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Exploring feelings of belonging and membership of CUNY noncitizen students

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ABSTRACT

For young immigrants who are also college students, the sense of belonging impacts not only their integration in the host society, but their school community as well. Group membership has been associated with the sense of belonging, which in turn impacts the sense of self. Self-esteem, defined as a feeling of self-worth and self-respect, is considered to be fundamental to psychological well-being. This study explores feelings of belonging and membership of noncitizen students and the impact on their mental well-being. Data were drawn from 137 participants across multiple undergraduate campuses across the City University of New York (CUNY) system. Initial findings of the CUNY Belonging Study indicate that, consistent with existing research, noncitizen students' immigration status impacts their ability to form a sense of belonging, and belonging and membership is related to the level of institutional support they receive.

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Introduction

About one-quarter of the estimated 10.5 million undocumented immigrants currently living the United States arrived as children (Gonzales et al., 2020). Having migrated into the US at an early age, they have grown up and completed their education after arrival. This population of young people—referred to as the *1.5 generation*—has been the subject of increasing research and scholarship (Gonzales, Suárez-Orozco, & Dedios-Sanguinetti, 2013; Rumbaut, 2004). Though relatively recent when compared to the studies on the immigrant experience generally, scholarship on undocumented youth has revealed much about their distinct struggles and realities, including those that impact their trajectories of adaptation, incorporation, and integration (Abrego, 2006, 2008, 2011; Gonzales, 2011, 2016; Gonzales & Chávez, 2012; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001).

From a research perspective, a field of study exploring the experiences of the young undocumented population is a logical avenue to follow for those interested in studying and understanding the immigrant perspective. To begin, although

these young people were born in the same country as their parents, they are growing up in a country foreign to them both. Living in an unfamiliar destination complicates the adaptation and integration process, as parents will be unable to help navigate their coming of age in this unknown country (Gonzales et al., 2020). This disjunction results in a struggle for undocumented youth to feel a sense of belonging, which has an impact on their mental well-being (Gonzales, 2016). Moreover, because of their undocumented status, these conditions co-exist with the same threat of deportation faced by their parents. Furthermore, the hostile anti-immigrant political climate and the increasingly violent nature of immigration enforcement within the last several years exacerbate the stressors of adolescence and emerging adulthood by forcing young people to confront increasingly antagonistic sentiments against their existence (Gonzales et al., 2013, 2020). The atmosphere is just as inhospitable for those afforded temporary relief from deportation under Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (“DACA”; “DACAmended”). Threats of deportation by the government have heightened the sense of fear in immigrant communities, creating an adversarial situation within which the young undocumented must navigate. All the aforementioned have a deleterious impact on their mental health, causing anxiety and heightening their sense of fear and emotional distress (Gonzales et al., 2013). And yet, there is evidence that—when provided with systems of support such as mentorship, financial aid, and political allyship—undocumented young people can withstand these harsh conditions with resiliency and success (Gonzales et al., 2020).

What role does the university and its infrastructure play in providing a sense of belonging for their noncitizen students within this climate of fear and anxiety promoted by increasing anti-immigrant sentiment? This article discusses the qualitative findings from a study conducted at the City University of New York (“CUNY”)—a multi-campus university system in New York City—which explores the feelings of belonging and membership of its noncitizen students, as well as their mental well-being. This research expands current scholarship on immigrants’ health broadly, and contributes to the research on the unique stressors of immigrant college students specifically.

Literature review

Deportation

Deportation—the removal of foreign-born persons from this country—and the impact that this form of immigration enforcement has on the lives of immigrants, their families, and their communities has given rise to an area of scholarship now referred to as *deportation studies* (Coutin, 2015). *Deportability*, or the vulnerability to removal, results in negative effects on immigrants’ well-being, including feelings of isolation, being unwanted, unwelcome, and not belonging (Leyro, 2017).

Deportability is a function of an immigrant’s *noncitizen* status. A person born in another country, who is permanently residing in the United States and has not naturalized into a citizen, is a *noncitizen immigrant* (Immigration and Nationality Act, Section 101(a)(15), n.d.). Any person living in the United States who is not a citizen

is vulnerable to deportation (Immigration and Nationality Act, Section 101). Noncitizen immigrants, or deportable immigrants, include those who are *documented and undocumented*. Documented persons are those who have legal authorization to reside in the United States, whether in the form of legal permanent residency (green card) or in a shorter-term “liminal, humanitarian legal standing,” such as a visa (Abrego & Lakhani, 2015, p. 274). An undocumented immigrant is a person who resides in the US without permission, either because they entered into the United States without authorization or because they overstayed their permitted time.

Particularly over the last several decades, the United States has used deportation as its most prolific form of immigration control. In 1996, The Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act (AEDPA) and the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) both became law. Each expanded the groups that would be vulnerable to removal and the types of crimes that would trigger deportation. The significance of using deportation as a sweeping form of immigration control is noteworthy, as it has resulted in an unprecedented number of expulsions. For example, during the fifteen-year period between 1997 and 2012 deportations outnumbered all those before 1997 (Golash-Boza & Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2013). Indeed, such numbers have resulted in the labeling of the United States by some scholars a “deportation regime,” and “deportation nation” (De Genova, De Genova, & Peutz, 2010; Kanstroom, 2010).

