Nothing for Us, About Us, Without Us, Dream Action Niu: (Re)formation of Undocumented and Mixed-Status Students’ Identities of Resistance

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NOTHING FOR US, ABOUT US, WITHOUT US, DREAM ACTION NIU:
(RE)FORMATION OF UNDOCUMENTED AND MIXED-STATUS
STUDENTS’ IDENTITIES OF RESISTANCE

SANDY LÓPEZ

228 Pages

Undocumented and mixed-status students often find themselves resisting in contested spaces at institutions of higher education. This project focused on how nine Latina leaders, whose advocacy spanned a little over a decade, produced identities of resistance at their predominately white college campus. This study captured the testimonios of the former Latina presidents and leaders of an undocumented student organization named DREAM Action NIU. Braiding together figured worlds, undocumented critical race theory, and Nepantla, we observed how las mujeres were agitated to action while residing in the figured world of their student organization. Their interactions in this space led to discourse which helped (re)shape their identities of resistance (activists, organizer, or leader), facilitate their understanding of agency, and ultimately exert their activist agency to create change on their campus. The Latina leaders partnered in the completion of this dissertation, which used an undocumented paradigm that recognized the value in honoring the richness of the undocumented community and uplifting the voices and experiences of those being researched as well as giving back the research to those who rightfully own it.

KEYWORDS: activism, cultural identity, higher education, identity formation, mixed-status college students, undocumented immigrants
NOTHING FOR US, ABOUT US, WITHOUT US, DREAM ACTION NIU:

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SANDY LÓPEZ

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of Educational Administration and Foundations

ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY

2022
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STUDENTS’ IDENTITIES OF RESISTANCE

SANDY LÓPEZ

COMMITTEE MEMBERS:
Beth Hatt
Stacy Otto
Luis Urrieta, Jr.
Tanya Cabrera
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to acknowledge the leaders, members, and community of DREAM Action NIU. This student organization fought for undocumented students and the immigrant community and decided their humanity was more important than the ignorance and intolerance of others. It is because of them and their advocacy that NIU is the undocumented-friendly campus it is today. To Yasmeen, Maria, Ivonne, Sara, Lizbeth, Erin, Laura, Dulce and Ainsley: I am honored to have advocated alongside you all for over a decade. I was blessed the moment I met you all and I am proud to be a part of the DREAM? Action NIU family. I am grateful to have you join this research project and make it ours and not mine! This was never about me— it was always about DREAM Action NIU and the undocumented community.

My sincere appreciation for your patience when teaching me how to advocate with and for others! To all the undocumented youth and adults, I have met and worked with, I love you dearly; you inspire me and, more importantly, hold me accountable when advocating with and for undocumented individuals. I am extremely thankful that I was invited into the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU. All the students who were a part of this organization not only changed the campus, but they changed my life and my family for the better. Thank you for teaching me how to honor the agency of young adults and to understand what it means to be an accomplice and not an ally.

For my family, Brian, Sofia, Tommy and Erin, thank you for helping me the past six years as you watched me write and stress over this dissertation. I am sad I missed so much of your lives these past years, but I promise we will make some great memories now that I am done. Brian, thank you for reminding me que soy hija de Eva when I was ready to quit. You are my oak and I am thankful to have you as my partner in every endeavor. To my little sister Tiffany,
who has helped me deal with the loss of mami, papi and my sister during this dissertation process. Mami made sure you and I would be tethered together forever.

To all of those in my many figured worlds: Soul (Sol) sisters, NIU sistahs, Cohort hermanas, López prima/hermanas, Bohlman sisters, my cohort siblings and all the other friends I have and love who are too many to list. You all have been the anchor I needed over the past six years, and I am eternally grateful to you all!

I want to also acknowledge my dissertation chair, Dra. Hatt, a mentor, muse and scholar – I do not have the words to express how much you have taught me and guided me through this process. I have only had one dissertation chair, but I know what you did for me and others is above and beyond what most chairs would do. I love you and am forever indebted to your kindness and the knowledge you gave me during this process. I know we will be connected long after this this dissertation is completed. Dra. Otto, thank you for the lessons you gave me during the past six years. You are an excellent educator and undeniably the best baker in EAF. Dr. Urrieta, thank you for your time and for writing a book that literally changed my life. You are an inspiration for me and for many educator activists in higher education. Tanya Cabrera, my ride or die, there is no one else I would want at my side when it comes to fighting for undocumented students. You are one of the most fearless mujeres I know when it comes to advocating for those we love. I am humbled and thankful to call you an hermana en la lucha.

There are so many powerful stories that need to be captured. I am honored that I was given the opportunity to collaboratively share the history of the guerreras and of DREAM Action NIU. As I helped share the testimonios of the guerreras I realized that I wanted to share my testimonio as the daughter of Evangelina López Casarez and Abel López Garcia so their history can be braided into this work. I lost both my parents since beginning this dissertation
process and I feel like those who are reading this should take the time to learn about two people who helped shape my identity. Their *consejos y educación* instilled a hard work ethic and pride in me about being a Méxicana in the U.S. They taught me and showed me how to stand up and fight for others and myself. The lessons learned keep showing up in my life as I try to honor them and their memories. Two of my favorite storytellers were my *mami y papi*. They were able to share the stories about their migration, their experience as migrant workers, and the racist-nativist encounters they had while they lived in this country. Mami was a tejana, she always told us “*Soy una de las vendidas de Santa Ana.*” I never understood what she meant by that, as we were never taught the history of México in school. I had to learn that lesson once I attended college. Papi was from México and always let you know he was Méxicano, “I ain’t trying to hide it” was a motto we came to associate with papi. Both of my padres took pride in their culture, language, and community. For this reason, I want to share the stories they were never able to tell. I had the honor of telling both of their stories when I wrote and read their eulogies. My mami passed away in December of 2018 and papi passed away a year and a month later from a broken heart as we entered a new year on January 1, 2020.

¡Para mi madre, Evangelina López Casarez y a todas las mujeres guerreras que luchan por sus hijos todos los días! ¡A mi querida madre que me enseñó a ser fuerte hasta la muerte y me dejó el ejemplo de cómo ser madre y guerrera!

S.L.
EVANGELINA LÓPEZ CASAREZ’S EUGLOGY

December 29, 1940 – December 6, 2018

Nuestra mami fue una mujer fiel, fuerte y llena de fe. Siento que todo el mundo tiene un recuerdo de mi mami. Fue una trabajadora desde sus días en los labores - Amá era fuerte desde bien chica, nos contaba que cargaba su moral de algodón y también el de mi tía. Ella siempre estaba cuidando de otros. Cuidó a sus hermanitos y hermanitas, los tres hermanos de mi papi, sus propio hijos, y nietos hasta visnietos. Así era mi mamá, siempre haciendo por los demás, abriendo su casa y corazón a todos.

She grew up with her 12 siblings in Laredo Texas. She worked as a migrant worker until she married my father in Fargo, North Dakota. She was married to my father for 54 years. When I asked her about that in June, she said – pensarlo es un coso...vivirlo está cabrón. They moved to Chicago Heights where she had five kids. She raised them and countless others. Our mom had so much love in her heart and made everyone feel as if they were her favorite. That was her magic; she raised her kids, her grandkids, and even some great grandkids. She loved everyone. Her heart and home were open to all, from cousins to friends and even strangers—she made them all feel at home and like family.

I know many of you know her either personally or via our many stories and shared memories. She was truly one of a kind; she has left a void in our lives that will never be filled. While we may find comfort in the love she leaves behind, there is only one Evangelina López.

Our mom had these amazing hands. Her hands were always warm like her heart. Esas manos—those hands that could roll a tortilla de harina in seconds, those hands that could put masa on an oja in three swipes when making tamales. Those hands that gave the best sobadas,
the best sculgadas de piojos, those hands that pulled you in for hugs that made you feel like everything would be okay. Our mom was a woman of faith and full of strength—she always told us to be strong and to be thankful to God for all that we have. Even during her final days as I prayed alongside her and at times broke down, she grabbed my arm and told me “hazte fuerte y dale gracias a Dios por todo lo que tienes.”

We will miss her calls and her consejos—ponte vicks, compra salarete, prende un vela, ponte a rezar—she had all the remedios. She had all the answers and leaves us asking many questions. Why her? Why now? What will we do without her? But she prepared us and gave us all the tools we need to be hard workers and loving human beings.

We have some peace in our hearts knowing that our mom is now with our brother after 24 years. She is finally with him and with God! Her faith never wavered, and she was never afraid to see God. Even until her final breath she was the example of a strong mother and filled with faith. She will live in our hearts, minds, and memories and one day we will see her again.

Nos vemos mami y te queremos mucho pero nosotros tenemos más trabajo que hacer. Nos dejaste un buen ejemplo y nunca vamos a llegar a tu nivel. Estamos tristes que se nos fue pero siempre vamos a dar gracias a Dios que nos dio nuestra madre. While we are heartbroken, she is gone, we thank God, we had her!

En su últimas semanas le dijo a mi papi – hay que ser fuerte hasta la muerte – ¡luego vamos a ver quien es quien! Y nos enseñó quien era -era una mujer fiel, una mujer fuerte y una mujer llena de fe.

Descanse en paz mami – siempre estarás con nosotros.

S.L.
Nuestro papi nació en Anahuac del estado de Nuevo Leon, México. Era uno de nueve y quería mucho a sus hermanos y hermanas. Papi siempre hablaba con much cariño cuando nos contaba historias de sus papás, sus hermanos y hermanas. Llegó a los Estados Unidos cuando tenía quince años. Aunque era residente permanente de los Estados Unidos, él siempre fue orgulloso de ser mexicano. Y así nos enseñó – puro orgullo mexicano.

He worked on a farm as a migrant worker. It was because of my tío José that he headed north to find work. He met my mother on a truck ride from Laredo, Texas to Minnesota. While they only lived less than 40 miles apart it wasn’t until that truck ride going north that they met. The next year the truck went north again, they were on their way to getting married. They wed in Fargo, North Dakota, and celebrated 54 years of marriage together on this earth. On July 25th they will celebrate 56 years of marriage together in Heaven. I remember my mami bragging about the time papi worked a cotton gin. Nobody knew how to work the cotton gin but papi did. It meant more money and that she and my tíos could go to the movies instead of working in the fields.

They moved to Chicago Heights after they found out mami was pregnant. While they had five kids together our house was always full. I remember my prima Juana telling me “Sandy, everyone stayed at your house when people came from Laredo from México. Sí, allí se quedaban,” they filled up our house. Looking back, we always had people living with us. If you know my dad, our dad. If you know our dad, you know he had a kind heart. Our dad always let homeless people live in our garage or in our basement. I remember driving with him to Laredo
one time and he said, “pull over, pull over” and he hopped out of the car to buy a homeless guy a sandwich. That was our papi. He gave what he had to those who needed it more.

Papi also loved to make people laugh but if you made fun of him—he was quick to tell you that wasn’t funny. “That wasn’t funny!” He always kept himself busy reading newspapers, Louis L’Amour books, or the little western books he would buy from the tiendas mexicanas; you know the ones. He loved to watch Westerns, Gunsmoke, or anything with John Wayne.

He was also a big sports fan. I remember watching lots of boxing matches and lots of baseball games—but ONLY the CUBS, don’t even mention that other team to him. When the Cubs won the World Series it felt like papi had won too! We all celebrated with and for him. He not only loved watching baseball, he also loved to play the game. He started a team called Los Bravos. So many of us remember countless weekends full of baseball games. I know a lot of our primos remember those because many of them were recruited to be on the team.

My father wasn’t always super religious, but he had faith. It was when my sister and my mom got diagnosed with cancer, I remember seeing him pray more openly. I can still see him on the edge of his bed with that bright light on (because he always took off the lampshades). The light was so bright as he sat there and his little hands would shake as he read from the Bible or prayers, he had folded up next to his bed, ¡aunque se veía tan pequeño su fe era grande!

Después de que perdimos a mami el año pasado, papi comenzó a llamar a todos por celular. He called us every day to check in with us. It wasn’t until this past month that I realized he called a lot of people. His list was long and he was up early shouting into his phone to check in with those he loved. I still have no idea how he got all of those numbers on his phone. He never seemed to figure out the phones we bought him. And while he would check in often, it took him four or five attempts before he could make the call successfully. I can’t count how
many times we all were hung up on repeatedly so that we could have a 45-second conversation with papi. The conversations were usually short and sweet—just like him.

When Sonia asked him why he never said good-bye when he finished talking to us, he said, “Well I’m going to see you again. Why should I say goodbye?” And we know that we will see him again, aunque estemos tristes de que se nos haya ido, deberíamos consolarnos sabiendo que mami y papi están juntos y han encontrado un rinconcito en el cielo.

Descanse en paz papi. Siempre estarás con nosotros.

S.L.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS FROM THE GUERRERAS DE DREAM ACTION NIU

I would like to acknowledge all the founding members of Dream Action NIU for their work in building up this organization. To all the students and faculty past and present who have had a part in fundraising, advocacy efforts, you all have played a part in making Dream Action what it is today. This organization was built and is maintained by our community. – Yasmeen

We stand on the shoulders of giants. Student advocacy at NIU wouldn’t have been possible without our family and community who taught us resilience, former NIU students who taught us about organizing, and faculty and staff who co-conspire with us every day. We are community-made. – Maria

I would like to acknowledge Adam Lopez, who passionately and openly expressed his and the community's frustration regarding student access. It was beautiful to see a room full of students at the Latino Resource Center Room 100 who responded to the call to action on Thursday, April 4th, 2013. Adam did and will continue to inspire me. – Ivonne

I would like to acknowledge the strong women that came before me that shaped who I am: Mama Maria, Martha, Sandy, Eva, and María de los Ángeles – Erin

Gracias a mi mamá y mi papá por querer darnos una mejor vida. Los quiero mucho. To my siblings for giving me love and knowledge. I love you both. Y para mi chosen family por siempre apoyarme con mucho amor. Los quiero para siempre. – Dulce

Quiero dedicar esta obra a mis papás y mi hermanita, Sabrina, porque sin su apoyo y porras, yo no podría seguir esta lucha, los quiero mucho. I would also like to acknowledge my
support system, who are also a part of my story. You all continue to give me the strength to tell my story and to be empowered by it; I love you all. – Ainsley

All my love and gratitude to each person we fight for in this movement. Y’all are who move every student activist on college campuses across this nation. My admiration and respect to all the compañeros who came before me, who laid the foundation for all our advocacy efforts at NIU. Gracias to every single person who has been a part of DREAM Action NIU, you belong to a legacy that has now transcended beyond Northern Illinois University – Lizbeth

To start, I want to express my appreciation to Sandy for allowing us to contribute to her dissertation collaboratively. I feel honored to have my experiences as part of DREAM Action documented and hope this work guides current and future generations of immigrant youth. To the members of Immigrant Youth Justice League, whose courage and vision inspired both me and a whole generation of undocumented youth to challenge all forms of injustice. To my friends, thank you for believing in my dreams and for showing up for the movement in big and small ways. Special thanks to my siblings—Erica, Mar, Lesly, Efrain Jr., and Melanie—who always supported my organizing work and participated in protests with me. To my husband, Fernando: our love serves as a sanctuary where I can exist without the limitations of my immigration status. To my mother, Rita: thank you for your love and support of my organizing work even when this work took me far away from home. To my grandma Margarita: your love and spirit are with me always. – Laura

I'm forever indebted, first and foremost, to my parents, who risked everything to come to a country that did not love them back. They were my first teachers and they taught me to never
give up and to *siempre luchar por mis sueños*. To Sandy López, thank you for being one of my grounding forces at NIU—your advocacy, your guidance, and the deep love you have to support ALL students is unwavering.

To the Immigrant Youth Justice League and undocumented young people—thank you for your bravery, your friendship, and your vision; it’s through your guidance that I learned to be the organizer that I was.

To all those who have put in their *granito de arena* into DA NIU throughout its existence, thank you. I may not know all your names but it’s because of the labor—both big and small—that was put in that it made DA NIU the space it needed to be. Thank you, thank you, thank you to all those who I struggled, organized, and also laughed with throughout my years at NIU/DA NIU; you all bring so much joy into my being – Sara

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We do this because the world we live in is a house on fire, and the people we love are burning. - Sandra Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street*

It’s a crisp morning in February as I drive an hour from my house in the western suburbs to my parent’s house in Chicago Heights. I need to drive an additional 45 minutes to Michigan City, Indiana, to take my father to a U.S. Citizen and Immigration Services (USCIS) Application Support Center from their home. I vividly remember this day when five Northern Illinois University (NIU) students were gunned down in Cole Hall.¹

We have an appointment because my dad’s Legal Permanent Residency (LPR) card is expiring, and he needs to renew it to receive his retirement benefits. We have difficulty finding the office located in Dunes Plaza, an almost vacant strip mall. The letters above the double glass doors read Application Support Center and do not reference USCIS, which confuses us both. After driving around a few more times, we realize this must be the place.

The front of the building consists of a row of windows with two possible entrances. We approach the first glass door and read a sign stating to use the double doors and walk to the right to enter the building. I am pleasantly surprised that we are the first ones to arrive. I immediately notice the American flag and the row of chairs lined up against the windows. There are desks and some office partitions stationed towards the back, and we make our way to speak to the only employee in the space at the moment.

The woman working in the office that day looks up as we enter and looks annoyed that we are interrupting her morning routine. She asks us to sit down, and my father hands her his

¹ https://www.niu.edu/forward/_pdfs/archives/feb14report.pdf
paperwork. My dad, a tiny man who only stands at 5’2”, with trembling hands that may be due to early stages of Parkinson’s or years of drinking, keeps saying “pardon me” while cupping his shaking hand up to his ear as she asks him questions. He is hard of hearing and comprehends more of what he hears if spoken in Spanish. I begin to translate for my father.

My attempt to assist my father turns out to be a huge mistake. The woman barks at me, “Does he speak English?” I respond, “Yes, but he is hard of hearing, and he seems to hear better in Spanish.” She responds with disdain, “Well, he has been here long enough. He should be fine with English.” She continues to scowl at us as she turns to yell to the people entering the office to take a number and a seat. As I look at her cluttered desk with stacks of paper piled high and her tight workspace, I realize that this woman has all the power, and I have none. I tell her I need to run to the restroom. She does not look up from her keyboard and points me in the direction of where I need to go.

I walk down a short hallway and into the bathroom with three stalls and begin to cry. As tears stream down my face, I pray to God and ask him to grant me the strength to help my father. I also pray for restraint so I do not hop across the desk and choke the woman. I wash my face, grab a cardboard-like paper towel from the dispenser, and wipe my face with what feels like sandpaper. I give myself a pep talk in the mirror and tell myself I will have to win her over with a smile and pleasant voice, and no matter what, I cannot challenge her. I let out a slow breath and brace myself for what will come as I exit the bathroom.

My father and I do not always get along and have had a problematic relationship since childhood, but he is my father and is not in the best of health. He has just beaten prostate cancer and only weighs about 120 pounds. Seeing him treated so harshly, as he tries his best, sparks a protective instinct in me that I did not realize I held for him. I tell my father in Spanish, “Tragate
esta mierda y despues vamos a comer para quitarnos este sabor de la boca” (swallow this shit and then we will go eat to get this taste out of our mouths). My dad and I “play nice” and leave, not knowing if his LRP card will be renewed. We drive away with much less energy than when we walked into the building. He lightens the mood by saying, “Thank God you came with me and not Corina (my older sister). Corina would have punched her. Then what would happen to me? I would be on my way to Mexico.” We both laugh and head to eat lunch.

The day I just described marks when I began to advocate for the immigrant community. It was then that I entered la lucha and swore I would not stand by and let people be dehumanized and disrespected as the woman had done to my father and me. I vowed to help the immigrant community. Shortly after that incident, I began volunteering at citizenship workshops, where I helped residents fill out the N-400 application to become U.S. citizens. In 2010, after I had started to volunteer for the immigrant community, I transitioned to a new job at the Northern Illinois University (NIU) Center for Latino and Latin American Studies (CLLAS) as the Assistant to the Director. Opportunities arose for me to advocate alongside undocumented students and the immigrant community through my work with CLLAS and my interaction with a student organization for undocumented students and allies called DREAM Action NIU.²

DREAM Action NIU increases awareness about the multiple obstacles undocumented students face on campus. Members share the belief that higher education is a fundamental human right for all, regardless of citizenship status. They strive to develop strategies to ensure that these students can attain a degree in higher education and achieve academic success. They also aim to

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² DREAM Action NIU is a Northern Illinois University student government-recognized student organization that aims to increase awareness about the multiple obstacles undocumented students face on campus.
provide accurate information to the university so it is better equipped to serve this population. In December 2010, I sat in the Latino Center and watched with NIU students as Congress failed to pass the Federal Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act (DREAM Act). I later learned I had been sitting with students from DREAM Action NIU. The following spring of 2011, I was asked to become one of their advisors. This NIU student organization was established in 2009 by two NIU student accomplices to the undocumented community. In the first year of its existence, the organization met mainly to offer undocumented students and allies a safe space. It was not until 2011 that undocumented students took leadership positions and the organization began to unapologetically push for change.

Throughout the last decade of doing advocacy work, my passion for immigration advocacy has not waned. As of August 2018, I began to serve as the Coordinator for Undocumented Student Support at NIU. My job only exists because of DREAM Action NIU students’ advocacy and demands beginning in 2014, which I will describe in more detail later in the dissertation.

As a final introductory note to this dissertation, my degree and this research are very personal. I will unapologetically write and infuse my lived experiences alongside the stories of those directly affected (with their permission) into this written work. I unabashedly embrace the fact that I, as a daughter of a borderland mother and an immigrant father, as well as the students of DREAM Action NIU, are knowledge creators (Archibald, 2008; Delgado Bernal, 2002;  

3 The DREAM Act, also known as the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act, was introduced on May 11, 2011, in the Senate (S. 952) by Sen. Dick Durbin (D-IL) and 32 fellow senators. The DREAM Act would permit certain immigrant students who have grown up in the U.S. to apply for temporary legal status and to eventually obtain permanent legal status and become eligible for U.S. citizenship if they go to college or serve in the U.S. military.
Freire, 1972; Quijano, 2000; Smedley, 1998). The knowledge I have and create is a testament to the cultural knowledge shared with me por los consejos y educación de mis padres y abuelos. Their life lessons and ways of knowing will continue with me, my children, and my activism. These life experiences brought me to my current dissertation topic on the activism carried on by undocumented students and students from mixed-status families.4

**Background of the Study**

When institutions of higher learning enroll undocumented students, these students are denied full access and participation at their institutions due to the racism, exclusionary policies, and inequities they face (Chang, 2018; Darder & Torres, 2014; Gonzales, 2016; Prieto, 2018). For example, undocumented students are not afforded the same funding, student employment, and research opportunities (Alonso Bejarano et al., 2019; Chang, 2018; Chomsky, 2014; Gonzales, 2016). Furthermore, many college campuses do not have a dedicated undocumented student support person, or an office designed to support undocumented students (Emerson, 2021). Special support services are necessary because undocumented students are simultaneously attempting to maneuver around obstacles such as immigration and labor laws, fear of deportation, financing college without access to federal financial aid and loans, hostile anti-immigrant political and campus climates, and trying to remain hopeful in the face of very uncertain futures.

During the past decade, I have witnessed undocumented students’ inability to fully participate on campus. Many of these students commute because they cannot afford to stay on campus.

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4 According to Mass et al. (2016), “mixed-status families consist of at least one family member without documentation and at least one member with documentation.”
campus or they work, sometimes multiple jobs, which often deny them the opportunity to build
community with their peers and professors on their college campus. This lack of belonging and
extenuating circumstances outside the classroom can result in students struggling academically,
lowering retention and graduation rates (Hurtado et al., 2015).

In addition to their second-class status on their campuses, undocumented students also
battle against interlocking systems of oppression in the educational system as a whole.
Undocumented and mixed-status students are marginalized through an educational system that
subscribes to the hegemonic narrative of “illegal alien” as well as dehumanization and the
devaluation of their language, culture, and humanity, which are used to dominate and keep
immigrants in a subordinate position in this country (Delgado Bernal, 2002; DeNicolo &
Gonzalez, 2015; Pérez Huber, 2009b; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Trucio-Haynes, 2000).
Exposure to a myriad of -isms can lead to deficit thinking, assimilation, and internalized
oppression. These issues are complex due to intersecting identities (Crenshaw, 1989) based on
race, ethnicity, culture, language, and immigration status (Darder & Torres, 2014; Menchaca &
Valencia, 1990; Trucios-Haynes, 2000). In sum, undocumented students face immense structural
barriers that can only be survived by finding ways to improvise around or destroy these barriers.
They may also struggle to name living between worlds and in third spaces, or what Anzaldúa
calls Nepantla (Keating, 2005). They are what she considers nepantleras in that they move
between these worlds and experience cultural choques, which can bring about change that may
be good or bad for them and their families (Anzaldúa, 1987).

While there has been fear in the immigrant community for many years, it intensified
during the 45th president’s era. During the four years of Trump’s presidency, I felt fear for
family, students, and community members as we faced over 400 executive orders affecting
immigrants (Migration Policy Institute, 2021). The immigrant community was set on fire. Many rushed to help put out the flames that a white supremacist presidential agenda had stoked by spouting racist nativist messages continuously since 2015 leading up to the 2016 election and during the entire 45th president’s tenure via social media (Galindo & Vigil, 2006; Gomez & Perez Huber, 2019; Young, 2017).

So how do undocumented and mixed-status students start to understand their agency in the face of such overwhelming systemic forms of oppression that create a sense of liminality where they are ni de aquí ni de allá (Anzaldúa, 1987)? According to Urrieta (2009), agency is the ability of people to act to their surroundings, while activist agency is infused with a person’s identities and how they respond to precarious experiences or situations. Prieto (2018) notes, “Mexican immigrants often seek to inhabit, not challenge, those institutions that are responsible for their subordination” (Conclusion, America’s Hypocrisy section, para. 10). I argue that this is not always the case for undocumented young adults at higher education institutions, especially those I have worked with and advocated alongside at NIU since 2010 (Chang, 2018; Muñoz, 2015; Tuck & Yang, 2014).

Still, some of these undocumented and mixed-status student activists struggle to recognize their activist agency as a daily practice that stems from “community and personal cultural resources, social networks and leadership roles” (Urrieta, 2009, pp. 90–91). Many recognize their activist agency during their last two years on campus and after joining DREAM Action NIU. These students confront many -isms, including racism, nativism, anti-immigrant legislation, and colonization (Chomsky, 2014; Gonzales, 2016; Molina, 2014; Pérez-Huber, 2010).
Research Problem

Through my work with DREAM Action NIU, I have witnessed many undocumented students and students from mixed-status families advocate for themselves and others. While some students arrived at NIU knowing they have power due to some of their organizing experience with immigrant rights organizations, many did not discover this power until they began to work with students from DREAM Action NIU. I have witnessed the transas they conducted to advocate for themselves and others. According to Urrieta (2009), transas are moves made by people with less authority to survive oppressive structures. Some students shift from feeling uncertain about what they can and cannot ask for to behaving boldly and unapologetically in their demands for equity. For example, Briseño Torres, a former DREAM Action NIU president, boldly reminded the NIU president and administration that undocumented students could no longer be kept in the shadows (S. Briseño Torres, personal communication, March 27, 2015). In 2016 the DREAM Action NIU president, Cholula Vivaldo, reminded local state representatives that they were NIU’s cash-paying students who left the university with zero to very little debt: “We are NIU’s best customers” (L. Cholula Vivaldo, personal communication, April 11, 2017).

As a result of my experiences with DREAM Action NIU students, this research focuses on the following question:

• How do undocumented and mixed-status students’ participation within the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU produce identities of resistance?

I have observed some of the undocumented and mixed-status student leaders of DREAM Action NIU shift from not realizing their power to becoming student and community activists. This experience has empowered me as a professional, an advisor, and an activist. Being a witness
to these transformations tethers me to these students for the rest of our lives. I am unashamed of my love for these individuals as students and fearless activists. The work we have done together and the pain we have processed individually and collectively has created a family of DREAM Action NIU members that lasts beyond their time at NIU.

My research differs from previous work because of my unique position and relationship with the undocumented and mixed-status activists of DREAM Action NIU. I am grounding this research in a post-critical frame to center the voices and knowledge of those directly affected that will allow for the “participants” to function as “co-researchers” while also being open to critique of myself as the researcher (Noblit et al., 2004). Alonso Bejarano et al. (2019) contend that anthropology’s practices of ethnography focus on learning about the lives of others without letting them benefit from the research conducted on them. Furthermore, those directly affected need to be a part of the process and the research results should be as useful for the participants as they are for the researchers (Alonso Bejarano et al., 2019). We must find a way to merge research with activism and social justice to help create change for those who participate in this research. Latz and Mulvihill (2017) remind researchers who “enter a community from the outside” that research needs to be done in collaboration “with” and not “to” those who are the focus of the study. Simultaneously, researchers must be willing to critique themselves and be open to critique from participants or co-researchers (Noblit et al., 2004). For these reasons, I purposefully am taking a participatory approach to my research.
Research Methodology

Until the lions have their storytellers, the story of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.

Ngugi wa Thiong’o, 2017

This quotation captures the driving force of this dissertation and the importance of centering the voices of those who lived the experiences and not those of the researcher. Since enrolling in this doctoral program, I have been reminded time and time again that those who are directly affected need to be the ones telling their stories. Aguilar (2018), the founder of UndocuCrit, asserts, “stories belong to those who live them” (Aguilar, 2018). Aguilar’s quotation, along with Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s epigraph, highlight the importance of who is doing the storytelling and describing their version of reality. In 2017, the president of DREAM Action NIU told me, “I am tired of people taking from us; they take our stories and use it in their research and their books and give those who have done the work none of the credit” (Laura Vivaldo Cholula, personal communication). Her statement stuck with me and so I have made every effort to ensure this research will not do what she and many other students have expressed when researchers who they never see ask for their participation in studies that do not directly benefit them.

I aimed to do this qualitative, confianza-based research study to validate students’ activism and credit them for the heavy labor they did and continue to do as activists at NIU. In the true spirit of using a decolonized methodology, I wanted to give the “lionesses” of DREAM Action NIU the ability and space to tell their stories. By honoring their work and knowledge, we hope to inspire others, both students and those who work at institutions of higher education, to either continue or begin to challenge inequitable practices on their college campus, in their community, state, and at the national level.
We, the co-researchers and I, gathered oral histories, testimonios, and artifacts to capture the experiences of nine alumnae who were leaders of DREAM Action NIU. The Latina leaders of DREAM Action NIU conducted an interview and were interviewed by another former leader. They were then part of a group interview, a plática. While our study focuses on Latina undocumented students, being undocumented is not solely a Latinx\(^5\) issue. Although 53\% of the unauthorized immigrants in the United States are from Mexico, In Illinois the top languages utilized by undocumented immigrant communities include English, Spanish, Polish, Chinese, and Tagalog (Gelatt & Zong, 2018). I work with students from 24 different countries; most of the students who are active members of the student organization, DREAM Action NIU, are from Latin America and the majority of the leaders are Latinas.

Our research differs from previous work because of my unique position and relationship with the undocumented and mixed-status activists who are members of DREAM Action NIU. I ground our research in a post-critical paradigm in order to uplift the voices and knowledge of those directly affected that will allow for the “participants” to function as “co-researchers” while also being open to critique of myself as the researcher (Noblit et al., 2004). Alonso Bejarano et al. (2019) find that current practices in anthropology’s practices of ethnography focus on learning about the lives of others without letting them benefit from the research conducted on them. Alonso Bejarano et al. (2019) ask that those directly affected be a part of the process and the results of the research be as useful for immigrants as the results are for the researchers. We must not just make research findings palatable for academics but also find a way to merge research with activism and social justice to help create change for those who participate in this

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research (Alonso Bejarano et al., 2019). Latz and Mulvihill (2017) remind researchers who “enter a community from the outside” that research needs to be done in collaboration “with” and not “to” those who are the focus of the study. Simultaneously, researchers must be willing to critique themselves and open to critique from participants or co-researchers (Noblit et al., 2004).

As a final aspect of my research, I hoped to develop something collaboratively with the alumnæ, such as an activism handbook that can be used to support undocumented student activism on other college campuses. The idea of a handbook has changed after hearing from my co-researchers and how they want to share this knowledge with other undocumented and mixed-status students. More details regarding the methodology will be discussed in Chapter IV. Next, I will discuss the theoretical frameworks that guided my research.

**Theoretical Framework**

I utilize a *trenza* metaphor to construct my theoretical framework. The *trenza* metaphor can braid together different methodologies and uplift the knowledge and experiences of those who are the focus of a research study (Quiñones, 2015). The weaving of frameworks is necessary for this study about undocumented and mixed-status alumnæ from DREAM Action NIU because undocumented identities are complex and become even more layered when adding activist identities. One theoretical frame was not enough and was too limiting to understand the co-researchers’ lived experiences individually and collectively. The three theoretical concepts I have chosen, when woven together, more appropriately center co-researchers’ knowledges and invite them to be active participants in this research done for and about them, but most importantly with them.

For this qualitative study, I braided together analytical concepts from Nepantla, Figured Worlds, and Undocumented Critical Race Theory (UndocuCrit) to construct the theoretical
framework. Nepantla is a Nahuatl word that describes the space between two worlds; while it can be uncomfortable for some, it can also be a transformational space. Anzaldúa (2002) elucidates that it becomes a space inhabited most of the time for some people. It is a place where questioning happens and those in the space try to make sense of the identities people hold, their knowledge, and culture. Anzaldúa also reminds us that this liminal space can bring about change and be confusing and cause some of its inhabitants anxiety. As the first in my family to attend college, I relate to the feelings I heard some of the students express with how they feel about their college and campus experiences. It was not until classes in graduate school that I learned about the concept of Nepantla, which truly spoke to my lived experiences as a Latina in higher ed.

A second theoretical framework, Figured Worlds, is conceptualized as a “historical phenomenon” where people develop their identities in relationship to their interactions with others and artifacts in a shared space (Holland et al., 1998). People can either enter freely or can be recruited. I want to explore how the students of DREAM Action NIU enacted contentious practices that Holland and Lave (2009) call “the encounters between people as they address and respond to each other while enacting cultural activities under conditions of political-economic and cultural-historical conjuncture” (p. 3), because of their interactions and shifting in these spaces while at NIU. Utilizing Figured Worlds as one of the theoretical concepts to construct my theoretical framework will allow me to understand DREAM Action NIU as a figured world and the ways students’ identities are shaped within the organization.

I chose UndocuCrit as the final theoretical strand to complete the theoretical framework braid because it honors the experiences and recognizes the different realities of undocumented individuals and, to some extent, mixed-status families. Undocumented Critical Theory
UndocuCrit has roots in LatCrit and Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit). Like TribalCrit, it respects “the multiple, nuanced, and historically and geographically located” ways of knowing and realities found within undocumented communities in the United States (Aguilar, 2018). Those who employ UndocuCrit aim to illuminate how undocumented individuals’ intersectionality and social and political experiences differ depending on local, state, and federal contexts. I will define my theoretical framework in depth in Chapter IV.

Decolonizing Knowledge

Due to the lack of parity on their campus, las mujeres de DREAM Action NIU became advocates and created change at the individual, collective, and campus levels. To honor them as knowledge producers and do this research for and about the immigrant community, I followed the example of Indigenous scholars and attempted to decolonize the paradigm and methodology I used to conduct this study. I centered the concerns, issues and knowledge of the undocumented and mixed-status students’ experiences and committed the work we are doing to this community (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). I also realized that I had to acknowledge the erasure and genocide of Indigenous people while avoiding the recentering of whiteness and extending innocence to the settlers (Tuck & Yang, 2012). I focused on the following questions that I answer in the following chapters:

Whose research is it? Who owns it? Whose interests does it serve? Who will benefit from it? Who has designed its questions and framed its scope? Who will carry it out? Who will write it up? How will its results be disseminated? (Smith & Tuck, 2013; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012)

As I thought about these questions and what it means to honor las mujeres de DREAM Action when gathering their testimonios, I realized I wanted to make sure I was decolonizing
what is considered knowledge and moving from an individual way of conducting research to a collective process where there was shared process and ownership, moving from focusing on the individual to a focus on the collective. I included the students in the research to counter some of the current research practices about undocumented student activism taking, silencing, and monetizing their experiences in higher education. Las mujeres from this organization were solicited to participate in other research projects or saw their friends’ stories in other research and often they were not compensated for their time. However, on several occasions, research focused on the lives and activism of undocumented immigrants has been shared with their consent (S. Briseño, personal communication, November 22, 2013).

