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# Navigating the Waves of Social and Political Capriciousness: Inspiring Perspectives From DREAM-Eligible Immigrant Students

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# Navigating the Waves of Social and Political Capriciousness

## Inspiring Perspectives From DREAM-Eligible Immigrant Students

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**Abstract:** This article examines the psychological and sociological impacts of the proposed Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act and in-state tuition legislation on DREAM-eligible students in the Midwestern United States. The researchers sought to capture the lived experiences of undocumented immigrant students through their rich interpretations of current immigration policy and how participants described their situation, their identity, and their dreams in relation to the volatility of their external environment.

**Resumen:** Este manuscrito examina el impacto psicológico y sociológico del propuesto Acto de Desarrollo, Asistencia, y Educación para Menores Extranjeros (DREAM) y la ley de educación para residentes estatales sobre estudiantes elegibles del DREAM en el medio-oeste de los Estados Unidos de América. Los investigadores buscaron capturar las experiencias vividas por estudiantes inmigrados sin documentos a través de interpretaciones ricas de la política actual de inmigración y cómo los participantes describieron sus situaciones, su identidad, y sus sueños y la relación de ellos con la volatilidad de su ambiente externo.

**Keywords:** *Latina/o; immigration; higher education; resiliency; DREAM Act; in-state tuition; undocumented*

### Introduction

Amid the heated immigration debate currently raging in the United States, there exist underlying meaning perspectives from which individuals from both the

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pro-immigration and the anti-immigration camp speak. These perspectives, shaped by personal histories and cultural models, influence one's way of interpreting identity and reality, both individually and collectively (Mezirow, 1991). Wortham, Allard, and Mortimer (2006) define these interpretations as "models of personhood—characterizations of the dispositions, moral strengths and weaknesses, typical behaviors and life prospects of a person or group" (p. 8). As a result of many social and political factors, immigrants, more specifically undocumented immigrants, exist as a common focus of such characterizations. Inevitably flawed and incomplete, these *models of personhood* placed on immigrants by the majority population dictate the tone of public discourse and ultimately the way immigrants are defined. Furthermore, these definitions, shaped by the majority, determine many of the rights and resources accessible to them.

As one evaluates the various social, political, and historical factors at play, immigration is arguably one of the most complex social issues in the United States today. Suárez-Orozco (1998) considers the dichotomous narratives that exist regarding immigrant populations in the United States and how they are characterized. He calls them "pro-immigrant" and "anti-immigrant scripts." These narratives are commonplace in today's public forums. On one hand, some view immigrants as hardworking, diligent souls seeking a better life for themselves and their families. On the other hand, some consider them lawless parasites, sucking the resources and quality of life from the communities in which they settle. Workforce concerns, health care, social services, taxes, and education are among the most critical issues raised within these pro- and anti-immigrant scripts (Larson & Ovando, 2001; Perry, 2006a, 2006b; Romero, 2005; Suárez-Orozco, 1998; Wortham et al., 2006). Many hold mixed feelings regarding these complex social issues, especially as they relate to the children of undocumented immigrants.

The voices missing from this public discussion are those of the children whose futures hang in the balance. Their voices have been silenced by an inflexible system that punishes children for their parent's choices. Those who support in-state tuition legislation and the DREAM Act (National Immigration Law Center [NILC], 2006), which would create a legal pathway to higher education and eventually citizenship, do so with the nation's future in mind. Many would argue that by denying opportunity for the sons and daughters of undocumented immigrants, we limit not only what these children can be but also what they can give back to this country as a result of their status. The proposed DREAM Act serves as a beacon of hope for those undocumented students who have graduated from a United States school and call this country *home*.