The introduction of DACA in 2012 provided significant relief to those young persons who were vulnerable to being deported. DACA provided deferment from deportation to young undocumented persons who arrived to the United States before the age of 16 and who had not yet reached the age of 31 by June 15, 2012 (Krogstad & Gonzalez-Barrera, 2014). In addition, reforms passed in 2014 narrowed the scope of those who would be prioritized for removal, resulting in a decline in overall deportations several years into the tenure of DACA (Johnson, 2014; Krogstad & Passel, 2015).

Any progress made with respect to relief from deportation, however, ended during the next governmental administration, which passed immigration policies specifically designed to increase immigration enforcement efforts and reverse the reliefs provided by the previous government. For example, one week into his tenure, the 45th president signed an executive order expanding the category of immigrants who would be prioritized for removal, including anyone believed to have committed a chargeable criminal act, irrespective of any actual prosecution or conviction. This expansion alone resulted in the first full fiscal-year of that administration logging an 11% increase in arrests and a 13% increase in deportations (Nixon, 2018). In New York City—where the CUNY Belonging Study was conducted—deportations by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (“ICE”) officers in New York City went up by 150% between 2016 and 2018, the largest increase of any ICE field office in the country (Stringer, 2019).

Several other policies were enacted that increased the enforcement against and control of the immigrant community. In September of 2017 DACA was officially rescinded; in January 2018 the administration ended Temporary Protected Status for persons from Sudan, Haiti, Nicaragua, El Salvador; and in the Summer 2018 a “De-naturalization task force” was created, with the mission to investigate and take away citizenship from naturalized citizens who were deemed to have been granted to be nationals “in error” (American Bar Association, retrieved 2019; Department of

Homeland Security, 2017; Taxin, 2018). Social science scholars have taken note of past and current immigration enforcement efforts, and continue to research the detrimental role deportation and deportability plays in the lives of immigrants, whether for the individual experiencing the removal, or their families and communities (Brotherton & Barrios, 2011; Golash-Boza, 2015; Martín, 2013; Zayas, 2015).

Immigration researchers associate belonging and membership as a factor of successful integration into US society (Alba, et al., 2012; Alba & Foner, 2015; Parekh, 2000). In addition, the sense of belonging is related to positive mental health when it provides persons a mechanism of integration into a community that results in making them feel needed, valued and contributors to the community (Crocker, Luhtanen, Blaine, & Broadnax, 1994; Hagerty, Lynch-Sauer, Patusky, Bouwsema, & Collier, 1992). Thus, the status of being deportable is considered to interrupt integration, with adverse consequences for a person's mental well-being (Leyro, 2017; Menjivar & Abrego, 2012). This article will explore deportability as a status of the noncitizen immigrant student, and if this status has an effect on their sense of belonging, membership, and mental well-being.

Belonging and membership, and noncitizen students

Belonging has been defined as “the experience of personal involvement in a system or environment so that persons feel themselves to be an integral part of that system or environment” (Hagerty et al., 1992, p. 172). For immigrants, “full membership ... means having a sense of dignity and belonging that comes with acceptance and inclusion in a broad range of societal institutions” (Alba & Foner, 2015, p. 1). Another important factor in integration is the process by which immigrants achieve social acceptance and participation in educational and political institutions, community organizations, and the housing markets, all of which increase their level of interaction within the majority group. Self-esteem, defined as a feeling of self-worth and self-respect, is considered to be fundamental to psychological well-being. Persons with high self-esteem have been found to be more satisfied with their lives, at less risk for depression, and to see the world around them more positively (Crandall, 1973; Crocker et al., 1994; Diener, 1984; Pelham & Swann, 1989; Taylor & Brown, 1988).

While self-esteem is seen as a basic tenet to mental well-being, how an individual sees their collective group within the context of wider society is also relevant, and viewed as being instrumental to mental health. Group membership has been associated with the sense of belonging, which in turn impacts the sense of self (Abrams, 1992, 1992; Bettencourt, et al., 1999; Brewer, 1991; Deaux, 1993; Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). The social or collective self is defined in social identity theory as “that aspect of an individual's concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership in a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (Crocker et al., 1994, p. 503). In other words, a person's positive sense of self has been found to also be associated with how their collective groups are viewed, and how the individual internalizes these societal perspectives. This collective self-esteem has an impact on mental well-being—whether negative or positive—in particular for those who belong to groups that have been historically marginalized, such as racially minoritized groups and immigrants

(Bettencourt et al., 1999; Crocker et al., 1994). For immigrants, belonging and being a member of US society plays a large role in their integration into this group and in their individual and collective self-esteem, as well as to their mental well-being. For noncitizens in university, feelings of belonging and membership to one's college community have been associated with a student's success in that school (Bettencourt et al., 1999).