Outline of the Dissertation

Eight chapters comprise the dissertation. Within the current chapter, I elucidate the purpose of the study and why I am passionate and unapologetic about writing a dissertation that focuses on undocumented and mixed-status students’ activism. I explain my background and how my experiences led to the research question. Unique for a dissertation, the entirety of the second chapter focuses on language and terminology used to discuss undocumented students and immigration issues in higher education. The language used to discuss immigration can humanize vs. dehumanize, miseducate vs. educate, and overall frame understanding on the topic. For these reasons and because there has been much misunderstanding and dehumanization regarding immigrants and immigration, I determined a full chapter was needed on language itself. In Chapter III, I review the literature focusing on undocumented students and the interlocking systems of oppression that create physical, conceptual, and mental borders/barriers for the students I work alongside. The conceptual and theoretical frameworks that direct this research on undocumented and mixed-status students from DREAM Action NIU are described in Chapter
IV. I also outline the methods used in conducting this research. The findings are described utilizing Wolcott’s (1994) approach guided by the three theoretical frameworks of Nepantla, Figured Worlds, and Undocumented Critical Race Theory (UndocuCrit). In Chapter V, I discuss the study’s thematic findings based on the individual and group interviews using the framework of figured worlds. In Chapter VI, I weave together the component of discourse from figured worlds to share findings using an UndocuCrit lens to analyze the discourse of DREAM Action NIU. In Chapter VII I present my findings while weaving together the element of identity from figured worlds and a Nepantla framework. In the eighth and final chapter, I discuss the findings as well as implications of this research, and offer recommendations for future inquiry, policy, and practice.

Chapter Summary

The focus of this research project is a direct result of the lived experiences and the Latina student leaders of DREAM Action NIU, which I have advocated alongside for over a decade. I shared this was personal to me as a member of a mixed-status family and how I came to advise this student organization on campus. I outlined the chapters of this dissertation and provided a short rationale of the theoretical framework which I will expound upon in a later chapter. In the next chapter I provide an overview of key terminology about the research. Because of the political context connected to terminology regarding undocumented students, it has been set apart as a chapter in itself.
CHAPTER II: TERMINOLOGY

Within this chapter I provide an overview of key terminology. The language around immigration and undocumented people has been inflammatory, dehumanizing, and extremely problematic. Support for undocumented immigrants is critical in times like these when the political rhetoric has demonized immigrant communities. Leading up to and since the 2016 election, the current administration has made many U.S. citizens fear “others” who they feel may be taking over their culture and politics and negatively affecting the economy (Molina, 2014). For this reason, I decided to devote a full chapter to explain various terminology and the choice of language within the dissertation.

Key Terms and Language Choice

**Undocumented.** To be undocumented in the United States means you either entered the country without inspection or entered with legal permission (visa) and stayed in the U.S. once that authorization expired (Immigrants Rising, 2019). A 2020 report from the Migration Policy Institute states there were 11 million undocumented or unauthorized immigrants in the U.S., which is down from the 12.3 million in 2007.

**Mixed-status.** According to the National Immigration Forum (2020), approximately 16.2 million people in the U.S. live in mixed-status households. Mixed-status families can have one or more family members who are U.S. citizens and legal permanent residents or undocumented members. As of 2020, there are roughly 6.1 million U.S. citizen children from mixed-status households. The number of U.S.-born children born to undocumented parents is on the rise. This growing population will face obstacles that their peers with U.S.-born parents will not have to experience. As these children face the fear of deportation of one or both parents while trying to attend schools in impoverished communities, schools will be called upon to assist this rapidly growing
population of students. They will need to become knowledgeable about laws and resources to share with students and families alike to ensure students attend school and utilize resources available to them to do well in school and matriculate to college. According to Mass et al. (2016), educators should assume they have a mixed-status student and therefore provide the service and resources that all students need to succeed.

There is a need to support the growing population of mixed-status students entering the educational pipeline. According to the Department of Homeland Security’s Inspector General (2009), the U.S. deported more than an estimated 100,000 unauthorized parents of U.S.-born children between 1998 and 2007. Passel and Cohn (2016) shared that approximately 3.9 million kindergarteners through 12th-grade students in U.S. public and private schools in 2014 were children of unauthorized immigrants. As this population has grown to 6.5 million, so has the stress from mixed-status students’ immigration issues as children of undocumented parents. As this stress becomes more burdensome, schools will be called upon to fill the void needed to help these students attend and persist at their educational facilities.

**DACA.** On June 15, 2012, President Obama issued an executive order called Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). This executive order offered those who qualified a temporary social security number, a two-year work permit, and protection from deportation for undocumented youth with no felony or significant misdemeanor. Since this program was not a law, it could be removed once a new administration took office. I still recall the exact moment when President Obama made the announcement. While I felt excited about undocumented students’ possibility of protection and the ability to work, I was also hesitant because this meant they had to provide the government with their personal information and where they currently
resided. Students gave documentation about their lack of status to the government, which scared many families, and some students did not apply for the program.

DACA is an executive order, which can be retracted once a new presidential administration is in office and decides they no longer wish to continue the program. During the 2016 election year, fear of DACA being terminated was at the forefront of minds for many students, families, and the immigrant community. On September 5, 2017, the Trump administration decided to end the program that initially provided work permits and protection from deportation to 880,000 undocumented “youth.”

**Dreamer.** The omission of the term “Dreamer” to describe undocumented college students and youth in this dissertation is intentional. I feel it is essential to address this term when discussing equity issues because this divisive political term was given to and not chosen by those directly affected. The word “Dreamer” is a term used by politicians to humanize young immigrants, who are depicted as upper-echelon students, to show they deserve to stay in this country (Pon, 2018). This is done by showcasing “Dreamers” as industrious and educated individuals who are valued due to their “potential economic output” (Abrego & Negrón-Gonzales, 2020). The “Dreamer” term refers to undocumented youth brought to the United States before the age of 16. This term does not encompass all undocumented college students at our universities; as an example, 14% of all the undocumented students in higher education are 22 years or older (Feldblum et al., 2020). To qualify for any form of relief or protection a person must be of good moral character to be eligible for this legislation. The term implies that equity is attainable when, in reality, equity is never a possibility, neither for students nor their families. Referring to undocumented students as “Dreamers” is problematic: because not every student meets the criteria or identifies
as a “Dreamer,” sometimes the students themselves may not realize that this term excludes many in the undocumented community until they learn more about the history of this term.

In 2001 the DREAM Act was introduced, and since then, this term has been used to depict high-achieving students. I find calling undocumented youth “Dreamers” offensive. The word “Dreamer” is an acronym for the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act. This bill refers to them as aliens and does not welcome their culture, language, family, or communities; it paints them as aspiring to achieve the “American Dream.”

The American Dream is a concept introduced by James Truslow Adams, who was born into a wealthy family in Brooklyn. Adams (1931) describes “that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement” (p. 404). It is hypocritical and ironic for a white man with paternal Venezuelan roots who was born into wealth to talk about a dream where people can still flourish regardless of “birth or position.” According to Prieto (2018), this “American Dream” centers this notion that hard work will result in prosperity, yet this country is not willing to offer membership for the hard work of immigrants and therefore this idea is more of an “American Hypocrisy.” The exploitation of immigrant workers perpetuates legal and social domination. This assumption that all undocumented youth desire to be “American” is key to this narrative because it is directly linked to the idea of deserving to be in this country and worthy of an adjustment of status (Negrón-Gonzales et al., 2015). The term and the legislation used to perpetuate the meritocracy regarding who is and is not worthy of citizenship also depicts the United States as a magnanimous entity that determines if you work hard and stay out of trouble, you will be able to have opportunities afforded by legislators (Tuck & Yang, 2014). Both the American Dream and meritocracy are metanarratives that some of las mujeres of DREAM Action NIU state they fell
victim to when they thought if they worked hard and were good people, they would be given an opportunity for citizenship in this country.

**Illegality.** The concept of assigning “illegality” to a human was established in 1924 to label Mexicans as criminal and set a quota system to limit immigrants from specific countries, Mexico in particular, and take away rights from Mexican Americans and Mexicans while allowing further exploitation of Mexican workers (Chomsky, 2014; Molina, 2014). The term “illegality” and the notion of referring to a human as “illegal” became a racialized concept/word that has become synonymous with Mexican and Latino (Chomsky, 2014; Flores-Gonzalez, 2017).

**Myth of Meritocracy.** Latinx undocumented students face obstacles due to their language, culture, race, and status. The U.S. created this idea, both via its laws and racialization of immigrants; their worth became tied to how hard they work and contribute to this country (Prieto, 2018). This valuing of immigrants for their labor may have influenced Americans and immigrants’ buy-in to the myth of meritocracy and the notion of “pull yourself up by the bootstraps.” This concept of working hard and earning your way fails to recognize all of the -isms such as classism, racism, and nativism that undocumented youth face when trying to achieve social mobility by obtaining a degree in higher education and the “American Dream.” The “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” mentality is rooted in meritocracy, as is the notion that racism is over and working hard can help you be successful (Mina, 2019). Many students and families who buy into Fanon’s (1967) “false promise,” of being seen as human, have echoed that if they work harder and stay under the radar and out of trouble, they will be accepted or viewed as worthy of being members of this country. Sadly, many people are quick to believe this false narrative. They fail to realize that as Latinx immigrants, they will not be seen as American, no matter what they do, because being American means being “white” (Chomsky, 2014; Flores-
Gonzalez, 2017; Molina, 2014). While Latinx and people of color have to deal with this false narrative of meritocracy, I argue that undocumented youth are hurt by this term more than their U.S.-born peers. This term is divisive because it excludes youth who may not meet the criteria of high-achieving students with “good moral character” while also excluding their parents and 11 million immigrants not classified as “Dreamers.”

**Generation 1.5.** Children who immigrate before adulthood are known as generation 1.5 (Rumbaut & Ima, 1998). Due to their generation, 1.5 undocumented-upbringing students struggle with their sense of identity and belonging. This internal battle creates a liminal state of existing for undocumented youth because they feel as if they “are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremony” (Turner, 1970, p. 4). Pulido et al. (2009) describe liminality as a phase of shifting from no longer being Mexican but not yet acknowledged as American.

**Chapter Summary**

Within this chapter I have attempted to provide an overview and explanation of language commonly used around immigration and undocumented students. I describe what it means to be undocumented or mixed-status. I also explain why the term “Dreamer” is problematic along with notions of “illegality.” For these reasons, I will use the terms “undocumented” or “unauthorized.” Educators need to make sure we refrain from this divisive immigrant narrative and strive to include all and not just some of the undocumented community.

In the next chapter, I examine research literature on policies and statutes that have influenced how people view immigrants, particularly undocumented immigrants, in this country. I will also expand on laws that have created hardships for undocumented people in the U.S. and laws that affect access for undocumented students in higher education. Lastly, I will discuss how
subtractive schooling policies affect Latinx students, including undocumented and mixed-status students.
CHAPTER III: *UN TAPIZ DE IDEOLOGY, LEGISLATION, AND EDUCATION*

Within this chapter, I provide an overview of the key literature with some of my own story interwoven. To understand the context of this research, it requires an explanation of the ideologies, historical context of legislation, and research literature connected to immigration, undocumented students, and Latinx students’ schooling experiences. The *trenza* metaphor applies here too. The ideologies, legislative historical context, and research literature are all separate strands but when woven together, they provide a more complex overview of the context of undocumented and mixed-status students’ lived experiences and the framing of the research.

I begin by discussing the first strand, which consists of ideologies that have fueled anti-immigrant sentiment in the United States. The second strand includes a historical overview of immigration laws and policies, which have created and preserved the current hostile environment and educational barriers faced by undocumented and mixed-status students (Abrego & Negrón-Gonzales, 2020; Chang, 2018; Gonzales, 2016). Because the co-researchers are all Latina, the third strand examines the schooling experiences of undocumented students and Latinx students.

**The First Strand: Ideology**

*“Valerse por sí misma”*

*I fell victim to internalized colonization and found myself, as Freire (1970) stated, wishing to resemble the oppressors. I lacked the knowledge to identify that Eurocentrism was a part of my everyday life and it was valued more so than my own Latino Culture. I was in middle school when my family moved to a part of town where we were the only family of color in my entire neighborhood. The kids made me feel shy and uncertain when they mocked my food, my clothes and lack of money. During my time at the predominantly white school, I was faced with varying levels of racism. Due to cultural and linguistic differences, I was ridiculed by teachers*
and peers alike. I was placed in speech classes to eliminate my accent and at times was humiliated in front of the class because of the way I pronounced certain words. All these overt racist acts led to internalized oppression. I found myself not wanting to embrace my culture or language. Thankfully my mother pushed back and taught me the lesson of “valerse por sí misma,” an important lesson of survival that has carried me over the years (Villenas, 2001). My mother made sure we spoke Spanish and always valued ourselves and our culture.

My story depicts how settler colonial ideology can affect us as immigrants or children of immigrants. I experienced choques that occur when Eurocentric or white values overlook or belittle other cultural values or experiences (Thompson, 2001). From a very young age, we are surrounded by these ideologies that function to encourage us to oppress ourselves by denying who we are, our raíces, and despising nuestra gente, cultura, y lenguaje. Referred to as “misrecognition,” (Taylor et al., 1994) this colonization of the mind occurs “when individuals are denied the equitable grounds upon which to formulate healthy notions of self as a result of a given society’s dominant and exclusionary patterns of interpretation and valuation” (Grande, 2018, p. 54).

Immigration and citizenship, influenced by settler colonialist and racist nativist views, are framed in the U.S. to criminalize and dehumanize undocumented individuals (Chomsky, 2014; Denvir, 2020; Molina, 2014; Quijano, 2000; Spring, 2001). These ideological tropes in the United States have shaped and continue to influence how undocumented students and parents are viewed and “othered” in this country, which wants their labor without offering them citizenship (Prieto, 2018). Next, I discuss settler colonialism as an ideology shaping attitudes and beliefs in the United States regarding immigration and citizenship.
Settler Colonialism

Settler colonialism functions as an ongoing structure that aims to control land, resources, and people on a permanent basis so that white settlers can claim the land they are moving to as their own and as “their home” (Glenn, 2015). In the United States this was done by forcibly removing or eliminating the Indigenous people who lived on that land, at times via militarized massacres. Once the Indigenous people were removed, the settler populations then made the land property that could be owned and made sure to establish a system so the white settlers, who took the land from Native Americans, were the only ones who could claim ownership to the stolen land (Glenn, 2015; Grande, 2018, Tuck & Yang, 2012; Wolfe, 1999).

It is important to distinguish between more customary definitions of colonialism, where kingdoms invaded countries and lands to remove people and resources with the definition and impetus of white settler colonialism in the U.S., which was to have rights over lands, bodies, and labor by making them property to be owned, traded, and exploited (Tuck & Yang, 2014). White settler colonialism, which has white supremacy at its heart, continues to maintain a system of power contributing to enforcing “white history, mores, morals, language, and customs” designed for governing and exploiting those who have migrated to this country and their descendants (Hatt & Urrieta, 2020).

In addition to Indigenous erasure, settler colonialism also “depends on the subordination of racialized outsiders in order to extract value from the invaded and expropriated Indigenous lands, secure its colonial foothold, and fuel its expansion” (Batra Kashyap, 2019, p. 557). Hence, the illegal seizure of Indigenous land and slavery were both functions of settler colonialism. Additionally, U.S. settler colonialism historically and currently relies on immigrant labor for
expansion (i.e., Chinese railroad workers) while also ensuring the subordination of racialized outsiders to protect ownership and power over stolen land.

A cornerstone of settler colonialism is racist nativism, which targets Native Americans and different groups of immigrants by stripping them of their language and culture and restricting the rights they have in this country (Darder & Torres, 2014; Spring, 2001; Urrieta, 2009; Valenzuela, 1999). Huber et al. (2008) describe racist nativism as:

The assigning of values to real or imagined differences, in order to justify the superiority of the native, who is to be perceived white, over that of the non-native, who is perceived to be People and Immigrants of Color, and thereby defend the rights of whites, or the natives, to dominance. (p. 43)

Racist nativism is another tool of colonization that white Americans use to defend their authority over people of color and claim themselves as the native people of this country, which they feel affords them the right to protect their country or stolen land (Pérez-Huber, 2010). The Trump administration used a common historical political approach by creating a heightened sense of nativism, which separates people of color by labeling them less American or un-American, while unifying white Americans. Lippard (2011) points out nativism becomes more prominent via anti-immigrant rhetoric during a crisis. We saw this come to light during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Initially, undocumented immigrants were excluded from many of the relief packages. For example, undocumented students were not eligible for the CARES Act grants during the first year of the pandemic (Stratford, 2020).

Manifest Destiny, a policy grounded in racist nativist and settler colonial thought, is a tool used by white settler colonialists to portray Indigenous people and Mexicans as inferior, diseased, and criminal and helped justify the genocide of Native Americans and the Mexican
American War (Molina, 2014; Pratt, 1927; Urrieta, 2009). Harris (1993) reveals that during the first two hundred years of the United States as a country, whiteness was a vehicle of inequality utilized to deny rights and create a hierarchy between white and Black people. She expounds that whiteness was vigilantly safeguarded because this was a mechanism by which to bestow citizenship to some and not others (Harris, 1993).

Citizenship has functioned as a mechanism of control by the U.S. settler colonial state for immigrants, African Americans, and Indigenous people. As a tool of the settler-colonial state, citizenship represents a double-edged sword whereas at the end of the Civil War, Black activists viewed citizenship as representing their struggle for rights while, “the crafters of federal Indian policy, for whom making Indians into citizens was part of a project of clearing Native nations’ collective title to land, dismantling their institutions of government, and transforming their cultures” (Kantrowitz, 2020, p. 33). In 1965 the United States passed immigration legislation that severely reduced entry from Latin American countries. This policy left migrants escaping poverty, who did not meet the quotas based on labor demand, family reunification or asylum, at the mercy of a white settler colonial state that allowed them to be exploited with little or no opportunity to acquire citizenship (Glenn, 2015).

In summary, all the inhumane policies, terms, and racism are the fruits of the deeply planted seeds of settler colonialism in this country. These seeds are then pollinated, at times, by the very people they oppress through the process of misrecognition mentioned earlier. Often, as an attempt to divide immigrants, our own people can eat this poisoned fruit and share it with others. It is imperative to stand up to anti-immigrant rhetoric rooted in settler colonialist and racist nativist practices that try to erase the collective memory of the undocumented and mixed-
status students, their families, and communities. In the next section, I review the history of laws that have created the current environment for undocumented and mixed-status college students.

**The Second Strand: Law and Policy**

At the 2016 NIU Coming Out of the Shadows event, a student, Juan, who had been very guarded about his status, decided it was time for him to share his feelings about DACA as we faced the potential election of a U.S. president who threatened to terminate the program on his first day in office. Below is a portion of Juan’s speech:

> I have been fortunate to have DACA for the past three years. I have been fortunate to benefit from some of the privileges that come with DACA, such as being able to work without feeling like I’m doing something wrong. These are rights which organizers fought for our community to have. But we must not forget about the others that are not covered by DACA. The ones that didn’t do so well in school, the ones that made mistakes, our parents, and the rest of the undocumented community that is less desirable. Immigrants and undocumented folks are flawed. We deserve rights not because you can profit off our labor, not because we have clean records or are good students. We can no longer adhere to respectability politics; we deserve rights because we are human beings.

Juan shares his story to remind others that not all students had DACA and just because a person does not have this protection and work permit, it does not make them any less worthy of being protected or treated humanely. Juan pushes back against the good immigrant narrative that was used to push “dreamers” into the political arena to show how “deserving” they are of citizenship.

In the second strand, “law and policy,” I highlight the ways the ideology of settler colonialism has led to the development of policy and laws regarding immigration and citizenship that have resulted in the dehumanization, racialization, exploitation, and criminalization of the
Latinx community (Chomsky, 2014; Glenn, 2015; Molina, 2014). I begin with Juan’s story because it spotlights how white settler colonialist policies leave undocumented immigrants exploitable and deportable. Juan recognizes that he and others are left to live outside of the privileges and protections of U.S. citizenship in a country that professes to value labor while equating it to “deservingness,” yet does not provide undocumented individuals an opportunity to adjust their status (Prieto, 2018).

Within this section I first provide a broad overview of immigration law and policy in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Then I provide a more specific historical overview of Mexican immigration into the United States. Finally, I discuss shifts in immigration policy post-9/11 through the Trump era that specifically targeted Mexican immigrants and families.

19th- and Early 20th-Century U.S. Immigration Law and Policy

The U.S. history of exclusionary immigration policies should not come as a surprise, but it is important to learn the sordid history of the laws so we can fully understand the injustice that continues to oppress immigrants today. I reaffirm Chomsky’s (2014) claim that “law is never neutral but rather reflects power relationships in society” (p. 24). This proves very true for immigration law.

In 1907 Woodrow Wilson demanded that China and Japan allow trade and migration from the U.S., and in 1917 the U.S. created a law banning immigrants who were defined as “aliens” and denied citizenship because of their race (Chomsky, 2014). The logic behind many U.S. immigration laws during the early 1900s can be tied back to Sir Francis Galton and the eugenics movement responsible for “scientifically” viewing people of color as inferior (Skiba, 2012). Subsequently, these views were then intertwined with immigration laws and policies to justify the exclusion of many based on race (Chomsky, 2014; Unzueta Carrasco & Seif, 2014).
Furthermore, Congressman Johnson, who helped pass the 1924 Immigration Act, was also the President of the Eugenics Research Association (Molina, 2014). The 1924 Immigration Act established a “national origins” quota system and the creation of “illegality,” making anyone who enters the country without inspection “illegal” and deportable (Chomsky, 2014, Hsu et al., 2019). It was not until creation of the border patrol in 1924 that passage back and forth between the U.S. and Mexico became more complicated and increasingly criminalized, which led to migratory workers deciding to stay in the United States and bring their families (De Leon, 2015; Molina, 2014). Before 1924, immigration laws did not apply to Mexicans because the U.S. did not view them as immigrants but as seasonal workers or sojourners who would return to their country and, if needed, could be easily replaced (Chomsky, 2014). In the 1930s the Depression led to repatriation programs that deported nearly one million Mexicans as well as U.S. citizens of Mexican descent to Mexico. It was during this time, when the United States was blaming Mexicans for its financial hardships, that the U.S. Census created the race of “Mexican” (Glenn, 2015; Molina, 2014). Immigration policies since the 1950s increasingly criminalized immigrants while giving more authority to the border patrol (Abrego, 2006).

20th-Century and Early 21st-Century U.S. Immigration Law and Policy

The first time the U.S. implemented migration quotas for Mexican immigrants was via the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, but this came as the Bracero Program was terminated. The Bracero Agreement between the U.S. and Mexico was a result of an executive order and a labor shortage during World War II from 1942–1964 to recruit male agricultural
workers, which allowed seasonal workers to travel back and forth as farmworkers⁶ (Bracero History Archive, 2022; Hsu et al., 2019). According to the Bracero History Archive (2022), there were 4.6 million contracts signed by Mexican agricultural workers, and many of the workers signed more than one contract as they returned to the U.S. to work more than once. In 1954 “Operation Wetback,” which aimed to capture and deport undocumented agricultural workers, followed the termination of the Bracero Program and resulted in the deportation of 1.3 million workers (Glenn, 2015). When the U.S. ended the Bracero Program, it did not legalize their guest workers like Europe did when they terminated their comparable programs. Instead, the United States “illegalized” their guest workers.

Laws that were put in place to curb immigration flow from the U.S.’s southern border inadvertently led to an influx of unauthorized immigrants (Chomsky, 2014; Gonzales, 2016; Molina, 2014). From 1965 until 1986 meeting a demand for “unskilled” labor, 28 million undocumented migrant workers entered the United States (Gonzales, 2016). In the early 1980s U.S. Congress, under President Reagan, passed the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), which allowed 3 million unauthorized individuals to adjust their status but did not adjust any of the laws that created the influx of an undocumented population and it also made it against the law for employers to hire undocumented workers (Chomsky, 2014)⁷. The implementation of harsher immigration laws made it more difficult to cross back and forth between the southern

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⁶ I recognize that Chavez’s work was essential to protecting farmworkers. As a daughter of migrant workers, the value of what he did hits very close to home; however, I want to acknowledge he was not inclusive of all farmworkers. Flanagan (2011) shares that Chavez was only fighting for those who were citizens. We cannot forget that he followed colonizing practices and was anti-undocumented immigrant and would alert immigration officers about the undocumented workers and have them deported.

⁷ One of the founders of DREAM Action NIU notes her parents were able to adjust immigration status due to the “Reagan Amnesty.”
border, which led to seasonal workers bringing their entire families to stay in the United States permanently. These laws led to an increase of undocumented immigrants from 1.3 million in the 1990s to a little over 12 million in 2007, with children of these migrants equaling nearly 2.1 million of the undocumented population in 2012 (Gonzales, 2016).

The Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) in 1999 was another law that added to the surge of undocumented adults and children in the United States. IIRIRA established three different bars for re-entry to the United States for those residing in the country without permission, called “unlawful presence” (Migration Policy Institute, 2021). Before IIRIRA immigrants could adjust status from inside the country, after IIRIRA immigrants had to return to their country of origin to adjust status (Gonzales, 2016). Depending on how long a person was in the U.S. without permission, they could be banned for three years, ten years, or for life if they exit the U.S. and try to reenter. It is important to note that one’s unlawful presence of a year will lead to the imposition of a ten-year bar, which creates a hardship if a person attempts to exit to adjust status “the right way.” Before this law, people could adjust status via employment or marriage without facing the possibility of being barred from returning. Due to these reentry bars getting triggered when a person exits the U.S., many immigrants could no longer apply to adjust status without being barred (Gonzales, 2016).

In addition to stricter southern border policies, this law reduced the number of undocumented migrants, including children who grow up in the United States, from qualifying for relief from deportation and leaving them with no mechanism to adjust status. IIRIRA also created other ways of policing and exploiting immigrants. The first was “e-verify,” which required employers who participated in the program to verify individuals as either citizens or immigrants with work authorization against federal databases (Chomsky, 2014). This act also
created a memorandum of understanding, often called 287(g), which allowed local law
enforcement agents to be funded and trained to enforce federal immigration law (Prieto, 2018).
IIRIRA led to a surge in deportations, but it did not stop the flow of unauthorized immigrants,
which increased from 5 million the year IIRIRA was passed to 12 million in 2006—10 million
more than the number of undocumented immigrants between the 10 years of the Reagan amnesty
and IIRIRA (Lind, 2016). This piece of legislation failed to recognize all the laws that increased
the migration of families and then left them without a method to adjust status. These laws also
failed to address the needs of undocumented students in higher education, which is left for states
to determine policies about “inclusion” and exclusion. Next, I discuss how an executive order
provides some relief to students yet does not help them adjust status.

21st-Century U.S. Immigration Law and Policy

I attended a presentation that mainly focused on the DREAM Act by Tereza Lee at NIU
on April 4, 2013. She was the invited keynote speaker for NIU’s Asian American Heritage month
program. Tereza is known as the “the original dreamer” (Fuchs, 2017) who inspired Senator
Durbin to create this bill that would protect high-achieving undocumented youth who had
entered the country before the age of 16 and were of “good moral character” by offering a
pathway to citizenship. I recall Tereza saying she and senator Durbin were getting ready to
leave for Washington to attend the Senate hearing for the DREAM Act on September 12th, but the
towers fell on September 11, 2001, and all flights to Washington D.C. were cancelled. She said
they had a good chance of passing the bill and had it not been for 9/11 and the wave of racist
nativist sentiment that followed the terrorist act, the DREAM Act would have passed in 2001.

As I stated previously in Chapter I, the DREAM Act, initially proposed on May 11, 2001,
focused on perpetuating the narrative that undocumented youth who had been brought to this
country by their parents, and not by their own choice, were innocent of any “crime.” It aimed to provide undocumented immigrant students who grew up in the U.S. the ability to apply for temporary legal status and to eventually obtain permanent legal status and become eligible for U.S. citizenship if they went to college or served in the U.S. military (Chomsky, 2014; Gonzales, 2016). The attacks on 9/11 not only delayed the bill by nine years but it also led to the creation of Immigration Customs Enforcement (ICE). ICE was created as part of the newly formed Department of Homeland Security in 2003 in response the September 11th attacks (Lartey, 2018).

In 2010, ICE requested $5.5 billion in discretionary funds, which they spent mainly on detention and deportation (Chomsky, 2014).

On June 15, 2012, President Obama implemented an executive order called Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). To me, DACA was an example of interest convergence in that the executive order was announced during an election year to garner Latino votes after failed attempts at comprehensive immigration reform to provide relief for eleven million undocumented individuals. I can say it won my vote and those of my family and friends, as we had been disappointed with President Obama’s deportation policies, resulting in the deportation of over two million individuals, 90% of whom were Latinos (Gonzales, 2016). The DACA program was meant to prevent the deportation of undocumented youth with no felony or significant misdemeanor convictions. I still recall the exact moment when President Obama made the announcement. I received a call from a student shouting in my ear; her excitement quickly faded when she asked me, “But what about my parents?” (M. Torres, personal communication, June 12, 2012). Her parents and countless others would be excluded from this temporary program. In 2014 President Obama tried to introduce Deferred Action for Parental Accountability (DAPA) that would have afforded qualifying parents of U.S. citizens and lawful
permanent residents temporary protection from deportation and work permits (National Immigration Law Center, 2015). DAPA was never implemented due to a federal district court in Texas issuing an order that temporarily blocked the program. In 2016 the U.S. Supreme Court deadlocked in a 4–4 vote, meaning the decision in the lower court stood and the program was never implemented.

DACA was introduced more than a decade after the introduction of the Federal DREAM Act, which would have provided a pathway to citizenship for the youth included in the DACA program. To qualify for DACA, youth had to have entered the U.S. before the age of 16. It has afforded 664,000 qualifying youth a work permit and a temporary social security number but no legal status, thus leaving them in a state of limbo (Gonzales, 2016). Initially it cost $465 dollars to apply for the program and required applicants to renew every two years. Since DACA began there have been 832,881 recipients who have been able to live their lives without the threat of deportation and the ability to legally work in the United States (American Immigration Council, 2021). According to the Migration Policy Institute (2021), more than 1.3 million U.S. residents were eligible for DACA as originally implemented.

The qualifying youth were painted as hard-working students who had been brought by their parents and therefore had committed no crime, who were deserving of citizenship and tied to what they can contribute to the U.S. while holding up American values and identity (Abrego & Negrón-Gonzales, 2020; Chomsky, 2014; Molina, 2014; White, 2014). According to López and Krogstad (2017), some of the DACA recipients were in their mid 20s when this executive order was announced, yet they were infantilized to gather support and block them from being targeted as unworthy of immigration relief. Sadly, this narrative at times pitted undocumented youth against their own family who had brought them to the United States (White, 2014).
Since its implementation, DACA has been under threat from numerous lawsuits. On September 5, 2017, Trump and his administration decided to terminate the DACA program that initially provided work permits and protection from deportation to 832,881 undocumented “youth.” After several injunctions in the lower courts contesting the program’s termination, the case was taken to the Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS), which heard oral arguments in November of 2019. This resulted in fear and uncertainty about the program; many who qualified did not renew their permits. The fate of DACA was not looking hopeful since Trump had appointed two conservative justices in 2017 and 2018. The students on NIU’s campus shared they had high levels of anxiety and depression over the possible termination of DACA, which would have resulted in the now 654,000 permit holders no longer being able to work or be protected from deportation (Migration Policy Institute, 2019). The DACA recipients had to wait until June 18, 2020, for SCOTUS to rule against the Trump administration’s attempt to end the DACA program in a narrow 5–4 decision. This decision did not remove all the angst and trauma caused by the exiting administration for undocumented youth. In response to the SCOTUS decision, on July 28, 2020, the Acting Secretary of Homeland Security, Chad F. Wolf, determined new guidance for DACA. These changes barred first-time applicants who would have qualified previously, while also changing the renewal period from every two years to once a year for current DACA recipients. These changes caused hardship for many students who struggled to afford the $495 renewal fee because they were then required to pay their application fees annually.

Undocumented students were able to find some relief on November 14, 2020, when a federal judge ruled that DACA’s “new guidance” was invalid because Chad Wolf was not lawfully appointed. On January 21, 2021, recently elected President Biden signed a
memorandum directing the Secretary of Homeland Security to take actions aimed at “preserving and fortifying” DACA, which helped students and those who qualified to feel a sense of support (Feldblum et al., 2020; Immigrant Legal Resource Center, 2021; National Immigrant Justice Center, 2021). On July 16, 2021, a Texas federal court judge challenged the legality of the DACA policy, which was not part of the SCOTUS ruling and once again stopped first-time applicants from applying, only allowing current DACA recipients to renew their permits (Informed Immigrants, 2022). It is important to remember that not all students qualify for DACA, and we continue to have issues of inequity on their college campuses for those who are not afforded the right to work or protection from being deported. Once again, students are waiting on some form of federal immigration relief.

The American Dream and Promise Act of 2021, which was introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives on March 3, 2021, provided hope to generation 1.5 undocumented youth with the possibility to adjust status. It stalled, however, and left many questioning the Biden administration and the promises made during his campaign. While President Biden has been criticized for not making progress on immigration relief according to the Migration Policy Institute, he has signed 296 immigration-related executive orders to undo the harm of the Trump administration, which logged a staggering 472 executive orders (Chishti & Bolte, 2022).

I provide this overview of the legislation that has shaped the current climate for both citizens and the immigrant community to provide an understanding on how we have arrived at the current juncture for undocumented immigrants in the U.S. and why it is not easy to adjust one’s immigration status. It may help to humanize the issue for some who do not fully understand why we have people in this country who “will not adjust status.” Once people realize there is not a system in place to adjust status easily, it may change their opinions about the
undocumented immigrants in the U.S. In the next section, I will discuss the third strand of the research context: educational access, opportunity, and deculturalization for undocumented and Latinx students.

The Third Strand: Educational Access, Opportunity, and Activism

Illinois ranks as the 5th state with the largest number of undocumented immigrants with an estimate of approximately 4,000 high school graduates (98,000 nationally) every year (Zong & Batalova, 2019) and 17,757 enrolled in higher education (Presidents’ Alliance in Higher Education and Immigration, 2021). It was not until 1982 that K–12 undocumented students were afforded educational rights at the federal level. The U.S. Supreme Court Ruling, Plyler v Doe, states that undocumented youth cannot be denied a K–12 public education; while this ruling assisted public school students, it did not address higher education access (Rodriguez, 2017). This law’s omission to address the needs of undocumented students in higher education left it to individual states to determine policies about “inclusion” and exclusion. As a result, higher education policy regarding undocumented students varies widely by state and undocumented students do not benefit from federal aid or qualify for student loans. While Alabama and South Carolina ban undocumented students from attending college, Georgia has some college systems that deny them access. Only 21 states and the District of Colombia currently allow in-state tuition for undocumented students (National Immigration Law Center, 2022).

While in-state tuition is not available nationwide, some states, like Illinois, now offer state aid to undocumented students. As of 2003, Illinois has provided undocumented students in-state tuition and, as of January 2020, they can apply for state aid via the RISE Act/Alternative Application for Illinois Financial Aid. As of January 2022, Illinois is one of 13 states and the District of Colombia that offers state financial aid to undocumented students who meet specific
criteria (National Immigration Law Center, 2022). The RISE Act/Alternative Application for Illinois Financial Aid undocumented is only for youth who meet the qualifications of HB 60, which means they must attend school in Illinois for at least three years and graduate from high school or earn a GED before entering a university. This requirement means recent arrivals to Illinois who may only have two years or less of high school or those who arrive after they have earned their high school degrees cannot benefit from this aid. The benefits are only for Illinois residents, so students who wish to transfer into the state of Illinois because of their friendly immigrant policies will not have the same benefits as those who attended high school in the state of Illinois.