The present research focuses specifically on the voices of students who could benefit from legislation and perspectives embodied by the tenets of the DREAM Act. Therefore, in the remainder of this manuscript, we will refer to this group of young people as DREAM-eligible students. Subsequent narrative and findings will rationalize this choice of terminology. In addition, we will highlight the sociopolitical climate surrounding immigration education legislation to contextualize the lived experiences of 15 undocumented, DREAM-eligible, college students in the Midwest. We will

further use the lens of *resiliency* in an effort to understand those factors that have challenged and those that have enabled the persistence of the students in their realization of what they interpret as the American Dream.

The narrative to follow provides a synthesis of the literature on immigrant identity development, a review of key policies related to immigrant education, a summary of the most salient themes from the data related to student resiliency, and a discussion of implications for future policy and practice.

## **Background of the Research**

Finding a single model that effectively captures the varied psychological and social dynamics in the lives of these DREAM-eligible students in the current context of American society proved difficult. This occurred despite the large body of literature regarding racial, cultural, ethnic, and gender identity development (Clark & O'Donnell, 1999; Helms, 1990; O'Keefe, 1994; Perry, 2006a, 2006b; Romo, 2005; Sue & Sue, 2007; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Tatum, Calhoun, Brown, & Aylvazian, 2000; Thompson, 1999; Wortham et al., 2006). Given the premise that identity is socially constructed and that knowledge is contextually bound, the ways in which an immigrant student constructs his or her concept of self is greatly influenced by the environment(s) to which he or she is exposed (O'Keefe, 1994; Parra Cardona, Busby, & Wampler, 2004; Romo, 2005; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Torres, 2007). Negative perceptions held by members of the dominant culture toward immigrants, their innate capabilities, and their rights to membership in society are often difficult and painful elements in the socialization process for immigrants (Perry, 2006b; Torres, 2003, 2007). Depending on the amount of time an immigrant has been in the United States, the age at which he or she immigrated, and the immigrant's legal status, the results of these processes can look very different.

Many immigrants who came to the United States as younger children have little or no memory of their country of origin. Having been socialized within mainstream American culture, they often develop a sense of membership in the United States despite their legal status. For many, the United States is the only country they have ever known (Perry, 2004). In contrast, those who came as older children or as adults often associate the transition into this nation as a "borderlands existence," where there is conflict and dispute between two worlds (Anzaldúa, 1999).

Because Mexicans are considered by many to hold the lowest status within the already devalued ethnic group termed *Hispanic*, Mexican immigrants in particular cope with psychological and emotional pressures that can be demoralizing to even the most self-confident individual (Baker, 1996; Katz, Joiner, & Kwon, 2002; Palmer, 2003). Over time, immigrants can begin to internalize negative stereotypes as popular culture, and the media reinforce skewed perceptions of them and their

families (Aguilar, MacGillivray, & Walker, 2002; Palmer, 2003). These anti-immigrant perceptions affect every aspect of life for these young people because they are often the innocent bystanders in the debate over immigrant rights.

## **Social and Political Context for the Study**

Policy made regarding education for the undocumented is unique in that it primarily affects minors—those who have no control over where they live or the circumstances under which they entered or remain in this country. These young people must navigate turbulent and difficult administrative and political waters as they pursue their education. For high school graduates, the strength of public opinion that supports their right to a college education ebbs and flows, subject to the tides of political caprice (Perry, 2006a, 2006b). Without having access to higher education or a realistic path to gain legal, viable employment, these individuals and their potential stand to go unrealized (Fields, 2005; NILC, 2006; Romero, 2005; Zuckerbrod, 2007).

## **Federal and State Actions on Immigrant Education**

The Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRAIRA) passed in 1996 serves as the primary restriction to higher education for the sons and daughters of undocumented immigrants. Language in Section 505 of the law specifically prevents states from offering in-state tuition rates to children of undocumented immigrants unless they provide the same offer to legal citizens from other states (House of Representatives, 2001; NILC, 2006). Nonetheless, many states have countered the federal government's involvement in state affairs by enacting legislation beneficial to DREAM-eligible students (within the narrow allowance that the federal law provides).