The unique immigration experience of the young undocumented merits a dedicated field of study. Unlike the study of migrants who begin their trajectory into the United States as adults, the 1.5 generation shares a starting place with their parents at different times in the life-cycle. For the former, seeking increased opportunities for "a better life" by pursuing a college degree is considered a factor towards upward mobility and integration (Abowitz, 2005; Kantamneni et al., 2016). For the latter, this trajectory comes with asterisks. While they are protected from immigration enforcement operations during their formative academic years (K-12), they are forced to confront their immigration status in the country they were raised during their adolescence and emerging adulthood (Abrego, 2006; Gonzales, 2016). This renders them unable to participate in typical experiences like getting their driver's license, or celebrating having applied to colleges and then receiving the acceptances (even rejections) from those applications, hindering their ability to develop a sense of belonging and membership with their peers (Gonzales, 2011; Gonzales et al., 2013; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008, 2011). For those who manage to enroll in a university, the vulnerability to deportation impacts more than their ability to properly integrate, succeed, and remain in their university. The constant threat of deportation negatively impacts their mental well-being by creating an environment of uncertainty and insecurity, combined with stress and anxiety (Gonzales et al., 2013).

Studying college students highlights another important aspect related to their stage of late adolescence: the association of young adults with increased risk for onset of anxiety, depression, and substance use disorders (Beesdo, Knapp & Pine, 2009). For many, the transition into college serves as a unique stressor (Hales, 2009). Compounding these stressors is the further unique experience that noncitizen immigrant students face, such as the fear of their own deportation, the loss of any advancements in status (such as DACA) and worry over the deportation of their parents and/or relatives (Cavazos-Rehg, Zayas, & Spitznagel, 2007; Leyro, 2017; Zayas, 2015).

For immigrants who are also college students, the sense of belonging impacts not only their integration in the host society, but integration into their school community. The status of being deportable, however, negatively impacts all of the aforementioned. Stress, anxiety, and trauma related to deportation can affect a student's success in college, as well as the desire to continue their higher education (Robotham & Julian, 2006). For students who are noncitizens, both their individual and collective membership as it relates to their immigration status plays a role in integrating into their school. Researchers have explored the effect of being undocumented and how this status impacts students' educational incorporation, and their sense of belonging (Enrique, 2016). Golash-Boza & Valdez (2018) studied the incorporation of undocumented students and found that the sense of belonging is not simply based solely on their immigration status, but is multi-dimensional. They urge

scholars to take a more intersectional approach on exploring educational integration in order to get a fuller understanding of how of this population experiences this process.

Despite the adverse political climate and the status of being deportable, research shows resilience and successful societal navigation on the part of the young undocumented population, particularly in cases where there is a network of support such as mentors, financial aid, and local political support (Flores, 2010; Flores & Horn, 2009; García, 2019; Gonzales et al., 2013; Portes & Fernandez-Kelly, 2008, Smith, 2008). One such mechanism of support came in the form of DACA. By allowing recipients to obtain work permits, attain driver's licenses, and receive consumer credit, recipients of DACA were able to establish themselves financially and become contributors to the economy, leading to a greater sense of independence, self-worth and sense of belonging (Gonzales, 2016; Gonzales et al., 2018). DACA has also allowed a sense of safety, which led beneficiaries to enroll, or re-enroll, in college (Patler & Cabrera, 2015; Gonzales et al. 2018). Despite evidence of successful integration for undocumented youth who receive support such as DACA, just as with their fully undocumented counterparts, their well-being, feelings of belonging, and successful integration are adversely impacted by a hostile anti-immigrant climate (Gonzales et al., 2013, 2020).¹ As mentioned earlier, the political landscape has become increasingly hostile from both a local and federal perspective. Immigration is the subject of heated debate and the sense of fear and anxiety is experienced by immigrants generally, not just those who have noncitizen status (Leyro, 2017). How the university community and the infrastructure of services provided by it ameliorates these negative impacts is yet to be fully explored, and is thus examined in the current study.

It is also worth noting that the successful outcomes for DACA recipients are extremely limited. The temporary nature of DACA—it is, after all, a *deferred* action from deportation, not permanent protection—and the fact that most undocumented young people in college are not DACA recipients, speaks to the narrow nature of the relief actually provided by DACA (Gonzales et al. 2020; President's Alliance on Higher Education & Immigration, 2021). Thus, any research on undocumented youth, particularly those in higher education, should not be limited to only those who are *DACAmented*.