In sum, undocumented students are guaranteed a right to K–12 public education but not to access for higher education in the United States. While Illinois has created some laws that afford students access to funding and in-state benefits, this is not the case for the entire country. Next, I will discuss how access to schooling and opportunity by Latinx students affect many undocumented and mixed-status students in this country.

**Latinx Students’ Deculturalization within Schools**

Feldblum et al. (2020) report 427,345 undocumented students are currently enrolled in higher education nationwide, and 39% of first-generation students and 45% of second-generation students in higher education are Latinx. There are currently 6.1 million citizen children living in mixed-status homes (National Immigration Forum, 2021). Undocumented students are a diverse population in higher education, with Latinx students accounting for 48.5% of undocumented students, compared to 24.2% for Asian students, 12.5% for Black students, and 12.9 for White students (Presidents’ Alliance in Higher Education and Immigration, 2021). While not all undocumented students are from Latin America, we know Latinx individuals make up most of
the undocumented population in our country. Educational attainment for the growing population of mixed-status youth should be a concern for the entire nation, as these students will have a tremendous effect on the national and global economy. Aretakis et al. (2015) argue that the success of Latinx students, of which mixed-status students comprise a sizeable proportion, should be the focus of educators since this demographic will become a substantial contributor to both the population and workforce of the United States.

Even though undocumented students are guaranteed access to public education in the U.S., they are entering school buildings that actively promote the internalization of colonization and misrecognition (Grande, 2018; Taylor et al., 1994). Schooling in the U.S. has largely functioned to perpetuate settler colonialism (Glenn, 2014; Grande, 2018; Tuck & Yang 2014; Valencia, 2012). Although this perpetuation occurs in numerous ways, I will only focus on deculturalization and language.

Spring (2001) elucidates that Native Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Mexican Americans have all been the focus of deculturalization, a method of “destroying a people’s culture (cultural genocide)” and replacing it with a new culture in educational settings. Educational institutions and policies are a vehicle to carry out a deculturizing ideology to indoctrinate immigrant students to abandon their culture and language to fit into American culture (Spring, 2001).

One of the tools utilized by colonizers and white settler colonialists to dominate Native Americans, enslaved Africans, and immigrants is language. As a result of colonization and settler colonialism, marginalized cultures in the U.S. have been the focus of what Spring (2001) calls “cultural and linguistic genocide,” which denies people from other cultures access to education, their native language, and teaches assimilation. These historical issues are still present in our schools and can be seen in the confining language regulations that continue to allow segregation
to exist (Darder & Torres, 2014). Trueba (2001) stresses language is the most important tool people need to sustain their self-identity. The failure to speak and understand one’s language can severely impede a person’s sense of belonging and ability to interact with those in their community or cultural group.

Practices rooted in settler colonialism devalue the language of Latinx students and omit undocumented and mixed-status students’ culture in the curriculum. Gimenez (1989) points out the method of “Americanization” is used as a method for the continuation of colonizing practices of devaluing Latino culture, language, and communities in educational settings. It addresses the invisibility of Latinx youth in the current curriculum and school practices that focus on whitestream culture (Urrieta, 2009).

When Spanish-speaking Latinx students are mainstreamed, they are exposed to an English-only curriculum; there is no maintenance or development of their native language (De Genova & Ramos-Zayas, 2003). This practice can result in feelings of separation from their Spanish-speaking family members and their familial history and culture (Cano et al., 2014). Students experience ethnocultural transactions as they struggle with internalized colonization to assimilate to predominately white institutional culture (Cano et al., 2014).

Language is a colonizing mechanism utilized to view the Latinx community as un-American and unworthy of the same opportunities and services as citizens (Flores-Gonzalez, 2017). An example of this was my experience with the USCIS employee who screamed at me as I tried to translate for my father when we were renewing his green card. She scoffed when I translated her instructions in Spanish for my father and then bellowed that he should understand and speak English since he was in this country.
This practice of being seen as un-American can lead to what Valencia (2012) describes as deficit thinking, which places blame on the student: “Who fails in school does so because of internal deficits or deficiencies” (p. 2). Menchaca (2012) asserts that deficit thinking is a form of oppression that can be traced back to the 1600s. This cruel use of power and influence is exerted to keep a group of people in their place. This practice of devaluing language leads to deficit thinking, a form of oppression that has a long history in the schooling practices of the U.S. and utilizes assimilation to strip children of their native language (Menchaca, 2012). Not speaking one’s native language can remove the ability to learn one’s family history and experiences with racism and oppression (Delgado, 2010).

Today settler colonialism continues in our educational settings as children are not taught the real history of colonizers, so they are not able to name what has happened to previous generations and what is happening to them (Glenn, 2014; Valencia, 2012). Many immigrant children and children of immigrants have been victims of colonization when it comes to language. This is not a new form of colonialism, and it has been present in the U.S. since Native Americans were forced into Indian Boarding Schools. The correlation between power and language as well as how it can impede the transfer of generational knowledge was stated eloquently by a Native American elder, “We should be proud of our heritage, but when we have a generation before you that does not know their heritage, how can they hand it down? How can they be proud about what they don’t know about it?” (Richie, 2008). Archibald (2008) notes that Indigenous stories have lost their educational and social value because of inadequate translations as well as the practice of adapting stories to fit the Western education system. In short, she attributes the lack of linguistic value placed on a language other than so-called “standard” English to colonization, which fails to grasp the connection stories have regarding cultural
teachings. It should be no surprise to us all that the inequalities have existed, still exist, and will continue to exist for our students and communities of color. The inequalities are not happenstance; they are intentional and have been for centuries.

In summary, Latinx students battle with racism through aggressive assaults on their culture, language, and beliefs (Valenzuela, 1999). The invisibility of Latinx youth’s cultural experiences in the current curriculum and school practices that focus on whitestream culture is intentional. Furthermore, by centering the focus of formal schooling on socializing and the “Americanization” of Latinx students, the current practices and curriculum result in the growing hostility toward the Spanish language and Mexican culture (Darder & Torres, 2014; Menchaca, 2012). Thus, schools produce monolingual students who struggle with identity and may feel detached from both Mexico and the United States (Valenzuela, 1999). Now that I have provided an overview of the experiences of Latinx students with deculturalization in schools, I want to discuss the research about student activism.

**Student Activism**

There was an influx of research about undocumented people in the U.S. in the 1980s (Chavez, 1991) and there has been extensive research conducted on undocumented students over the past ten years, that focuses on the DREAM Act, DACA, and issues with access to higher education (Abrego & Negrón-Gonzales, 2020; Gonzales 2016; Huber et al., 2008). While there has also been a growing body of literature around undocumented student activism and/or identity (Gonzales, 2016; Diaz-Strong et al., 2011; Muñoz, 2015; Nicholls, 2013) there has been limited scholarship about the activism of mixed-status students. When discussing undocumented and mixed-status student activism I believe it is imperative to cite work from undocumented or previously undocumented scholars like Aguilar (2018), Abrego & Negrón-Gonzales (2020),
Chang (2018), Mena Robles and Gomberg-Muñoz (2016), Reyna Rivarola and López (2021); and Unzueta Carrasco and Seif (2014) to view the experiences via the lens of people who have lived as “illegalized” persons (Chomsky, 2014; De Genova & Ramos-Zayas, 2003; Gonzales, 2016) in a nation state that uses citizenship as a tool of control to exploit them and their families (Alonso Bejarano et al., 2019; Escudero, 2020, Abrego & Negrón-Gonzales 2020, Glenn, 2015; Unzueta Carrasco & Seif, 2014). For these reasons, we need more scholarship about undocumented student activists from the individuals who are undocumented or formerly undocumented and to hear from mixed-status student activists. In the next section I will discuss the undocumented and mixed-status student activism on college campuses.

Undocumented and Mixed-Status Activism

Thompson (2010) and Ferguson (2017) provide historical accounts of student movements at higher education institutions. The students in the 1960s used sit-ins and protests and even sued their universities as they fought against a society where, according to Thompson (2010), they faced “poverty, social and political inequality, and the threat of nuclear annihilation that led many Americans, students foremost among them, to question American democracy” (p. 209). According to Thompson (2010), many Americans supported the use of violence against student protestors, and some even noted that “students must expect injury or death during civil disorders” (p. 213). Ferguson (2017) notes students and those wishing to create change must know the history and institutional context of demands and protest to continue developing agendas and movements that challenge the mollifying of knowledge created by neoliberalism tactics. He reminds activists that they must understand their historical and institutional environments, to assume they do not belong, and to recognize when institutions say yes, that can be a moment of jeopardy and not just a victory. Thompson (2010) reminds us that people in the
United States gained rights and protections via activist activities and notes how these rights are
delicate and, therefore, an ongoing process to ensure that these rights are not just promised to the
people but that they are carried out.

The societal reaction to students challenging oppressive systems in the ’60s is relevant to
undocumented and mixed-status student activists’ demands today, as students are challenging
systems where they usually do not see themselves and are asking to be included in the
conversations and curriculum while being treated with dignity and respect. Much of the research
conducted over the past ten years regarding activism by undocumented youth has focused
primarily on their use of storytelling and other strategies to garner support for the DREAM Act
and then to demand change on their campuses and communities after Congress failed to pass the
Federal Dream Act (Chang, 2018; Escudero, 2020; Gonzales, 2016; Muñoz, 2015; Nicholls,
2013; Tuck & Yang, 2014). When legislation did not afford them any benefits, these student
activists realized the law was both a tool and target of their activism (Escudero, 2020). These
young activists recognized the power of telling their stories as an organizing tool and
“constructed and leveraged their individual and collective identities” (Escudero, 2020; Nicholls,
2013). Muñoz’s (2015) research depicts specifically how youth targeted legal change through
having a critical legal consciousness, “an awareness that undocumented social activists use to
gain new knowledge about their legality” (p. 12). Undocumented youth have been telling their
stories or “coming out” about their undocumented status for years but it was not until March 10,
2010 in Chicago when the Immigrant Youth and Justice League, after the failure of the federal
DREAM Act, held the first Coming Out of the Shadows event that led to national and campus
movements where students boldly stated they were “undocumented, unafraid and unapologetic”
(Mena Robles & Gomberg-Muñoz; Unzueta Carrasco & Seif, 2014).
While many scholars note the power in telling one’s story, scholars must recognize there is also trauma in this process. Pelaez Lopez (2021) shares how they\textsuperscript{8} were trained to tell their story in the most compelling way possible in under two minutes for when they encountered anti-immigrant, xenophobic people in order to inundate them with stories that portrayed the violence that migrants experienced every single day. Pelaez Lopez’s “story of self” quickly became popular, but the truth was they were taught to share their trauma and not their family’s story. They note that the organizer who helped them tell their story was a white citizen Latino and the person who taught them how to memorize it was a white citizen Latina, neither of whom shared Pelaez Lopez’s racialized experience or had the privilege of citizenship. Pelaez Lopez (2022) tweeted recently, “I was really indoctrinated in the nonconsensual performance contract of the DREAM Act. I am sorry to all the youth I trained and told to wear a cap and gown because it would serve—–the movement—–.” Tuck and Yang (2014) theorize that undocumented youth utilize survivance stories to counter stereotypes and connect their opposition to personal experiences to challenge skewed power structures and use the nation’s narrative about bravery and justice. The word “survivance” has not been fully defined but is “an intergenerational connection to an individual and collective sense of presence and resistance in personal experience and the word, or language, made particularly through stories” (Tuck & Yang, 2014, pp. 106–107). This is a reminder to all scholars conducting a qualitative study that stories, while powerful, can also be painful to share. We must be mindful when asking others to share their personal narratives for the purpose of advocacy or research.

\textsuperscript{8} Pelaez Lopez uses they/them/their pronouns and is also known by their artist name MigrantScribble.
Gaps in the Literature

First, while much research has centered undocumented students sharing their stories, there is much to be problematized and understood around undocumented student storytelling or *testimonios*. My own research does include the stories of undocumented students but, unlike previous research, focuses on a student organization created by students for undocumented youth on a college campus.

Secondly, the ethics of research around undocumented activism is key. In fact, it is so important that to the best of my ability I chose to cite research that has been published by undocumented or formerly undocumented authors. Since I am not currently nor have ever been undocumented, this is hard for me to address because there needs to be an increase and spotlight on the scholarship from those who are directly affected. While there are articles, tweets, poems, art, podcasts, and other forms of knowledge being shared by those who are undocumented or formerly undocumented, we do not see enough of those individuals illuminated in academia (MigrantScribble, 2017; Reyna Rivarola & López, 2021).

When I first enrolled in this Ph.D. program in the fall of 2016, I thought my topic would focus solely on undocumented students. While collecting the *testimonios* of undocumented and mixed-status students, the aim is to be respectful and honor the students’ community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005). For those of us who do such work, in the spirit of reciprocity, we hope to transfer students’ knowledge about their identities and activism to others. Therefore, my research shifted from having “participants” to, instead, “co-researchers,” where they will present with me at future conferences and co-author future papers as well as determine how the findings will be shared with the undocumented and mixed-status students at their alma mater and other universities across the nation. In this way, this research contributes to a gap in the literature by
demonstrating a novel approach to incorporating undocumented students into the research process and giving them control over representation of their stories.

Finally, there has been very little research on mixed-status student activists. These students have the privilege of both the fear of sharing their family’s immigration status and the lack of familiarity with how to navigate and utilize resources as a child of unauthorized parents. This has resulted in a silencing of these voices, gaps in educational support and activism, and the invisibility of this student population in schools. I decided to include the knowledge and activism of mixed-status Latina activists in this study because they too are susceptible to acculturation stress; due to race-gendered and anti-nativists experiences, they have different experiences than their immigrant parents and undocumented peers (Santiago et al., 2014).

Of the 5.1 million children under the age of 18 with an undocumented parent, approximately 4 million are U.S. citizens (Balderas et al., 2016). Thus, mixed-status families make up a sizeable portion of the undocumented population in the United States. This growing population of students will have additional needs that may not be realized due to their U.S.-born status. Mass et al. (2016) find that mixed-status students require specialized support from school staff due to emotional trauma, poverty, and legal issues. They may hide their family status for fear of legal repercussions or may not take advantage of the benefits they are entitled to as citizens. My research fills this gap, as some of my co-researchers are students from mixed-status families.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter I shared the effects of this country’s history with settler colonialism and how it has led to laws and policies that create obstacles for students in higher education. In turn, these laws led to colonizing practices in schools that aim to deculturize undocumented and
mixed-status students. Students on college campuses may see a shift in those identities as they begin to join organizations attend classes that help them understand who they are and come to terms with their multiple identities. Their participation in these activities can lead them to be “activated” as student activists and begin to demand change on their campuses. I also discussed student activism at institutions of higher education and why it is important to learn from past struggles and how undocumented youth (re)claimed their stories to push back against notions of “illegality” and “citizenship.” I end the chapter explaining that my research fills a gap in the research literature by researching a university undocumented student organization, approaches research with undocumented youth as co-researchers, and includes mixed-status stories rather than just focusing on undocumented students. In the next chapter, I discuss how this project uses a trenza metaphor for my research frameworks and why one framework is not enough to capture the nuances of undocumented and mixed-status students’ lived experiences, realities, and activism.
CHAPTER IV: TRENZA METHODOLOGY

When I think of the word confianza, I imagine a common DREAM Action NIU practice, which asks members to gather their chairs in a circle and then take turns checking in on everyone to see how we are doing and what we need to feel supported to get through the next week. Confianza represents culturally the importance of taking the time to build trusting relationships. For these reasons, I utilized what I am referring to as a confianza-based methodological approach grounded in the trust I have built with these students as an accomplice and fellow activist for the past 10 years. This confianza-based methodological approach is grounded in Indigenous and undocumented research paradigms and reflects Aguilar’s (2018) reminder that narratives belong to the people who have experienced them. In honoring that my co-researchers’ stories do not belong to me, a confianza-based approach includes a collective rather than individualistic endeavor.

When I began to think about this research project, I had conversations with some of las mujeres of DREAM Action NIU. It was then that I realized all the work done by the students was always done collectively and for the good of others. For this reason, I reached out to them and asked if we could work on this project together and make it a collective piece of research. This study was purposefully designed to welcome in the undocumented and mixed-status Latina alumnæ to be co-authors, with our research findings benefitting the undocumented community. Confianza-based research also echoes and honors Anzaldúa’s call to de-academize theory so that the knowledge produced through a study is not kept from those whom it is about or those who will hopefully benefit from the lessons shared. Anzaldúa (1990) enlightens us by stating:

Necesitamos teorías that will rewrite history using race, class, gender and ethnicity as categories of analysis, theories that cross borders, that blur boundaries—new kinds of
theories with new theorizing methods. We need theories that will point out ways to maneuver between our particular experiences and the necessity of forming our own categories and theoretical models for the patterns we uncover. We need theories that examine the implications of situations and look at what’s behind them. And we need to find practical application for those theories. (Anzaldúa, 1990, p. xxv)

The above quotation perfectly represents what this research aims to achieve through the confianza-based methodology—theory that represents the cultura of myself and the co-researchers, theory that is generated by us, rather than imposed upon us, and theory that represents epistemologies honoring the resistance and survivance of our ancestors.

Research Question

As stated in Chapter I, the following question guides our research study:

*How do undocumented and mixed-status students’ participation in the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU produce identities of resistance?*

An Undocumented Research Paradigm: Reframing Research

Before jumping into a discussion of my research methods, a discussion of my research paradigm is essential. According to Wilson (2008), a paradigm is a set of ideas that guide our actions. A research paradigm guides the steps we take to conduct our research, which includes how we view what is real (ontology), our ethics (axiology), the knowledge we hold (epistemology), and the process by which we acquire more knowledge (methodology). Wilson sees the components of an Indigenous research paradigm flowing in a circular pattern and not as singular components. He notes that Indigenous ontology may have more than one reality. Wilson (2008) notes, “Reality is not an object as much as it is a process of relationships and equates it
with epistemology” (p. 71). This resonated with me as I began to consider las mujeres de DREAM Action NIU had multiple realities due to their status.

Indigenous axiology is built on relational accountability by fulfilling your role and obligations to those with whom you are in relation. The methodology must include respect and reciprocity (how it will benefit the community). Although I do not claim an indigenous identity, Wilson’s (2008) description of the research process and an indigenous paradigm resonate with my own cultural values and ways of looking at the world. As a woman of color, white logic and white methods do not reflect my own ontological, epistemological, and axiological groundings. As a result, Wilson’s work closely reflects and honors my own beliefs and cultural grounding. I also recognize the value in honoring the richness of a community and centering the voices and experiences of those who belong to the community being researched as well as giving back the research to those who rightfully own it. I aim to honor Wilson’s (2008) work in developing what I am referring to as an undocumented paradigm, which I will attempt to explain in more detail in the following paragraphs (see Figure 1).

As a result of my doctoral studies and lived experiences, I realize that research paradigms do not always account for the lived experiences and cultural knowledge of those being researched. My proposed paradigm is my resistance and denunciation against colonized theories and methodologies in academia that do not recognize the knowledge created by las mujeres with whom I am collaborating for this study. The students I work alongside have all experienced schooling practices with “historical amnesia” and being framed only as immigrants, while crediting European Americans as rightful owners of this land. Their language, culture, and views are not seen as worthy and seldom taught in their schools (Villenas & Deyhle, 1999).
Research has functioned similarly by researchers operating as “colonizers” and, rather than stealing land, they have been stealing stories, particularly of undocumented youth and families (MigrantScribble, 2017; Reyna Rivarola & López, 2021). The harm in constructing a reality based on white values, reality, ethics and ways of acquiring knowledge is that it not only discounts the history and knowledge of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities, but it also only recognizes those white normative forms of knowledge and methods of conducting research (Scheurich & Young, 1997).

For these reasons, I struggled to identify a research paradigm when conducting this research; I realized I was facing the same issues other scholars of color have faced. When trying to make sense of how to describe the research paradigm for Indigenous-focused research, Wilson (2008) argues he had to leave behind academic paradigms to honor the stories being told and the lessons learned. I feel similarly. Anzaldúa (1990) notes that she struggled when looking for a theory to discuss the work we are a part of, and we need theories that rewrite the history told
from a decolonized lens and across borders. I join these scholars who argue for the need to “de-academize theory” and connect to the community for which the research is being conducted (Anzaldúa, 1990; Archibald, 2008; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008).

de Sousa Santos (2016) argues that there has been an “abyssal line” dividing knowledge and theories for the past five centuries that only values epistemologies of the North, which are based in settler-colonial logic. He refers to this process as epistemicide—a killing-off of epistemologies of the global South. de Sousa Santos describes epistemologies of the South as “the ways of knowing from the perspectives of those who have systematically suffered the injustices, dominations and oppressions caused by colonialism, capitalism, and patriarchy” (p. 19). More specifically, de Sousa Santos believes in exploring a third knowledge that is created when the epistemologies of the North are interwoven with the epistemologies along the abyssal line. The “abyssal line” refers to the invisible marker between northern and southern epistemologies. He goes on to state that

The epistemologies of the South call not just for new methodologies, non-extractive methodologies, but also for new ontologies. It is problematic whether the still dominant canons of scholarship will allow for the methodological innovation and transformation called for by the epistemologies of the South. (p. 27)

I posit undocumented students’ and families’ epistemologies represent the epistemologies of the South in that undocumented and mixed-status students face interlocking systems of oppression that uniquely situate them. Undocumented and mixed-status students experience shifts in what is real (ontology) depending on their environment. For example, their realities as documented or undocumented regularly shift as a result of the constantly changing legal
landscape. What is ethical (axiology) may also shift due to the *transas* that have to be made to succeed on a campus that may not welcome them or their knowledge (undocumented epistemologies). According to Urrieta (2009), *transas* are “calculated practices that do not follow mainstream prescriptions and are conducted to benefit the oppressed against the injustices of the system” (p. 11). For example, undocumented and mixed-status students may need to lie or subvert the law to ensure their own survival and that of their families. Finally, their ways of knowing (epistemologies) are acquired via the *consejos y educación* given to them/us by their/our parents and community.⁹ For example, undocumented and mixed-status students often acquire unique knowledge and understanding from their elders in how to navigate the world with the constant threat of deportation and delegitimization as a people. The epistemologies they have as a result of immigration are rich due to their undocumented community cultural wealth; their activism is the methodology that leads them to acquire more knowledge about themselves, their rights and their ability to bring about change via resistance. In sum, the ontological, epistemological, and axiological grounding of undocumented peoples are unique and do not fit within paradigms that have been named to date.

Therefore, within this research I aim to follow Archibald’s (2008) lead as she researched Indigenous people and incorporated the principles of “respect, responsibility, reverence, and reciprocity” to help guide my work with the *testimonios* and knowledge of undocumented students (p. 1). By acknowledging the students’ lived experiences, culture, language and ways of

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⁹ Godínez (2006) points out that while *consejos* and *educación* may sound similar, *consejos* are the lessons parents give their children and *educación* is how they show them those lessons.
knowing, I am pushing back against the colonized educational system that upholds whiteness and values Eurocentric epistemologies over those students’ knowledges participating in this research.

This paradigm is unique in that it recognizes the resilience and realities of the undocumented and mixed-status student activists and that these realities may shift due to location, political climate, and current immigration laws. Those who work within this paradigm recognize students may face an internal struggle with what is ethical as they try to protect themselves and their families as they enter institutions of higher education. In this paradigm their knowledge is both individual and collective and is a result of their participation in organizing spaces or in this case, DREAM Action NIU. While similar to an indigenous paradigm in valuing the lessons of family and community, the knowledge these student-activists acquire is also about surviving and traversing what can be hostile campuses with invisible administrative and campus policy-made borders.

Finally, axiology, or the ethics of research, has to be centered for undocumented research that no other form of research requires, as one misstep can lead to not only the deportation potentially of a student, but of their whole family. As research participants, undocumented students risk having to literally be forced to suddenly live in another country and lose their dreams and hopes in the process. What other research participants exist that are taking such extreme risks to participate? A unique paradigm for this form of research is necessary. In the next section I describe my positionality, as it is a central component of an undocumented paradigm. Who the researcher is and their purposes for conducting research are central axiological questions.
Positionality

Like a trenza, my personal, academic, and activist lives are deeply intertwined. I am a fierce advocate for all students, particularly undocumented and mixed-status students. At the time of this writing, I am in my 29th year as an NIU employee and have worked in four different departments; previously I worked as a teacher for the deaf, an adjunct American Sign Language instructor, a technology director, and an academic advisor. I credit the creation of my office and position as the Director of Undocumented Student Support at Northern Illinois University to the students of DREAM Action NIU. NIU heard student activists’ demands to create this position to assist them with navigating all the nuances of higher education while enrolled at NIU. Next, I attempt to share my positionality and its three strands of the personal, academic, and activist that weave together within this research project.

I am the longest-standing “member” of DREAM Action NIU and carry a lot of history. As the unofficial historian, I have been able to assist current members as they educate incoming members about the history of their collective struggle and activism on our campus. I have kept ties with DREAM Action NIU alumni to bring them back to share the history and organizing information with current students to ensure their legacy of activism continues. When I feel tired and overwhelmed, I think about the Sandra Cisneros quotation shared at the beginning of my dissertation and use it to motivate myself to keep advocating because those I love and care about are under attack. This broken U.S. immigration system terrorizes and dehumanizes immigrant families, which has created a call to action for advocates to inform, advocate, and protect ourselves and those we love. This research is not just for my community, but it also was conducted with those for whom I have been advocating in the undocumented community for over a decade.
The day after the 2016 general election was a stressful day for many Latinx students on our campus. Many of them sought refuge with the staff at the NIU Latino Center. Mental health counselors were on call as university staff provided the support that these students so desperately needed. One interaction that is ingrained in my mind was that of a freshman student. I noticed her pacing back and forth outside of the building, visibly shaking. As I approached her, a series of emotions flashed across her face. I asked if she needed a hug; she nodded and broke down in my arms. I had worked with her in several settings but was unsure of her immigration status. It was then that I asked her if she was undocumented, she responded: “No, but my parents are.” I held her and said, “I had no idea you were from a mixed-status family.” She would later inform me how grateful she was for the support on the day following the election and told me, “I didn’t know we had a name. Until you told me, I thought I was alone.”

I enrolled in a Ph.D. program in the 2016 fall semester, firmly believing that I would focus solely on undocumented students. The day after the United States’ presidential election proved to be a traumatic time for the immigrant community. The election results were incredibly distressing for the undocumented immigrants who roughly number 11 million in the United States (Gonzales, 2016). Leading up to the election, students faced anti-immigrant rhetoric in the media, campus, and classes. The immigration issue was at the forefront during the election that year. As an advisor for an undocumented student-led organization comprised of undocumented students and allies, I witnessed first-hand the stress of an election that demonized and criminalized families and communities.

After my interaction with that student in 2016, I realized there was an entire population of students being affected by immigration status. The change in administration heightened the racist nativism and anti-immigration policies, causing anxiety, uncertainty, guilt, and stress in the lives
of these students, which often goes unaddressed and unsupported. I began to read more about the experiences of mixed-status students and realized I needed to advocate with them and the undocumented students on my campus.

As I stated at the beginning, I was not always an advocate for the immigrant community. I did not enter *la lucha* until after 2008 when I took my father to a U.S. Citizen and Immigration Services appointment on February 14, 2008. However, it was not until 2016 that I realized I had been only advocating for undocumented students and never considered the toll immigration status had on mixed-status students. Illinois State University accepted me into the Ph.D. program during the 2016 election year. I had been working alongside undocumented students for six years. I entered this Ph.D. program to be in spaces that could help me advocate and amplify undocumented and Latinx students’ voices and issues at my university. These were spaces and conversations that both they and I could not access.

It was not until I began to work at the Center for Latino and Latin American Studies (CLLAS) as the Assistant to the Director that I began to mentor and advocate for students. I worked with/for undocumented students as an advisor for the undocumented student organization, DREAM Action NIU. This position provided an avenue for me to interact with students who had very similar lived experiences growing up in an educational system that failed to teach us about our culture’s rich history and knowledge. It is this same educational system that fails to mention that students of color bring Community Cultural Wealth in the forms of: “aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistance” and how these forms of capital empower us to fight back against many of the inequalities we are confronted with and continue to face (Yosso, 2005, pp. 77–80).
I am fully aware that research is often a tool of colonization, as the researcher is often the one who determines what is and is not of value. For this reason, I am hyper-aware of my privilege and position and do not want to embody colonized methods or behaviors during this process. As I reflect on the work I do alongside the undocumented community, I realize that my citizenship is a privilege I have taken for granted most of my life. When working alongside students, I am constantly aware of the privilege I have as a U.S. citizen. Although I am often not seen as American, my nine-digit number affords me access and full participation in higher education that undocumented students do not have. I fully understand that my positionality affects the research I want to do for my dissertation. Although I am from a mixed-status family that struggled to make ends meet, I never understood the obstacles undocumented immigrants faced until a little over a decade ago when I began volunteering for immigrant rights organizations. I realize that my experiences and ability to speak Spanish helped me connect to many of the students I have met over the years. Many of the undocumented students I work with are from Latin America. Growing up in a Spanish-speaking home and being a part of an English Language Learners program helped me connect and share feelings of being seen as inferior or un-American. I recognize that while I may feel un-American, it is their reality, and their or their parents’ lack of citizenship has created hardships far beyond what I have experienced. I never had to face the inability to apply for funding to assist me with paying for college, accessing healthcare, or being unable to work legally, nor have I had to deal with the fear of deportation for myself or my immediate family.

Because of my role as an advisor for the undocumented students at NIU, I built strong relationships with students. After joining the students in demonstrations, marches, and helping plan acts of civil disobedience, I realized that those directly affected should always take the lead
when sharing undocumented narratives. My desire to do a *confianza*-based research project was solidified through conversations with student leaders of DREAM Action NIU who were frustrated by researchers only showing up to meetings to ask them to participate in research but never compensated them for their time or shared the results. These conversations reinforced how undocumented people experience exploitation on many levels.

As a U.S.-born, light-skinned, cisgender, heterosexual Latina who is pursuing her Ph.D., I realize that I am incredibly privileged. I hold many intersecting identities, but privilege was never one I connected with as the daughter of migrant workers. We lived below the federal poverty line, and I was the first in my family to attend college. I only saw myself full of deficits due to my educational experiences. I often remind myself to recognize who I am both individually and collectively and how my position can affect the research I wish to conduct (Bourke, 2014). My education and employment have given me more privilege than I could have ever imagined. I never envisioned graduating from college, let alone that I would end up working at a university for close to 30 years. As I think about the work I do alongside undocumented youth and immigrant organizers, I think about the journey that brought me to fight with and for the immigrant community. During my time working at NIU alongside the immigrant community, particularly Latinx undocumented and those from mixed-status families, I have personally witnessed these students resist the inequities they faced. Now that as a reader you more fully understand my paradigmatic grounding and my positionality as a researcher, I will share how I conducted research for this dissertation.

**Trenza Metaphor as Methodology**

“Y mientras tejo tu trenza

Imagino cuando crezcas

62
Verás como vas a brotar”
La Trenza, Mon Laferte

When I think of trenzas they elicit memories of family and familial ties. My mother used to braid our hair when we were young, and I have carried that tradition on with my daughter. But when I think of my mother and trenzas, one memory always comes to the forefront of my brain.

*When I was ten, and one of my older sisters was eleven, we started to argue. We lived in a small house and shared a bedroom, so there was no escaping one another if we were not getting along. Our argument escalated quickly, and we began to shout at one another and then started to hit each other. Mother was busy, haciendo que haces, in her room sitting on the edge of the bed cross-stitching. My sister and I became loud enough for her to hear us. We had started to hit each other and were running around the house. We created enough of a mess that my mother got up from where she was cross-stitching to yell at us. My mother was upset with us, and when she tried to calm us down, we kept screaming. She said, “Esto no es como se tratan hermanas.” When we continued to argue, she stood us up back-to-back and proceeded to braid our hair together. She then made us sit at the foot of the bed, where she positioned herself on the end so she could keep one eye on us while she continued with her cross-stitching. I remember my sister tugging at the braid to cause me pain, but it ended up hurting her too. Los consejos de mami were, if you do harm to her, you do harm to yourself, no se pelean entre familia. She instilled educación by showing us how to stop harming one another by making us sit there until we calmed down and could treat each other with respect.*

I have chosen “trenzas” as a culturally grounded metaphor to creatively guide the conceptual framing of my processes. According to Quiñones (2015), metaphors used in qualitative research can create a patchwork of theories or methods that honor the knowledge
systems of research participants. In her research, she uses *trenzas* as a tool to assist in focusing and structuring the research process and shaping the design and data collection to discuss the findings of work that focuses on identities and cultural knowledge.

A *trenza* has three strands that get woven together to form a braid—sometimes they can be messy or crooked, not perfect, but they hold together. When I think of the multiplicity of the students’ identities and resistance, it feels similar to the strands that held me together in the form of my family, education, and organizing. The epistemologies and lived experiences of undocumented and mixed-status students cannot be forced into only one theoretical box. Their stories and the contexts of their lives are layered and complex—deeply woven together as a shield of protection within interlocking systems of oppression. The idea of braiding together more than one theory allows me to uphold the complexities of the epistemologies, identity-making, and activism of the undocumented and mixed-status students at NIU.

The three strands include Holland et al.’s (1998) theory of Figured Worlds, Anzaldúa’s concept of Nepantla, and UndocuCrit. First, I will provide an overview and definitions of the theoretical concept of Figured Worlds, followed by Nepantla, and I will end with UndocuCrit.

**Figured Worlds**

Figured worlds are spaces that people are invited, recruited, or enter. The interactions, conversations and activities people are a part of shape who they are, how they see themselves and how others see them. This shaping or formation that happens to a person can be at an individual and/or collective level for a member of a specific figured world. A person can belong to many figured worlds. Holland et al. (1998) posit that figured worlds are both real and imagined spaces where participants may value certain consequences more than others and discover how to distinguish each other and the roles they sometimes have with strong emotional
attachments. First, figured worlds are “historical phenomena” where participants are enlisted or enter, and develop identities through their interactions with other participants. The historical components can be the person’s personal or collective history, identities, and struggles. Second, figured worlds are constructed by the social interactions and positions people have in those spaces. Because of our positions, we may never be allowed into some figured worlds. Thirdly, these worlds are structured and recreated. A person’s interaction in this space can differ depending on how they interact or what role they have in the figured world they are in at the moment. And, finally, figured worlds disperse participants to different areas of action. Due to their involvement in figured worlds, people have shifts in how they understand their individual and collective identities (Urrieta, 2007).

Three key components make up Figured Worlds: artifacts, discourse, and identity. Artifacts represent objects, people, or events and can elicit meaning or emotions from those who reside in the figured world where the artifacts exist. Discourse occurs in the figured worlds which can (re)construct a person’s individual or collective identity and lead them to push back against the inscribed discourses of society or other figured worlds to which they belong. Identities are constructed when a person enters a figured world and are told who they are, or the person defines who they are and then act out who they make claims to be in the shared space. These identities are complex and not developed in a linear process; they can be shaped by other people, discourses, or activities that they engage in that let them enact the identity in a particular figured world. I will describe artifacts, discourse, and identity within figured worlds in greater depth in the chapters on analysis.
Nepantla

I argue las mujeres were in a phase of Nepantla\(^\text{10}\) while at NIU and mainly due to residing in the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU. This term comes from Anzaldúa’s notion of *EntreMundos*, which means “in between worlds,” “alter-space” and “another way to name the borderlands,” according to Anzaldúa & Keating (2015). *EntreMundos* consists of five sections: *autohistoria-teoría, nepantla, nos/otras, conocimientos el mundo zordo*. These first two processes can lead to the discourse that expands one’s knowledge and vision of what is possible. The third phase of *EntreMundos* focuses on the intersectionality that happens where this space allows one to be both an insider and outsider while struggling with an us (oppressed) and them (oppressor) discourse. The fourth stage is both self and collective. Anzaldúa sees *conocimiento* as “a conscious-raising tool” and can be the *chispa* needed to step into an activist mode (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2015). Anzaldúa (2015) discusses Nepantla as a space where one is:

…exposed, open to other perspectives, more readily able to access knowledge derived from inner feelings, imaginal states, and outer events, and to “see through” them with a mindful, holistic awareness. Seeing through human acts both individual and collective allows you to examine the ways you construct knowledge, identity, and reality, and explore how some of your/others’ constructions violate other people’s ways of knowing and living. (p. 544)

This quotation describes the in-between space often felt by Latinx students. Nepantla is a space that allows a person to connect to other people and ideas, and while it can be a painful place it can also be a place to feel seen and have your feelings validated. For the purpose of this study,

\(^{10}\) A Nahuatl term meaning “in-between space.”
the Nepantla framework assists in analyzing the liminality that undocumented and mixed-status students face not only in the United States but on their college campuses. Together with figured worlds, nepantla will help me analyze how students transform and self-author who they are and how they will behave. A more in-depth discussion of nepantla will be provided in the next chapter on analysis.