Despite the opposition to such legislation, the notion of providing access to an affordable education for undocumented students has its share of supporters at the federal level (NILC, 2006). The proposed federal Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act (DREAM Act) is bipartisan legislation that offers an avenue for undocumented immigrant children to access higher education and ultimately permanent residency in the United States. First introduced in 2001, the DREAM Act was designed to address the legal and economic barriers faced by the estimated 65,000 undocumented high school students who graduate each year in the United States (NILC, 2006).

This legislation, also known as the Student Adjustment Act, would give states back the authority to determine their own residency, admission, and scholarship criteria. The federal DREAM Act legislation, in its current form, would repeal section 505 of the IIRAIRA and support the efforts of the 10 states that have already enacted in-state tuition legislation (Texas, California, New York, Utah, Oklahoma, Illinois, Washington, Kansas, New México, and Nebraska). It maintains that those

young people who have lived and been educated in the United States for 5 years or more, have exhibited good moral character, and have graduated from a United States high school would be eligible for conditional residency. Furthermore, in obtaining conditional residency status, these undocumented students would gain access to academic services and federal financial aid in the form of educational loans. Access to this avenue of funding is invaluable for immigrant populations in the United States, especially undocumented immigrants, because many struggle to afford college at any rate of tuition, without some type of financial assistance (Fields, 2005).

DREAM Act beneficiaries would be required to successfully complete at least 2 years of college within a 6-year period to maintain their conditional residency. By doing so, they would then be eligible to apply for permanent residency, given that they have maintained good moral character (NILC, 2006). Once they become lawful permanent residents, undocumented immigrant students, that is, DREAM-eligible students, would have further access to funding and support systems such as Pell grants and state and federal scholarships that would otherwise remain off-limits.

Although the key components of the DREAM Act legislation have taken many forms over the past several years, the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee passed this legislation as an amendment to the Comprehensive Immigration Reform Act, which failed in 2006. The DREAM Act was then reintroduced in 2007 but did not carry in late October, 52-44—just eight votes short of moving forward. Although this vote was a significant setback, advocacy organizations such as the National Immigrant Law Center and government supporters of the DREAM Act remain resolute.

## **The Midwest Picture**

Because the Midwest is experiencing unprecedented increases in culturally and linguistically diverse populations, the social and political climate of the region is in a state of flux (Alba & Nee, 2003; Gutierrez, 2006; U.S. Department of Education, 1998). Attitudes and dispositions toward undocumented immigrant students in the Midwest—students who could benefit from such legislation—vary significantly. Governor Kathleen Sebilus spoke out in favor of in-state tuition for *qualified* undocumented students in the state of Kansas and signed an in-state tuition enactment bill in 2004. In that same year, a leading anti-immigrant organization, Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), rallied a group of students who were willing to file suit against the state of Kansas in efforts to get the in-state tuition legislation overturned. Although this case continues to make regional headlines as the plaintiffs consider another appeal, there are many political leaders, both Republican and Democrat, who have maintained their support for in-state tuition legislation (Fields, 2005; NILC, 2006; Romero, 2005; Zuckerbrod, 2007). Unfortunately, the mood of the social and educational landscape is often determined by who is speaking the loudest.

The thousands of DREAM-eligible children who have progressed through the public school system amid this legal turmoil in the past decade wait with uncertain

futures. Although these DREAM-eligible students are allowed on college campuses in some states, the political, social, and economic gatekeepers to resources in institutions of higher education hold firmly to their positions (*Day v. Sebelius*, 2005; Illinois State Board of Education, 2002; Kobach, 2006). The myriad of obstacles and challenges these students face in pursuit of a postsecondary education in today's climate is daunting. Yet there are many who endure despite the odds. Often with little or no prior knowledge of the nature of institutions of higher education or how to navigate bureaucratic systems successfully, they persist. Circumstances for these students often necessitate resilience.