The undocumented are not the only group of noncitizens living in the United States who are also susceptible to removal. Legal Permanent Residents ("LPRs"), or green card holders, are in fact vulnerable to deportation. While their status is considered permanent, LPRs are nonetheless subject to removal, though there is a level of security that the green card affords. They are nonetheless noncitizens, and with that status comes certain levels of insecurities that are shaped by the hostile political environment. This reality has also been found to cause fear, anxiety, and stress (Leyro, 2017). The number of LPRs in the 18–24 age group to be around 600,000—how many

¹Technically speaking, DACA students are also undocumented. However, because DACA holders receive temporary protection from deportation and a work permit, we make a distinction between those *fully undocumented* (do not have temporary protection) students, and those who were granted DACA. As explained earlier, it is the deportable status being explored as a possible factor that impacts a student's feelings of belonging and membership.

of these young green card holders are college students is unclear, as the data on legal status is limited and in many instances available only through information provided by the colleges and universities themselves (Baker, 2019; Hsin & Reed, 2020). Thus, there is very little research on this population of young people that examine the impact their legal status has on their experiences in university, as well as navigating belonging and membership. The current study is not limited to undocumented students, but rather asks the perspective of fully undocumented, DACAmented, and LPR students, and seeks to explore how immigration status and the vulnerability to deportation that results from it impacts feelings of belonging, membership, and mental well-being.

Methods

The data were obtained during the 2017–2018 academic year and through the end of the 2018 Fall semester. The study site was the City University of New York (CUNY). The CUNY system stretches throughout all five boroughs of New York City, allowing for maximum participant recruitment. Using a convenience sample, participants were recruited via in-person visits to and posting flyers at all undergraduate campuses across the university system: seven community colleges (two-year institutions), and 11 senior colleges (four-year schools). Appeals to faculty, staff, and organizations across these campuses for their help in spreading information about the study were also sent. In addition, snowball sampling was incorporated, as participants were asked to refer their friends and classmates to take the survey.

Once an interested student contacted the primary investigator, an information and consent form was given or sent via email, depending on the method of communication the student utilized to contact the PI. After the student indicated they would participate in the study, a link to the survey was shared via email or by text, depending on the preference of the participant. Survey data was gathered using Survey Monkey. The survey contained thirty-one questions. The instrument begins with a description of the purpose of the study, and an IRB approved script advising the student of their rights to anonymity, confidentiality, and assurances of safety. The first question asked, “Do you agree to participate in the survey?” Once the respondent replied “yes,” they would continue to the demographic section of the survey. In this section participants were asked questions such as age and gender identity, as well as country of birth, age of immigration to the United States, and whether they were LPR, undocumented or DACAmented. Participants received compensation in the form of an eight dollar gift card, which was distributed after the student sent the primary investigator a special code generated after the final question, establishing that the survey was completed. Distribution of the gift cards was done in person by the research assistant.

Participants

The main independent variable is noncitizen immigration status: DACAmented, LPR, or fully undocumented. The sample totaled 155 undergraduate students from campuses across 14 colleges—despite recruitment efforts, 4 of the 18 schools did not

yield any participants. Of this sample, 18 did not complete the demographic portion of the survey. These were removed from the dataset, yielding a final total of 137 usable responses.

54% of participants self-identified as women, 44% as men, with 1% as transgender female to male and 1% declining to answer. The largest percentage of participants was born in Mexico (30%), followed by countries in Central and South America (15%), the Caribbean (8%), and Eastern Asia (8%). The majority of participants identified themselves as DACamented (39%), followed by LPR and fully undocumented at 23% each, and 15% chose “other.”

The remaining survey items measured membership and belonging to their school, and personal estimations of mental health. These items were based in part on the Collective Self-Esteem Survey (CSES). The CSES is believed to be appropriate as a measure for any type of group membership (Ethier & Deaux, 1990). The scale was constructed to measure a person’s memberships to ascribed groups, such as race, gender and nationality, and has been used to assess well-being and adjustment (Bettencourt et al., 1999; Crocker et al., 1994; Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992). The scale is a 16-item scale measures four types of self-esteem associated with one’s group: (1) Membership Esteem—how good or worthy a member of the group one is; (2) Private Collective Self-Esteem—how good one’s social groups are; (3) Public Collective Self-Esteem—how one believes others evaluate one’s social groups; (4) Importance to Identity—how important one’s group is to one’s self concept (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992). All items are answered on a 7-point Likert Scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree).

The CSES was used by Bettencourt et al. (1999) to examine if collective self-esteem influenced adjustment to college. Similarly, the instrument was used in the current study to explore feelings of belonging and membership of noncitizen students to their university, and to assess their mental well-being as they relate to their collective self-esteem. Wording changes were made to the questions, wherein participants were instructed to think in terms of their membership in their college. Luhtanen and Crocker stated that “... at times researchers may want to use a more specific measure based on a particular group membership. Preliminary data [...] suggests that altering the scale for a specific achieved group did not compromise its psychometric properties” (1992, p. 315).