**Undocumented Critical Theory (UndocuCrit)**

UndocuCrit is a newer branch of Critical Race Theory that builds upon the LatCrit and TribalCrit theoretical frameworks that evolved from Bell’s (1995) Critical Race Theory (CRT), which employs multiple disciplines to question and improve inequalities in education. It openly recognizes the permanence of racism and how it affects societal and educational systems (Bell, 1992). CRT also honors students’ life experiences and views them as having strengths, which views the knowledge of people of color as a strength and honors their family histories, as well as their lived experiences via methods such as counter-storytelling (Delgado Bernal 2002; DeNicolo & Gonzalez, 2015; Pérez Huber, 2009a; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Trucio-Haynes, 2000). This approach not only recognizes the value of counter-stories but it also understands students of color bring knowledge to educational settings. This approach also acknowledges the commitment students of color have for resisting injustice and advocating for social change within their educational and home communities (Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995).

While I am a proponent of CRT, the theory does not consider all the issues faced by women, immigrants, and Latinx individuals. LatCrit provides an avenue for scrutinizing additional issues of language, ethnicity, immigration status, and culture (Pérez Huber, 2010), but it does not discuss the four areas covered by UndocuCrit. TribalCrit is based on the understanding that colonization is pervasive in our country and that U.S. policies regarding
Indigenous people are rooted in white supremacy (Brayboy, 2006). According to Brayboy (2016) TribalCrit draws from Indigenous epistemologies based on traditions and ancestral histories and recognizes the power in honoring Indigenous lived experiences. UndocuCrit adds to the TribalCrit lens to recognize the nuances of undocumented people and their lived experiences as “illegalized” people in this country.

UndocuCrit has four principles that focus on fear, liminality (and different experiences of reality), parental sacrificios, and acompañamiento (Aguilar, 2018). Aguilar (2018), the researcher who initially theorized UndocuCrit, argues that racism and colonialism are prevalent in our society, leading to racist anti-immigrant polices, laws, and rhetoric that aim to instill fear throughout the undocumented community. This framework looks at the undocumented community from an asset-based lens. Aguilar (2018) asserts fear is common in the immigrant community, but a person does not have to stay in a state of fear, and it can also be tied to empowerment. The second tenets of UndocuCrit, liminality and reality, reveal differences in lived realities because of the liminality undocumented students encounter. The third tenant, parental sacrificios, uplifts the sacrifices made by parents and sees them as a form of community cultural wealth and not as criminals. The final tenant is acompañamiento, the “embodiment of mentorship, academic redemption, and community engagement.” To truly embody this tenet, one must honor the Indigenous practice of reciprocity and create scholarship that is accessible, beneficial, and respectful of the undocumented community while amplifying the voices of undocumented individuals (Aguilar, 2018). This idea of acompañamiento is not just about being there to acompañar youth in academic settings but also a reminder that they need to be held by community as they create knowledge when advocating and supporting others. In short, UndocuCrit is meant to validate the experiences of undocumented individuals and condemn the
societally made borders that marginalize and intimidate undocumented immigrants. This lens allows researchers to focus on the experiences and hope of those directly affected.

**Research Design**

Narrative inquiry, simply put, is storytelling and a methodology that allows the listener or reader a way to connect events to a larger story or stories (Mina, 2019). For this dissertation I utilized *testimonio*, a LatCrit methodology with Latin American roots used as a tool to decolonize research by centering the knowledge of the Latinas who were interviewed. *Testimonio* allows marginalized people to shed a light on the oppression and harm they have experienced (Carey, 2017; DeNicolo & Gónzalez, 2015; Elenes, 2000). Elenes (2013) notes by sharing their *testimonios* with others, those who have faced oppression hope to raise awareness about their struggles, move others to action, and bring about change. By gathering the *testimonios* of the Latina leaders of DREAM Action NIU, this research provided them with a way to educate others and challenge stereotypes and myths about undocumented and mixed-status students.

**Research Ethics**

As discussed previously, the axiological grounding for this research has been central. Before gathering *testimonios* from *las mujeres de* DREAM Action NIU, I had to apply for institutional review board (IRB) approval. But the ethical considerations for my research went well beyond IRB approval.

I use the term “co-researchers” in place of “participants” or “subjects” because, as I stated before, this research aimed to co-create knowledge with those who have lived their lives and advocated while being affected by their immigration status on NIU’s campus. I had nine former DREAM Action NIU alumnae from Northern Illinois University who agreed to be my co-
researchers. Since this is a confianza-based project, I discussed how they wanted to conduct the testimonios.

Thus, the gathering of testimonios was a collective effort. Las mujeres de DREAM Action were both interviewers and interviewees. They took turns being the interviewer and being interviewed in a one-on-one virtual setting by another co-researcher. I intentionally did not want to have the role of interviewer during the individual interviews because I did not want to inhibit the flow of information shared. I was cognizant of the unintentional power of hierarchy structure las mujeres may have still held for me, as I had served as an academic advisor for some and as the student organization advisor for all the co-researchers. I also recognized that I had forged strong relationships, and many saw me as a tía figure or as a madrina in higher ed, as I was referred to on several occasions. I was also aware that the mixed-status students were very cognizant of their privilege and did not want that to stop them from speaking freely about their experiences advocating in spaces alongside those directly affected by immigration status. I wanted all the co-researchers to be comfortable, supported, and validated when sharing their experiences. This was why I chose for them to interview and be interviewed by a peer who had similar life experiences and perhaps similar experiences when advocating as a leader of DREAM Action NIU.

Data Collection and Analysis

I have created a visual representation of my data collection and analysis through a data accounting log (see Appendix B).

Site Context

The site selected was Northern Illinois University and includes the years 2009–2021. NIU is 65 miles west of Chicago and has a student population of 11,834 undergraduates, 4,079
graduates, and 321 law students. The campus is becoming more diverse, with a Latinx population of 17.03% which has increased consistently over the past decade and now identifies as an emerging Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI). While none of the interviews took place on campus, the students discussed events that happened at DREAM Action NIU meetings, events, and advocacy efforts on campus and in the state of Illinois.

The climate of NIU has changed considerably over the past 13 years. When *las mujeres* of DREAM Action first began meeting in 2009, undocumented students were living in the shadows at NIU, and the campus was not as welcoming to undocumented or mixed-status students as it is today. When they first began meeting, they met at the Latino Center, working specifically with the Latin Resource Center. The following year they began to work with both the Latino Resource Center and the Center for Latino and Latin American Studies. In 2018 they moved to a central location in the NIU Campus Life Building and the home of the Office of Undocumented Student support, where they met weekly.

**Co-Researchers**

There has been a total of 18 leaders of DREAM Action NIU since it began. For this study, I focused on only the nine Latinas who were previous leaders of DREAM Action NIU since it began in 2009 and who are no longer undergraduate students at NIU. The nine co-researchers were selected based on their leadership roles in DREAM Action NIU and their self-identification as Latinas. All the Latinas in this study were viewed as leaders and often were leading the charge to create change on NIU’s campus to make it more undocumented-friendly. Only one of the co-researchers is not currently affected by immigration status.
Yasmeen shared her reaction to being invited to assist with this research project:

At first, I thought, oh my gosh it's so cool that it's so many women leaders and then I thought well that's not an accident. I feel this is how I feel, I really love that Sandy's doing this because...it's not an accident that so many women students have stepped up to lead DREAM Action. To me it makes a lot of sense and I'm really happy to see it, because I think there needs to be more visibility and if we go back to any movement women have always been there, we've just been systematically erased.

Yasmeen’s quotation is a reminder that over the years, mujeres de DREAM Action have answered the call to lead this organization and deserve to be recognized for the good work they have continued to do on behalf of DREAM Action NIU since it was created in 2009. Four of the co-researchers were born in Mexico, one was born in Ecuador and four of them were born in the United States. All the co-researchers are alumnae of Northern Illinois University. Four of the co-researchers have adjusted status and are no longer undocumented and three are from mixed-status families.

The data sources for this research project consist of semi-structured interviews and one group interview, plática con poderosas. Each mujer participated in two individual interviews (one as the interviewer and one as an interviewee) and in one plática. Due to the pandemic, the individual interviews were conducted via Zoom and recorded to the cloud since I was not present during the interviews. The Zoom application created video, audio, and transcript files for each interview. The data was moved from my Zoom account and downloaded to my computer and then erased from the cloud. I had las mujeres de DREAM Action NIU conduct the one-on-one interviews with assigned students who shared similar immigration statuses. Those who are undocumented or formerly undocumented were partnered with an interviewee and interviewer
who had a similar immigration status. Those who are U.S. citizens had a similar setup of being interviewed and interviewing other U.S. citizens.

On several occasions the co-researchers stayed on the Zoom meeting to catch up or reminisce after they had asked all of the interview protocol questions. The co-researchers were very generous with their schedules and were able to conduct all the interviews within two weeks once we started. They also helped review and edit the questions. They asked additional or follow-up questions for both personal reasons and to clarify responses. Some of the co-researchers had taken an oral history class or participated in the Latinx Oral History program at NIU. Some of the co-researchers shared that they had a lot they wanted to chime in at times and some did share a little of their own experiences. Often, they gave words of encouragement or agreement when co-researchers shared struggles or joyful memories. They were also given the opportunity to listen to all the interviews. While they were being interviewed, some of las mujeres stated they wanted to hear other interviews once we were done with the process.

The individual interviews focused on students’ immigration status, their pathway to NIU, what motivated them to participate in DREAM Action NIU, memorable moments as a member and how membership affected their political views, well-being, and academics (See Appendix A for a copy of the interview questions). Several questions asked them about how their identity was affected by their involvement with DREAM Action NIU and if they identified as activists. Interview questions were designed to inspire co-researchers to share personal stories.

Table 1 lists my co-researchers, their country of origin as well as when they graduated from NIU. Figure 2 is a screenshot from our initial Zoom meeting when we discussed the research project and las mujeres de DREAM Action agreed to be co-researchers for this project.
Table 1

Co-researcher Profiles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Country of Origin</th>
<th>Graduation Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yasmeen</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>May 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>México</td>
<td>December 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sara</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>México</td>
<td>May 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lizbeth</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>December 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erin</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>May 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>México</td>
<td>B.S., May 2018, J.D., May 2021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ainsley</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>May 2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dulce</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>México</td>
<td>December 2020</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2. Las mujeres de DREAM Action NIU.
Plática con Poderosas

The plática con poderosas, referring to the group interviews/meetings, is a term and practice I used to culturally ground my methods and hold a conversation in a more informal setting, so my co-researchers felt free to share their experiences. I conducted the plática con poderosas to have dialogue about the collective work of las mujeres de DREAM Action NIU. I focused on las mujeres’ experiences as co-researchers, what they wanted to happen to the data, and what they hoped would come from the research project, data, and knowledge. The one-on-one interviews were conducted within two weeks. The plática was conducted two weeks after the final one-on-one interviews were conducted.

Bringing these women together at the end of this project allowed the co-researchers to share what they learned and accomplished as a collective and celebrate their achievements. The use of testimonios allowed for more in-depth discussions and information that I was not privy to due to my role as an advisor. When they shared and reflected on how they processed their identity and activism on campus, it was at times difficult to hear due to the amount of time they gave, the stress felt, and trauma they experienced. For some of the co-researchers who had adjusted status, they had to go back and recall painful memories and experiences they had to endure while being undocumented. All of them discussed how advocating while students took a toll on them mentally but in the end, they all understood how important it was to “…do work that matters. Vale la pena, it’s worth the pain” (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2015, p. 22).

Documents/Artifacts

The documents and artifacts for this study were collected via a shared google drive with las mujeres. Once I created the drive and gave them access, they created their own folders and uploaded a variety of documents. The documents include such things as photos from meetings,
advocacy events, trips to the state capitol in Springfield, Coming Out of the Shadows, as well as flyers that were used to advertise their work and opportunities for engagement. They also added videos, audio and the demands from Coming Out of the Shadows. The documents provide an additional lens in understanding the stories of the co-researchers captured by the interviews and pláticas. These artifacts will also assist in showcasing the type of advocacy in which they participated, the change that occurred due to this advocacy, and how they passed on their legacy to others so that readers can fully understand the stress they felt as student advocates. Sharing artifacts is just a glimpse into the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU and the work that was done by these amazing activists.

Data Analysis

To organize the data, I created folders for the audio, video, and the transcripts from Zoom as well as a folder for the artifacts provided by las mujeres. I made edits to the transcripts for accuracy, as Zoom was not able to capture the text when las mujeres spoke in Spanish or at times spoke too fast for the application to properly translate what was shared. I organized the data as it was originally gathered and then created new folders with the updated/modified transcripts.

I then utilized Wolcott’s (1994) approach to data analysis. He describes three steps to analysis: description, analysis, and interpretation. For the first step, description, the key question guiding the analysis is, “What is going on here?” For this first step I used my analytical frameworks and created an Excel sheet for each mujer who was interviewed and color-coded responses to correspond with Figured Worlds, UndocuCrit, and Nepantla. The second step of analysis according to Wolcott is “analysis” and centers the question of, “How do things work?” where you begin looking for relationships in the data. Within this phase of coding, I began to examine the relationships between my analytical frameworks. In accordance with Wolcott’s
approach, I also began to critique the research process and assumptions I made as the researcher. The final stage of analysis is referred to as “interpretation” and the question, “What is to be made of it all?” centers the analysis. Within this phase, I followed Wolcott’s guidance and began asking how my analytical frameworks were limited or began to break down. I began to understand how UndocuCrit could be expanded and the ways Nepantla and Figured Worlds overlapped.

**Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I have identified the research paradigm I utilized, which I call an “Undocumented Paradigm” that was modeled from Wilson’s (2008) Indigenous Paradigm. I used the Undocumented Paradigm to posit a _trenza_ methodology was necessary to braid together frameworks that allowed me to honor and understand the nuances of undocumented and mixed-status knowledge. I shared why one framework would not suffice when trying to capture the nuances of the Latina co-researchers. I outlined my decision to use _testimonios_ to explore the lived experiences and stories of undocumented and mixed-status students in college, which allowed me to move away from whitestream academic research methods and interrupt the “epistemicide” that often happens to undocumented and mixed-status students in educational settings. My research setting, co-researchers, the data sources, and data analysis push against traditional research to yield a greater understanding of how contested spaces bring forth activist identities and lead to resistance on college campuses. Using a social justice lens as I conducted this research was always my goal as I developed the critical analytical tools necessary to understand the oppression _las mujeres_ experienced and their socialization and existence within oppressive systems. Within the next three chapters I offer my analysis by weaving together
artifacts, discourse, and identity—key aspects of figured worlds. I then weave Nepantla and I will begin by discussing my analysis of artifacts.
CHAPTER V: THE ARTIFACTS OF THE FIGURED WORLD OF DREAM ACTION NIU

The research findings are organized like a trenza and utilize the three theoretical frameworks as threads in a braid. As I began to map out the findings, I quickly realized I needed to break the findings into three chapters which included the three components of Figured Worlds: artifacts, discourse, and identity. This chapter will focus on artifacts, Chapter VI will focus on discourse and Chapter VII will focus on identity formation within the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU. I posit that the student organization, DREAM Action NIU, is a figured world and helped produce and thicken the activist identities of las mujeres de DREAM Action NIU. I begin by weaving the findings with the first trenza strand, figured worlds.

In this chapter I will discuss the role of artifacts: again, because identity formation within DREAM Action and NIU is layered and complex. In the next section I will focus on defining artifacts and, more specifically, the artifacts that helped shape the identities of las mujeres and an ever-evolving DREAM Action NIU community.

Artifacts

Artifacts play a fundamental role in constructing and altering figured worlds. Holland et al. (1998) define artifacts as the “means by which figured worlds are evoked, collectively developed, individually learned, and made socially and personally powerful” (p. 61). Their concept of artifacts arises from work by Vygotsky. In accordance with Vygotsky’s work, they claim that artifacts function within figured (or cultural) worlds as semiotic mediators. These semiotic mediators, which result from the interactions and/or items in a particular figured world, allow participants in those worlds to change themselves, others and even the world(s) itself (Holland et al., 1998). In figured worlds, artifacts can be objects, people, or events and can be
either concrete or abstract. According to Holland et al. (1998), “artifacts assume both an obvious and necessary material aspect and an ideal or conceptual aspect, an intentionality, whose substance is embedded in the figured world of their use” (p. 61). Consequently, these artifacts are given meaning and produce memories about the experiences on both the individual and communal level for those who are part of a particular figured world. The artifacts can also be used as tools in the figured worlds where they exist to help create discourse and memories. The artifacts operated as semiotic mediators in that students became transformed like actors in a play where they took on a role and became that character for the time they were involved in the play or participating in the event.

Through my interviews and data analysis, my co-researchers named many artifacts including but not limited to weekly meetings, a PowerPoint on the history of the organization, the IL Dream Act, lobbying, advisors, guidebook for undocumented students, professors, circles, Latino Center, legislators, protesting, event flyers, and Coming Out of the Shadows. Overall, 100% of the co-researchers brought up a DREAM Action NIU event as a key artifact related to their experiences. For this reason, I am limiting my analysis of artifacts to two key events named: Weekly meetings for DREAM Action and Coming Out of the Shadows events, an annual event organized by DREAM Action. The events were assigned meaning by members of DREAM Action NIU both individually and collectively while helping to shape how *las mujeres* saw themselves. First, I will discuss weekly meetings followed by Coming Out of the Shadows.

**Weekly Meetings**

In discussing the weekly meetings, I will first provide an overview of how they functioned and then I will share themes in how the meetings functioned as semiotic mediators for the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU. Figure 3 is a picture from a DREAM Action
meeting in 2018 that was shared with me by one of my co-researchers. It was posted on Facebook on May 2, 2018, with the following caption.

Thank you to everyone who came to our last meeting of the academic year. We have built camaraderie and friendships that will last a lifetime. Congratulations to all graduating seniors but especially to our very own Erica, Laura, and Erin. Good luck in all your endeavors. —Laura Vivaldo Cholula

Figure 3. Last DREAM Action meeting of the academic year held on May 2, 2018.

As a part of DREAM Action NIU, members attended one-hour weekly meetings held throughout the fall and spring semesters. When DREAM Action began holding weekly meetings, they were on Thursdays at 6:30 PM in the NIU Latino Center in 2009. However, in 2017, the meetings were moved to Wednesdays at 6:00 PM and held in the Campus Life Building, a more centrally located space to be more welcoming to students from all ethnicities. The meetings were slated to last an hour but often spilled over to an hour and a half.
The first meeting DREAM Action held was in the fall of 2009 on November 4th and focused on building awareness and support for the federal DREAM Act. It was held in the NIU Latino Center. The meetings utilized circles; students gathered around in chairs to discuss obstacles they encountered and process their feelings at a predominately white institution (PWI). Generett and Tredway (2015) note circles are a way to construct safe spaces between individuals that allow for relationships as well as the ability to create collective work and support for those who enter that “sacred space.” They utilized these circles to advance social justice both on and off-campus.

The hour to hour-and-a-half weekly meetings were a means to share information about issues, events, and how to be engaged in advocacy while feeling seen and safe. As students learned more about what it meant to advocate or be an activist, the role(s) they identified with or were assigned evolved in their Figured World of DREAM Action NIU meetings. These roles were also affected when people entered or left the meeting space over the years. The “meetings” functioned primarily as semiotic mediators for joy and hope, and for identity production through education. I will now discuss these two themes.

**Mi Existir Es Resistir: Joy and Hope**

*A revolution without dancing is not a revolution worth having.* —Emma Goldman

The ability to share and feel supported is why weekly meetings were important for so many of *las mujeres* who begin to have shifts in their identities and became *luchadoras* as they begin to resist against the oppression they felt in their everyday lives and on their campus. The DREAM Action NIU meetings were where they felt understood and organizing gave them an opportunity to bring about change. Sara notes the importance of “listening to the deep feeling within ourselves, that this is not it, there has to be more to this than just constant struggle.” With
the exhaustion of constant struggle, the weekly meetings offered a time where there was room for being part of a group that allowed them to feel more powerful and connect joy to activism. While they were working hard to bring about awareness and change, they also had opportunities to laugh and find happiness.

**Maria:** And I also wanted to have fun. And so, trying to balance all of that was difficult but I guess my thoughts and feelings on … my involvement with DREAM Action NIU is that DREAM Action gave me happiness and a place where I felt happy and productive and important. Where I felt I was also doing it and was actually moving, I was actually doing something that I could show; when you look at the Guide,\(^{11}\) I could show you something physical. I was part of this, my name is on this, it’s very tangible, it’s here in a way that I couldn't speak of in anything else.

Maria’s words highlight how this figured world was a space for advocacy and creating change while also being a place for joy and pride. She was part of a team that created NIU’s first handbook for working with undocumented students; this gave her a lot of pride to create a guide and contribute to making the campus a friendly place for undocumented students.

Ainsley noted that it was nice to be friends, not just seen as activists. The ability to laugh and be in community with one another was extremely important and what made the weekly meetings an artifact that was both powerful and personal in the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU.

**Ainsley:** I think it’s just the jokes people would tell. The cohort, I don’t know what we could call each other, “the group” that we created, everybody was so funny. And then I remember laughing all the time, whether it be Laura, Sandy or Sandra or somebody that cracks a joke and being able to laugh together, and it could be the most random thing. We also did work, I think those moments, where we could just be together and be friends, rather than activists. That’s something that I remember, and I still appreciate, to this day.

Ainsley’s quote highlights the value of joy despite the work that needed to be done. She has strong memories of the laughter and fun that also existed in this space. These meetings became mediators of joy for students who also experienced stress from advocating.

The ability to laugh and experience healthy relationships with other students was further expressed by Erin.

**Erin:** We would have fun things to do. It wasn't always just business. We'd always create time for a place so that people could destress so that people could not just be, “go go go” or “work, work, work,” but also to just to get to know each other.

Both Erin and Maria shared similar sentiments about having “fun” and even partying together with other members as an important aspect of the weekly meetings. These meetings, which were artifacts in the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU, were not only meaningful to the production of this space; they also produced joyful memories that have lasted years after *las mujeres* graduated.

**Maria:** My other favorite things were meetings, Thursday night. Because this was the thing; it was meeting some Thursday nights where we meet up to talk about DREAM Action NIU, and it would be also drinking legally, because we were over 21…You know, with my support network, that was my safety net and that was really my chosen family,
my friends, my group of friends, that I still talk to on Snapchat and that is the core group of friends that I choose as family.

Maria’s quote is telling about the relationships forged in the figured world constructed by these college activists. Many of *las luchadoras* have noted that they are friends with their fellow DREAM Action NIU members even after graduating. This space was not just about resisting against systems of oppression; there was also a lot of joy and support that created familial-like relationships.

Along with opportunities for joy, these meetings gave *las mujeres* an opportunity to push back against feelings of loneliness and helplessness to bring about change, as Laura’s quote below depicts.

**Laura:** I didn't want to feel helpless and organizing seemed like the only option for me, because at that point, all I have is a community college education. I was a restaurant worker, so a lot of times, I felt invisible, but with organizing it really felt like an opportunity to make a difference, regardless of how insignificant, or what other people thought. Because there were other people who said, “*Why are you doing this and you're not going to change anything,*” but the alternative is to not do anything and things just staying the same. That's why organizing [matters], regardless of the circumstances, because to do nothing feels like you've already given up and I do not give up.

Laura’s quote represents how *las luchadoras* believed the meetings helped them to feel less alone and, consequently, more powerful. Thus, these meetings functioned as semiotic mediators that allowed them to change how they felt because of residing in this figured world. In feeling more powerful, they were able to have enough hope to continue influencing change.
Maria’s quote below provides another example of the meetings providing a sense of hope through feeling less alone.

**Maria:** I think it helped me a lot. They supported me and I knew that I wasn't alone, I had a support network [to lift me up] in times where I was extremely stressed and tired and when I was ready to give up.

Maria’s quote reflects how the weekly meetings provided a place to share space with other people who were experiencing the same stressors and dealing with feelings of fear or uncertainty as well as the ability to share in a space where peers who also were struggling could affirm their experiences. The meetings allowed *las mujeres* to know that there were others in the struggle with them. For example, some *luchadoras* stated it gave them a space to feel connected and gave them a place to share some of the trauma they were experiencing due to being undocumented or having undocumented parents.

**Sara:** I think it's such a beautiful space for students to come together and feel some sort of connection, some sort of understanding. When we're left alone with our trauma, things just get really exacerbated and so when there's community there, when there's other people there, to witness you and hold you, it breaks that isolation. And so I do think DREAM Action is a space that really helps alleviate a lot of isolation that students or others may feel. And not just undocumented folks but also students with mixed-status families who may not be directly experiencing it from their own individual experience but are experiencing it from loving somebody who's undocumented. Even supporting them as they're navigating and moving through so much. I do think it's a space that really helps students feel connected and feel supported.
Sara’s quote depicts how the weekly meetings functioned as mediators for joy and hope that countered the constant struggles they were experiencing outside of DREAM Action. The meetings provided a supportive and affirming space which then led to change, not just on campus, but within *las luchadoras* themselves and what they wanted their Figured World of DREAM Action to look like and provide them. The ability to collectively process what they were experiencing helped relieve some of the stress they carried and assisted them with realizing they were not the only ones feeling the tension from living in this country as person who was undocumented or from a mixed-status family. These meetings also allowed them to push back against frustration and channel those feelings into action beyond the meeting space.

**Sara:** A space that then leverages all of the anger, frustration, sadness and transforms that energy into something beautiful whether that’s storytelling or advocacy or organizing or changing conditions, I feel it’s a really transformational space; a lot of energy really tends to get transformed if that’s what students are wanting from that space.

Many of *las luchadoras* noted that these meetings provided hope and the ability to transform the campus while providing them with a place to connect to others and share experiences that were not uncommon to others in attendance. Overall, the meetings were noted as a “brave space” and facilitated change in *las mujeres* where they could be their “full authentic selves” and most importantly felt individually and collectively empowered. In sum, the meetings were semiotic mediators for hope and joy.

Lopes’s (1987) work on the psychology of risk helps us to understand the importance of hope. She states,

The belief that one can control one’s fate appears to be necessary to good mental health…. When highly desired outcomes are believed to be unlikely or when
highly undesirable outcomes are believed to be likely, and when the individual believes that nothing can be done to change these likelihoods, depression results, causing attendant motivational and affective deficits. (p. 28)

She goes on to discuss how when people begin making plans to influence their futures, that it is “applied hoping” because planning is part of hoping and believing you can have some influence on future outcomes. Although Lopes’s (1986) work has nothing to do with undocumented students, her work applies in that the meetings allowed students the opportunity to feel less alone, and subsequently, more powerful as a group with the ability to influence their futures. Through this collective power, the meetings acted as semiotic mediators of hope, encouraging the production of identities of resistance in the process.

The meetings also functioned as semiotic mediators of joy. When youth activists have identities that result in social exclusion, having spaces where they can form social bonds by having “fun,” and even partying, becomes an important part of their political and social solidarity building (Gurr, 2019). The experiences of las mujeres de DREAM Action NIU was similar where “meetings” became a key space of joy and belonging—a stark contrast to the world beyond DREAM Action NIU where undocumented and mixed-status families are demonized and marginalized in society. Gurr (2019) argues that opportunities to have “fun” outside activist activities can help youth experience a glimpse of an “inclusive and utopian social order, with enough music, dance, and romance for everyone” (p. 14). In essence, having fun helps young activists remember and envision what they are fighting for while helping them heal from constant resistance and struggle outside DREAM Action NIU.

In her work on Pleasure Activism, brown (2019) claims an important aspect of social justice organizing is joy. She argues that engaging with joy should guide our pursuit of a better
world because it contains what is necessary for liberation. She claims that when we get stuck in our suffering, it can be difficult to imagine and believe in a better future. So, although the joy and sense of belonging las luchadoras felt within the meetings might seem trivial, it is really quite revolutionary considering the level of suffering and pain undocumented and mixed-status students can experience. The joy and belonging found within the meetings allowed las luchadoras to sustain their will to resist while also helping them to feel hopeful about the possibility of change for a better future. As brown claims, “pleasure activism is the work we do to reclaim our whole, happy, and satisfiable selves from the impacts, delusions, and limitations of oppression and/or supremacy” (2019, p. 15). Next, I will discuss how the meetings contributed to the identity production of las luchadoras via the lessons learned during their time in the weekly meetings.

Production of Identity

The meetings also provided an opportunity to learn about themselves as individuals who are undocumented or from a mixed-status family. Their participation in the weekly meetings of the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU shaped their identities via their participation and the positions they held which were “defined by the organization of this worlds’ activity” (Holland et al., 1998; Urrieta, 2009). There is no formal education of what it means to be undocumented in this country, and much of what the students knew about their status came from the media or their parents, who sometimes did not discuss immigration or what it meant to be undocumented in this country. Some of las luchadoras de DREAM Action NIU learned more about their status or their parents in the weekly meetings.

By participating in these meetings, las luchadoras were able to make connections as to how status had affected them and their families. According to Urrieta (2009), “people reinterpret
their own pasts when identity shifts occur and develop new understandings of themselves and their lives with a stronger emotional investment in their new world” (p. 77). Ivonne shares how her own identity shifted as an undocumented person who did not understand the nuances of being undocumented until she began attending weekly meetings. Ivonne says she “didn’t learn about it, so I was learning about me in DREAM Action, and ‘Oh my gosh, so many things made sense.’”

Others note that they had been told to protect the status of their families, and a lot of those lessons were wrapped in fear. The participation in the weekly meetings led to identity production and facilitated a change in “not only their conception of themselves but also their new view of the world” (Urrieta, 2009). It was meeting others with similar experiences that helped some of las mujeres have shifts in their past experiences and they learned to release some of the anxiety and fear they had. They began to feel empowered once they realized others had similar experiences.

Ainsley: I believe that DREAM Action NIU is important for mixed-status students, because it allows us to break that fear and that learned behavior that our parents, or families—that it is something to be kept secret, and I think that there’s empowerment over that because it doesn’t hold so much power over you, you’re able to be in this space and discuss and have these experiences and be accepted, and to not live in fear.

As Ainsley’s quote reflects, las luchadoras de DREAM Action NIU began to shift not only how they viewed themselves but how they viewed their past and the world around them (Urrieta, 2009). Learning about undocumented people and the immigrants’ rights movement helped answer a lot of questions students had and at times they felt they could not ask their parents. Ivonne notes she cried from the relief she was given at some of the meetings.
**Ivonne:** My involvement with DREAM Action NIU really helped me learn about myself, which really helped me answer questions that I had for my parents that they weren't even able to answer, you know, because they were in their own thing. So, I cried a lot after DREAM Action meetings and it just felt really good, though, to cry because I’m learning, I’m answering so many questions.

And Ivonne was not alone in how emotional the meetings were for her. The weekly meetings evoked powerful personal shifts in the identities of *las luchadoras* who attended and eventually were leaders in this figured world. Dulce noted that it was powerful to see an organization for students who were either undocumented or from mixed-status families but equally important was the ability learn about undocumented people, but it was critical learn the laws and learn about the immigrant community. These lessons provided a shift in how they viewed the world around them.

**Dulce:** From my perspective, as a student, I think it was important to see that there was an organization that was doing something for people like me who identified as undocumented or who were in mixed-status families. And it was also kind of, wow these things exist; all we had at Harper was Latino Unidos. They were the ones doing this type of raising awareness on immigration. But also, I think it's important. You gain so much knowledge, especially if you attend meetings, general meetings; you know, with Immigration 101 there were things that I did not know. Even being undocumented. Attending those meetings was just kind of, “Whoa.” So, if I came in knowing I was undocumented and I didn't know certain things about immigration laws, I’m sure other students came in the same way.
Similar to Dulce, many *luchadoras* note that these meetings were a vehicle to learn by interacting with others, listening to presentations, and sharing stories that led them to denounce the fear that had power over them and had silenced them prior to coming to DREAM Action and openly sharing with others who were supportive.

The herstories of *las luchadoras* paint a picture of how important these meetings were for the members of DREAM Action NIU’s identity production. The meetings, as an artifact, provided them with an opportunity to collectively understand the issue of immigration, how it personally affected them and others as well as why this advocacy was so important. *Las luchadoras* learned what it meant to be activists and took on those roles. Some did that during their time as leaders of DREAM Acton and some continued with that role after leaving NIU.

Urrieta’s work on the production of identity assists us in understanding the role of education and learning about systems of oppression had in the formation of *las luchadoras*’ identities. *Las mujeres* sharing their participation in weekly DREAM Action NIU meetings led to “procedural identity production,” which meant there was a shift in their identities and the meetings were a space where they could “practice” their “new identity” of student activist and how their views had changed (Urrieta, 2009).

In the weekly meetings *las luchadoras* learned about laws, the importance of fighting for all undocumented immigrants, and pushing back against a narrative that erased those seen as undeserving. They experienced shifts in their identities as they recognized their fears but stepped into their power as students who wanted to bring about change on their campus. All these lessons also created a shift in how they viewed the organizing space as a place of joy and hope.

In the next section I will discuss how these meetings led them to create an event that pushed out beyond the walls of their meeting spaces to hold Coming Out of the Shadows,
another artifact that was an event, which allowed las luchadoras to push their activist efforts out to the university.

**Coming Out of The Shadows: Performance of Identity**

Figure 4 shows the advertisement for another event that functioned as a mediator for las luchadoras: Coming Out of the Shadows (COS). This figure shows messaging for the 2016 COS that was asking for the dismantling of ICE and defunding the police, as well as asking for support with the ACCESS Bill, which became the RISE Act. These events were shaped by the students of DREAM Action NIU and others who were invited into this figured world and given roles to assist with this event. The COS events have powerful memories for every student who spoke and “came out of the shadows” or shared narratives of solidarity. All las luchadoras who were interviewed participated in this event in one fashion or another as either a speaker or emcee or in some cases both; two of them spoke at COS events after they had graduated. They were invited to share their narratives and some of the history of DREAM Action NIU. This event allows the students of DREAM Action to publicly share their counter-narratives to dispel myths about undocumented immigrants.

According to Urrieta (2009), the production of identity includes the opportunity to “perform” an identity. He states, “through participation in figured worlds, people can reconceptualize who they are, or shift who they understand themselves to be, as individuals or as members of collectives” (Urrieta, 2009, p. 70). Coming Out of the Shadows was a powerful force for the production of identity for students because it was a collaboratively planned event where performance of an identity as an undocumented activist is central and very public. They unapologetically stood outside of the Holmes Student Center for any of their college peers, professors or NIU community members to see and hear them. They had fellow Huskies and
supporters there to cheer them on and encourage their acting out these activist identities. It was a moment of confronting their fears about people knowing their status. This was a moment of liberation to say, “We will no longer be silenced,” when they basically understood their needs were greater than their fears. Although COS also functioned as a semiotic mediator for hope and joy, as I will describe, the most important component was the opportunity to publicly perform identity.

Figure 4. The 2016 Coming out of the Shadows flyer.
Coming Out of the Shadows events were public and open to all the campus and community, which differed compared to the other events DREAM Action NIU held, which were mainly held at either the Latino Center, the Campus Life Building or in spaces that were deemed as safe spaces to process and heal as a collective. This event was held both outside and, due to inclement weather, inside of NIU’s student union, called the Holmes Student Center. It was also streamed virtually via a Facebook live event during shelter in place when the pandemic hit the country in 2020. Las luchadoras de DREAM Action NIU learned about COS from the Immigrant Youth Justice League (IYJL), which had organized its first Coming Out of the Shadows on March 10, 2010, outside of federal plaza in Chicago. IYJL’s event proved to be the first of its kind for undocumented individuals in the Midwest. The roots of COS are credited to the National Coming Out Day, organized by members of the LGBTQ+ community.