### **Resiliency: A Theoretical Framework**

Research has shown that many oppressed individuals possess or acquire the ability to endure hardship and unfortunate situations—ultimately exhibiting traits of resilience (Benard, 1991; Garabino, 1995; Henderson & Milstein, 2002; Stanton-Salazar, 2001). The literature on resiliency of at-risk populations—those who come from impoverished, abusive, or culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds—is extensive (Benard, 1991, 1997, 2004; Ceja, 2004; Henderson & Milstein, 2002; Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990; Rutter, 1983; Werner & Smith, 1992). Until the early 1990s, research had been primarily based on a “medical model approach that identified the symptoms of risk rather than indicators that preserved resiliency” (Rausch, Lovett, & Walker, 2003, p. 572). The majority of early studies took a deficit perspective—placing students who lacked resilience at the focus of the research.

Garabino (1995) characterized resiliency as those “qualities that foster a process of successful adaptation and transformation despite risk and adversity” (p. 103). Current researchers have identified multiple protective factors that characterize resiliency and contribute to developing it in both youth and adults (Benard, 1991, 1997; Ginorio & Huston, 2001; Henderson & Milstein, 2002; Romo, 2005). These factors are associated primarily with one's relations to family, school, or community (Benard, 1991).

Bonnie Benard (2004), an educational scholar devoted to resiliency research, has identified four internal factors and three external factors that foster resiliency. Internal factors are those characteristics that an individual possesses and that promote resiliency in the face of struggles. The four internal or personal factors include the following: (a) social competence, (b) ability to solve problems, (c) autonomy, and (d) a sense of purpose. External factors are those aspects of an individual's environment or family that are conducive to the development of resiliency capacities. The three external or environmental/familial factors that are said to be protective factors for students are (a) caring relationships, (b) high expectations, and (c) opportunities for participation and contribution. The relationship between these two types of factors, internal and external, is a synergistic one. The internal characteristics of resilience (e.g., social competence, problem solving, etc.) that one possesses are

directly correlated to the types of environmental factors (e.g., caring relationships, high expectations, etc.) that one is exposed to. Conversely, the way in which one responds to adversity and poor environmental factors is correlated to the types of personal strengths that he or she possesses as an individual.

These interrelated factors of resiliency served as the guiding framework for this study, which sought to answer the following qualitative research question: Given the volatile sociocultural and sociopolitical contexts for undocumented immigrant students, what influences challenge and what influences or factors enable their success in postsecondary education?

Although this guiding framework addresses all facets of student resilience, it is important to note that a student's academic resilience exists as the ultimate indicator of her/his likelihood of success or failure in higher education. All other contextual factors (e.g., individual, familial, social, political) mold and shape the outcome of this factor (Alfaro, Umaña-Taylor, & Bámaca, 2006; Ceja, 2004).

This microethnographic, qualitative study focused specifically on those factors of resilience that enabled participating, DREAM-eligible students to cope with and respond to the anti-immigrant scripts that regularly surrounded and often hindered their access to higher education. Using this framework, the researchers sought to capture the lived experiences of undocumented immigrant students through their rich interpretations of current immigration policy and the ways in which these participants described their situations, perspectives, and dreams in relation to the volatility of their sociocultural/sociopolitical environment.

## Method

This research was undertaken as a qualitative, microethnographic case study of the challenges confronted by 15 DREAM-eligible students in postsecondary education and those factors that influenced their personal and academic success. A qualitative and microethnographic design is appropriate when the outcomes of the study will surround descriptions and interpretations arising from discovery, insight, and analysis (Creswell, 2007). The researchers used the region's leading nonprofit, advocacy organization to identify and contact potential students for the study—37 in toto. Students were assured that their participation in the study and their family information would remain confidential. Those individuals who chose to participate were asked to contact the researchers in the way he or she preferred to initiate the discussion. Of the 37 students contacted, 15 Latino/a undergraduates from five institutions of higher education in the Midwestern United States chose to participate. They ranged in age from 18 to 22 years. All 15 students were in their sophomore or junior year of their undergraduate degree programs, and they were pursuing a broad range of academic majors. Among these students, their tenure in the United States ranged from 4 years to 15 years, and although each of them was fully bilingual (English and



Spanish), none of the participants had returned to their country of origin since entering the United States.