In order to gather more in-depth information, two qualitative open-ended questions were added that would allow participants to express themselves more personally and in their own voice. The first question asked, “Which group did you identify with the most as you answered the previous questions about membership?” The second question requested for participants to, “Explain how your membership to the group you chose above affects your membership to the other group.” The qualitative questions were meant to gather information that would provide a deeper understanding of participants’ reasons for choosing their selected group. The answers were analyzed using content-based coding, which is a process of using specific words or sentences to identify themes (Creswell, 2003; Saldaña, 2009). The survey ends with 2 questions of self-rated health to perceived physical and mental wellness. Self-Rated Health (SRH) items are meant to gather personal estimates of personal physical and mental health: “In general, would you say your [mental] health is” with a scale ranging from Poor

(1) to Excellent (5). SRH is a simple, easy to administer measure of general health. It is a valid and reliable measure among those without cognitive impairment (Bombak, 2013).

Results

The first aim of the study is to explore the impact that noncitizen status has on feelings of belonging and membership of CUNY students. Initial quantitative analysis shows that survey responses indicated several significant, moderately strong relationships between immigration status and feelings of belonging and membership.² In addition, the data indicate that immigration status has a statistically significant, weak negative correlation with membership self-esteem, suggesting that CUNY membership is *more important* to students with less secure immigration status. Another aim of the study was to explore how these feelings affected mental well-being, which was assessed by the collective self-esteem survey, also used to measure belonging and membership. While the survey is quantitative, this article focuses on the qualitative data gleaned from open-ended questions posed to the participant at the end of the instrument.

Qualitative analysis

The two open-ended questions at the end of the survey were designed to elicit responses in the participants' own voices. Asking the students to write in their own words allows for a richer, deeper understanding of what they are thinking or feeling about a particular subject—in this case, noncitizen students' perspective on why they identify with the group(s) they chose. These questions asked participants to explain why they chose the identification they felt most membership to and how that particular identification affected their attachment to the other group(s). From the responses three main themes developed: (1) belonging is associated with participation in student activities; (2) lack of belonging is associated with the inability to receive financial aid; and (3) noncitizen status was still omnipresent in the lives of students, irrespective of participation in college activities or financial support.

For those who identified most as a member of the student body, students cited on-campus activities and involvement in college groups as factors that led to a stronger sense of membership. One student who is a green card holder stated: *"I am actively involved in programs and clubs in my school that make me feel welcome."* Similarly, an undocumented student stated that because they are a member *"of the student body, I do not identify as a noncitizen because I feel accepted."* Another student who is DACAmented expressed sentiments as those above:

I identify with the member of the student body because I feel engaged to my school when attend meetings or clubs. I participate in many events as well part of organizations

²A separate article discussing the quantitative analysis of the survey results has been sent for acceptance and review. Therefore, this article will only provide a short description of those findings.

such a [Black Male Initiative]and [Student Government Association] as a senator at my college.

Conversely, those who identified as a noncitizen before classifying themselves as a member of the student body cited their inability to participate in campus activities as the reason for adopting that primary status. One student stated: *"Because, other than attending class I don't partake on other activities around the college, so I don't feel as a member of the college."* Another student wrote, *"I have identify [sic] myself as a noncitizen because [CUNY School] offers many things for students to travel, and most of the stuff is require to be a citizen. I can't travel outside United states, scholarships ... undocumented students is not enough."* For other students, it is the desire to create community that drives their involvement. One student stated:

One of the reasons I applied there, though, was the fact that it ... where I feel I belong for its diversity and the big number of people in my same situation. Because of my situation, it has become a necessity for me to be part of a diverse population, to be able to learn about other cultures going through similar struggles and be more inspired to keep the path I'm following now.

Table 1 has several other select quotes which speak to the theme that belonging is associated with participation in student activities.

The resonating theme among the aforementioned students is that their sense of belonging and membership is related to their ability—or inability—to participate in school activities. How some students become involved in or even aware of school activities is not clear from the survey. But for those who are aware of the school resources and activities, their immigration status is a direct factor in why they do not become more involved in school activities. One fully undocumented student stated: *"I do not wish to participate in the student body due to my own perception of the fact that my status would be at risk."* Another student stated that *"being a noncitizen makes me push away or stay away from other noncitizen in the student body, mostly because of fear and embarrassment."* The worry these students expressed regarding how their immigration status would be perceived was an impediment to their engagement in

Table 1. Theme 1—Belonging and membership to the college is associated with student activities.

Supporting quotes

- I am a student that participates in fellowships and interacts with advisors and faculty frequently. I am also in on-campus efforts to push for immigration reform.
- If I want to be an active member of the student body, meaning being part of internship opportunities, programs affiliated with outside organizations, etc. The question of "Are you able to work legally in this country" it's always there. Discouraging me from even trying to participate or get more information in such "resources" that CUNY offers.
- I am actively involved in programs and clubs in my school that make me feel welcome.
- I am not a citizen but the student body has always been welcoming and supportive with my status
- Well, to be honest, the other group I don't really [understand] because I'm not involved in the student's government or others club in the college.
- Being a successful student and being not eligible for important academic programs because of my being noncitizen sometimes is discouraging.
- If I want to be an active member of the student body, meaning being part of internship opportunities, programs affiliated with outside organizations, etc. The question of "Are you able to work legally in this country" it's always there. Discouraging me from even trying to participate or get more information in such "resources" that CUNY offers.

school activities. One student stated simply, *"I'm afraid to open up about my status."* In these cases, the fear experienced by these young people did not allow them to build relationships within the school community that might've fostered belonging and membership.