The first Coming Out of the Shadows event launched similar events across the nation and eventually college campuses (Escudero, 2020). “Undocumented, Unafraid, and Unapologetic” is a slogan used by IYJL to denote that a person’s “undocumented” status does not determine or define that person’s existence, nor does it confine them to live in fear. Coming Out of the Shadows was a tool that allowed for sharing of counter-stories, unlike the “Dreamer narrative,” which had predefined talking points of high-achieving students with no criminal record (Schwiertz, 2015).

This event provided an opportunity for las luchadoras de DREAM Action NIU to define themselves, to determine how they viewed their status and how they could stand in solidarity with others. It also allowed them to (re)claim their stories and demand change on their campus. It was important to reclaim stories that had been told about them rather than by them. During the COS events, DREAM Action publicly demanded action from the university’s administration.
It would not be until 2014 that DREAM Action NIU would host its very first Coming out of the Shadows event. Figure 5 demonstrates how Coming Out of the Shadows was an event that invited others in and was not just comprised of DREAM Action NIU members. Sara shared it was an event she wanted to bring to NIU when she transferred to NIU in 2013. In 2014 Sara and the leadership of DREAM Action NIU pushed out a call to campus organizations to see if they would be willing to help create, promote, and support the event. Student organizations and campus partners answered the call and the first Coming Out of the Shadows event was held at NIU on April 8, 2014, outside of the NIU Holmes Student Center. The following was shared in *NIU Today*, NIU’s virtual newsletter, on March 27, 2014.

Figure 5. Undocumented students and allies at NIU’s first Coming Out of the Shadows event.

From the national scale to NIU’s backyard, members of DREAM Action NIU, MEChA, De Mujer a Mujer, Saudi Students Association and the Women’s Studies and LGBT Studies programs will host NIU’s first Coming Out of the Shadows (COS). The event, which is free and open to the public, begins at 6 p.m. Tuesday, April 8, at the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Commons. (Tiahui, 2014)
This is a significant artifact because it opens up the world of DREAM Action NIU to other organizations and becomes a much larger collaborative effort. This allows students to feel safe, seen and supported by their fellow Huskies at NIU. The COS events functioned as a mediator for las luchadoras to make sense of their identities as activists or organizers by participating in this activity that has become a part of DREAM Action NIU’s figured world since 2014. It allowed others to see their performance, which is an important aspect of identity production. All the COS events (see flyers in Appendix C) became mediators that were personally and collectively powerful for las luchadoras and the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU. These events were important because they provided a space outside of the weekly meetings for las luchadoras to participate in activities and the “practice and enactment” of being an activist on their campus (Urrieta, 2007) as they stood in front of the entire campus and demanded change.

The planning, participation and “enactment” that happened at these events were important for las luchadoras because they not only were able to tell others who they were—student activists—but they performed these “roles” in a much larger space than the weekly meetings. These events created a space to organize various student organizations and share their messages to a wider audience. Sara’s quote provides an example.

**Sara:** What I loved about my experience at NIU is, while it was hard sometimes to gather student organizations together when I put out a message around who's interested in coming together to organize the first Coming Out of the Shadows at NIU, so many people showed up. You know, from Greek organizations to other student organizations to people who are just wanting to know more about it, and I think it was just so beautiful because,
you know, that experience of organizing that event was a really beautiful act of collaboration.

Sara’s quote demonstrates how the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU was determined by the social exchanges and behaviors of those who belonged to that space (Holland et al., 1998; Urrieta, 2009). It was their participation in the event and in organizing others that shaped Sara’s identity and how she was viewed by other students as an activist.

During the COVID-19 pandemic this event allowed DREAM Action NIU to share their struggles and demands beyond the campus. In the next quote, Dulce shares a bit about how she was feeling leading up to the virtual event and how surprising it was to have such a large viewing audience.

Dulce: Another memorable experience was Coming out of the Shadows. When I came out, I guess, to NIU and I think that was when we were in quarantine so March or April 2020. That was really impactful for me because I didn’t know that so many people would actually tune in and want to listen to us. Yeah. And we just got a lot of support and support that I have never really seen.

Dulce’s quote notes this event helped her feel supported and seen by so many people via the streamed event. This artifact is a significant mediator because it creates a “new understanding” of how las luchadoras “view themselves in their lives with a stronger emotional investment in their new world” (Urrieta, 2009, p. 77). Both Dulce and Sara shared how this event helped them feel supported.

The COS events, weather permitting, were held outside, in the MLK Commons, a public space outside of the Holmes Student Center, NIU’s student union. Since it was an open space
there was a request to have peacekeepers on the perimeter to provide a sense of safety for those who spoke. Sara explains how NIU students showed up to support and protect one another.

**Sara:** And it felt really beautiful to even have other student members, peacekeepers surveilling, standing outside of our event area in order to make sure that students and everybody felt safe. It was just an event that I think really created safety. And that created *presencia*, but *presencia* of undocumented students. “Hey, we're here; these are our stories, and these are the ways in which we're struggling,” and these are the ways in which we're also connecting with one another and supporting one another.

The speakers at COS shared stories of their families but also their struggles and were able to ask for support from other organizations. The event was also powerful in that it allowed students to unapologetically share their lived experiences and status. They were able to participate in an activity where they came to view themselves as the activists or organizers; they were often told they were on their college campus. This allowed them to practice this new identity and physically perform their new selves (Urrieta, 2009, p. 70).

![Figure 6. Sara at the 2015 COS: The University has the chance to be the role model.](image-url)
The first COS event was a *chispa* that created collective change for how NIU supported undocumented and mixed-status students. Figure 6 is an image with the messaging “This University has the chance to be the role model for other institutions on how they treat undocumented students, not just in Illinois—for the rest of the nation.” This reveals how they publicly and unapologetically asked NIU administrators for support. The following COS events continued that legacy of visibility, accountability, and demands.

According to Urrieta (2009), “It is important to understand that activist agency does not just happen, but rather, it is enabled by an activist identity” (p.174). This event provided a sense of empowerment for undocumented and mixed-status students. As Dulce explains, this event—a space to exert their activist agency—opened up the possibility to speak directly to the President of the University.

**Dulce:** We have a list of demands during our Coming Out of the Shadows, and I think, maybe a few days later, President Freeman reached out to Sandy saying that she wanted to meet with our board. And so I think I remember Sandy, Ainsley, and myself being in that meeting; yeah, I’m pretty sure other members were there too. And the imposter syndrome kicked in. What am I doing sitting in a virtual meeting with the President of NIU? And I do really have anything important to say to her? But Sandy was very helpful during that time and so was Ainsley. And yeah, it was just really powerful. I really amazed myself, I guess; I never thought that I would be in a place like that. I remember President Freeman saying, “Okay, this is the agenda” and then Ainsley, saying “No, we have an agenda in mind; we want to follow our agenda,” and so that was kind of cool to see that students can actually take the lead, and we should take the lead when it’s about us.
Dulce’s quote exemplifies how COS led to additional opportunities of identity performance and advocacy through meetings with the President, etc. Erin also shares some feelings about meeting with the president of the university when she was president of DREAM Action NIU. As a mixed-status student, she had a role to let those directly affected take the lead. She shares moments of disbelief in sharing the demands with the president of NIU.

**Erin:** My job is to sit back, observe, let you know undocumented students lead the charge, and when they need me to tap me, and so that was definitely a time where I got tapped… I made sure I got the okay; is that okay, I’ll speak, right, so then I kind of started it and then everyone started to chime in, but it was that initial kind of, “Oh my God, we got a meeting with the president of the university and now we’re going to make all these demands,” and it was wild.

Dulce shares an additional moment of empowerment in how they advocate, how they name certain objects in their figured world, and why they create a sense of empowerment.

**Dulce:** You know, with DREAM Action NIU being a student organization, we had more freedom. An example was Coming Out of the Shadows. Some people call our list of demands [a] list of asks, and I think when Ainsley and I were co-presidents we said no, we’re going to make it a list of demands. So, we’re a little more, I don’t know how to describe it, but we had more freedom, I guess. In the way we did things.

Figure 7 shows the types of demands DREAM Action NIU was making, not just for themselves but for other students as well. They not only ask for funding and housing scholarships; they also ask for support of state legislation. During their advocacy efforts which resulted from COS events, las luchadoras realized they had agency over how to shape the discussion surrounding their demands for support and change on NIU’s campus, which made
1. We are asking for support in the areas of room and board for Huskies
   a) Food insecurity continues to be an issue for many of the undocumented students, but we recognize our fellow documented Huskies also need help with paying for food. We ask NIU for 125 meal plans to help both on and off campus Huskies.
   b) We were told that there used to be a housing scholarship and ask NIU to bring that back but also ask for a total of 125 housing scholarships to honor the one hundred and twenty-five years of NIU’s existence. We want to make sure to be inclusive and make this available to not just undocumented students but also for transfer, international, freshman and low-income students.

2. MORE FUNDING FOR UNDOCUMENTED STUDENTS: While we appreciate the previous efforts from the NIU Foundation we are asking for them to actively fundraise for the PROMISE Fund and Immediate Assistance Fund for Undocumented Students.
   a. We ask guests and ALL NON-STUDENTS to consider donating what you can to the PROMISE FUND via the NIU Foundation’s website. We ask that you donate $125 in honor of NIU’s 125th Anniversary that we were unable to properly celebrate due to the pandemic.

3. More work opportunities for undocumented students. We would like to ask NIU to create opportunities for students to gain work experience on campus while being paid via a tuition waiver or scholarship for students without a work permit. We realize not all of the UndocuHuskies have DACA.

4. Having a designated liaison in Admissions that works with the Office of Undocumented Student Support for high school visits and NIU events. We ask that new admissions staff and newly appointed Director attend Undocumented Ally training.

5. We want Academic Advisors to attend undocumented Ally training. Students have shared that advisors offer advice that may not always be realistic for undocumented students. Undocumented Huskies cannot always take a full load and be full time students, and this can delay their graduation.

6. Support for HB 3438 - This bill will ask that public universities and community colleges have an undocumented resource liaison on staff to help support undocumented and mixed status students. Undocumented Student Liaisons will offer support services, including, but not limited to, State, federal, and other financial aid assistance, academic counseling, peer support services, psychological counseling, referral services, and legal services.
   a. We want NIU to Support this bill in Springfield
   b. We are asking the DeKalb Representative Jeff Keicher to not only support the bill but to consider becoming a co-sponsor

7. We want NIU to work with DePaul University’s Staff Attorney to learn more about how they set up an Asylum and Immigration Law Clinic. We would like to work with the Office of General Counsel and the College of Law to host immigration clinics on our campus once a semester so undocumented students can get legal support from someone who is an expert in immigration law. Our students would benefit from help with DACA, immigration consultations and applying for Individual Tax Identification Numbers.

8. MORE Mental Health Counselors who are Black, Indigenous, and People of Color: We realize that more mental health counselors are needed on campus, but we demand more BIPOC Counselors to help meet the needs of the diverse student population on campus. We want counselors that can understand our language, culture and lived experiences.
them feel powerful. The demands were not only read at the COS events; they were also made public via social media and were delivered to the office of the NIU President.

As Sara notes, they also had the agency to reclaim their stories and the narrative they were pushing out. While these events were stressful to coordinate, they also elicit moments of pride and joy because as, noted below, “We also deserve that too.”

**Sara:** The sharing of stories for Coming Out of the Shadows to then marching together, you know, to the next building to them having a performance by Olmeca and having people also celebrate and be joyful: It was a combination of, “Wow, this is really hard” and reclaiming of stories and then we’re also going to celebrate. And we’re also going to be joyful because we … deserve that too, and so it was a combination of all of that into one event that felt really beautiful.

The first COS event allowed the students to march, chant, and then celebrate with a concert by Olmeca, a bilingual Hip-Hop artist, producer, activist, and scholar. The COS events are crucial artifacts in the Figured World of DREAM Action because they bring forth so many emotions and intense memories. These events create a shift in the identity of *las luchadoras* as they participate in these events, which cause both stress and joy and, most importantly, create opportunities to exert their activist agency and collective energy (Urrieta, 2009). Sara describes how much work went into the event and its toll on her and others.

Figure 8 is a Facebook posting the day after the first COS at NIU. Sara acknowledges everyone’s help and the last-minute courage by students who had not planned to participate in the event and ended up enacting a performance of their activist identities.

Lizbeth shared how COS created awareness and an awakening for NIU: “I think it's something really empowering to be in those spaces and to really be shouting and screaming and
Figure 8. Sara’s Facebook post the day after the 2014 COS event.
demanding these changes.” Laura noted the COS event she helped coordinate in 2017 was a catalyst for shifts in the university resulting from the list of demands they shared. Figure 9 shows attendees at COS dancing to music by Quinto Imperio, a band from Chicago that was hired to play for the 2017 COS event. Laura mentioned that it was an event that led to change on the college campus. She also explains that, while it was a stressful time, it is one of her favorite moments from DREAM Action NIU and gave her a sense of pride.

![Figure 9. A joyful moment from the 2017 COS event.](image)

**Laura:** Overall, my favorite moment ever honestly was the Coming out of the Shadows from 2017 after Trump was elected into office; that’s one of my favorite moments, and because, you know, I was part of the team that helped plan that, but I felt that moment, looking back was kind of a catalyst for all these other shifts that were coming to NIU. In terms of what kind of support they gave to undocumented students and really solidifying
that, the climate at this University has changed. We are no longer just gonna say we support undocumented students; it’s now, you have to support undocumented students. That’s where the climate is now at NIU; if you don’t, there are so many allies, that you really cannot [refuse to] support. A lot of the demands or asks that were asked that day did come to fruition, which is something that I’m very proud of … because all the organizing up to that point kind of led us to that point in 2017 to really push it and really make so many things that were kind of asked for before really come alive. There were a lot of different things, a lot of forces, a lot of factors that helped along the way. The new appointment of the Diversity Officer, the Vice President for Diversity Equity, and Inclusion, a new NIU President and the organizing that was happening against Trump. Using all that, all the things that were happening around us to our advantage to get a few things that we've been wanting for years.

As Laura’s quote demonstrates, these events and the work to organize the annual event became a rite of passage for many of las luchadoras de DREAM Action NIU. They were also significant because, as Lizbeth recognized, it empowered las luchadoras and moved others to join their advocacy efforts.

Lizbeth: You know, bringing the first Coming Out of the Shadows to NIU, that also, I think, started something very beautiful on campus. I think that that was really what brought a lot of awakening to not only students but faculty. It was just that time when these events started happening annually that people started paying attention and these demonstrations, these protests, I think it’s really what ignited what NIU is now. I think that the energy in the room, the response that we received, [what] I mean is that truly was the beginning of demanding change … demanding change and asking it at an
administrative level, at an institutional level, and it was not received very well, I mean [it] was. I think [that] was an instrumental piece that had to happen for change later on. It's like this domino effect and that definitely was a moving piece. [It] inspired us and moved us to present at a larger Board of Trustees [meeting], and there was a lot of people that were definitely allowing us to be in those spaces that typically DREAM Action had not been in before.

Through their interactions, discussions, and activities las mujeres began to recognize their agency and understand how they did not just have to reside in contentious spaces. Instead, they could push messaging beyond the walls of their meeting space and to demand change.

Discussion

Both weekly meetings and Coming out of the Shadows events functioned as mediators for identity production, which shaped the emotional development and behaviors of las luchadoras while in this world. These events, or artifacts, allowed las luchadoras to step into their activist/organizer identities and try them out by creating interactions that shaped the (re)construction of the identities of las mujeres and DREAM Action NIU (Holland et al., 1998). During these events in the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU, las mujeres were transformed into activists as they led a meeting or participated at Coming Out of the Shadows. While weekly meetings and Coming Out of the Shadows events created platforms for las luchadoras to act out their activist identities, the events also served as mediators of joy and hope. The events instilled powerful memories about their time in the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU, all of which became significant to the collective history of DREAM Action NIU.

As I began to interpret the data, I was surprised by the responses to the question regarding their favorite memory during their time in DREAM Action NIU. I expected las
luchadoras to share about their lobbying efforts, the laws they passed or the DREAM Action NIU scholarships for which they annually raised funds. Instead, they spoke about moments of joy and how their involvement with DREAM Action NIU helped them feel less alone and push past feelings of fear, isolation, and helplessness. These artifacts, both the weekly meetings and Coming Out of the Shadows events, functioned as semiotic mediators for joy and gave las mujeres the ability to “modify the environment’s stimulus value for their mental states” (Holland et al., p. 35). The artifacts functioned as tools in the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU and changed the mental states of las mujeres from feeling stress and isolation to a space of joy where they felt seen and supported. Many luchadoras noted they had established lifelong relationships with other members from DREAM Action NIU. Las luchadoras pointed out that organizing provided them hope to create a change on campus and remove barriers they faced at NIU. Holland et al. (1998) contend that how artifacts are assigned meaning “depends upon a collectively remembered history of use and interpretation that is a common part of the social commentary that accompanies most interaction” (p. 36). Las luchadoras looked back at their participation in the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU and noted that their advocacy helped make NIU an undocumented-friendly campus.

Las luchadoras shared the Figured World of DREAM Action, which provided an opportunity to learn more about themselves as individuals and as part of the collective undocumented community. During meetings and while planning for Coming Out of the Shadows, they learned about nuances that affected them individually, the undocumented community, and immigration laws that helped them understand more about being undocumented in the U.S. According to Holland et al. (1998), “selves are socially constructed through the mediation of powerful discourse and their artifacts” (p. 26). Las mujeres shared how they
appreciated a space for undocumented people where they could be less alone and less stressed and could channel their anger and frustrations into something meaningful like storytelling and advocacy. Due to their participation in this figured world, they saw other students acting out and modeling what it meant to be an activist before they began to lead and stepped into the activist identity resulting from actively participating in the DREAM Action NIU figured world.

The meanings (i.e., activists, leaders) *las luchadoras* attributed to the artifacts were not assigned randomly or individually; instead, they learned to associate these artifacts with community, transformation, visibility, and empowerment, while participating in the events and even once they were done and graduated from NIU. Finally, the *testimonios* of these nine *luchadoras* provided a way to push back against the oppression they felt outside of DREAM Action NIU meetings. They also offered an opportunity to educate others and served as a call to action for others to join them in asking the university to better support undocumented students.

These artifacts were mediators that led to discourse for change in advocacy, policies, and funding of undocumented students. In the next chapter, I will discuss the discourses of the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU and how most of their discourse unknowingly utilized an UndocuCrit lens.
Holland et al. (1998) state, “The discourses and categories dominant in a society…are
‘inscribed’ upon people, both interpersonally and institutionally, and within them. Selves are
socially constructed through the mediation of powerful discourses and their artifacts” (p. 26).
In the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU, las luchadoras struggled with their past histories
and discourse(s) that had been “inscribed” on the undocumented community via the media, their
parents and educational curriculum. Holland et al. (1998) reveal, “persons and, to a lesser extent,
groups are caught in the tensions between past histories that have settled in them and the present
discourses and images that attract them or somehow impinge upon them” (p. 4). The discourses
in the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU were influential for las mujeres over the years.
The experiences empowered them to confront the dominant discourses they heard about
immigrants, their families, and other marginalized communities. Las luchadoras began to
pushback and developed their own voices and stances regarding immigration, undocumented and
mixed-status individuals, and advocacy.

When I began to analyze the data, I realized the discourse of las luchadoras was a
discourse of UndocuCrit. As las luchadoras de DREAM Action began to step into their student
activists’ roles and utilized their activist agency their discourse mirrored that of UndocuCrit,
which aims to, “investigate and share the stories of resilience and success despite adversities,
highlighting experiences encountered by undocumented individuals and documented family
members who defy the legal versus illegal narrative through differing and nuanced realities”
(Aguilar, 2018, p. 5). The UndocuCrit framework allows me as a researcher to look beyond the
effects of lacking a legal status by looking at the intersectionality of undocumented immigrants
and how the “individual, familial, and communal experiences” shape their realities and identities.
(Aguilar, 2018). As undocumented students move in and out of states of “illegality” those who continue to higher education may struggle with their experiences and feelings of belonging. Although all of the tenets of UndocuCrit were present in the discourse of Dream Action NIU, my analysis will center the most reinforced tenets of parental sacrificios, fear, and acompañamiento.

In the next section, using an UndocuCrit lens, I will discuss how recognizing the sacrificios of their padres assisted las mujeres in pushing back against the narrative of meritocracy and deservingness many of them had heard and believed prior to joining the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU.

**Parental Sacrificios: Unveiling the Hypocrisy of Meritocracy**

Many undocumented individuals push back against the criminalization of their parents for coming to this country and working hard. Aguilar (2018) argues that parental sacrifice is a form of capital and should be seen as cultural wealth in the undocumented community. This “cognitive capital” can come in the form of “recuerdos, stories, consejos, and lived experiences,” and the parents’ sacrifices deserve to be valued (Aguilar, 2018). Parental sacrificios have been shown to motivate undocumented—and I add mixed-status—individuals to excel academically and engage civically (Aguilar, 2018; Seif, 2011). I have personally witnessed how heavily the sacrifices their parents made to migrate to this country weigh on their children and this is a source of motivation to do well to honor their parents. This lens also allows me to see how las luchadoras de DREAM Action shifted their conversations in the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU as their discourse evolved and they began to interrupt the racist nativists views they encountered regarding themselves, their families, and other marginalized communities. They
recognized the nuances of undocumented people and their lived experiences as “illegalized” people in this country.

Utilizing the lens of UndocuCrit I witnessed how las luchadoras used the sacrificios of their padres as a form of capital (Aguilar, 2018). Lizbeth shares why she needed to be involved and create change, “I owe it to my parents, and I owe it to other people that have sacrificed so much to be in this country.” Some of the driving forces for change within their Figured World of DREAM Action NIU that motivated las mujeres was the cognitive capital of their parents and their sacrificios (Aguilar, 2018).

Dulce shares a bit about how the recuerdos of her parents sacrificios instilled in her that she could have an education in this country. But she still bought in to the belief of “good immigrant” when she arrived at NIU and when she joined DREAM Action NIU.

**Dulce:** I think I accepted my status, but I also knew that they could change and that's what my parents would always tell me. We came here so that you could have a better life, you could have an education. I always kind of thought, if I’m a good person here if I’m a good student if I’m just a good person, then you know, maybe one day legislation will pass where I will be included in that, and I’ll get citizenship. That's not the language that I was using back then, but I was hoping that just by being a good person, things would somehow fall in place, and my status could change.

*Las luchadoras* de DREAM Action NIU also note when they arrived on campus many of them believed the master narrative of meritocracy, the belief that if you are a good person and work hard you deserve citizenship, but this does not happen for undocumented immigrants (Chomsky, 2014; Flores-Gonzalez, 2017; Molina, 2014, Prieto, 2018). The discourse of meritocracy is woven throughout U.S. society and is used to “justify” inequity and “justify” who
has privilege to the point that people begin to internalize the notion of deservingness (Abrego & Negrón-Gonzales, 2020; Chomsky, 2014; Molina, 2014; White, 2014).

In the weekly meetings *las luchadoras* began to hear the accounts about the “Hypocrisy of Meritocracy” and began to challenge the “Dreamer narrative” which had been a dominating discourse in the media and to some extent their families. The discussions held in the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU helped *las luchadoras* name the dominating narratives and they began to view them as problematic for themselves and their families who had sacrificed to come to this country.

Maria explains “neatly fitting into the norms of national mainstream society as students with good grades and an appealing identity as ‘cultural Americans’” (Schwiertz, 2015) was a discourse that was inscribed in her shortly after arriving in this country. She began advocating for the federal DREAM Act when she arrived as a teenager and before entering the world of DREAM Action NIU.

Maria: I had just arrived [in] the United States, or had been here for two or three years, and it was one of the many introductions of the DREAM Act, and this was when I was in high school. I was invited to go to DC and so when I think of the DREAM Act or the Dreamer movement both have already had a long history and are fairly palatable for people.

Due to their interactions in the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU, *las luchadoras* began questioning the hegemonic narrative of meritocracy and instead of reciting the narrative of hardworking immigrants as good people that “deserve” citizenship, they came to recognize the harm in this “merit”-based narrative. Dulce notes below that the Dreamer narrative left out a lot of people including her parents, who had sacrificed so much to migrate north.
**Dulce:** I think I became more confident in saying I am undocumented. I also remember when I was in high school, I was very comfortable with the term Dreamer. I was yeah, I’m a Dreamer, I’m here, they brought me here. I have these big dreams and I want to go to school and. And then while I was in community college, I was saying I’m a Dreamer I’m undocumented. Well, no, I don’t think I would say undocumented as much, but I used Dreamer a lot. And I was kind of, well, I deserve to be here because I’m a good person. I’m doing all the right things, and then, when I came to NIU and when I got involved with DREAM Action, I learned about how the term Dreamer can be problematic. Because you’re leaving out a lot of people. And it hit close to home because my parents are undocumented and so why am I deserving and why aren’t they deserving?

As Dulce notes, when she entered the Figured of World of DREAM Action NIU her discourse around the Dreamer narrative was restructured. This was also the case as new members entered the space and began to question the conversations being held. They recognized the divide it caused within communities and began to challenge a system that “presupposes individual achievements as a condition for rights” (Schwiertz, 2015). They realized how the discourse, which focuses on the accomplishments and de-criminalization of Dreamers, was exclusionary and disqualified some youth from being seen as worthy of citizenship.

**Sara:** When I came into DREAM Action, a lot of the sentiment that I got from other students was that I was too radical. And I always struggled to understand what that meant. When I came into DREAM Action there was also a lot of respectability politics around being students, being the good immigrant. We don’t, we don’t have DUIs, we go to school, and for me that felt really unsettling.
Sara shares how the discourse she encountered was not one she had in other worlds she belonged to and when she pushed back against the current discourse in DREAM Action, she clashed with members who thought she was too bold, yet these conversations led to reformation in the DREAM Action world.

**Sara:** A lot of the media also push these narratives around good versus bad immigrant, and so I tried to have conversations with other folks around the nuances of our identity. I do feel, at this time, there was a lot of movement around ending deportations. And not just deportations, ending deportations for our Abuelito who’s sick and is set to be deported but also ending deportations for uncle who might have had a DUI and made a mistake. I feel a lot of the other organizing circles that I was a part of were really shifting my perspective, and my understanding around, the nuances of immigration experience and how our organizing even within DREAM Action didn’t need to stop at NIU. How are we connecting it to larger issues? I feel there was so much happening.

Sara’s quote represents how the discourses she had with other organizers spilled into the DREAM Action NIU world as she had discussions and challenged the current conversations being held in the weekly meetings regarding ending deportations for all and doing advocacy outside of NIU.

Dulce shares that she began to use the term “undocumented” and recognizes how DACA creates another divide within the immigrant community and does not benefit most of the people living in this country.

**Dulce:** I became more confident in being in spaces and being undocumented. This is who I am. And I think I became a little more aware that DACA doesn’t include all 12 million or 11 million undocumented people, so just keeping that in mind. How can I advocate for
myself without leaving others out? Because I don’t want to leave others out based on merit.

Dulce and the other luchadoras begin to have conversations around deservingness and recognize the harm of this narrative for them and for their families. The discussions had in this figured world evolved over time and began to push back against the “hypocrisy of meritocracy” which had them conforming to a concept of needing to be good and hardworking individuals to understanding that “emerging activism more directly includes those who do not conform to the classed, gendered and racialized ‘model citizen,’” (Unzueta Carrasco & Seif, 2014). To be clear, this dominating discourse can be traced back to settler colonialist ideologies that have continued to be ingrained in our country for centuries (Glenn, 2014; Grande, 2018).

In the next section I utilize an UndocuCrit lens to discuss how fear permeates the lives of students, yet they do not have to succumb to the weight of it and once they break through feel liberated and empowered and the ways the discourse in NIU assisted with this.

**Fear(less) Activists**

Fear is a reality of living as an “illegalized” person in this country. This emotion is also true for mixed-status students who may fear the deportation of their parents or family members. “The state of deportability, of always being vulnerable to being separated from one’s job, family and daily life, and the fear, hopelessness and vulnerability that this produces, has been highly successful in disciplining and subjugating many undocumented people” (Unzueta Carrasco & Seif, 2014, p. 284). Maria shared, “being undocumented at times brought feelings of shame and fear.” Las luchadoras noted they felt fear during their time in the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU and it showed up in differently in their everyday lives.
**Sara:** All the uncertainty and all the fear, even if we were saying undocumented and unafraid, there was still a lot of fear, there was so much fear...I think about the anxiety, the fear.

UndocuCrit points out that the experiences of undocumented people will shift due to exposure with liminality or being heavily surveilled. Aguilar (2018) explains fear “manifests itself physically and mentally in their lives.” This framework notes while there is a pushback from undocumented activists, fear is still a part of their lives, and it shows up in their bodies and minds even when they are claiming to be “undocumented and unafraid.”

**Sara:** Not being able to drive, you know with a peace of mind because I drove without a license, you know, even the comfort, we would feel even now, I know my body senses when there’s a cop around me because even before I was constantly looking. I think being undocumented really impacted every aspect of our daily life in the smallest of ways that sometimes we weren’t even aware of until we were faced with a particular scenario. Sara’s quote describes how even now as a formerly undocumented person she is still feeling the stress and is affected by her experiences as a person who was undocumented. There continues to be an underlying fear or uneasiness when police are present due to being surveilled in this country.

The discourse around mental health prevalent in the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU also allowed students to seek the help they needed to deal with the fear and anxiety they felt after the 2016 election.

**Laura:** Trump getting elected into office was a, in a lot of ways, it was damaging because it already made me more hyper anxious about my future. It really made me fear what could happen next, and really took away the sense of safety and stability that had
built in just a few years that DACA was in place. And I think the fear was so
overwhelming that if I hadn’t been encouraged to take sessions with a counselor/therapist
[through DREAM Action NIU] I don’t know if I could have graduated or continued to be
enrolled at NIU.

Laura’s quote touches on how incredibly stressed students were after Trump was elected
and how the threat of losing DACA interfered with her ability to study. This resulted in mentors
encouraging her to attend therapy to deal with the stress and anxiety she experienced while
trying to attend classes and stay on track to graduate.

Laura notes the importance of letting go of the fear she was holding. “If I can just get
over the fear, you know, or the fear or whatever the feeling is that stops you from using your
voice. Good things can happen.” In the quote below, she discusses how the discourse that
happens and is modeled in DREAM Action NIU spaces can assist students in pushing past
feelings of apprehension they may be experiencing, which may be good for students who have
not felt empowered on campus.

Laura: There are students who are currently enrolled at NIU who are undocumented or
have a mixed-status family and it’s almost as if they haven’t found their voice yet or they
haven’t felt empowered to use it. And DREAM Action immediately provides examples
and leadership, [of] people, even though they also are scared, to use their voice, or
hesitant, they’re still being pushed or gently pushed to really be undocumented and
unafraid, whether that’s Sandy or the other mentors or alumni who were telling them
about what they’ve [DREAM Action NIU] done in the past to kind of ignite something
inside them.
Laura shares how the discourse shared by the people who reside in the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU helped new members feel empowered and face their fears which allows them to step into their activist roles. She notes that sometimes it is via these discourses that students have a *chispa* lit in them to use their voices and advocate.

Lizbeth shares how she benefitted from the lessons learned while she was in the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU. She shares that not only did she become knowledgeable about what it meant to lead, she learned it was important to express your thoughts even while afraid.

**Lizbeth:** I can tell you that DREAM Action taught me about leadership, taught me about courage, taught me about going into a space and having your voice shake but knowing, deep down, you have to say these words.

While fear was present, it was not permanent for *las luchadoras* de DREAM Action NIU. Through the UndocuCrit discourse that was present, they realized that they could create change within themselves or on campus and sometimes that meant using their activist agency while afraid. The discourse they had in the figured world still holds strong memories for *las luchadoras* and is a good reminder that a person’s status does not mean they have to be imprisoned by fear and they can break free and bring about change.

The brave conversations the students had in the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU allowed them to move beyond their state of fear, assert their agency and step into their power as students on a college campus. Ainsley shared a bit about the feelings felt on campus the day after the 2016 election and how *las mujeres* were able to be a part of a supportive space that allowed them to process the fear they felt.

**Ainsley:** I started school, I started going to NIU in 2016. August 2016 and obviously that’s when Trump’s Presidency began…the elections happen in November 2016 and
then he became President official officially in January. I believe ... I remember that
DREAM Action created the space for us to grieve. And at that point, the thought of
grieving over a presidency [was] kind of funny to me, but it really does take a toll. I
didn’t realize that after he won and was sworn in, it really did take a toll on me and my
family, so they had created a space for us to grieve and there were multiple groups that
were there at the time. I remember the Black Student Union was there and I believe the
Muslim Student Association, there were multiple students from multiple backgrounds,
that were there and talking. People’s words became so passionate about how scared but
also we’re scared or whatever that this President is here, but what do we do about it?
What can we do right now, right here? We can create a space that is safe for us, and I
recall that meeting being very telling and very comforting that not only are we able to be
vulnerable but to also have an action plan. To not be forgotten about, and not to be
disregarded, while this was happening on the national level. But that wasn’t the only
instance; DREAM Action always made sure to create these groups or these moments,
where we can destress and talk. That's something I really did appreciate.

Ainsley’s testimonio demonstrates how the discourse happening in the world of DREAM
Action NIU opens up their meeting space to fellow Huskies in a time of fear and othering that
led up to the 2016 election. They processed their feelings as a collective but then took back their
power as they began to ask themselves, “What can we do in this moment?” In the next section I
describe the third tenet of Acompañados of UndocuCrit and how it functioned within the
discourse of DREAM Action NIU.
Acompañados: The Power of (Re)claiming Stories

Our whole lives are made up of stories. Some stories define us in ways we can never move on from. Of all the powers in the world, storytelling is one of the greatest. Stories are highly political. Those with the power can control whose story is told and how it is told. Scholars discuss the “grand or master narrative” as a form of story told by the colonial machine in the service of the imperial project. —Walker, 1999

This quotation is a reminder that everyone has a story to tell. It also clarifies that those with power determine which stories and parts of a story will be told. This research project is cognizant of the power structures that are common in studies like this one. For this reason, it was imperative to share the discourse surrounding the personal stories of las luchadoras.

Aguilar (2019) shares to be acompañados as UndocuCrit scholars is about creating knowledge that is accessible and relatable for the communities by upholding their experiences. I posit that las luchadoras de DREAM Action NIU are scholars who are sharing their undocumented and mixed-status epistemologies via storytelling. Solorzano & Yosso (2001) highlight the importance of counter-storytelling to share experiences that are not often shared and to confront people with influence. The sharing their “coming out stories” provided las luchadoras with a sense of empowerment and visibility. Archibald (2008) states that both traditional and personal stories can help people “feel and be” through the power of stories. The stories shared in the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU provided valuable lessons and served as a means to educate the members about the history, advocacy efforts as well as learn about themselves and the undocumented community.

In Cree tradition there are three styles or levels of storytelling, stories are sacred, share lessons, and help educate or counsel others (Wilson, 2008). The way storytelling was used in the
Figured World of DREAM Action NIU was very similar to the three Indigenous styles noted by Wilson. Not everyone wanted to share their story; this realization happened when *las luchadoras* began holding COS events. They understood that the process of sharing one’s story can be both liberating and empowering but came to realize the importance of protecting their stories, themselves, and their families. Sharing stories can serve two purposes, not only allowing the speakers a venue of informing others on issues or topics, but also allowing listeners to relate to presenters and their narratives (Generett & Tredway, 2015).

These stories also taught *las luchadoras* the importance of defying the harmful discourse about meritocracy and the racist nativist messaging that inundated them via the media.

This process—experimenting by turning persuasive discourse into speaking persons—becomes especially important in those cases where a struggle against such images has already begun, where someone is striving to liberate himself from the influence of such an image and its discourse by means of objectification or is striving to expose the limitations of both image and discourse. (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 348)

Bakhtin’s quote is reflective of what was happening in the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU. *Las mujeres* learned to counter the harmful messaging and conversations regarding immigrants. The discourse shared via storytelling and in the stories, themselves were used to educate new arrivals into the figured world by teaching them about legislation, advocacy efforts, and at times a way to release trauma or vicarious trauma they carried.

