to undocumented immigrant communities. Schools can declare their campuses “sanctuary.” These visible forms of support make families feel welcomed and safe in school spaces. Relatedly, college campuses should not only be “undocu-friendly” to their undocumented students, but include in the campus community undocumented parents as well. They should also be vocal about the supports they have for undocumented students on their campus so that parents are aware of them and feel more comfortable with their students attending these institutions of higher education.

**Recommendations for Policy**
Pass a Comprehensive Immigration Reform (CIR). Immigration laws kept parents in this study in a state of marginality—they are undocumented because the nation-state says they are undocumented. The current immigration system in the United States is broken. This is a phrase that is often said. Yet, the real-life implications of this “broken” system are often left out of political and policy discussions—immigration, writ large, is often discussed at the macro level, in economic and political terms (i.e. what the economic contributions of immigrants are or “building a wall” to keep them out). As the experiences of the parents in this study show, the repercussions of these conversations, ones that often exclude undocumented immigrants, significantly shape their lives. A comprehensive immigration reform, one that sets a pathway to legal permanent residency (LPR) and citizenship would significantly improve the lives of these parents and their families. With a CIR, the fears and anxiety their deportability creates would be gone.

Develop Immigrant-Friendly State Policies. Considering the lack of action from the federal government in regards to a pathway to legal permanent residency for undocumented parents, states have the ability to improve the everyday lives of their undocumented immigrant communities. States can develop policies that help alleviate some of the stressors of deportability and help them access basic social services such as health care and housing. California’s Assembly Bill (AB) 60 is one example of this. AB60 allowed undocumented immigrants to apply for driver’s licenses beginning in 2015. The parents in this study explained how being able to drive without the constant fear of being stopped by police officers, who could then possibly refer them to ICE authorities, significantly improved their lives. With a driver’s license, parents felt more comfortable driving to work, driving their children to school and to their extracurricular activities, and were more flexible in their scheduling.
Recommendations for Future Research

Consider Evolving Family Engagement. There is a need to explore how parental engagement shifts and changes as Latina/o first-generation students advance in and complete their post-secondary trajectories. Building from this study, which shows how undocumented Latina/o parents continue to emotionally and financially support their children when they begin their college careers, I recommend a more nuanced investigation of this process. How do Latina/o parents’ understandings and perspectives of higher education change as their children matriculate into, experience, and graduate from post-secondary institutions? Additionally, it is equally important to incorporate students’ perspectives into this conversation, comparing and contrasting parent and student perspectives. How, if at all, do students describe their parents’ engagement in their higher education?

Understanding Latina/o Mixed-status Family Dynamics. In this study, undocumented Latina/o parents were the unit of analysis, analyzing parent-child relationships from the parent perspective. I recommend extending this research to the family unit as a whole, including the perspectives of immediate family members (e.g. children and grandparents). Existing scholarship shows that the consequences of an undocumented immigration status are passed down from parents to children in the form of delayed early childhood development outcomes and has begun to explore the “pecking order” that exists between siblings who have different immigration status (Dreby, 2015; Yoshikawa, 2011). Yet, little is known about how inter-family differences in immigration status shapes family dynamics, specifically in regards to post-secondary aspirations, planning, and success. In response to this, I suggest the following questions: how, if at all, does “illegality” shape how different family members come to understand post-secondary education and planning? How do different family members experience the repercussions of parents’ undocumented status?
Study the Impact of Contemporary Political Climate. Data collection for this study occurred before and after the 2016 Presidential Election. During the open-ended interviews, parents brought up the nation’s political climate without being prompted. In particular during the third set of interviews, which took place in January 2017, parents openly and candidly discussed their worries and fears about the implications of their undocumented immigration status during the shift in presidency and how these shaped their parenting decisions. These fears were in great contrast to what they had discussed in previous interviews. Building from this, I propose further exploration of how the messaging of the nation’s contemporary political climate trickles down, shifts, and impacts the everyday lives of undocumented Latina/o parents. How are Latina/o families (including students) interpreting political climate messages? How are these impacting, shaping, or shifting their dreams and aspirations?

Final Reflections

As I sit here, attempting to conclude this dissertation, the uncertainty and anxiety surrounding immigration policy and the future of undocumented immigrants in the United States is palpable. The current political climate, under the Trump Administration, has scapegoated undocumented immigrants in violent, dehumanizing ways. As I attempt to keep up with and process news stories that cover ever-changing policy proposals and recommendations, I keep going back to the conversations I had with parents this past year. I return to their stories of migration and struggle in the United States, how they described often feeling unwanted, depressed, and discriminated against. I wonder how they, and their families, are doing, physically, emotionally, spiritually, under this political climate. It pains me to remember the fear in their eyes when we discussed the possibility of their deportation, their deportation plans, and the impact it would have on their families, especially their
children. Although, at the time of our interviews, this seemed like an unlikely scenario for parents, I wonder how many times they have now revisited these plans.

At the same time, I return to our conversations about their dreams and aspirations for their children. I recall how parents’ faces lit up with pride and joy when they shared their children’s accomplishments with me. I return to their smiles when they shared the different ways they supported their children — selling tacos, helping them choose interview outfits, and cheering them up when they were down or academically stressed. I return to their unconditional love for their children. These memories and stories, evoked during my interviews with parents, have become a saving grace, a source of hope during these turbulent times. They are reminders of the support immigrant Latina/o parents, undocumented or not, have invested in their children over generations. They are reminders of the sacrificio of my own parents. And because of these sacrificios, their sacrificio, it is essential that we, as educators, researchers, and community members, continue to support, uplift, and love our Latina/o students, parents, and families. We owe it to them. To the parents in this study, to our parents, and to the generations that came before us hoping for a better future for all of us.

It is easy to describe the parents in this study as resilient because they are resilient. Not only did they learn to navigate a foreign country, in a foreign language, but they also successfully supported their children into and through their post-secondary education, in spite of the limitations their immigration status created. Personally, “resilience” does not capture the essence of their parenting. Despite the barriers they faced, the parents in this study were proudly and successfully engaged in their children’s education. They practiced and embodied apoyo sacrificio. As educators, researchers, practitioners, and policymakers there is much we can learn from their engagement. It is time we sit down and listen.
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