Another theme found in the responses was that lack of belonging is associated with the inability to receive financial aid. Economic difficulties were common reasons for those who identified foremost as a noncitizen. One student who is in the US seeking asylum stated, *"Noncitizen. No scholarship, no aid no funds no grants. Pay for everything. No study abroad."* A fully undocumented student stated:

I identify myself with the group of noncitizen because I don't have any help for tuition, all is pay out of my pocket ... It makes me feel like because of my status I can't focus on the real aspect of attending college: learning. I become depressed thinking about the society around me. How it is making a barrier to young people like me.

In addition to stating that the lack of financial support impacts how they identify, this student cited depression as a consequence of their status and the inability to foster a sense of belonging. Another student also cited depression as a result of both their inability to participate in college offerings (Theme 1), as well as their financial situation:

Depression. As a noncitizen, I can't access many of the opportunities that the office of career development alerts me to. I have to strive to work during and outside of the semester in order to afford tuition because my family is far below the poverty line and can't do much to help me pay for it. Depression and distress from my limited opportunities as a noncitizen has been far more significant than any distress poor grades could possibly have on me.

What these students expressed is consistent with the aforementioned research that shows a relationship between a person's mental well-being and their sense of belonging and membership. For college students, their immigration status and the resulting impediments to being able to foster belonging and membership to their college has an impact on their mental health.

Table 2 has several other select quotes which speak to the theme that belonging is associated with participation in student activities.

For some students, the status of being a noncitizen is omnipresent in their lives. This is the third theme found among the qualitative responses. An undocumented student wrote, *"As much as I would like to say that my status does not define who I am, it shapes nearly every aspect of my life. Above all, I am undocumented. I see myself as part of the student body as an undocumented person. I see everything through that narrative."* Some students who said they identified as both a member of the student body and a noncitizen mentioned still experiencing systemic reminders of their noncitizen status. One student who is a green card holder stated *"As much as I feel inside my college the status doesn't matter, when it comes to many procedures, scholarships, programs I am reminded that I am not a citizen."* This person was not the only one who identified as a member of the student body but still expressed sentiments that their noncitizen status was a salient identity. A DACAmented student mentioned the ever-presence of their legal status above any other identity:

Table 2. Theme 2—Lack of belonging is associated with the inability to receive financial aid.**Supporting quotes**

- Though I may feel a sense of belonging at CUNY I have come to terms that lest I am a full citizen I will never be able to pay for my education as easy as my native colleagues. I cannot receive federal or state aid and my options for grants are all but limited.
- I identify as a noncitizen because there are some things like scholarships that I can't apply for or out-of-state conferences that I don't feel comfortable attending that makes my experience different from the citizen students.
- Because others don't have work to pay for college or books or anything they can attend colleges with higher tuition because it can be taken care of by state.
- Well, being undocumented affects me financially because I don't get the benefits that students with citizenship get in the college.
- Although it doesn't affect me a great amount, I do notice differences. I can't talk with my friends about problems with financial aid, because I don't receive any.
- As much as I feel inside my college the status doesn't matter, when it comes to many procedures, scholarships, programs I am reminded that I am not a citizen.
- Due to my immigration status I can't fully integrate to the student body since I am not eligible for financial aid.
- I identify myself with the group of Noncitizen because. I don't have any help for tuition, all is pay out of my pocket.
- Sometimes I feel like I don't have the same opportunities to be part of other groups. Mainly financial support for school.
- Being undocumented limits the amount of things I can do on campus such as work-study or receive financial aid.

The opportunities I've actually been able to access at school were all inherently dependent on me being a part of the student body but were all the more significant to me because of my legal status. Those resources I haven't been able to access have only served to remind me that though I am a part of the student body, I am also set apart from it. ... In almost every interaction I have with bureaucracy, employment, or academia, I sooner have to consider whether I qualify (legally) than whether I have a chance of being accepted at all.

This student stated that when confronted with certain aspects of college life they are still reminded that they are not indeed, permanent citizens of the US and are therefore limited with what resources they have access to. Another student also expressed how they are constantly reminded of their legal status: *"As a non-citizen, that classification will always be there and inform all decisions I make, until my status changes, I am enrolled in college, so I see myself as a student. I am a student but I have to remember that I am also not a—a citizen of this country."*

One undocumented student wrote how the omnipresence of their noncitizen status, and the limitations of this reality, makes them feel:

My membership to my noncitizen group affects the other because my citizenship determines many factors of my college life. Mainly because of the financial aid I need in order to go to college. Also, because I can't attend a 4 year college without a scholarship which is hard to compete with other immigrants. As a student its hard to feel worthy in a school because they never refer any help towards us. Causing us to hide in the shadows and not share how we feel about things going on that at are at play that directly affect us.