During the interviews, the dialogue emerged about the importance and sacredness of *testimonios*. Utilizing an UndocuCrit lens, *las luchadoras* noted, these stories belong to those who had to live those experiences. While some of *las luchadoras* found storytelling to share and
process what they experienced they also realized these were sacred and not owed to anyone to humanize themselves.

**Sara:** Reflecting on my organizing experience even myself, having been an undocumented person and telling my story. I feel storytelling is so crucial and so beautiful and so important, but I do think, at that moment, I thought that I owed people my story. I thought, I needed to tell my story in order to organize or I needed to tell my story in order to get results in order for to get funding. I do feel a part of what I’ve reflected on is we don’t owe anybody our story. We don’t owe the movement our story. In addition to the discourse around the sacredness of stories and noting they did not need to share them with everyone to be humanized and seen worthy of assistance.

**Yasmeen:** I would say that, when we were starting DREAM Action, a lot of times people didn’t believe that undocumented students were on campus and they wanted to hear firsthand from students and obviously as leadership we were very protective of not doing that because it felt very much that you want someone to share their trauma, in order for you to humanize them. And in order for that person to be able to feel empathy or anything that first, I need to believe you. And it’s very cringy. It just seems very horrible that you would need someone to share and show their vulnerability and share such a deep secret in order for you to believe them or in order for you to have some sort of empathy or want to jump in and help with establishing an organization.

**Las luchadoras** also realized that a lot of emotional labor was required when telling their stories. The need to protect oneself and others was another argument for protecting and reclaiming these stories.

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Dulce: I think I agree with what Laura and Yasmeen said. I think I’m realizing now that I used to really love being on panels and sharing my story; I think it helped me make sense of what I was going through, but now, I think it’s labor. It’s emotional labor when you have to talk about these things and I think it’s good research is important but it’s also about who are we putting at risk when we want to get this research out, and I think what Yasmeen was saying, do people really need to hear from us in order to believe us and see our humanity, when it could just be we could just be accepted and be seen as humans.

The sharing of stories was addressed as both a form of educating others and being educated. Bakhtin (1981) discusses “space authoring” and how a newcomer versus an experienced person “begins to rearrange, reword, rephrase, reorchestrate different voices and, by this process, develops their own ‘authorial stance’” (p. 183). Space authoring very much happened within DREAM Action NIU. When she first joined the figured world, Erin notes she needed to be taught how to tell her story to protect her mother. Hence via the sharing of stories las luchadoras were educated on how to construct their testimonios while educating others via the knowledge and lessons told in their stories.

Erin: When we were prepping for Coming out of the Shadows and I was going to speak and Sara was teaching me how to tell my story and my family’s story. And making sure that my mom’s identity would be protected, and I made sure to ask under the FERPA Act they can’t divulge any student’s information. So then that was pretty scary but that that was, I received the support that I … needed for that … event.

Dulce points out the conversations she had with other members of DREAM Action NIU affected how she was sharing her story. This allowed her to be unapologetic about what they
shared and what they needed. Space authoring served as a lesson of speaking up and seeing the value of their undocumented epistemologies.

**Dulce:** Who I was having these conversations with just made me see things a little differently. I think I became a little more all right. I don’t care what the majority has to say; listen to me, because what I have to say is valuable. I kind of became more, I guess, entitled. Especially when it came to serving on panels. And I’d think, well if I’m going to talk in front of a group of white people I want to be heard, and I want to be straight up and obviously entitlement can be good and bad. I want to say that it was good for me; it was growth because before I used to not speak up.

The discourse surrounding storytelling also exposed how the stories were a vehicle to process their lived experiences. An important lesson learned by Sara was those who share their story deserve to be supported and feel good when giving their testimonios.

**Sara:** I think our stories are really beautiful and they’re a catalyst for a lot, but I think that in reflecting back, even around that, planning the first Coming Out of the Shadows. I thought everybody was going to be on board with telling their stories, you know, and just because I had my own process of how powerful that was without really realizing, Oh, people need support and even feeling held when telling their stories. While there has been a lot of shifts at NIU and there's more support, I often tell students you don’t owe anybody your story and if you want to share your story make sure that you're also feeling held and that you also feel supported and that you feel good about sharing it.

Sharing a story can also be therapeutic, as it provides the storyteller the ability to unload the weight they have carried due to their status and lived experiences. Yasmeen noted the power in sharing a story with others who were part of the collective world of DREAM Action NIU.
Yasmeen: Each of us carries more of a burden, a lot of the times, because we think that we have to handle things ourselves or you don’t speak up about issues, because you were taught you can’t disclose your status to anyone or you can’t disclose that XYZ happened to whatever it is that there’s this shame around it, so people go around living with the shame. And once you open up to one person, it makes it easier to open up to others and just knowing that you’re not alone, that's what DREAM Action NIU represents; we're a community that says “Hey, this isn’t right; join us—we’re making changes. These are the things that we care about and really giving you the permission to share your story to be your full authentic self and not have to put up this wall or guard yourself or live with this shame that you’ve been carrying.

In the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU, the discourse of storytelling from an UndocuCrit lens was one that recognized the power of sharing testimonios but there was also labor involved that at times could take a toll on the storyteller. Ultimately the stories belong to those who lived them. Las luchadoras note storytelling was a way to transfer knowledge, reclaim their stories as theirs to hold and shared on their terms as UndocuCrit notes their undocumented epistemologies. Bakhtin (1981) shares that “One’s own discourse and one’s own voice, although born of another or dynamically stimulated by another, will sooner or later begin to liberate themselves from the authority of the other’s discourse” (p. 348). Next, I will discuss how the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU shaped the identities of las luchadoras.
Intersectional Solidarity

There is no thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives.

—audre lorde

The audre lorde quote is a reminder that many students on campus held *trenzas de identidades múltiples* (Godinez, 2001) and there was more than one battle students were facing on campus. Aguilar (2018) invites undocumented scholars to add to his UndocuCrit framework. I fully recognize that as a person with the privilege of citizenship I should not add to this framework and that I should uplift the knowledge of others, so I will share how the discourse of *las luchadoras* highlights the need for this framework to be expanded. One-way UndocuCrit needs to be expanded upon includes intersectional solidarity, which I will now address as a suggested additional tenet to UndocuCrit that emerged via the discourse of *las luchadoras*.

As the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU was (re)structured by new people who held different roles, students became more versed and critical in their thinking. They began to ask themselves, Who are we not fighting for? Who is left out? Their discourse is (re)shaped when they invite and are invited into the figured worlds of other marginalized students on campus. The evolving discourse in the world of DREAM Action NIU leads to a restructuring of the world of DREAM Action NIU to be more intersectional.

**Dulce:** I guess before being involved in DREAM Action NIU …I used to say I was liberal or whatever. And follow liberal media. But once I came … to NIU and got involved with DREAM Action, I don’t want to say I became a little more radical, but I started questioning the media that I was following. Most of them were white, yeah, white people on a screen or on social media. I think I was also very, yes, Latinos woohoo, you
know. But then being involved in DREAM Action, and you know in DREAM Action we’re always saying immigration is not just a Latino issue. That made me start thinking about, how does this tie to immigrants that are Black, that are Asian, that come from different places? And then I started to see how problematic Latinos are and how anti-Black the community can be. I don’t know what I would describe it as now. But I don’t want to put a label on it.

During her interview Dulce continued to share how she had a realization regarding the need to be more inclusive and intersectional with advocacy efforts once she realized that the struggles marginalized communities face are all interconnected.

Dulce: I think I talked about this before, but I think through DREAM Action NIU I learned about other identities. I attended a meeting once and we had to introduce ourselves and then state our pronouns and I remember looking at Ainsley: “What are my pronouns?” and she goes, “Well, I think they are she, her, hers.” I was thinking, all right, and then I was thinking what is this about; why, why do we ask pronouns? I feel that I was very ignorant about other movements happening. You know, it was Latinos; that’s all I would inform myself about because I am Latina. So, I think, in regards to my own culture, my Mexican culture, my Latina culture, my community, there was a little bit of a disconnect because I learned that there’s a lot of anti-Blackness in the Latino community and the Mexican community, even within my family. I did not want anything to do with that. There was a lot of homophobia, so, through DREAM Action I learned about other issues; it kind of made me be critical of how my own culture and community [felt] about these issues. What the general thoughts and feelings are about these other issues. But it also made me realize that all these issues, all these social justice issues, they’re all
connected in some way. So I thought okay, I am advocating for myself, for other people, but also all these other movements; we’re all just connected.

Dulce recognizes a shift in her views to understand the importance of intersectional advocacy because of the discourses she is a part of in a “socially and culturally” constructed space of DREAM Action NIU.

Ainsley discussed the importance of the discourse happening in the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU and how it led her to develop new understandings of her beliefs. It also helped her question the master narrative that immigration affects the Latinx community. She also emphasized the importance of learning the history of COS, which made her more appreciative and helped her see issues beyond that of Latinx immigrants.

**Ainsley:** It made me become [a] more critical thinker, with my community. Because as a Latina you see these stigmas and these thoughts that people have towards the immigrant community, that it’s only a Latino issue. When in reality it isn’t talked about but it doesn’t mean that others don’t experience the same thing, if not worse than a Latino who was undocumented. It made me become more appreciative, so although it made me become more critical, I also became more appreciative because of the people who paved the way and learning about those people who paved the way and what [was] the work that needed to be done before getting us to this point…. You get to learn about the origins of Coming Out of the Shadows and how it was created by a group of mainly queer women and it was started in Chicago. Those type of movements and that type of history, it’s what made me more appreciative of the culture and the community that we became a part of as members of DREAM Action. It didn’t feel that you were the only one, that this was
bigger than us and that’s what I liked about it. Seeing the change but also helping,
whether that be empowering undocumented and leaders on how to achieve that goal.

Ainsley’s quote is an example of how the discourse happening in the Figured World of
DREAM Action NIU was challenging prior beliefs and led to a shift in how she thought about
issues and made her thankful and created a “stronger emotional investment in her new world”
(Urríeta, 2007).

Las luchadoras mentioned their participation in this world gave them opportunities to
participate in conferences and organizing events outside of the world of DREAM Action NIU
that led to discourse on topics that they had not learned about, and it helped broaden their views.

Laura: It’s definitely impacted my political views; I think my political views or
worldviews have changed over time. I definitely do not hold the same kind of views that I
had 10 years ago, or even when I was first part of DREAM Action NIU in 2015. I think
that, in part, has to do with meeting other organizers, meeting other activists, whether it’s
students on campus or through the conferences or the other organizing meetings that you
become a part of when you join organizing spaces. I don’t think DREAM Action directly
radicalized me; I think I’ve met people through DREAM Action NIU through the
organizing that has ended up radicalizing me. Before I had no understanding of
colonialism, no understanding of anti-Blackness, no understanding of ableism. All these
“-isms” I didn't have any understanding of—even how I understand immigration as a
broader issue has shifted. From focusing narrowly on Mexican undocumented people to
all kinds of undocumented people from different kinds of countries with varying
immigration status, because sometimes you’re not undocumented. You might fall out of
status, etc. So, I guess my views have really broadened. In some ways, I try to make up
for that political education; I tried to find it in my university education. DREAM Action NIU has, I guess, I would describe it as perhaps [it] was a catalyst to really change. Change me and how I understand the world in this country.

During the plática, las luchadoras noted there needed to be more discourse about DREAM Action addressing the lack of standing in solidarity with other marginalized communities. More importantly, to remember not to let the institutions or others use their advocacy efforts to pit the undocumented community against other communities who are also advocating against the struggles they are facing on campus.

Maria: I don’t know if this is relevant, but something I do not want to happen is to utilize this research to take resources away from other students, because often there’s other people who look at us and they want other students to advocate the same. The reality is that DREAM Action NIU benefited from students who are already active in high school. And also there was an active and current movement that DREAM Action was able to get connected to because when DREAM Action NIU was started was when the DREAM Act was legislation that was being discussed. There’s the sense always that immigrants are hardworking, who built this country, blah blah blah, which the reality is that we’re not treated that way, but it’s also utilized to pit us against other communities, particularly the Black community and Native communities. I think about the Center for Black Studies, and I think about how there were initiatives there that were not strongly supported by staff or administrators, because it was at the Center for Black Studies and not at the Latino Resource Center and it’s, yeah, so I’ll leave it at that.

Maria’s comment led to more of las luchadoras to chime in and discuss the need for standing with and for other communities that are facing oppressive systems on campus. This led
some of *las luchadoras* to shift how they advocated and to be more intentional about including other marginalized students and issues into their advocacy.

**Laura:** I just want to reiterate Maria’s point. When I was leading DREAM Action NIU, co-leading DREAM Action NIU with the e-board in 2016, 2017, 2018—it was also happening at the same time that the Black Lives Matter movement … I don't know how [to] describe it; [it] was definitely not accepted as it is now. Saying Black Lives Matter was not trendy, it was not. Especially from the staff it wasn’t necessarily supported and there were times where Black students told me, especially when I went to the Black Student Union [meetings], that DREAM Action NIU is the token organization. It's the organization that NIU wants to support, and they weren't telling me this to be mean, or, what's the word, [in] an un-spirited way. They were just making me aware, which also changed how I moved strategically after I was told that. If DREAM Action was perceived as the token organization by NIU, then I wanted to take that, and use it strategically to benefit Black students. But yes, I hope that the research or what comes from it isn’t used or weaponized against less popular movements on NIU’s campus where students are told, you’re not organizing the right way, or you should do things like DREAM Action has done, I definitely emphasize and agree with Maria’s point.

Sara added to the conversation, reminding *las luchadoras* and anyone who accesses this research project when fighting for one’s liberation, who is erased from the advocacy and narrative?

**Sara:** For documentation purposes, I think I talked about this in the interview but I’m really glad that Maria is really speaking to this point because I do think there needs to be more intentional conversations. I think we haven’t had that many intentional conversations, for whatever reason, and maybe this is time to also repair that and think
through it more carefully. I also remember when Ferguson was happening, and there was very little Latinx students out when a lot of the Black Student Union and a lot of Black students were walking out and we’re doing rallies. I remember talking to some leaders from [the] Black Student Union, and this was back in, what, 2013, 2014 and there was also a lot of sentiments around how DREAM Action is [a] very token agency or organization and there was a lot of really hard feelings around resources going to undocumented students and again it’s both; there needs to be more resources and then also in our path towards liberation who are we also erasing or maybe leaving out of conversations. I do think there needs to be more intentional conversation. Because I don’t think I, even until this moment, this talk, as I thought about, what does repair look like? what is looking back, and having intentional conversations, what does it look like even supporting current students right now? And kind of bridging those conversations, so it doesn’t happen again, because it’s not a single issue. There’s a lot of Black undocumented folks too. I think, maybe even then going back, I think, that’s just one of the things that my hard lessons [come] to is that there has also been a lot of erasure that I unintentionally did, but I need to own up to and need to really think about how to repair that and how we need to really strengthen our politics or solidarity politics.

*Las luchadoras* reminded one another, future students and the university that the advocacy they were doing intersected with others who held marginalized identities across campus. The discourse led *las luchadoras* to reflect on the power relations DREAM Action NIU had in the past and could have in the future on campus and the importance of recognizing the demographics of marginalized peers on campus, especially those affected by the social constructs of gender, race, and citizenship (Schwiertz, 2015).
In this chapter, I shared how the discourse held in the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU followed most of the tenets of an UndocuCrit discourse as they discussed the sacrificios of their padres, advocating while facing their fears and the importance of reclaiming their stories. Las luchadoras had shifts in how they viewed themselves and their world that had inscribed narratives of Dreamers and meritocracy before joining the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU.

The findings in this chapter reveal the shifts las luchadoras experience in the figured world due to the discussions they hear or are directly a part of while participating in DREAM Action NIU. The analysis of this data informed us that the identities of resistance these luchadoras held were not all constructed while in the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU. Although las mujeres were continually constructing and reconstructing their discourse in the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU and “most of their constructions are not original. They [are] appropriated in the course of social interaction with others who, in turn, had appropriated the devices from others” (Holland et al., 1998, p. 36). Both Laura and Sara shared their involvement with the Immigrant Youth and Justice League shaped their views on advocating for the immigrant community. When they enrolled at NIU, they communicated these ideas and discourse with other members of DREAM Action NIU which then reconstructed the discourse around the Dreamer narrative and notions of deserving immigrants.

During the discourse held in this world, las luchadoras came to understand the importance of their stories; some realized sharing stories required a lot of emotional labor and should not be necessary for others to view them as human. The discourse regarding telling one’s story that emerged reminded members that they “do not owe the movement their stories.” Their
stories become seen as something sacred to protect themselves and their families, as a means to empower others to act and educate people about what it meant to be an undocumented or mixed-status student on a college campus. The discourse that happened via the storytelling in the Figured World of DREAM Action was a cultural vehicle for identity formation” (Holland et al., p. 71). The stories of las luchadoras contributed to cultural (re)construction in three ways:

1. The stories provided a base for the beliefs and advocacy efforts of the collective group to new members who listened to stories and lessons from current leaders as they entered into this figured world.

2. They served to educate new members on what it meant to be a member of this figured world and provided a way to connect and identify with those in this figured world by comparing their lives and stories.

3. The discourse provided a method to understand the self and one’s experiences as an undocumented or mixed-status person in this figured world.

Las mujeres begin to experience a shift in their identity through their discourse in the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU. They became luchadoras and learned how to advocate for themselves and others. Through their conversations, they shared ideas; they also “made claims” about who they were in relation to one another in this figured world (Holland et al., 1998). Their time in figured worlds provides them with an opportunity to discuss and confront their fears. They begin to exert activist agency as they speak, even while their voice shakes as they step into their activist identities. They face their fears while advocating for a more undocumented-friendly campus. Las luchadoras also confront the Dreamer narrative and begin to see how this term and movement is only focused on some and not all the undocumented
community. They begin to question why only some and not all are seen as deserving as they begin to fight for all and not some of the undocumented community.

Due to the activism discourse in the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU, las mujeres began to step into their activist roles to demand change and become luchadoras on their college campus. Due to their relational identities and how they identified their positions in the Figured World of DREAM Action, las luchadoras’ individual and collective identities shift as they become more comfortable to “speak” to each other and to “command” others (Holland et al., 1998). Las luchadoras become more critical of their views and those of the organization and begin to push back against the inscribed messages they had heard and often repeated before entering this figured world. They recognize and honor their parents’ sacrifices, confront their fears, and question their views which are not inclusive of the entire undocumented community. They join others struggling on campus and begin to attend meetings or create a space for other organizations to gather to support one another.

In the next chapter, I will discuss the discourses of the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU and how most of their discourse unknowingly utilized an UndocuCrit lens.
CHAPTER VII: IDENTITY

Bridges are thresholds to other realities, archetypal, primal symbols of shifting consciousness. They are passageways, conduits, and connectors that connote transitioning, crossing borders, and changing perspectives. Bridges span liminal (threshold) spaces between worlds, spaces I call nepantla, a Nahuatl word meaning tierra entre medio. Transformations occur in this in-between space, an unstable, unpredictable, precarious, always-in-transition space lacking clear boundaries. Nepantla es tierra desconocida and living in this liminal zone means being in a constant state of displacement—an uncomfortable, even alarming feeling. Most of us dwell in nepantla so much of the time it’s become a sort of “home.” Though this state links us to other ideas, people, and worlds, we feel threatened by these new connections and the change they engender. —Gloria E. Anzaldúa (2009, p. 243)

This quotation shares how many of las luchadoras were also nepantleras, or “in-betweener,” and felt as if they were in limbo due to their status and other obstacles they faced on campus and in their everyday lives. I want to reiterate that, while I have been weaving three stands of theoretical frameworks for my findings, Figured Worlds is the main strand and Nepantla is an additional strand that needs to be woven in to better understand the nuances of identity production in these student activists. I assert that, for some students, the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU served as a bridge to help students travel between other worlds and out of nepantla as they transformed and stepped into their activist identities.

In this section, utilizing the concept of Nepantla, I focus on the shifts las luchadoras, who I refer to as nepantleras in this chapter, experienced as their identities were (re)produced in the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU. I use this lens to help explain and understand the
formation or thickening of the co-researchers’ identities as they resided in “liminal space between worlds.” These nepantleras crossed in and out of liminal spaces and at times, due to their status or their experiences as a mixed-status person, felt they existed in a state of limbo.

According to Anzaldúa, when nepantleras move in and out of nepantla, they develop a “perspective from the cracks” as they are exposed to different discourses while being pulled in and out of the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU. Las nepantleras in the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU lived within “consciousness and opportunities for change” but often felt a sense of *ni de aquí, ni de allá*. The nepantleras struggled with finding a space to process the liminality they experienced from straddling multiple worlds. In the world of DREAM Action NIU they were able to build a bridge and made connections as to who they were, their beliefs and experiences, to help them deal with this liminality and make sense of their identities and how they fit into this new world.

Holland et al. (1998) explain identity is developed in part when “People tell others who they are, but even more important, they tell themselves and then try to act as though they are who they say they are” (p. 3). Using Holland et al.’s (1998) concept as a lens in this section allows me to clarify how the relationships, activities, and discourse in the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU gave meaning to the lived experiences and knowledge of *las mujeres*, leading them to name the systems of oppression they faced as they stepped into their agency, all of which helped them (re)form their activist identities.

**Nepantleras**

I will be using the notion of Nepantla, a Nahuatl term meaning “in-between space,” that is a part of *EntreMundos* to discuss how the nepantleras, while in the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU, experienced the crashing of their multiple worlds. This was due in part to the
making of new relationships, participating in new events, and holding discussions that led them to release some of the weight they felt due to immigration status and allowed them to create a shift in their identities, beliefs and actions.

According to Holland et al. (1998), we are not controlled by one identity and “our sense of self comes from the history of our arrangements, our styles of saying and doing through others” (p. 211). A person’s agency is created by “authoring the self” which is affected by the multiple identities people hold and conceptual identity shift they experience because of how they are seen and how they come to understand themselves and their role(s) in their figured world(s).

As mentioned when discussing settler colonialism in Chapter IV, settler colonialism aims to create a colonization of BIPOC people, resulting in internalized oppression, or “misrecognition,” where oppressed people see themselves in a distorted manner. When experiencing “misrecognition,” people of color are made blind to how systems of oppression are intersecting in their lives and falsely telling them who they are or who they should be through a colonialist, white supremacist lens.

The discourse and participation in the activities the nepantleras had in the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU were a way to push back against this false message from the systems of oppression they experienced as well as against the notion of assimilation to be seen as deserving. DREAM Action NIU allowed las nepantleras to grapple with which parts of their “inner struggle and pain” they wanted to process both individually and collectively and share in this figured world. This led to a shift in their views of their pasts and their identities.

While in the Figured World of DREAM Action, las nepantleras also discussed the transformation that was happening and how it was both scary and uncomfortable. Their residing
in this figured world and finding a home in this state of Nepantla linked them to one another and “to other ideas, people, and worlds” (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2015).

While EntreMundos notes different phases to expand knowledge, challenge preconceived notions, and being called to action, I assert las nepantleras were in a phase of nepantla while at NIU but learned to process their feelings of residing in this state due to having roles in the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU. Their moving in and out of nepantla was not easy for las nepantleras, as their testimonios share the stress, fear, weariness and empowerment they felt as they traversed EntreMundos and experienced a state of liminality which helped shaped their identities of resistance, countering misrecognition.

In the next section I will discuss the choques some of las nepantleras faced as they found themselves in a state of nepantla and began to construct and make sense of their identities in the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU.

Choques

*The Gringo, locked into the fiction of white superiority, seized complete political power, stripping Indians and Mexicans of their land while their feet were still rooted in it. Con el destierro y el exilio fuimos desuñados destroncados, destripados – we were jerked out by the roots, truncated, disemboveled, dispossessed, and separated from our identity and our history.* (Anzaldúa, 1987, pp. 7–8)

Here, Anzaldúa shares how settler colonialism has led to the creation of inner struggles for students and their identities. The devaluing of their language and culture leads students to feel in a state of limbo and experience culture clashes. As las nepantleras arrived on campus at NIU and moved away from what was familiar to them, they experienced choques due to residing in a state of nepantla. On campus they battled against systems of oppression that in addition to
physical borders led them to face financial, mental, and conceptual borders. Rendon et al. (2014) find Latinx students are “called to stretch their capacity to navigate the tensions of constantly shifting contexts, deal with the psychological and emotional wounds of culture shock, negotiate separation anxiety, and to work through the tensions of dislocation and relocation” (p. 8). Figure 10 illustrates the choques Latinx students can experience on their college campuses in terms of the complexities of transitions to college for Latinx students who are the first in their family to attend college. Figure 10 depicts the various figured worlds in which students live and how the movement in and out of these spaces is not a linear process and results in cultural clashes (Rendon et al., 2014). Rendon (2014), utilizing the terminology of EntreMundos, describes how Latinx college students are navigating multiple worlds simultaneously while trying to succeed in college.

![Figure 10. Rendon et al.’s EntreMundos: Navigating the transition to college.](image)

I argue that undocumented and mixed-status students experience additional choques, as described by Rendon, due to their immigration status or that of their parents, caused by layers of oppression (see Figure 11). Figure 11 has the added choques that undocumented and mixed-
status students face due do status. Figure 11 is representative of how *las nepantleras* in the Figured World of DREAM Action battled against interlocking systems of oppression, including racism, nativism, anti-immigrant legislation, and colonization (Chomsky, 2014; Gonzales, 2016; Molina, 2014; Pérez-Huber, 2010). These *choques* and time in nepantla lead them to have shifts in their individual and collective identities; as a result of the discourse they begin to push back against inscribed narratives and step in and out of an activist identity when this discourse leads to performing their activist roles at meetings or events.

![Diagram](image)

Figure 11. The -isms that create additional *choques* for the *luchadoras*.

In DREAM Action NIU, *choques* happened on individual and collective levels. As *las nepantleras* learned more from their time in the DREAM Action NIU figured world, as well as other worlds they were a part of, clashes occurred in the DREAM Action NIU world regarding terminology, deservingsness, and advocacy efforts.

Sara provides insight into how being caught between clashing worlds also created clashes within the group at times.
**Sara:** I remember there was a lot of clashes; as much as there was also beautiful moments, there was also clashes around how we also internalized, everybody internalized their own identity as being undocumented very differently. And that's also due to other trauma, you know, factors around differences. And how we internalize[d] and understood identity as undocumented folks and then there was also allies within that space, who sometimes try to also tell us what to do, or how to understand certain things, which felt very unsettling for me. So I do feel I tried, or at least I think that I tried to push back against particular narratives that were being pushed down at us by the media.

On the individual level, some of *las nepantleras* struggled with not agreeing on certain issues and sought advice from supportive people outside of the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU, as depicted by Ivonne.

**Ivonne:** I feel in this movement or in these settings that people expect us to be 100% on everything. It’s if you are not in, you’re out. So, people who have known me and they know that I can have different views and [they] could be problematic views, because that’s me. I made sure also to ask my friend, he’s a licensed social worker so he’s able to see things in a different way, as well, a very humanistic way; he’s also very aware of the politics.

Ivonne battled with the change in discourse that was happening in the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU and not being in total agreement with the group’s advocacy efforts. She learned she had to seek outside perspectives to assist her in reconciling her feelings about not always agreeing with other members in the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU. This quote shows how not everyone who resided in this space was on the same page regarding issues and
advocacy. These *choques* within DREAM Action led to internal and external discussions that affected these student activists’ world.

Due to their immigration status, *las nepantleras* experienced *choques* even before arriving on campus. These *choques* happened when applying to attend institutions because the undocumented or mixed-status students were often the first in their families to attend college. *Las luchadoras* had to figure out how to navigate the college application process while worrying about their undocumented status and having to protect their parents’ status.

**Sara:** You know, even when I was thinking about these colleges, it was exciting; I wanted to experience what it was like to apply to colleges. And I gave myself that experience, but in a way, it was also so disappointing because I couldn’t afford them. I didn’t have the resources. I didn’t even have the support to figure out how to navigate getting into those schools. And it was also so scary, senior year when representatives from colleges would come in, and all the applications had social security boxes. I remember holding back all my applications and students realizing that I was holding them back. And they’d ask, “*What are you doing?*” “*I just want to review them later.*” I guess this goes back to shaping your identity; we were always lying. I feel I was always lying about my identity to protect myself. But it felt like I couldn't even be my full self because I was just constantly lying and coming up with all of the different scenarios in order to survive and not give my status or my family status away. I just remember in classes hiding these applications and feeling so heartbroken, angry, and wanting to cry because I don't have a social. What do I put in this box? I didn't even feel safe enough to ask my teachers, and so I feel even then in high school there was no support.
Sara’s quote demonstrates the *choques* she experienced prior to residing in the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU when she considered applying to college and how that affected her ability to be her authentic self because she always had to hide her true identity. The stress caused by her status and need to protect her family had her feeling the crashes of her worlds with no support.

*Las nepantleras* feel the full effect of their status and encounter *choques* when they begin to apply to colleges and realize they cannot afford to pay for the costs yet do not qualify for any funding. They also realize there are layers of inequities they face due to their status.

**Laura:** My immigration status affected my entire educational journey because there were a lot of things I thought were out of reach because of my immigration status. Obviously financial aid—federal financial aid, even state financial aid—when I graduated from high school was unattainable because I did not qualify for those kinds of financial assistance. But it also shaped what decisions I would make after high school. When I saw the price tag on in-state public universities compared to private universities. I knew that I could never afford that, or, more specifically, my mom and the man she lived with, who can be considered the stepparent, could never afford to pay those kinds of prices.

Oftentimes students arrived at college and were told their area of interest was not a good path to take due to their status. The students had to deal with the *choques* that came in higher education due to their immigration status and chosen areas of study.

**Maria:** I was fortunate enough to receive a two-year full tuition scholarship with the intention of double majoring in psychology and history to receive my teaching certification. And I found out when I was there that there was a line to the licensing process. So, it would take an extra year for me to graduate, and my scholarship was only for two years. My counselor also told me, “*We don't know if you're going to be able to*...
get your license because you're undocumented.” So, the uncertainty of that and realizing that I didn't know … how I was going to be able to pay for that extra year pushed me to change my major. It also meant that there was a lot of different possibilities with it and it helped me put my mind at ease when it came to the uncertainty after graduation. So, all of those decisions were entirely made on the fact that I was undocumented and not too much, even honestly, not even being low income. It was primarily immigration status.

In sum, Las nepantleras experienced choques related to internalized oppression that leads to believing in notions of deservingness and meritocracy, and immigration status affecting their ability to apply to college and study their chosen major. Las nepantleras managed to move through this process that was described as unsettling and scary and began to shift their views and ultimately their identities. In the next section I will discuss how their undocumented and mixed-status realities caused them to experience liminality and feeling they were in limbo and how this affected the development of their activist identity.

**Limbo**

I claim las nepantleras identities are (re)produced via the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU and their experiences while residing in nepantla and resisting on their college campus. This production was due to the experiences and discussions they have in this figured world as well as sharing testimonios in public events such as Coming Out of the Shadows that help them individually and then collectively transform while as part of DREAM Action NIU. This also led to changes in their constructed world. Holland et al. (1998) note that “identity is one way of naming the dense interconnections between the intimate and public venues of social practice” (p. 270). Their engagement and discourse they have in these spaces allow them to feel seen and validated as they share their experiences with living their lives in limbo.
Las nepantleras feel the weight of their liminal status. When they arrive in DREAM Action NIU, they are able to see that they are not alone with trying to process these feelings which affected their mental health. It was difficult for them to process, and they now can look back and understand they and others in this space struggled with depression due to their liminal status.

**Sara:** Dealing with your own mental health, on top of also the vicarious trauma of hearing other undocumented folks go through it. I think this heaviness of being in limbo really worn me down to the point where I was just, I really, you know, I recognize now that I would go through these depression cycles, each time because I thought I was always, because I felt I was in limbo, and then I was dealing with my stuff. And then, at the same time, hearing about stories from other students of how in certain ways they were having a harder time than I was just at the same time, dealing with family and hearing all of these community issues and it just felt things were just always piling up and so it—that was hard, you know, it was really hard hearing all of that.

Sara explains the how she struggled during her college years while residing in a state of nepantla. It was her participation in the Figured World of DREAM Action that helped her realize others were also feeling the same way but having to process her own inner struggles while trying to create capacity to support others at times became too difficult.

During the interviews las nepantleras note they still are processing some of those experiences of liminality when they recall their time as leaders in this figured world. They share how this in-between state affected how they interacted with others and even how they planned. At times when they shared, they had to pause or took a deep breath before answering and sharing their memories as they made their journey into and joined the figured DREAM Action NIU.
**Sara:** The uncertainty just constantly being in limbo, not knowing what to do what the next step. You couldn't even plan ahead. It's so interesting to name I have plans, but I don't really even like planning ahead that much either (laughs). I do think it somehow ends up shaping who we are, how we interact, I even think about dating. How big and scary it was to potentially date somebody and be afraid to tell them about your undocumented, status and it's just so interesting because it really rippled into every aspect of our daily life.

Some of *las nepantleras* note their time in the world of DREAM Action NIU helped them form their identity and helped them deal with the liminality they had experienced regarding language and acculturation.

**Yasmeen:** It definitely helped me feel more connected to my culture. I would say that I have struggled a lot with my identity and always feeling I’m not Mexican enough or I’m not American enough. I don't understand these people's references are. I don't speak Spanish perfectly or so and so just laughed at me because I didn't know that was a Spanglish word that's not a Spanish word, I thought it was Spanish. Always feeling I was never enough anywhere, is something that I think DREAM Action really helped me with forming my identity and realizing that we all, even if the issue doesn't impact you 100%, we all are needed to progress things forward and you're just that. You are enough, right, your experiences, everything that's unique to you is necessary and to just know that and know that you are enough.

The liminality some of *las nepantleras* felt was also due the uncertainty of whether they would return the following semester due to costs. They note that this state of limbo was isolating and depressing. An important note also is that the university caused barriers for applying for
scholarships due to holds on accounts which blocked them from accessing their transcripts, which led to the inability to apply for scholarships they so desperately needed pay their bill and return the following semester.

**Sara:** I always remember, just the feeling of limbo, and not being able to know if I was going to come back the next semester. I think I always, even as I’m talking about it, I deeply remember that feeling And I deeply remember the depression associated with my status, especially around higher ed. And days, where I would just lay in bed staring at my ceiling wondering, “*Am I coming back next semester?*” or “*Is this even worth it?*” There's so many different pieces that were coming up. And that state of limbo, it felt so depressing and the bureaucracy of these systems too around knowing that you have to pay $2,000 or $3,000 left of your tuition. You're trying to apply for scholarships and then they're not giving you your transcripts in order to apply for scholarships so then, what do I do?

*Las nepantleras* who were accomplices in this world also struggled with their feelings about how they “fit” into DREAM Action NIU while being a leader of an organization when they were not the ones directly affected.

**Yasmeen:** I think that is something that I struggled with a lot, this guilt or shame of oh my gosh I’m the face of this organization, but I’m not undocumented. I felt a bit like a fraud, and I don't know how this even happened. Me helping lead this organization and having to speak to things that I don't know if I 100% feel comfortable [about].

While the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU was seen as an affirming space it was also a painful space to inhabit for some of *las mujeres*. *Las mujeres* experienced liminality connected with not feeling Mexican enough, hiding their status from those they dated, and the
uncertainty of returning semester after semester. As they processed their struggles alone and as part of a collective student organization, las nepantleras began to shift and recognized they had agency to challenge narratives and policies. Anzaldúa noted when a person resides or moves in and out nepantla their “individual and collective self-conceptions and worldviews are shattered” which can result in individual or collective transformation (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2015). In the next section I will discuss the shifts that happened as las nepantleras’ identities began to be (re)produced as a result of their time, engagement and interactions with others in the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU.