Data for this case study were collected using (a) open-ended surveys (see the appendix), (b) participant observation (totaling 30 hours in the context of social and political student events), (c) semistructured, individual, follow-up interviews (in English and Spanish), and (d) reviews of documents that established the context of the study (including media coverage of immigrant debates, rallies, and government briefings). Coding was used to initiate data analyses according to the constant comparative method (Straus, 1987). Initial coding of observation notes and transcripts occurred according to the etic<sup>1</sup> perspective, using resiliency theory as a substantive theoretical framework. Etic codes included Benard's (2004) seven internal and external factors (e.g., social competence, problem solving, etc. and caring relationships, high expectations, etc.). Subsequently, analysis from an emic<sup>2</sup> perspective on the data enabled the emergence of participant voice, organized progressively according to codes, categories, and themes (discussed in the findings).

The truth-value of the research was maximized through careful attention to trustworthiness criteria for qualitative research (Guba & Lincoln, 1981). Through the use of thick descriptions (a systematic effort to document the nature, context, findings, and interpretations of the research), the researchers established transferability to a larger audience. Credibility was established through member checking and the triangulation of findings and interpretations from multiple sources of data (Creswell, 2007).

## **Presentation of Findings**

The findings of this study with undocumented immigrant students served to both (a) reaffirm previous research in the field regarding resiliency among immigrant students and (b) offer new insights into the unique challenges faced by and ways of coping found among undocumented students, given the current sociopolitical climate of the United States (in particular the climate of the Midwest). Although the number of participants in this study was small, their moving stories spoke volumes because they represented many others who, like them, desire the opportunity to pursue their own dreams through postsecondary education. Insights regarding challenges and ways of coping took the form of recurrent themes in participant voice and experience.

From the emic perspective on the data, these themes may be described as follows: (a) "the land of opportunity and denial," (b) "win or lose, I am here today," and (c) "choosing to fight." The sections to follow will be organized according to these three themes. For each theme, the section will present the thematic challenges, illustrate resiliency in the face of those challenges, and discuss how the theme relates to or departs from the current state of knowledge about resiliency theory.

**Table 1**  
**Table of Resiliency Challenges and Factors Associated With**  
**DREAM-Eligible Students Who Attend U.S. Colleges and Universities**

Theme in Qualitative Research Findings	Land of Opportunity	Win or Lose, I Am Here today	Choosing to Fight
Primary challenge for DREAM-eligible students	Mixed messages about <i>welcome</i> to America and opportunities for immigrants	DREAM-eligible students suffer consequences of choices beyond their control	Microaggressions aimed at children of undocumented immigrants on U.S. college campuses
Internal resiliency factor(s) associated with challenge/theme	Autonomy, sense of purpose	Personal ability to solve problems	
External resiliency factor(s) associated with challenge/theme		High expectations	
Unexpected resiliency factor(s) associated with challenge/theme			Advocacy

### The Land of Opportunity

Student quotes associated with this theme in the findings suggested that students were compelled to self-interpret and resolve the mixed messages that they often received regarding this country as a land of opportunity (see Table 1). Of the 15 students, 8 spoke about this dynamic and how their experiences either challenged or supported their previous notions of United States society and, in turn, their resiliency to persist as a member in it.

According to this theme in student voice, undocumented students were confused by and frustrated with mixed messages about America. On one hand, there are the messages of American icons/symbols (e.g., the Statue of Liberty) and the parents of these students that portray America as a land of opportunity. On the other hand, there exist the realities of America’s denial of such opportunities to these students (e.g., sociopolitical battles over enabling mechanisms, such as DREAM Act legislation).