This student cited not feeling worthy and having to hide in the shadows because of their immigration status. This language is indicative of mental distress, and was not a solitary example. Another student stated:

Being undocumented above a member of the student body can make me feel alone at times. I have a great support system, but that can only go so far. I often think about the

ways in which I am different from the rest of the student body. My struggles are unique to my undocumented experience. I can become detached from student body affairs due to the overwhelming amount of stress I experience due to my undocumented life.

Table 3 has several other select quotes which speak to the theme that a student's noncitizen status is ever-present.

Another important finding gleamed from the participant responses is that the university plays a role in the integration of these noncitizen students, as well as their ability to be able to form a sense of belonging and membership to the college community. Indeed, a student cited CUNY as a direct factor in their integration into the college community:

I entered the CUNY system because at the time (and due to my legal status), it was the only university willing to give me an opportunity to continue my education. From the moment you step into adulthood, and college specifically, the impact of not having legal status, is obvious. From financial aid, to not being able to apply to certain academic programs, and even student clubs, my immigration status and my college experience have always intertwined. However, ... I no longer shy away from my situation—CUNY is a big reason for this. For the most part, the system has been receptive and in fact, has helped my progress."

Another student also identified their school as being helpful in having a positive college experience:

I identify with both groups equally because yes, I may be undocumented but like any other student who attends [CUNY school], I matter just as much. Nonetheless, one of the main reasons I'm attending [CUNY school] is because I am a noncitizen and was one of the school's I could get into. Altogether though, the school has been very helpful with information and guiding me through even though I am undocumented.

As indicated by the above quotes, the college plays a crucial role in helping them foment a sense of belonging and membership. The college's understanding of student circumstances, particularly those who are going to school in addition to holding other responsibilities is key to developing programs, resources, and other offerings that could be accessed and made widely available for these students. As one undocumented student stated,

Being a member of the noncitizen group greatly affects the student body membership as being undocumented really limits the amount of time that can be offered to involving

Table 3. Theme 3—Omnipresence of noncitizen status.

Supporting quotes

- I am an active member of the community in my institution. However, at times I do feel, as a noncitizen, that my opportunities are limited.
 - Because of [receiving a] scholarship, I do not have to worry about paying for tuition; this has been a big factor in aiding my integration to the college community. Nevertheless, as previously mentioned, I often feel that I am not (or rather cannot) exert my full potential as a member of the student body simply because my status restricts me from getting opportunities (such as tutoring, applying to scholarships).
 - Both being a [CUNY School] student and noncitizen have some important effects on my life. Being a ... student will change my career, and being noncitizen has affected and will continue to affect my decisions in my life.
 - As a noncitizen, that classification will always be there and inform all decisions I make, until my status changes, I am enrolled in college, so I see myself as a student. I am a student but I have to remember that I am also not a—a citizen of this country.
-

oneself to the student body.... In my case, prior to a current scholarship, I had to work over 40 hours a week and do part-time school to be able to pay for tuition and still have enough funds to survive.

In addition to having wide access to students, having qualified and informed staff will help students navigate the bureaucratic side of the college experience. For non-citizen students, the need is particularly important, as their immigration status creates a unique administrative reality. One DACAmented student mentioned,

Sometimes I feel like an outcast. Even though a lot of students here are immigrants, my situation is unique. ... I feel, more so now, I am always having to reveal my status. It's not necessarily bad, but I feel like it's so tedious especially when people do not understand what DACA is. I have been sent to numerous offices and had many back and forths just because people do not understand DACA.

Certainly, it is the obligation of the university to foster an environment where feelings of belonging and membership can be developed. How that atmosphere is created and cultivated differs from one institution to another. Ensuring that the school experience can be one where these attachments can be fomented is important, especially in light of student comments that indicate their mental well-being is being impacted by their ability to establish these bonds.

Discussion

Qualitative responses indicate that students associate their membership to the college community with their ability to participate in on-campus activities and be involved in college-peer groups. This is consistent with findings in other studies of belonging (Gonzales et al., 2013). Another theme found in the data is that the lack of membership to the college is associated with the inability to receive the same financial support as other students who do not have noncitizen status. Although there has been progress made in the area of providing financial support of the undocumented population, students who have unauthorized immigration status still do not qualify for grants such as Pell ("Financial Aid and Undocumented Students," n.d.). Students who identified as noncitizen before classifying themselves as a member of the student body indicated in their responses that this identification was associated with the limitation in financial aid. In addition, student responses show that they live with feelings of isolation, depression and/or other forms of mental distress, such as stress and anxiety. Furthermore, even among those who indicate a sense of belonging to their college community, the noncitizen status was still salient, and students still expressed sentiments that suggested membership and belonging is tenuous.