Now Let Us Shift

In nepantla you are exposed, open to other perspectives, more readily able to access knowledge derived from inner feelings, imaginal states, and outer events, and to ‘see through’ them with a mindful, holistic awareness. Seeing through human acts both individual and collective allows you to examine the ways you construct knowledge, identity, and reality, and explore how some of your/others’ constructions violate other people’s ways of knowing and living. (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2005, p. 10)

This quotation describes the shifts that happen in nepantla due to the interactions with others and the knowledge gained which help construct new identities. This mirrors Holland et al. (1998) who elucidate that “identities become important outcomes of participation in communities of practice in ways analogous to our notion that identities are formed in the process of participating in activities organized by figured worlds” (p. 57). As las luchadoras felt the weight of residing in nepantla while in the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU, they recognized their individual and collective agency and (re)claimed an activist identity on campus as members of DREAM Action NIU. As las nepantleras are dealing with the uncomfortableness
of residing in nepantla they make time for joy and to build community. Erin’s quote below is an example of how they were felling stressed and tired, but they still made time for fun and to get to know each other as they were advocating for themselves and others.

**Erin:** I have a lot of a lot of good memories, but the sugar skulls were supposed to generate funding for DREAM Action for the scholarships and it was *puras risas* everyone coming together, and you know building that community and getting to know one another. We were dying [from laughter] it was one of those things where you're all really tired and stressed out, but like just like spur the moment thing that's one of my most memorable memories.

Erin shared in her interview that they were in an apartment working on making sugar skulls for *día de los Muertos* to raise funds for an annual scholarship the organization gave to undocumented students. The *nepantleras* experience moments of joy, process pain, and begin to shift as they feel empowered with their activist identities.

*Las nepantleras* began to understand that their struggles were not unique, and others were also struggling when they joined the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU. They noted their views shifted because of participation in this figured world.

**Lizbeth:** Because of all of that information I have acquired throughout the years I think my view of the world, and just people in general has definitely shifted in able to recognize struggle and respect struggle, respect people that came here in a different level. I think you're able to see we grew up with it, but I don't think that you really understand it fully until you're an adult and you're really able to not only link privilege and status but privilege and English. Privilege in not having to worry about a lot and I think it was not until college that I realized all of that has impacted my viewpoint of the world now.
Las nepantleras noted this figured world exposed and educated them to a variety of issues, obstacles, and people. Some of them learned more about what it meant to be undocumented, and it made them realize that people had intersectional identities and struggles.

**Ivonne:** DREAM Action specifically why it's important to me, is all about education it's about exposure. That's why it's important, especially at a university setting you know being exposed to everything and everyone and. You know, the intersectionality of everyone, and everything, so this is my first thought just being exposed to that education. This world was also a place to shift their identities and realize that there were other struggles outside the immigrants’ rights movement, and how other struggles were interconnected with theirs. They noted that it took time for the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU to “shift” and recognize the importance of the importance of intersectionality advocacy.

**Maria:** DREAM Action NIU taught me a lot about it's not enough to have people who are directly affected and at the table it is extremely necessary to have us there to shape the direction of whatever policies we are developing to support undocumented students. However, I think that it took some time for DREAM Action NIU to create a narrative where we understood how our struggle was interconnected to their struggles. I think that because we were lacking that and then, as I, you know, continue to learn at NIU and connect with other groups, specifically the LGBTQ community and the Black students and the Black Student Union. Those things started to make me question how our narrative of DREAM Action NIU and the Dreamer movement in general, was lacking a um *como so dice* an intersection of analysis, it was. Very singular, very specific to us and I think that actually radicalized me learning outside of DREAM Action NIU, over shortcomings, radicalized me so by the time that I graduated or was close to graduating.
from NIU my political views included thinking about what other communities are being marginalized and how is it that our struggles are interconnected.

Some of the *las nepantleras* had a shift in immigration status and they noted they are still trying to make sense of this new status. Sara recognized she held multiple identities but being undocumented was the strongest identity she held while in the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU.

**Sara:** First, I think now having my immigration shift, it is. It has been something that I have not fully processed what it means to now have some sort of relief in being a Green Card holder. It's something that now I rarely think about, what it was like being undocumented? Honestly, I think it's because it's so painful that when I am reminded of what it was like being undocumented, I feel it in my body just the experience. I do think how my immigration status impacted my identity was huge because. I think about undergrad was definitely the time, where I was developing my identity and I identified as a Mexicana, as you know, a *mujer* I didn't this was a time where I think a lot of people were oh *soy Chicana, soy esto.* I’m this I’m that but in that moment, one of the strongest identifiers was being undocumented And I remember at every meeting, I’m Sara I’m undocumented, it was just such a huge identity. An identifier, and I even think about now to not have that anymore I think oh, then who am I so that is something that I’m still processing. But I think what really resonates is just how much it impacted my identity.

For some of *las nepantleras* it was their immigration status that helped them develop a strong sense of self and understood they were not “American” and did not have papers. It was the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU that allowed them to shift their understanding that their status did not define who they were, they were more than just undocumented.
Maria: I think before being undocumented I have always identified myself as an immigrant, because when I came here from Mexico, I was 15 already. So, and since I, and I came right into high school, knowing that I wasn't documented. So, my experience was different than many other undocumented students who grew up thinking, maybe that they have papers and then they realize in high school that they didn't. I didn't have an identity as an American. So, with that said. I think my immigration status shaped the career path I took. It shaped my political views it allowed me to be more compassionate. Also, more critical of the government and more critical generally speaking of the structures of power that for the most part destabilize and oppress vulnerable communities, not just undocumented immigrants, but an array of communities…. It also allowed me to see myself again because of the opportunities to have a social life to interact with other students to go to parties together. It also allowed me to see myself as something more than [an] undocumented student; I was also just a student.

Stepping into an activist identity was not easy for all of las nepantleras, they still battle with narratives of what it means to be an activist. Some of las mujeres struggled to accept the activist identity others have given them because they resided in the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU and their advocacy.

Dulce: I never saw myself as an activist. Before this I think my notion of activist was someone going out to protest, someone being arrested because they're protesting. I thought, well, I don't do that; back then, I used to feel that I couldn't fight, because if I was putting myself out there, and if I get arrested, I could get deported blah blah blah. Even now, I still struggle with saying I was an activist, or I am an activist. It's still hard to
see myself as that. I do see myself as a leader. I think I have shown those skills. But I think the imposter syndrome sometimes gets in the way of that.

In short, the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU that also functioned as a bridge or “a threshold to other realities” and became a “symbol of shifting consciousness” that led *las nepantleras* to shift and become *guerreras*, as they stepped or were pulled into their activist identities and used their activist agency when they began making demands of the university to tear down institutionally made borders. In the next section I will discuss how *las nepantleras* stepped into their activists’ identities and asserted their activist agency to become *guerreras* who were unapologetic in their advocacy and demands of the university.

**The Final Shift: Guerreras**

I contend *las guerreras*\(^\text{12}\) of DREAM Action NIU (re)constructed their activist identities and became warriors of social justice as they fearlessly fought for justice on their campus, community, and state. Holland et al. (1998) assert the simple method in the construction of identity happens when:

One learns “the” identity of inscribed acts—the signs or markers of culturally constructed identity, whether they be the display of particular skills, the enactment of certain motives, the cultivation of ways of speaking, the use of certain expressions, the display of certain emotions, or the wearing of distinctive clothes—in like manner. They are first parts of an undistinguished behavioral routine, second a means to affect others, and third, if the

\(^{12}\) Once *las mujeres* of DREAM Action NIU step into their activist agency they begin to speak out as undocumented, unafraid, and unapologetic activists and become fierce *guerreras* on their campus and in the state.
identity forms to this extent and especially if objectified in the figured world, means to evoke one’s own sense of who one is and so organize one’s behavior. (pp. 281–282)

Holland et al.’s quotation depicts how the behavior of las guerreras de DREAM Action NIU developed a sense of self and ability to spark others into action with them, once they stepped into their activist roles. In the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU, las guerreras were exposed to an UndocuCrit which they fully embraced, took on and fully embodied this discourse with others as they learned about themselves, the immigrants’ rights movement, and harmful narratives surrounding immigrants. These interactions and their participation in events, such as Coming out of the Shadow, encouraged the performance of resistance, and as a result, produced activist identities that led them to wield their activist agency and speak against systems of oppressions, as well as name and challenge inequities on their college campus.

In the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU, it was the roles others had that inspired las guerreras to want to be involved and aspire to be activists on their campus. In the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU, they began to tell themselves they were leaders, organizers or activists and acted those roles out in weekly meetings where they led discussions and in the planning of events like Coming Out of the Shadows.

Ivonne: I remember seeing Yasmeen and Maria, they were leading it, and then it was me. I remember seeing them and I thought, oh my God, I could do that, you know, they look so cool and are super activists. And I thought why can’t I do, that I want to do that and, interestingly enough, I was at Kish [Kishwaukee, a local community college] so I thought oh my God, are they, are they going to let me? How [is this] going to happen?
Chispas were important turning points for the shifts towards activist identities and they took many different forms. Once the chispa happened, las guerreras not only heard the call to action, they were also ready to ramp up their engagement in activist activities.

Ivonne: When I was in DREAM Action, I thought I’m going to change the world and was, shut it down, you know, let's do a sit-in. Let's go talk to the Ombudsman person, so we can …(giggles). I had these wild thoughts. I put it out there, asked can we go and spray paint the bridge (giggles). Also, vandalism what?! I was so fired up and I'm sure that had to do with finally finding a place to what’s the word? …to… I forgot the word to let out. Something…I don't know if you've seen the pyramid or the spectrum of activism. So I definitely saw myself at not that extreme but, a little further behind. I was willing to do anything [except] tie myself to the bus.

Maria credits her involvement with DREAM Action NIU as helping her solidify her identity as a leader and reminded. Her that she could succeed despite her struggles.

Maria: Think I will tell you that when I started my first job as a community organizer. Part of the experience that I listed was my involvement with DREAM Action NIU and I viewed myself as someone who can be an agent of change, not by myself, but with others, I think DREAM Action NIU really solidified the vision I have of myself as being a leader and as being someone who, despite facing a struggle of being undocumented I could still succeed.

Lizbeth shared some of her favorite “wins” while a member of DREAM Action NIU when she became a student activist. She makes note of the NIU One Card, which was the moment that catapulted DREAM Action into working with others and collectively demanding a change to a
policy that gave students second-class status on their college campus. She also shares about her
chispa, her stepping into her power as a student activist.

**Lizbeth:** My God, there's so many. Well, the One Card [NIU student ID card] situation, I
mean, I clearly remember that emergency meeting that went out to all the Latino students.
I remember, in general the lobbying that we did, the protests that we were involved in. I
think it's something really empowering to be in those spaces and to really be shouting and
screaming and demanding these changes. And being able to go lobby in Springfield, that
was just such a cool experience, because I had never been exposed to any of that stuff.
And then to learn the power of demonstrations to learn the power of lobbying. That also
allowed me to gain some transferable skills. Speaking to representatives or senators as a
student and feeling so inferior but knowing that you have so much power at the same
time. At that time, we were advocating for the ACCESS bill, so the RISE Act that passed
in Illinois, we were involved from the beginning of those efforts, so it was really nice.
That's very memorable for me to say, I was a part of that movement from the beginning
to see it bring about change.

Laura credits DREAM Action NIU with helping her accept an activist identity that she
had been given by others. She discusses how it was difficult for her to embrace at first and now
that she is no longer on campus is looking for a space like DREAM Actin NIU

**Laura:** Being a part of DREAM Action really made me carry or identify with the labels
of activist, organizer. I felt DREAM Action was a huge part of my identity while I was
going to NIU. That's what I was known for amongst students, faculty and staff. I think
sometimes people saw me as an activist and organizer even before I really embraced the
role…But along the way I just embraced it because I thought this work was very
important, and there was an opportunity to really change things on campus. I guess at the end of it by the time I graduated I really considered myself to be this organizer and an activist and now that I’m not part of DREAM Action NIU there is still a part of me that's kind of looking to find a similar space like DREAM Action NIU.

Sara shared that she did not feel comfortable with being called an activist by her professors or other adults and wanted to point out that she embraced the term “organizer” more because that “involved a plan, strategy and clear direction.”

Sara: There were adults around me, professors, other people in big nonprofits saying, “Oh, you're an activist, you’re undocumented youth activists,” and that felt so unsettling. I think, maybe because of the young people that kind of were in the similar processes or spaces as me, I think, I felt more comfortable kind of claiming that. I do want to also make the distinction. I felt more comfortable when being called an organizer because there was a strategy, we had a strategy, we had a plan we had demands, we had a clear direction. In that moment, there was also a larger conversation around national movements, what was happening and there was a correlation there and there was also strategy behind. I think there was strategy there, and so I do want to make a distinction that when I was plugged into NIU I was more organized. Now I definitely align more with advocacy work… but I just wanted to make that distinction.

Two of las guerreras noted there was a movement being led by undocumented youth happening in the country and more specifically Chicago, where they were easily accepted, mentored, and activated to get involved before arriving at NIU. It was their time in those spaces that agitated them to action.
Laura: I will start by also naming that there was already a movement of undocumented youth that I was inspired and even mentored [by] in some capacity. That I didn't have to show credentials, I didn't have to, you know, explain my whole life story. I just told them “I’m undocumented” and they told me “Well, we can do something about it; here's the work that we're doing.” And I think from that, that's where I felt empowered to take action and really learn, you know not just how to organize or make a press memo, be the media person, etc., but really understand the work we're doing from a historical analysis. Really understanding the context and factors of why I am undocumented here in the United States, in 2000 whatever.

Sara noted that her introduction to advocacy was a matter of survival and was thankful to the undocumented youth who mentored her who she also credits helped her embrace the term organizer as opposed to activists.

Sara: I’ll try to make this as quick as possible. I think, echoing what a lot of folks said, that I feel growing up and seeing injustice, it was just kind of a thing that you did at least I felt I had to address, or I had to. I always say I organized in order to survive that was my way of just surviving. I think even similar to what Laura said, I was also a product of being mentored by other undocumented young people who were doing the work and being connected to them. And I feel that was really inspiring and that's what kind of got me into organizing and I do want to make a distinction that, other people called me activists. And, and never I don't know it always made me feel uncomfortable, but it was when undocumented youth, who are doing organizing called me an organizer I think that's when I started to embrace it more.
Both Laura and Sara noted that they had been doing activist and organizing work prior to NIU. This space allowed them to become activist on their campus, hone skills and a way to create a change.

**Laura:** I’m very grateful that there was a movement already established that embraced me and allowed me to you know, be of service and give back in the way that I could. It almost feels like this duty or this obligation. And if I want to get really specific just to finish, I definitely think the moment I felt the power to call myself an activist is before coming to NIU was hearing Tania Unzueta’s speech\(^{13}\) her Coming Out of [the] Shadow[s] speech and I wasn't even there. It was a recording on SoundCloud, that was it.

Sara shared how the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU let her serve as more of a facilitator and be part of a collective process and assisted her in holding a student organizer identity.

**Sara:** You know I feel prior to come into NIU I was kind of getting my footing or my start around organizing and specifically around student led organizing because of work, I had done in Rockford. Then coming into a leadership position and having a space like DREAM Action allowed me to step into more facilitation processes and more collective processes that I wasn't really a part of before. I did think DREAM Action facilitated this process for me to really see myself or getting into this identity around student organizer. And yes, I think DREAM Action and having a leadership position really cultivated and facilitated a process in a space for me. To really hone in on different skills and you know even the lessons around particular moments have been really helpful in the sense of really building my foundation around organizing.

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\(^{13}\) Tania Unzueta’s March 10, 2010 speech Coming Out, [https://soundcloud.com/search?q=iyjl%20coming%20out](https://soundcloud.com/search?q=iyjl%20coming%20out)
It is the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU where for many of *las guerreras* they become the fear(less) activist they need to be to create change on their college campus. Each of *las guerreras* experienced *chispas* that were turning points for their shifts towards activist identities. These *chispas* included hearing the youth from Immigrant Youth and Justice League speak at the first Coming Out of the Shadows or fighting to have their photos on their university ID, the NIU one card. They begin to accept what it means to be an activist, leader or organizer and step into these roles and then during their time in this figured world prove to themselves and others that they are in fact student activists.

**Discussion**

In this chapter, I outline the findings on identity production in this research project. I share how the study utilizes both figured worlds and nepantla. I discuss how these *mujeres* produce identities via their participation in the activities that are a part of the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU (Holland et al., 1998). I discuss how the *guerreras*, via their organizing, figure out a sense of self and their collective identities of resistance while residing in an in-between state on their college campus.

The identity production of *las guerreras* did not happen overnight, nor was it a simple sequential process. In the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU, the *guerreras* develop their identities of resistance as they are given identities by other members and people on their college campus due to their positions and social relationships as part of this student organization. They note they were not always comfortable with being called activists. Some of the *guerreras* use terms like “leader” or “organizer” and only feel comfortable accepting the “activist” label after undocumented youth call them activists. Holland et al. (1998) posit,
figured worlds in their conceptual dimensions supply the contexts of meaning for actions, cultural productions, performances, disputes, for the understandings that people come to make of themselves, and for the capabilities that people develop to direct their behavior in these worlds. (p. 60)

During their participation in this figured world and social interactions, the guerreras begin to act out their identities of resistance. This production of identities of resistance was complex, and the (re)formation of identities was both individual and collective. The complexity of identity production shared in this dissertation is seen in how the co-researchers are referred to throughout this research project. The co-researchers are referred to as mujeres, luchadoras, nepantleras, and guerreras, all identities assigned to them as part of this research project and due to the many choques they encountered when they arrived at NIU.

Holland et al. (1998) claim identity is in a constant state of flux. Based on the findings, I argue that my co-researchers’ identities shift from members (mujeres) who enter the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU to luchadoras when they begin to battle against inequities on campus to nepantleras. At the same time, the state of limbo causes clashes they experience on their campus due to immigration status and the interlocking systems of oppression that result in choques. Las nepantleras begin to shift due to residing in space as they try to make sense of their past identities. Their final shift as guerreras happens due to changes in how they viewed themselves and acted in the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU (Holland et al., 1998). Some may never feel like they belong or feel they are in a constant state of nepantla. Aguilar (2018) notes this liminality is like a cloud over students.

The level of participation by las guerreras increased as they were validated in the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU. According to Holland et al. (1998), “authoring comes
from the I, but the words come from collective experience” (p. 171). For this reason, I argue that is the experiences and different interactions with others and which *trenzas de identidades* multiples (Godinez, 2001) they hold are all part of producing these identities of resistance. They step into their activist identities not just by saying they are activists but by acting out these identities in weekly meetings and events like Coming Out of the Shadows.

In the next chapter, I will summarize how this study was imagined, designed, and carried out or, stated in academic terminology, the theoretical and methodological processes used to center the voices and lived experiences of the *guerreras de DREAM Action NIU*.
CHAPTER VIII: CONCLUSION

I will begin by revisiting the initial question I purposed in the beginning of this research project. I provide a summary of the answer to the question as well answer other questions that were relevant to this study. I will provide implications of the study, contributions to the field of supporting undocumented and mixed-status student activists, and future directions and questions this study has opened. I used a braided theoretical framework which consisted of Figured Worlds, UndocuCrit and Nepantla, which allowed me to look through lenses of the lived experiences of nine Latina alumnae of DREAM Action NIU instead of positioning myself as a researcher who was guided by literature that existed in academic spaces. This project led me to follow Wilson’s research process and an Indigenous paradigm which honors my creencias y cultura. For that reason, I shared an undocumented paradigm that aimed at uplifting the voices and experiences of las guerreras de DREAM Action NIU while giving the research back to those who owned it and, more importantly, making it accessible to the undocumented community.

Research Question and Summary of Findings

This research study sought to understand the following research question:

*How do undocumented and mixed-status students’ participation within the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU produce identities of resistance?*

The question at the beginning of this research project is not the question these findings ended up addressing: the space that created identities of resistance was the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU. The research project expounded on how identities of resistance were produced in DREAM Action NIU. The project braided three theoretical frameworks—Figured Worlds, Nepantla, and UndocuCrit—to discuss identity components in Figured Worlds. I shared
how the study utilized UndocuCrit and Nepantla to address the data that focused on undocumented and mixed-status Latinas from DREAM Action NIU. I discussed the shift with las mujeres, who were also nepantleras due to the contested space they resided in, later became luchadoras and then fear(less) guer­erras in the world of DREAM Action NIU. I also outlined how their activist identities were (re)constructed in the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU and the shifts that occurred as they stepped into their student activist identities.

As members of DREAM Action NIU, las guerreras accessed artifacts that helped shape their identities. This research focuses on the artifacts of weekly events and Coming Out of the Shadows events and how they functioned as semiotic mediators for joy and hope, which are essential for identities of resistance because they create a substantial emotional investment in this space and advocacy efforts. The events of DREAM Action NIU provided a platform for students to perform the identity of undocumented and mixed-status activists and fully embody how they began to identify and how others saw them as activists. This Figured World of DREAM Action NIU also allowed for discourse framed around UndocuCrit, which they used to educate themselves and reframe the inscribed ideas about what it meant to be undocumented.

The discourse in DREAM Action NIU also altered how they began to see storytelling, and they realized they “do not owe the movement their stories.” They began to step into their activist identities when they understood their narratives meant empowering themselves and others to act. They used their stories to educate people about being an undocumented or mixed-status student on a college campus. They also realized these stories were sacred and needed guarding to protect themselves and their families. DREAM Action NIU also helped them make sense of their state of nepantla and the choques they experienced as undocumented students or from a mixed-status family. It was also a means for how they came to view who they were and
what they would advocate for at NIU. I shared artifacts such as photos, flyers, and Facebook posts to generate a more extensive understanding of how residing in nepantla, contested spaces, (re)created activist identities and led to a call to action to create change on their college campus.

This study revealed the transformations that happened to their identities due to their time as leaders of DREAM Action NIU. Holland et al. (1998) share that “figured worlds provide the contexts of meaning and action in which social positions and social relationships are named and conducted. They also provide the loci in which people fashion senses of self—that is, develop identities” (p. 60). In developing their student activist identities, las guerreras traversed multiple figured worlds before they came to reside in the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU. For las guerreras in this study, their involvement in DREAM Action NIU helped them build relationships, have conversations, and deepen their understanding of how being an undocumented or mixed-status person affected their lives in both big and small ways. It was the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU where they stepped into their activist identities and answered the call to action to create change on their campus.

Epifanías

When conducting this research project there were many realizations I had during the dissertation process. When I began listening to the interviews, one major insight was that as a person who has resided in the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU, I had certain expectations as to what their responses would be to the questions posed. It reminded me that my knowledge of the history of this student organization biased me as to expectations. My involvement spanned more than a decade and I advocated alongside all las guerreras in one form or another. I was often reminded of my biases by my dissertation chair, and I had to remind myself to look at the data and not fill in any gaps with my memories and thoughts.
I also recognized that my insider knowledge about *las guarreras de DREAM Action NIU* led me to anticipate some of responses to the questions asked. I expected responses to certain questions that were not answered the way I had anticipated. I came to understand that our questions at times were too broad. An example of this is when I asked for their favorite memory and I thought they were going to share about advocating but sometimes it was just memories of them laughing and having fun making buttons, sugar skulls or even just going out with friends and enjoying being college students. Joy and hope were very important in the lives of these *guerreras*.

I also expected the data to show it was because of DREAM Action NIU that they became student activists. The reality was some of these *mujeres* arrived at NIU with experience *en la lucha* and brought the knowledge they had acquired in their other activists’ spaces prior to joining DREAM Action NIU. They noted the work of the Immigrant Youth and Justice League as an organization that inspired the creation of DREAM Action NIU. A few of them also shared they were mentored and accepted by other undocumented youth who had begun to push back against the Dreamer narrative and held the first Coming Out of the Shadows events.

The data also showed that many *guerreras* were not comfortable with the title “activist” and no longer see themselves as activists since leaving DREAM Action NIU. Some of *las guerreras* noted they were more comfortable with the term “leader” or “organizer.” *Las guerreras* did not all see themselves as activists; some used the words “leader” or “organizer” and noted they felt more comfortable with those terms. While some of *las guerreras* already had experience organizing, it was not until they arrived at NIU that they led the charge and become student activist/organizers. They begin to understand their power as students and exert their activist agency. The shaping of their activist identities did not happen easily—they noted they
experienced stress, anxiety, and weariness, all of which took a toll on their mental health—but this space was also a place to seek counsel and validation and heal from the trauma of living in “illegalized” bodies or having family members who were undocumented.

When conducting the group interview, I was also surprised that some of las guerreras did not speak up more. I noticed a pattern that the accomplices or mixed-status guerreras did not speak as much as the undocumented or formerly undocumented guerreras. In retrospect, I should have done an interview with those directly affected and those from mixed-status families so that the accomplices would have felt more comfortable responding to the questions posed without feeling they were taking space that was not theirs to have.

Las guerreras were given access to the questions and asked to edit, delete, or add more to what I initially shared. While they had access to the questions ahead of time, when they conducted the interview or were interviewed themselves, many of them noted it was difficult to recall some of the painful memories and some noted it was difficult to hear others share their experiences. I realized having them interview one another was emotionally taxing on both interviewer and interviewee. They noted at times they needed more time to answer the questions being asked. I too found myself having to take breaks when hearing them talk about the trauma, loneliness, fear, and anxiety they felt as student activists.

The final insight I had about this project was that there was a much larger story to tell. I asked about las guerreras’ experiences in becoming activists, but I should have also asked about the results of that advocacy. Due to their advocacy, they created change on their college campus and helped pass legislation that has made the lives of students a bit less stressful with more campus resources, funding and mental health support compared to their time on campus. Their advocacy resulted in the creation of the Office for Undocumented Student Support and home to
the Director of Undocumented Student Support, which is currently the only office in the state of Illinois that only focuses on supporting undocumented and mixed-status students.

Again, there was so much data I did not incorporate, and I am disappointed in myself for not being able to honor *las guerreras* how I had envisioned via this project. The are many reasons why capturing the lives and identity formation of the nine DREAM Action NIU alumnae in this research project proved to be an impossible task. The main reason is their lives are beautiful and unique tapestries that have been woven by their ancestors that carry all of their familial history, knowledge, and ways of knowing and no one project could capture all of the history they have. They dedicated a significant amount of their time to create a better space for themselves and others. This advocacy was never just about and for them, it was also for the students coming after them. The fact that they all committed to wanting to share the history, work and lessons learned with the larger undocumented community brings me a sense of comfort because I know we will continue to share this collective work at conferences, in podcasts and via exhibits.

**Sabidurías**

There are many lessons I learned in the process of writing this dissertation. One lesson was that my timeline and goals were not linear, nor were they realistic for me. What I was able to accomplish shifted constantly due to losing my parents and sister, this pandemic, and work responsibilities. I realized I had to set deadlines and try to achieve small goals with the mentality that I had to always keep moving forward no matter how much progress was made.

When I first began to think about this dissertation, I wanted to investigate the following question: What are the *choques* and dilemmas of doing a truly collaborative research project with undocumented students? I wanted to be able to provide some insight to doing work with
undocumented students so that their knowledge and voices were centered and they were recognized as scholars. The knowledge they have is something that cannot be taught in a classroom and should be seen as credible and worthy of citing. Sadly, I was unable to conduct this portion of the research but hope to focus on this in the future.

As I wrote about UndocuCrit I had a moment of asking myself, should I use a lens when I do not hold that identity? Should I be using UndocuCrit as a citizen? I also had the same questions when I began to use Indigenous ways of knowing and sharing stories. I do not hold either of these identities, and while I recognized the need to incorporate them, I was fearful of being seen as colonizing these methods. I then reminded myself that I was doing this research in partnership with both undocumented and mixed-status students and needed to honor their experiences due to immigration status and was confident that these lenses incorporated many of the nuances around their experiences of students who are undocumented or mixed-status.

I also learned that trying to carry out a collaborative research project was challenging for many reasons. The IRB process required additional steps, and I was asked to reach out to my university for permission to do this study. It took several rounds of edits and a letter of support from NIU’s upper administration to finally get the approval to conduct the interviews. I realized my timeline was not realistic to truly make this as collaborative as I wanted to when I first began discussing this project with las guerreras. The interviews were conducted via Zoom due to the pandemic and because two of the co-researchers do not live in the state of Illinois. While las guerreras helped with finalizing the questions and interviewing one another, knowing they are mothers to young children, have full-time jobs or had to study for their programs, I was hesitant to ask too much of them when they had already given so much to the university and continue to come back and help. Some of them helped with transcription, naming the dissertation, and
provided their own acknowledgements in the beginning because this work does not belong to me.

I had to challenge and critique the entire dissertation process and myself along the way. As someone who attempted to decolonize the process, I kept falling back into the colonizing patterns often seen in academia. This dissertation initially used the word “my” throughout the document. I had to go back and insert the word the words “this dissertation” or “this study” instead of “my dissertation” or “my study” when applicable. I also had to do this with the use of the word “my” and instead use the word “we” because this work—the advocacy and the changes created at NIU—has always been about “we” and never about “me.” I have been honored to be invited into the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU, a space that has welcomed me, a nepantlera, and served as my bridge and helped me walk out of nepantla and into my own identity as an “educator activist.”

Consejos

In this section we will share advice from las guerreras de DREAM Action NIU why it was important for undocumented and mixed-status students to either begin or continue advocating. We are including this section because las guerreras de DREAM Action NIU wanted to make sure this information was used by those who were directly affected by status. They wanted their knowledge and experiences to be shared so future DREAM Action NIU students as well as students on different campuses in the state of Illinois can also feel empowered and have an opportunity to learn from their experiences as college activists. We have also included advice for students, faculty, and staff and hope to gather this advice into a handout so it can be shared with future and current college students, faculty, and staff.
Why Advocate?

*Las guerreras* were asked the following question: Why is it important for undocumented and mixed-status students to advocate at institutions of higher education?

**Your Voice Matters**

**Ainsley:** I think it’s very easy to think … Oh, well, I’m just going to school, I’m just a student, I don’t have much of a say. But the truth of the matter is that you do; you do have a lot to do with that institution and how they treat their students and on the resources that they provide, and probably even the money that they get. So, you’re very important to the institution and for you to not become involved in programs and groups like DREAM Action NIU is not only a disservice to you, but a disservice to students in the future, you know, because [laughs] … because you know they chose you for a reason. They accepted you; they've accepted your application for a reason so it’s your job and it’s your obligation to make that your space, because it is your space. But whether or not NIU tries to take away that space from you or whatever higher ed institutions, that may be, you know, they wouldn’t be there [but] because of you.

**Advocate for Your Needs**

**Dulce:** I think it's important for undocumented and mixed-status students to advocate because we need our needs met. There are so many needs that our community has and if we don’t advocate for those, for those things that we need we’re not going to get them. Because higher education institutions aren’t meant for us. Now, in the grad program I am doing in higher education and student affairs we had to read this book, *Ebony and Ivory*, and you know, higher education institutions were built by African slaves. They were built by Indigenous people. Indigenous people were put in some of these institutions so that
they could assimilate to Western culture, so they’re not meant for us. So we need our voices; [they] need to be out there, so that we get what we, what we need.

**Ivonne:** It's important because that's just that's how things have changed. Well, but it's important because the students are the ones who are connected to the students, the students are the ones who see the struggles. It’s important to advocate and it is important for students to know that. Without students there’s no institution, you know, without students it doesn’t exist so taking advantage of that is huge in higher education, especially now that they're struggling, the higher institutions are struggling.

**Lizbeth:** Because if students don’t do it, no one else will, you know. The faculty aren't going to stand up, the administrators … they’re not going to do it, unfortunately. Sometimes institutions just continue being because it’s always been that way and so students have to serve as this… holding institutions accountable so it’s important for students to be involved, for them to be aware of what’s happening, for them to know that they can create change and that institutions need to listen to their demands. And be open to change, and that all needs to come from students specifically. Because again, these institutions will not always favor us. And we’re moving towards, I think, a time where institutions claim so much about supporting students, about DEI stuff and all of this inclusivity but it’s … unfortunately it’s up to the students to really hold institutions accountable for these changes, and for them to be long term. Not for them to just be a trend or something that we’re doing now, because it’s the right thing to do now and it’s going to take a lot of work and it’s going to take a long time, because things will just not change very quickly.
**Maria:** Because we have to. You’ll find out when you’re there that if you don’t, you don’t have access to things that other students have and being [in] higher education is already hard, it’s difficult. So, if you're not advocating … you’re missing out on an opportunity to make things better for yourself and making things better for others. You know, I think of others but also think of the personal gain that you have; I mean, I’ve talked about the importance of having a political experience that you can use upon graduation, and that can inform how you become involved with democracy afterwards, you know. But most importantly in institutions of higher education NIU feels extremely welcoming and it is, but it wasn’t this way before DREAM Action. I mean, NIU has come a long, long way [throws head back and looks up] and it has been because of student activism, and there is still room for growth. Not just undocumented decisions, but for other populations and/or identities; we’re not just undocumented students, we are so many other things, and all of these identities are affected, in one way or another, by the policies that an institution has. I believe we all have a responsibility to make the world a better place [and] that includes the institution of higher ed that we choose. If you’re not leaving the world a better place … when I say the world, it means every space you’re in—your job, your school, your home—if you’re not making it better then you’re wasting your life.

**Sara:** In the simplest way it’s because no one’s going to hand us things just simply because people are nice. As unfortunate as it is, nothing has been won because people were “Oh, you want more money, here you go” or “You want DACA, here you go.” It has always been fought for and has always been advocated for and so I think it’s so crucial that we’re able to understand that. I think once we understand that, then
everything else becomes clear. We think, okay, what do we need to do in order to shift? Where do we have power? Where do we feel agency? What’s our vision for [what] we want to feel at the school? How do we make that happen? I think this is going to go back to the other question. What would I tell students? [It] is—shit—dream big, really get in the practice of, as hard as it is, into the practice of imagining how you want to feel, what do you want your school to feel, to look [like]; it doesn’t have to be hard. It really doesn’t have to be hard, but there’s certain conditions [that] have really made it difficult. I really do think my advice wholeheartedly for students is to really imagine beyond what our current reality is because, once we do, we can start taking those steps to making that a reality. It’s not just “Oh, you're too green, that'll never happen, you need to be realistic,” NO, part of our work has always been imagining and listening to the deep feeling within ourselves. That this is not it, there has to be more to this than just constant struggle. I think that’s why it’s so important because, even coming into DREAM Action, I knew there was this space that had been created for a reason. The more I began to understand even the history of DREAM Action, and I thought, okay, I got it. Even understanding how DACA was won and how undocumented people were putting their bodies on the line, literally risking arrest to get us what we needed. It just made things clear: okay, it’s up to us, no one’s going to come! It’s literally up to us! I think that’s why it’s so important for us to really be part of these processes and spaces.

**Yasmeen:** Because you have to bring visibility to an issue that frankly, no one’s going to care about until you make them care about it. I think undocumented students have to always be at the forefront of this to bring a face to the issue. It’s easy for faculty or for an institution to say no to certain policies or things when it’s not in their face. It’s a lot
harder when you’re in their face and you’re sharing your story and you’re humanizing yourself in front of them. It’s a lot harder for them to say no. I think you need to basically be the force that brings visibility to these issues, I think about the Disability Rights Movement and how the American Disabilities Act—literally, disabled people had to throw themselves on the steps of the Capitol and block the Capitol and crawl—paralyzed folks crawling up to bring visibility to the fact that there is no ramp to get up to the Capitol and there’s no ramp to get up into most public buildings. Basically, forcing yourself to make an invisible issue visible and … making it hard for people to say no, and kind of being that thorn in the side. You should care because we’re here and we’re not leaving. We’re attending your institution as much as you want to say that we’re not here, as much as you want to think that we’re not here and dispelling the myths, or these ideas that people have of what an undocumented student looks like or what an undocumented student is because a lot of times they think “foreigner.” And you think it’s someone who’s so far away from you and you don’t realize that it’s the students in your classroom and your neighbors and the kids in your kids’ school and it’s so easy for people to just think that. Oh, you can just get in line and get your papers, you can just do it and for them to think that that’s how the immigration system works when you dig deep and you start peeling back the layers of immigration. Laws are inherently racist and have always been and have always favored European immigrants coming into the U.S. versus any Black or Brown immigrants gaining citizenship in this country, and I think our country likes to forget or conveniently erase history. I’m going off on a rant, but this is so crucial, because I think it’s where this is just so American for us to think that things work one
way where when you start to peel back the layers it’s not that way and it’s a lot more nuanced and complicated than you originally think.