For example, the following excerpt of student discourse is, on one side of the coin, indicative of the sorts of opportunity messages that undocumented students have received and been socialized to in their experiences:

I do this [seek opportunities to further my education] because it is an opportunity to fulfill the American Dream: that is liberty, and freedom of speech . . . the chance to vote. The chance to provide a future for my family.

Similarly, another student stated,

This [DREAM Act legislation] would liberate us from the labels of society, and give us a larger freedom as well as an opportunity to completely enjoy the “American Dream,” as for my mom, a single parent, she would no longer have to worry about her kids’ possible education costs.

As these excerpts of recurrent participant voice demonstrate, undocumented students, via whatever socializing influences (icons, parents, literature, etc.), were keenly aware of the American Dream and the opportunities and the rights that American institutions (e.g., the American Educational System) purport to offer all *persons*, not just citizens (see 14th Amendment to the United States Constitution; House Joint Resolution, 1866) in America.

On the other side of the coin, undocumented students have also been denied, in America. These denials stand in stark contrast to the prior socializing influences on undocumented, DREAM-eligible students and function as soul-searching challenges to their initiative, persistence, and resiliency as seekers of the American Dream. The excerpt to follow epitomizes the recurrent confusion and frustration experienced by undocumented students who confront America as “the land of opportunity *and denial*.”

I want to succeed in life! I want an education. I don’t understand what people who vote against this [DREAM Act or similar legislation] are afraid of. This is the country of opportunity. So I ask myself why do people want me to fail? . . . My parents just want to give me and my brothers and sisters an education. . . . They don’t have money . . . just faith in God that they can stay here and make us somebody that has more opportunity than they had in their life in México.

The challenges that confront this undocumented student and her contemporaries are a product of the confusion and disillusionment that she experiences in reconciling two influences. One influence is her parents’ socialization to the notion of America as a land of opportunity that may be enabled by the student’s persistent and capitalizing pursuit of a quality education. A contradictory influence is the reality of the denial of such opportunities to certain persons in America, including these undocumented students.

Accordingly, formidable and recurrent challenges confront undocumented students as a product of the confusing and contradictory messages associated with the theme of land of opportunity and denial. Yet this microethnographic study found that many of these participating students also found ways to persevere and remain resilient vis-à-vis these powerful challenges. The following passages of their voice are indicative and exemplary of this resiliency:

I keep my hopes up and my faith strong. One day, everything my parents have done and my efforts in school will pay off.

Clearly, these students are aware of threats to the American Dream, that is, the dream to which they have been socialized. Yet they remain resilient; they persevere, in spite of these threats, as they continue to pursue their postsecondary education and their careers. They do so as contributing members of a democratic society that purports to protect their rights and afford them equal opportunities.

Thus, the findings of this study indicate that land of opportunity and denial is a recurrent theme in challenges to resiliency and perseverance among undocumented, postsecondary students. In terms of resiliency theory (Benard, 1997, 2004), these findings further indicate that students' ways of coping with this challenge tend to surround two internal or personal resiliency factors primarily—autonomy and a sense of purpose.

As to the former factor, participants' discourse recurrently emphasizes their mindfulness of the sacrifices that family members have made on their behalf and their perceived responsibilities as autonomous students to remain self-directed in their studies and in the pursuit of their dreams. According to Goleman (1995) and Benard (2004), such mindfulness enables these students to manage the emotional side of such challenges, as they remain focused on their aspirations and the appropriate actions that will achieve their goals.

As to the latter resiliency factor, definitive career goals often provide them with the sense of purpose that they need to confront the challenges of opportunity and denial. Because of their sociocultural and biographical histories, undocumented students can ill afford to vacillate among life goals or squander opportunities for the education that they believe will facilitate the attainment of those goals. Accordingly, such DREAM-eligible students often hold a strong sense of purpose, as supported by the findings of this study and the literature. In turn, this sense of purpose often fosters powerful achievement motivation (Benard, 2004; Henderson & Milstein, 2002; Vaillant, 2002).