A noncitizen student's feelings of belonging and membership are related to the level of participation in school activities, as well as the amount of support they receive from their university. This certainly may hold true for students who are permanent citizens. What is specific to the noncitizen student population, however, is that their immigration status can stand in the way of their ability to foment those college ties that lead to belonging and membership. As cited by several participants, a student's immigration status is still prominent in their self-identification. Moreover, several students used language that is indicative of mental distress. Survey responses included

terms such as “depression,” “stress,” “fear,” and several also expressed feeling discouraged by the fact that their immigration status limits their ability to access resources and foment a sense of belonging and membership.

Certainly, a positive college experience is crucial for any student to successfully navigate their time at university—not just academically, but from a mental health perspective as well. Being able to develop belonging and membership to the school community is key for this journey to be effective and productive. This hold true for noncitizen students in particular, as their immigration status puts them in a specifically cumbersome situation with respect to administrative matters, as well as being able to participate fully in the college environment. Indeed, as cited above, some participants named CUNY as a factor in their feelings of belonging and membership.

The results of this study are consistent with and supports existing research that finds the and young undocumented experience positive outcomes when they receive support. In addition, this study adds to the research by finding that within a university setting, services and support can add to these beneficial results, as well as promote a sense of belonging. This finding, however, means that there is a heavy responsibility on CUNY to fulfill its promises to stand by the students and help them to form these attachments.

Limitations

This study provides valuable insight on a population that is relatively new to research: the noncitizen student comprised of fully undocumented, DACAmented, and LPRs. In addition, this research broadens the existing scholarship exploring how this population’s immigration status impacts feelings of belonging and membership, as well as their mental well-being. There are many limitations, however, to this study. To begin, it is difficult to state whether or not the results from the population sampled can be generalized to different regions of the country. As previously stated, resilience by the young undocumented population is based in part on political support. The level of this assistance varies across the country, and this fact will undoubtedly impact student responses regarding how their immigration status makes them feel. Moreover, the question of scale arises, as not all non-students were surveyed—the data is based on 137 responses, and of the 18 campuses canvased, four did not yield any participants. More than a third of CUNY’s over 241,000 undergraduates were born outside the United States, and an estimated 5,000 CUNY students are undocumented (CUNY, 2019, 2022).

Most importantly, the main instrument in this study was a survey, and although two open-ended questions were included, the data is mostly quantitative. While significant and useful information was gathered with the two qualitative items included in the survey, in-depth interviews are necessary to tease out the nuances of the open-ended responses. These dialogs enable the researcher to gather a deeper and richer understanding of the noncitizen students’ view of their college experiences, how they impact their ability to develop feelings of belonging and membership, as well how they would describe their mental well-being. Future research can address these gaps in the current study and continue to contribute the scholarships exploring the unique perspective of these young people.

Conclusion

Findings of the CUNY Belonging Study as discussed above are consistent with and contribute to the existing research on immigration status and its impact on psychological well-being, as well as the scholarship that finds there is a relationship between feelings of belonging and membership and mental health. Moreover, these findings support the scholarship on noncitizen students and how their immigration status impacts their mental health, as well as the ability to develop feelings of belonging and membership. By not limiting the participant pool to undocumented students and adding LPRs, this student broadens this literature as well. Finally, the data make clear the crucial role college institutions play in helping students develop these feelings, and the resulting impact on their mental health.

CUNY has called itself the American Dream Machine, and refers to its high ranking in social mobility as evidence in support of this title (Chetty, Friedman, Saez, Turner, & Yagen, 2017; Colangelo, 2016; Leonhardt, 2017; Matos-Rodriguez, 2020). As an institution, CUNY has a variety of resources specifically available for their noncitizen student population. The “CUNY Citizenship Now!” Program offers free legal advice to noncitizen students (CUNY, n.d.). Most recently, CUNY announced that it created a centralized office and appointed a director in a dedicated leadership position to coordinate support services for noncitizen students across all of its campuses (CUNY, 2022). In addition, there are “Immigrant Success Liaisons” on each campus, who are staff that are tasked with helping immigrant students navigate different aspects of college life, including acquiring financial aid, and applying for the Dream.US scholarship (“Undocumented Student Support,” n.d.). However, there is still work to be done, as there have been incidents across the university that challenge the idea of CUNY being a safe space for noncitizen students and very possibly impeding their ability to foster a sense of belonging and membership. For example, during a time when there was a significant increase in detentions and deportation in New York City, a CUNY professor publicly expressed anti-immigrant, anti-Latinx sentiments and used derogatory language when he stated “illegal immigrants” should be deported (Algar, 2018). In addition, students from the afore-mentioned professor’s college organized a rally demanding action from administrators and arguing that the school is not supportive of their undocumented students (Kadrigamar, 2018). Certainly, these examples challenge the notion that CUNY is a sanctuary campus. In order for the university to foster an environment where all students, including noncitizen students, can develop a sense of belonging and membership, then it must also ensure that their faculty and staff are invested in helping noncitizen students as well.

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