**Empowerment**

**Laura:** I think it’s really important immediately, because there are students who are currently enrolled at NIU who are undocumented or have a mixed-status family and they …haven’t found their voice yet or they haven’t felt empowered to use it and DREAM Action immediately provides examples and leadership, who have people who, even though they also are scared to use their voice, or, you know, hesitant, they’re still being, you know, pushed or … gently pushed to really be undocumented and unafraid whether that’s Sandy or the other mentors or alumni who were just, you know, telling them about what they’ve [DREAM Action NIU] done in the past to kind of, you know …ignite something inside them. They feel empowered to advocate and use their voice and whatever context or setting they’re in. So, I think immediately that’s why it’s so important to advocate and be part of a DREAM Action NIU but I think overall organizing in this … little Illinois university in the middle of DeKalb County is so necessary because you know, historically universities …excluded people of color, excluded Black people, excluded … disabled people, it was a place just for whites, you know, white men to access education. And as more people were let into this institution, they’ve been met with resistance. But those who have historically been excluded had to, you know, engage in this long struggle to fight back and to really say that we belong here … so I see DREAM Action in the long term, being part of this ongoing historical resistance by marginalized people or oppressed people where they’re not just accepting things as they are, but they’re constantly pushing the institutions as far as they can with
the time that they are there. I don’t know what’s going to be at the end of that struggle, if there is an end, but I think we must continue to [confront] oppression. And you know, any kind of racism and any other sort of -isms at these public universities, because it’s so important and it’s inspiring to the generations that come afterwards.

The advice las guerreras de DREAM Action NIU share as to why advocating is important encouraged students to dream big and to not miss the opportunity to create a change on their campus to make it better for themselves and other marginalized groups. They also shared that advocating provides an opportunity to feel empowered and use your voice because you are paying to attend a university and should be afforded the resources like every other student on campus. It is via advocacy that you will create visibility for yourselves and for the issues and changes that need to be made, and if you do not speak up, change will not happen.

In the next section, las guerreras share the advice they have for faculty and staff who have an opportunity to support and mentor undocumented and mixed-status students on their campuses.

Advice for Faculty or Staff

Listen

Erin: I think the advice I could give [is] to just listen and not listen with their ears, but listen attentively. If someone who isn’t documented comes to your office to ask you for guidance on something or for help on something, listen. If you don’t know how to approach the issue, preface it, but also say, I’m here as a resource and it’s vital: if I can’t answer all your questions, I’m going to connect you with someone that can. Because if they’re coming to you for guidance, that means that they trust you and they trust your judgment and they trust that you have the ability to have a conversation with them and
provide that guidance. And then I would also encourage them to learn more about issues that affect undocumented students, because I know, for the most part, a lot of professors still haven’t been in the Ally training. And it’s just not doing the Ally training but continuing the work, continuing to get yourself educated, because I still continue to become educated on these issues; even though you know [you] have done work in the past, things always change and there’s always more to learn. I would encourage them to go to a DREAM Action meeting …know the basics, in order to, you know, provide resources, provide information.

**Ainsley:** When I say this advice, I have a very specific audience in mind: it’s more so for people that think they know what they’re talking about but are the ones invading spaces that are not meant for them, but then they get offended when asked to leave. Just shut up. That would be my advice: for them to shut up and listen because I think we all live a life with our own privileges, but we also [have] our own disadvantages and obviously we don’t know each other’s disadvantages and privileges, but if you have more privileges than the person you’re talking to, … then it may be a good indicator to shut up and just listen. Because obviously you’re not the one affected by this, and especially to staff and faculty. If your job is to become a resource and support the students and you’re not actively listening and actively being there for them then I think that you have no rights or no means to be working with students in the first place. Because, at the end of the day you’re there, you’re there for the students and if you’re not listening to the students then what are you doing with your life?
**Yasmeen:** I would say, listen and listening is critical. I think, when we were first starting out that’s something that we could have done a lot better. I was such a proponent of scholarships and let’s raise money, we need scholarships because that’s going to help people now. And what I realized is that you definitely need that short-term and long-term strategy to address the needs of students. The needs of students are going to change depending on what’s going on. Right now, with COVID or online learning I’m not even sure how classes—classrooms—are set up, but figuring out, what are the needs of the students now because that’s always going to change and I’m assuming right now, whatever, their needs are different than what it was 10 years ago. And addressing those needs and not assuming that you understand what’s going on, what, what these students need, really listening with the intent of understanding and trying to really understand the student’s point of views and what it is that they’re struggling with currently. And how to make that better in the short term, but also in the long term, because you feel you need to start putting resources out there in the now but also building and kind of putting those bricks out there to build the longer-term vision or strategy.

**Use your power to help students**

**Laura:** I would say to just be, just in general, just be supportive, have some interest in the students. I think it’s really easy once you work in a university, especially as a staff member or even a professor to think you’re going there to work, you’re not going there to organize. But I would encourage them to not just show up for their job but show up for the students that they’re there to serve. There are a lot of factors that encourage you to not show any resistance, or just go about the status quo. I think if you’re neutral and you don’t show any interest in supporting students who are constantly under attack, whether
it’s undocumented students or, you know, students who are disabled or students who just … come from these identities that are constantly marginalized and oppressed, I think those staff and professors are complicit in the marginalization of those students. I understand how easy it is to stand by quietly and not cause any trouble. I think professors and staff, faculty should really use their positions of power. Even if they don’t participate, they can be great advisors for the students who are organizing. I know I’ve gone personally to professors and staff to gain institutional knowledge, to gain institutional understanding in how the hierarchy works at the institution. Who are the decision makers? They helped me identify those and where they think we could be the most powerful, so getting … strategy advice on how to proceed on, you know, mobilizing this issue. I think professors and staff can be really helpful in that aspect as well. [They] don’t generally [have to] accept the status quo, [but] be brave enough to challenge it. But also, you have knowledge about the institution that can be very valuable for students who just got there, and they don’t know the ins and outs. Or the history between an administrator with this issue that can be helpful and keeping that knowledge that’s not written down.

Maria: NIU has come a long way and I also see there were people at NIU and not just the social justice organizations who are very como se dice paternalistic; what is that other word? They feel the need, especially undocumented students, they feel the need to protect you, the need to baby you, the need to be a parent to you. That is so disempowering; when we are advocating for other people, we need to remember that we need to do it with those people. First of all, that’s the number one rule: nothing for us, without us. The second rule is don’t do for others what they can do for themselves. Faculty and staff have
a lot of power, and they sit in spaces that students cannot sit at; they can use that power to give us a seat at the table. If not a seat at the table, ask for our experiences to inform the decisions that they make at those tables. So build true relationships that are based in respect and are based in trust with your students, so that you feel confident, would you sit at these tables to say that, yes, I have spoken to the students, and this is what they have to say. Because if you’re not going to do that, give the students the tools [so] we can do this ourselves. Then this, going back to this whole idea of don’t do for others where we can do for ourselves, students have the capacity. Sometimes, we don’t have the tools to advocate for ourselves, and that should be the responsibility or one of the main concerns of faculty and staff. Because it doesn’t matter how much they study these issues, how much they write and do research around issues of undocumented students, they’re never going to know what it’s like to be undocumented. Even I right now, I as a green card holder, I need to step back from these spaces and provide my support and guidance and share my knowledge. But I can no longer try to make decisions on behalf of undocumented people in these spaces, because I am no longer affected in the way that an undocumented person is. Also continue educating yourself, obviously, build relationships based on respect and dignity and acknowledge the power dynamics. Never stop advocating for students, not just for undocumented students, but look for the different ways in which the struggles are interconnected and look at how different policies in your institution are keeping students from succeeding. The majority of the answers to the problems that students face, students can come up with a solution for it. But we need to be engaged. I think bottom line is listen, truly listening with respect, with love, with compassion. With a critical mind, but, most importantly, with respect, so that we give
students, we allow them to use their voice; there’s no reason why faculty or staff need to be the voice for us, we have our own voice, they don’t have to take the mic away from us.

Support Students’ Visions and Aspirations

Sara: I would tell faculty and staff and admin you can’t tell students that their vision for what they want their campus to look or feel is wrong or that it’s not attainable. Especially by folks who are directly impacted, you cannot do that, don’t tell them that it’s not possible or that, you know, X, Y or Z … it’s because of X Y and Z that it’s not gonna happen. I think the role of faculty, staff and admin is to … ask, How do we get there together? I always felt there was particular moments where I think this is ageism too, but especially when it comes to young people or students. There’s certain feelings that I would get from “Oh you’re too green, oh, you're being too idealistic,” and that in itself is not helpful. Let’s have real conversations around what’s possible; don’t tell me that it’s not. Tell me how we get closer to our goal. I feel be helpful, be resourceful, be able to offer constructive criticism, but constantly shutting down people who are directly impacted or not caring doesn't do anything. How do we get in the practice of just deeply listening? I felt sometimes people… staff, faculty would just jump the gun around constantly commenting on certain things and know, if you were listening to what we’re telling you, what we want, we’re telling you what we need. For faculty, staff, admin, how can you learn to cultivate a practice around deeply listening to those directly impacted, deeply listening to those on the ground, doing the work. And they’ll tell you how you can support, they’ll give you spaces. If you’re also saying that you’re wanting to help then also do the part of showing up and not just saying you support, but not actually doing the work. I think about Mariame Kaba: how do we bridge the gap between values and
practice? You can’t say I support undocumented students because it’s a nice little plaque on your wall, but not practice it in every, in everyday ways. How are you facilitating conversations around language around inclusivity and making sure that there’s a sense of belonging and safety? How are you showing up to events that undocumented students are telling you to show up for that need support? How are you also supporting … their wellbeing? There are so many different ways that go into an everyday practice. It’s not just, you attend this one-time training, you know. I do think there’s other conversations around how to really build that muscle around what everyday long-term practices really look like and not just those one-time things and I think that goes into continuing to deeply listen.

Ivonne: There’s this one thing that, I don’t know if you know Susana—Susana Das Neves. She was very involved now; I think she’s very involved with the migrant workers and education. But I remember, she said, and this is something I would say, too, is that she will work with every student. If an undocumented student tells her I want to become a teacher, I want to become a nurse, you know: those professions that you need to have a social security number. If a student says Hey, I want to be a teacher but I’m undocumented, Susana would say, “I’m going to work with you and we’re going to get you there because today, you might not be able to work, but what if, in a week something changes, in two weeks, in a year. You already have all this [education].” So, my advice is to work with students until you can’t, until there’s literally a stop sign, not to get intimidated. Something that I’ve learned to say, “I can help you; if I don't know the answer, I’ll make sure to get in contact with someone.” There’s no excuse anymore; we
have internet, there’s really no excuse. So, there’s an excuse to not help, and if we feel uncomfortable there are others who won’t feel uncomfortable.

**Educate yourself on supporting undocumented and mixed-status students**

**Dulce:** I think what I’m about to say is the bare minimum that they could do. Educating themselves, this is hard because media is so big and you’ve got different opinions, different things, but educating themselves seeking out professional development opportunities that they could use that will further their knowledge on undocumented and mixed-status students. And being empathetic towards students if they do come in and ask for help. In my graduate program now, I know there are faculty, staff, and administrators who don’t know about these issues. They can come off a little not friendly towards undocumented students and mixed-status students, so I think being empathetic towards students and not being deficit-minded, thinking the student is at fault. No, this is bigger than the student being at fault.

**Lizbeth:** To do the work on their own; do not expect students to teach them. I think that we, the students, need support; they don’t need to be the educators. I think that there are a lot of resources that they can utilize: there’s the Office of Undocumented Support, there’s Ally training. I think that rhetoric is important, I think that the rhetoric that they use and referencing just not only undocumented students and their experience, dropping the I-word. But in general, them being knowledgeable about DI initiatives, always having a DI lens and in the way that they teach. Maybe structure their syllabi and the way that they teach material, to know that all of their students are coming from different experiences. They’re coming from different high schools, they’re coming from different neighborhoods. Just knowing that students need support at different levels and that each
student isn’t the same. And it’s just to provide grace and provide compassion and I think, mainly it’s that rhetoric and educating themselves. To teach without trying to be hurtful and if they are hurtful or they say the wrong thing because they are still learning, to take accountability for that. Acknowledge that everyone has a learning curve, not everyone is perfect, everyone still makes mistakes and is still learning. But just as educators, they need to hold themselves accountable and if they make a mistake, to own up for it… own up to it. Because I think that a lot of harm is done in classrooms that is never acknowledged. Then it’s never, como se dice, they never speak to it, or they never apologize for a harmful comment that could have been very harmful to someone. I think that accountability in the classroom is important.

The advice given to faculty and staff to support undocumented and mixed-status students can be used when supporting all students who hold marginalized identities. Faculty and staff were advised to recognize their privilege and to listen to the needs of students. They were also encouraged to take some onus on educating themselves and not leave it on the students to help them understand how the systems of oppression are taking a toll on them as students. They need to understand and utilize the power they hold as faculty and staff and share some of the institutional knowledge that could benefit students’ advocacy efforts. Lastly, they were encouraged to authentically care for the students and not just attend a training for performative purposes or to get a plaque for their offices.

In the next section we share general advice for future students of DREAM Action NIU who are either undocumented, from mixed-status families, or accomplices.
**Advice for Students**

*Intersectional Advocacy*

**Maria:** I think being very intentional about building an intersectional community, seeing the struggle for undocumented rights, to be treated with respect and dignity. To be safe from dangers of being incarcerated and deported, it is something that doesn’t just affect us but it affects so many communities. And I think that’s important because, when I see the outside world, outside of … our campus, that is what is missing. Because if we are truly going to change the systems of oppression, we have to do it from an intersectional point of view. DREAM Action NIU is a powerful organization: it was, it has been. And we have the opportunity and the responsibility to have that analysis to make our work truly meaningful and for it to truly be a force of change. Those experiences for current undocumented students who are at NIU, at DREAM Action NIU, and even non-undocumented students, I think the most important [is] that you build relationships outside of just our small group of people who are coming together advocating for undocumented students.

**Erin:** Build community. The work is really important, but also making sure that everyone is seen and heard is also important, and making sure that you have different voices at the table is also important. Because immigration and undocumented student issues are not just Latinx; it goes across races, across ethnicities and across different types of identities. It’s important to make sure that you have as many people as you can at the table so that you can get as many perspectives as you can.
Commitment and Patience

Ivonne: To me loyalty was huge when it comes to being a part of something, really be part of it, being committed. That was really big for me. An example, I remember Adam at some point, he was part of Latino Student Alliance, he was part of SOL, he was part of DREAM Action, he was a student, he was a GA, he was a husband at that time. He had to do things around the house and I’m sure it wasn’t just him, so many other students … do this, so my advice would be: You got to pick one, two, maybe three maybe so that you can do a good job in them versus having five and you doing a minimal job in them.

DREAM Action NIU is such [an] important organization, not that the rest are not. But it’s more important than the others [laughs]. Because we’re talking about people’s livelihoods, we’re talking about stability; we’re not talking about a social organization that needs to raise funds for a trip. We’re helping students [with] their livelihood.

Erin: For future student leaders, I would say, be patient in the process. Sometimes other centers or the people you're trying to reach out to aren’t going to get back to you right away, but just keep trying and try other avenues. You have to send an email to the whole department and have no shame asking for resources, for spaces, for anything the university’s there to provide. They should be able to provide given the money that … we paid them or that we continue to pay them. And also provide a space for students for them to hold space for each other.

Mental Health and Community Support

Sara: Okay. I’ve gone back to DREAM Action and done these presentations around storytelling. The more … work I do around mental health and even reflecting on my own organizing experience. Having been an undocumented person and telling my story. I feel
storytelling is so crucial, so beautiful, and so important, but I do think, at that moment, I thought that I owed people my story. I thought I needed to tell my story in order to organize or I needed to tell my story in order to get results, in order for to get funding, you know, and so I do feel a part of what I’ve reflected on is we don’t owe anybody our story. We don’t owe the movement our story. I think our stories are really beautiful and they’re a catalyst for a lot. But I think that in reflecting back, even around planning the first Coming Out of the Shadows, I thought everybody was going to be on board with telling their stories, because I had my own process of how powerful that was without really realizing, Oh, people need support and even feeling held when telling their stories. So, I think for students, especially while there has been a lot of shifts at NIU, there’s more support, I tell students you don’t owe anybody your story and if you want to share your story just make sure that you’re also feeling held, right, and that you also feel supported and that you feel good about sharing it. And then I also think back to the importance of delegation. I do think DREAM Action fell on a lot of undocumented women. Just like any other movement and other movements really being led by BIPOC queer women, but I do think the importance of delegation in terms of realizing that you don’t have to carry it all. And for students to really think through how does shared leadership look, how does it look to support one another. What does it look like to have a vision together and help each other get to that vision, as opposed to one person carrying it all? At certain points, I felt I carried it all and it led to burnout. It led to huge burnout; once I graduated from NIU I wanted nothing to do with it for a bit and so I think back to those moments around how I could have done things different. There could have been conversations that could have been facilitated and I think that at the time I didn’t have the
tools honestly on how to communicate effectively or to name certain needs either. I do think back to telling students around us, what does it look like to really build your communication skills with each other around what is needed and when you’re feeling overwhelmed. Who can you tap into and who can tap in while you take a break. How do we contain or sustain healthy organizing within these spaces? I know that that often feels very contradictory, but I think back to the importance of delegation. I know that’s something I didn’t really feel I did a lot, even asking for help. I think those are just personal lessons that I’ve learned, that I feel are important to share.

**Maria:** Take care of your mental health. Being undocumented really affects people in different ways, and I have seen how too many of my friends and my classmates [sighs] and other members of DREAM Action NIU being undocumented, that really messes them up, it really affected the way that they saw themselves. The things they thought that they deserved or not. I think a lot of that has to do with your status and that needs to be processed with either the help [of] therapists or the help of friends around you that are going to hold you accountable to take care of your mental health to avoid having any type of continued trauma you are experiencing. Being undocumented comes with the fact that many of us are first-generation low-income students so on top of being undocumented there are things that are important to be taken care of and to discuss. If you are going to be taking the responsibility of being a leader to be involved with an organization, this work, it’s extremely important for you to take care of your mental health because it’s going to become heavy at one point. And it shouldn’t be our only identity; there is so many other things in higher ed and so many other opportunities for growth, also outside of DREAM Action.
**Lizbeth:** You are not in this alone. You have people that deeply care about you.

Graduating from NIU, I think that there are people that deeply care about your well-being, about your emotional well-being especially. But I also want them to know that it’s okay to feel all the things, I think the anger, the confusion, the contradicting feelings that students sometimes have because of their status. I would want them to know they’re not alone and there’s people here that are actively trying to work for these things to change. I would tell them that the people that come later on are going to be really proud of the work that they’re doing today, even if they don’t feel that the work they’re doing is impactful. I would say, take up space, be confident that you as a student has a lot of power in institutions of higher ed. And to never doubt the reason why you’re doing it. Because we all have a why. We all have our why, as to why we’re doing this work and why we are inspired to join DREAM Action and who we’re doing it for whether it’s yourself, or whether it’s for your family, whether it’s to honor their sacrifices. Never doubt your why; embrace that and hold on to it, because that is what's going to fuel you during the times when you’re feeling down, when you're feeling disappointed, when you’re feeling discouraged, when you’re questioning the world and things don’t make sense, because things will continue not to make sense. We will continue to be angry, because we want things to change so badly. But it is then that you rely on your peers, you rely on your advisors, you rely on the people that have constantly been there and supporting you as allies. Rely on your community, and you are going to have setbacks, you’re going to have to tap out a couple times and that’s okay; you refuel, you recharge, and you come back, and you fight harder. Because I will not, I’m not going to tell you
that you will not burn out because this work is exhausting, this work is heavy, but it’s so important for you to continue to be a part of.

**Speak up: Be open to criticism and conflict resolution**

**Dulce:** I would tell them to speak up. Speak up a lot. Say what’s on your mind. I think DREAM Action NIU is a brave space. Even if you feel that what you’re going to say may not be right or you’re not going to say [it] right just say it, because you deserve to be heard. I think that’s one of the biggest things I learned: we have so much to offer. If DREAM Action NIU is an organization that advocates for undocumented and mixed-status students then we need to hear from them, we don’t need to hear from someone who maybe doesn’t hold those identities. I would say just speak up, use your voice, there’s so much that you have to offer.

**Yasmeen:** My biggest advice would be to use your voice and give yourself permission to use your voice authentically. For me, what that means is, if you need help, not being afraid to voice that and say, “Hey, I need help” or “I’m struggling” or whatever it is, because if you don’t speak up for yourself no one’s going to speak up for you and no one’s going to know what you’re going through. Unless you share that a lot of times in the group we didn’t know that some were struggling with mental health issues, or they weren’t going to come back next semester, they were worried if they had this hold on their account, they weren’t sharing that. I think it’s a lot when you hold those things because they’re so heavy versus if you share it could be uncomfortable and maybe you feel some shame around it at first, but it can only get better. If you speak up and allow… yourself that permission to take up space because that’s what the group is there for and I
would say, using your voice and giving … yourself the permission to you to use your voice, to help yourself into really be[ing] your authentic self.

**Ainsley:** The advice I would give is to not be afraid of criticism, because I think it’s very easy for people to say, oh I take [constructive] criticism well. I’m the same way, too, but when somebody gives you [constructive] criticism, that can kind of hurt [laughs]. I would say to be comfortable with receiving criticism. I would also say be comfortable with receiving criticism at any tone. Because depending on the person that’s giving you [constructive] criticism, depending on their tone could probably determine how hurt you are, but most people mean it with love, they want to see you grow and to see you become a more established person. I think whatever criticism you receive, whether it be given positively or negatively, it’s important to become comfortable with it.

**Laura:** I would really advise them to figure out how to resolve conflict. Conflict is a healthy thing; it shouldn’t be seen as if there’s conflict that the organization is going badly. Instead, it should be viewed as, if there’s conflict, you know, we should have a method to resolve it and address it, because I feel within organizations, there can be interpersonal relationship breakdowns. I think the organization suffers … as a whole if students don’t figure out a healthy way to address conflict. I think that’s one piece of advice I would give current students who are part of DREAM Action NIU. The other part is that school comes first. I think I always I tended to put school stuff to the side because I prioritized whatever [was] going on with DREAM Action, because it was more interesting, or I just found it easier work to do. It wasn’t work. In some ways, I didn't want to read an article that was 30 pages long, when I could do something else for DREAM Action. But I would definitely say prioritize school, and also to get therapy. I
think there’s a lot of issues that come up when you are university students outside of immigration status that everyone could benefit from a few sessions of therapy just to talk through whatever issues you’re dealing with.

The advice for future DREAM Action members included the need to be patient when advocating, as change does not happen overnight. Las guerreras also shared that it was important to use your voice and be your authentic self in this space but to also recognize that burnout can happen, so finding mental health support is very important. It is also important to recognize you are not alone and you can build community in this figured world but you need to be intentional and intersectional while you do it, as struggles are interconnected.

**Reciprocity**

When las guerreras were asked what they wanted to come from this research, las guerreras noted they wanted the data to be as accessible as possible. To create snippets so it could be easily “digested.” Some ideas included art, podcasts, zines, tik tok or a visual exhibit. “And that podcast should be on Telemundo and Univision because that's what they’re watching.” Someone suggested having it at the library to keep this as part of historical archives. They also noted that NIU needed to financially fund these projects. Las guerreras then said they wanted this information in their parents’ hands in a way “que ellos entiendan.” The other important point made was that they did not want this information used against other communities of color or against people who hold marginalized identities and that this data not be used to pit communities against each other (plática con poderosas).

While we shared ideas creating a way to share this research, we recognized the importance of continuing to archive the lessons learned and the work done via this student
organization. We committed to working together to create a way to share this research with the community it was about and for when we began this study.

**Future Research**

There are so many opportunities for future research that centers undocumented and mixed-status college student activists by allowing them to be a part of the research design, data collection and analysis. More needs to be done to then share the results back with students, families and communities who are directly affected by immigration status. Universities should create paid research positions to allow students to be a part of the research and be compensated for their labor.

While this study focused on identities of resistance within a student organization, it only focused on one institution. I would recommend a study on how undocumented student organizations across the state worked collaboratively to create change at the state level. I also recommend other studies that focus on the critical practices of pedagogies that created change in campus climates, policies, and funding for both undocumented and mixed-status students.

While this work focused on nine Latina leaders of DREAM Action NIU there were also males who led the organization; a follow-up study on their experiences would add to this body of work. Another follow-up study could be focused on the non-Latinx students who were members or leaders within DREAM Action and how they navigated liminality and organizing in primarily Latinx spaces.

The final area I would like to see more research on is how students who are admitted to college campuses are being informed about the support they will receive from their institutions via the polices, with funding, mental health, and legal support and if the universities follow through with what the students are promised.
I have worked alongside undocumented and mixed-status students since 2010 and I have found many areas that need to be researched further, but not just by scholars; we need to invite undocumented and mixed-status students in and center their knowledge, voices, and experiences.

**Final Thoughts**

The space created by DREAM Action NIU helped strengthen students’ sense of belonging by assisting them to “figure” who they were through activities and social relationships with their fellow organizing students and accomplices (Urrieta, 2005). Due to their time in the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU, many of them were led out of nepantla and began exerting their activist agency. This led to them (re)structure themselves and the world of DREAM Action NIU. Their time in the Figured World of DREAM Action NIU also led them to strive and make NIU an undocumented-friendly campus for themselves and others. They not only crossed the bridge out of nepantla; they were able to help others cross bridges and re(shaped) how the university community viewed and supported undocumented and mixed-status students.
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APPENDIX A: RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What is your immigration status? Has it changed since being a part of DREAM Action NIU?

2. Tell me a little about how your immigration status has shaped who you are.

3. How did your immigration status (as an undocumented student or a mixed-status student) affect your journey in higher education?

4. How did you end up at NIU?

5. What motivated you to participate in DREAM Action NIU?

6. What were some of the most memorable experiences or stories you have about your time as a member of DREAM Action NIU?

7. How has your involvement with DREAM Action NIU affected your political views, attitudes, and well-being?

8. Why is DREAM Action NIU important for undocumented/mixed-status students at NIU?

9. How has being a leader of DREAM Action NIU influenced how you view yourself as an undocumented/mixed-status student activist?
   a) Has this view of yourself changed since leaving DREAM Action NIU (not being an active member)?

10. What advice would you give undocumented students from your experience being a part of DREAM Action NIU?

11. What are some of your thoughts and feelings in how your involvement and advocacy with DREAM Action NIU had on your:
   a) academic,
   b) mental,
   c) emotional well-being?

12. How did being a member of DREAM Action NIU connect you to your culture or community?

13. How did your participation in DREAM Action NIU influence your identity as an undocumented/mixed-status person?

14. Why is it important for undocumented/mixed-status students to advocate at institutions of higher education?
15. As a former leader of DREAM Action NIU, what advice would you offer to faculty, staff and administrators who work with undocumented students?

16. Do you have any previous experience with people wanting to interview you for the news or research or etc.? What has that experience been like for you?

17. Is there anything else you would like to add about your experiences with DREAM Action NIU?

Plática con poderosas

Part 1

Part of what I’m interested in understanding is what your experiences were/are in being co-researchers on this project. So I’m going to start off with some questions for you about this first.

1. How do you feel about undocumented students and their stories being used for research in general?
2. What does it mean to you that I am asking each of you to be co-researchers?
3. What was it like for you to interview each other?
4. How do you think it would have been different if I interviewed each of you instead?
5. What are your hopes for what come out of this research project?
   a. What impact are you hoping it might have?
6. What would you like to do with all of this data and knowledge?

Part 2

Part of what I’m interested in understanding is how each of you became activists. So the following questions are meant to help you explain that to me and to each other.

1. Some of you said you did not see yourselves as activists until DREAM Action NIU; others said you had already started that work before you came to NIU.

2. Can you describe that moment when you felt empowered to call yourself an activist either on campus or before coming to NIU?

3. When did you realize you had to speak up as part of DREAM Action NIU? Was there a moment when you realized you felt comfortable speaking up?

4. How do you define the DREAM Action NIU community?

5. Do you feel you have multiple memberships/ belong to multiple communities? If so, why?
APPENDIX B: DATA LOGS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviews</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Time CST</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Interviewee</th>
<th>Interviewer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>21-Nov-21</td>
<td>1:00PM</td>
<td>zoom</td>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>Ivonne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>21-Nov-21</td>
<td>11:00AM</td>
<td>zoom</td>
<td>Sara</td>
<td>Maria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>22-Nov-21</td>
<td>7:00PM</td>
<td>zoom</td>
<td>Laura</td>
<td>Sara</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>23-Nov-21</td>
<td>4:30PM</td>
<td>zoom</td>
<td>Lizbeth</td>
<td>Erin</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>27-Nov-21</td>
<td>5:00PM</td>
<td>zoom</td>
<td>Dulce</td>
<td>Laura</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1-Dec-21</td>
<td>6:00PM</td>
<td>zoom</td>
<td>Yasmeen</td>
<td>Lizbeth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2-Dec-21</td>
<td>6:00PM</td>
<td>zoom</td>
<td>Ainsley</td>
<td>Yasmeen</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Ivonne</td>
<td>Dulce</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9-Dec-21</td>
<td>6:00PM</td>
<td>zoom</td>
<td>Erin</td>
<td>Ainsley</td>
</tr>
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</table>

| Plática con Poderosas               | 20-Dec-21 | 7PM      | Zoom     | *las poderosas* | Sandy |

217
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviews</th>
<th>Transcribing</th>
<th>Coding</th>
<th>Formatting</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maria’s interview</td>
<td>4 hours</td>
<td>14 hours</td>
<td>3 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sara’s interview</td>
<td>4 hours</td>
<td>14 hours</td>
<td>3 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura’s interview</td>
<td>4 hours</td>
<td>14 hours</td>
<td>3 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lizbeth’s interview</td>
<td>4 hours</td>
<td>14 hours</td>
<td>3 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dulce’s interview</td>
<td>4 hours</td>
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<td>Yasmeen’s interview</td>
<td>4 hours</td>
<td>14 hours</td>
<td>3 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ainsley’s interview</td>
<td>4 hours</td>
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<td>3 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ivonne’s interview</td>
<td>4 hours</td>
<td>14 hours</td>
<td>3 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erin’s interview</td>
<td>4 hours</td>
<td>14 hours</td>
<td>3 hours</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Plática con poderosas</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandy interviews <em>las mujeres</em></td>
<td>6 hours</td>
<td>6 hours</td>
<td>4 hours</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX C: ARTIFACTS

DA NIU 2014 Overview

DREAM Action NIU is a student-led organization. Our organization aims to increase awareness about the situations undocumented students face in the U.S. and particularly on our campus. Our members share the belief that higher education is a fundamental human right for all, regardless of immigration status.

As an organization, we understand the multiple obstacles undocumented students face, and therefore we strive to develop strategies to ensure that these students are able to attain higher levels of education and academic success. We also aim to provide accurate information to the institution so that it is better equipped to serve this population.

History:
- Founded in 2009 by 2 student allies to the undocumented community.
- Focus: Advocate for the DREAM Act; create a guidebook for undocumented students; create a scholarship open to all regardless of immigration status; and to create a space for undocumented huskies and allies.

Accomplishments:
- We have created a solid student base since 2009, bi-weekly meetings averaging between 10-15 students per meeting.
- We have given more than 10 scholarships to students since the scholarship was created in 2009.
- We have successfully trained faculty, staff, and administration on how to work with undocumented students in previous trainings. Trainings have been student-led and have been on “How to Work with Undocumented Students” and on “Mental Health Professionals.”
- We have lobbied in Springfield on three separate occasions: to garner support for the DREAM Act in 2010, to pass drivers licenses to undocumented immigrants in 2012, for CIR in 2013 and to pass HB3528 (state funding for undocumented students) in 2015.
- We have successfully implemented institutional changes at NIU regarding undocumented students. Specifically, with NIU One Cards and also establishing a taskforce to support undocumented students.
- We have established and promoted educational events pertaining to immigration. Events in the past have ranged from showcasing documentaries, participating in law panels with the NIU school of Law & LLSA, and hosting two NIU Coming Out of the Shadows events.
- We also created a Drop the I-Word campaign.
COMING OUT OF THE SHADOWS

PERFORMANCE BY MONOTONE FROM ELEPHANT REBELLION

GIVE US ACCESS!

THU 3/24 @ 12PM | MLK COMMONS


#ACCESSIL DREAMACTIONNIU@GMAIL.COM #NIUWITHUS #NIUHEARTS
COMING OUT OF THE SHADOWS

WED MARCH 29, 2017 @ NOON
MLK COMMONS
UNITY MARCH TO FOLLOW THE EVENT

12:00 WELCOME
12:10 PERFORMANCES (QUINTO IMPERIO)
12:20 SPEAKERS
12:50 CLOSING REMARKS AND MARCH AROUND CAMPUS

Rain location: Regency Room, Holmes Student Center
NIU COMING OUT OF THE SHADOWS
12 PM | Wednesday, April 10
Davis Hall Terrace
Performances by:
Four Poets, One Mic and Elephant Rebellion
Rain Location: Carl Sandburg, HSC
Contact: dreamactioniu@gmail.com
WEDNESDAY
APRIL 8, 2020

COMING OUT OF THE SHADOWS

STILL UNDOCUMENTED. STILL UNAFRAID. ALWAYS UNAPOLOGETIC.

Sponsored by The Office for Undocumented Student Support

Facebook: Dream Action NIU | Instagram: @dreamaction_niu | Twitter: @DREAMAction_NIU | Venmo: @DreamActionNIU
COMING OUT OF THE SHADOWS
PERFORMANCE BY 4 POETS, 1 MIC

THEY DIDN'T KNOW WE WERE SEEDS

April 7, 2021
6 pm cst

THEY TRIED TO BURY US

UNDOCUMENTED & UNAFRAID
HOSTED BY DREAM ACTION NIU
DREAMACTIONNIU@GMAIL.COM

Register at http://go.niu.edu/2021COS
RESOLUTION

SOLIDARY SUPPORT FROM THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES
OF NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY REGARDING THE
DEFERRED ACTION FOR CHILDHOOD ARRIVALS (DACA) PROGRAM

WHEREAS, the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program was established in 2012 and allowed those who immigrated to the United States as children younger than the age of 16 prior to 2007, to remain in the country and obtain work permits on a renewable basis if they met a series of criteria;

WHEREAS, on Tuesday, September 5, 2017, President Trump initiated an executive order to end DACA, affecting the lives of more than 800,000 immigrants; and

WHEREAS, the State of Illinois has joined at least 15 other states in challenging the recent federal legislation that serves to overturn the protection measures of the DACA program; and

WHEREAS, Northern Illinois University (NIU) Acting President Lisa Freeman has issued a clear and swift response of commitment of continued support to all NIU students and their educational pursuits, as well as employees, regardless of their immigration status; and

WHEREAS, NIU proactively fosters an inclusive culture for all – including more than 200 undocumented students, who are seeking a path to citizenship as well as economic and societal stability; and

WHEREAS, NIU is taking a transparent position of solidarity in standing with our undocumented students and employees, in vowing to continue to offer resources and forums to address the inevitable repercussions of the White House actions to rescind DACA;

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the Board of Trustees of Northern Illinois University supports legislative actions to create a pathway for citizenship for DACA participants; and we strongly encourage all local, state and national citizens to support our position of solidarity;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that this RESOLUTION be sent to Illinois lawmakers and a copy of this document be placed in the official files of the Board of Trustees as part of the permanent record of the University and the great State of Illinois and as a lasting testament of the voice of this body, which believes in due process rights for all and the tenets of the United States Constitution.

Adopted in a regular meeting assembled this 14th day of September, 2017.

BOARD OF TRUSTEES OF
NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

_____________________
Wheeler G. Coleman
Chair

_____________________
John R. Butler
Secretary

Chair Coleman asked for a motion to approve the resolution. Trustee Boey so moved and Trustee Wasowicz seconded. The motion was approved.