### **Win or Lose, I Am Here Today**

A second theme found in the data, “win or lose, I am here today” (see Table 1), suggests that participants are aware of the many hindrances to their successful educational goal achievement as undocumented students in the United States. More than 65% of the participants made reference to his or her lack of control over the family's decision to come to the United States and how this decision either challenged or strengthened their resolve to persist, despite the odds. Excerpts to follow illustrate the theme “win or lose, I am here today” in challenges to resiliency.

According to this theme in student voice, the participants struggle with their situations as undocumented high school graduates. Student discourse relates their efforts to resolve the conflicting messages received from their family, the members of which have sacrificed much for their future, and from those who promote anti-immigrant scripts in the argument that undocumented students do not belong in higher education.

The following student quote exemplifies this challenge in participant experience:

I didn't decide to come here . . . my parents made the sacrifices, they didn't know about all the things you have to do here to get an education. It is hard to explain to them that I just can't make it happen . . . but I keep trying.

Another student described how her family supports her, and though they get weary, they encourage her to keep up the fight for a college education. She stated,

My parents are very aware of the significance of the DREAM Act. I always tell them about it, and they are crossing their fingers for me. They say they are tired of seeing me fight so hard for so long . . . they wish they could do something to help me. But, they listen to me and believe it [the DREAM Act] would be a lifesaver for me.

As these excerpts reveal, DREAM-eligible students must interpret the challenges to resiliency and determine how the said challenges will affect their individual identity and future actions.

Student discourse further revealed that despite their current position in American society, the students remain resilient, maintaining notions of diligence and resolve as indicated in the following excerpts:

We are here to succeed and contribute to this country. I didn't ask to come here but I'm here today. I'm glad my family came [and] gave us an opportunity to follow the dream. . . . They always tell me that nobody can take what I have learned . . . my education. So I will keep going until they tell me I cannot go to college anymore.

I do not know what my future holds for me, but I know that I will be successful. I am the type of person who is persistent until I get what I want. I will not let anyone keep me down or keep me from pursuing my dreams. I cannot tell you where I will be at, or what I will be doing, but I am certain that I will be successful and still fighting for justice.

It is clear that these DREAM-eligible students, aware of their uncertain futures, desire to persist in postsecondary education in hopes of one day gaining validation as contributing members of American society. Challenges to resiliency associated with this theme include the prospect that the proposed DREAM Act legislation might not pass at the national level. Furthermore, the possibility that these students will obtain their degrees but not prove able to work using that degree in the United States is also a real concern. Although they have seen DREAM Act–related legislation modified, unenacted, and reintroduced numerous times during the past 6 years, these undocumented students continue to persevere.

Findings associated with the theme “win or lose, I am here today” are consistent with the internal or personal resiliency factor of problem-solving capacities as well as the external or familial factor of high expectations. The internal or personal factor,

ability to solve problems, which encompasses the student's resourcefulness, futurity, and flexibility in adapting to new realities, is what Benard (2004) calls a "figuring-things-out-quality" (p. 17). In like manner, these participating students were able to look beyond their current circumstances and set attainable goals for themselves (Ginorio & Huston, 2001; Henderson & Milstein, 2002) in the pursuit of their educational aspirations and lifelong dreams.

The external or familial factor associated with theme in student discourse, high expectations, related to the support and encouragement offered to these undocumented students by their families. Participating DREAM-eligible students indicated that family members challenged them to pursue their goals and aspirations. As suggested by Benard (2004), adults' high expectations that are positive and youth-centered can serve as strong protective factors for student resilience.

### **Choosing to Fight**

Participant discourse associated with a third theme suggested that the current volatile sociopolitical climate regarding undocumented immigrants in the United States affects these students on a daily basis. The theme "choosing to fight" (see Table 1) proved most salient in this study because it described student experience in relation to DREAM Act-related legislation.

Current immigration laws (such as the IIRAIRA) and public opposition to the existing in-state tuition legislation that is affording them the opportunity to attend college in select Midwestern states served as major challenges to their resiliency. The following excerpt echoes many of the undocumented students' concerns for the future:

My future truly depends on the DREAM Act. I am halfway done with my major and I don't even know if I'm going to be able to pursue a career. As of right now, I am not going to be able to work after college. But I have hope in the DREAM Act. It is truly the key to my future.

Given the current state of immigration in the United States, students could not understand the logic behind microaggressions aimed at the undocumented who attend American colleges. One student struggled to make sense of the resistance toward undocumented students gaining an education, as illustrated in this statement:

It really does break my heart that I had to fight so hard just to be able to attend college. Shouldn't it be a right? Honestly, well-educated, bilingual individuals can contribute so much more to their community than those who have no higher education.

Despite persistent challenges, all but two students in the study indicated that they were actively involved in supporting immigrant rights at a personal and political level. These DREAM-eligible students recounted the various events, rallies, and hearings they participated in as representatives of the undocumented population.

They participated in these activities in addition to their often heavy course loads. Courage to stay the course and fight against prevalent anti-immigrant sentiments served as an example of participant resiliency. One student described his role as an advocate in this way:

I am very actively involved with the DREAM Act. I don't see how it could be any other way, after all I am so dependent on it. I can't just leave it up in the air and hope that it comes true. I need to fight for it. And that is what I am doing.

As a result of being socially and politically active, the students' notions of advocacy and its benefits extended well beyond their interests and was seen as a way to effect change for generations to come, as evidenced in this excerpt:

I figure that even if I don't live to see it, it [fighting for the DREAM Act] will help someone someday. I feel like I can at least leave a stepping-stone for someone else to come after me. I fight for equality. I just hope I live to experience it.

Undoubtedly, these students possess a sense of responsibility to fight for human rights and are empowered by opportunities to exercise the limited freedoms this country affords them as undocumented individuals. Given the capacity of such advocacy to yield a sense of empowerment among students, in a threatening environment, it is not necessarily surprising that the incidence of advocacy actions across students studied was quite recurrent. Yet in the current literature of the field (see the Introduction section), advocacy is not yet associated with protective factors of resiliency. Nonetheless, the findings of this microethnographic case study strongly indicate that undocumented immigrant students find in advocacy common purpose, self-preservation, and resiliency in highly volatile sociocultural and sociopolitical contexts. Further research is needed to examine whether resiliency, in highly politicized contexts, tends to demand of the individual new, unexpected, or unforeseen capacities not necessarily typical of other circumstances and/or environments.

## Discussion

The authors conclude this article with earnest hope that humanistic research, which captures the voices and rich experiences of DREAM-eligible students, be explored further to inform policy and practice. As the immigration battle in legislation continues with little indication of sound resolution, educators on the front line must decide where they stand on the issues. As they witness the talent and potential of their DREAM-eligible students, they must serve as strong advocates and allies for those whose voices have been silenced.

To dream is to hold hope for the future and a better tomorrow. These DREAM-eligible students have significant aspirations for their lives in this country, and their

voices have much to teach us beyond the political rhetoric—if we will listen. While they continue to move forward with diligence and resolve in becoming contributing members of this nation, further action and understanding is needed from those who often stand on the sidelines of such difficult debates.

## Appendix

### Open-Ended Survey Administered to DREAM-Eligible Students

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My Identity, Recognition, and Thoughts about the “Dream Act”

Name:

Age:

College:

My age when I came to the United States for the first time:

What does the “Dream Act” mean to me?

What does it signify to my family, especially my parents?

When did you realize that being undocumented would have consequences on your decision to pursue a professional career?

What do you think the United States is missing out on when it is not concerned with educating *everyone*?

What would you say to convince me that you have the right to pursue a college degree in the USA?

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## Notes

1. Etic coding: An analysis tool for approaching the data based on identified concepts or themes defined and outlined within the chosen theoretical framework for a study.

2. Emic codes: Those patterns in participant voice or actions within the context of a study from which themes are derived.

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