



“Don’t Let Our Dreams Die”: Undocumented Students’ Fight for Educational Equity in Tennessee

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Abstract

Educational equity for undocumented immigrants has become a widely discussed issue in both the political and public realm of Tennessee, in large part as a result of the individual determination and collective resistance of undocumented youth living in the state. This article focuses on the ways in which undocumented immigrant youth in Tennessee confront and challenge educational inequities, particularly that of affordable access to higher education. Specifically, we suggest that the undocumented youth in this study engage in both individual and collective forms of resistance to overcome educational barriers, a process we refer to as boundary politics. This article draws on data from 24 oral histories from a multi-year participatory action research project with members of a youth-led undocumented-immigrant organizing group. This participatory methodology was used to complement the collective action and individual forms of resistance employed by undocumented youth in this study. Overall, we argue that by engaging in a combination of various forms of resistance and activism, undocumented youth are influencing the social and political landscape of Tennessee, laying the groundwork for educational equity to become a more plausible reality within the state.

Keywords: *undocumented immigrant; youth-led activism; resistance; tuition equality*

On a warm, sunny day in May 2012, twenty-four undocumented immigrant high school seniors clad in their graduation caps and gowns gathered in a mid-sized city in Tennessee. With a crowd of allies, media, and interested onlookers standing by, undocumented students shared their feelings of uncertainty about if and how they would be able to pursue their dream to attend college. “It’s hard not to give up hope when we have to pay so much more than others, especially when we have to pay three times as much for college tuition...Many of us have the potential to do great things; we just need to have the chance to prove it,” Rafael¹ explained to the crowd who had gathered to honor the graduating high school seniors. Several other students at the rally shared similar stories of encountering significant barriers to pursuing their education, as well as their desire to persevere despite the obstacles standing in their way. Rafael and his peers shared their stories to illuminate the harsh reality facing undocumented immigrant youth throughout Tennessee, such as having to pay high out-of-state tuition rates no matter how long they have lived in the state.

1. This is a pseudonym. All subsequent names of study participants in this manuscript are pseudonyms.

This mock graduation event signaled the beginning of a multi-year statewide campaign for educational equity for undocumented youth in Tennessee that continues to this day. Propelled by the individual determination and resistance of young immigrants, as well as their collective efforts to address injustice, educational equity for undocumented students has become a widely discussed issue in both the political and public realm of Tennessee. This article focuses on the ways in which undocumented immigrant youth in Tennessee confront and challenge educational inequities, particularly that of affordable access to higher education. Specifically, we suggest that the undocumented youth in this study engage in both individual and collective forms of resistance to overcome educational barriers, a process we refer to here as *boundary politics*. To illustrate the multiple ways in which the youth in this study engage in boundary politics, we detail some of the key challenges undocumented youth confront in pursuing their educational goals and how they often find creative ways to navigate these obstacles. In addition to these individual forms of resistance, we illustrate how the undocumented youth in this study have engaged in a larger collective effort to transform the educational landscape of higher education in Tennessee through their involvement in an undocumented youth-led group called Tennessee Youth for Immigrant Justice (TYIJ).² In particular, we detail the 2014 tuition equality campaign led by TYIJ to illustrate the creative ways in which undocumented students have exerted significant pressure and influence on members of the Tennessee State Legislature. We argue that through the aforementioned forms of resistance and activism, undocumented youth are influencing the social and political landscape of Tennessee, laying the groundwork for tuition equality to become a more plausible reality within the state.

Undocumented Youth and the Fight for Higher Education Access in the U.S.

The 1982 *Plyler v. Doe* U.S. Supreme Court decision ensures that students cannot be denied a public K-12 education due to their immigration status, but this ruling does not provide a mandate regarding undocumented students' access to post-secondary education. However, some federal legislation, such as the 1996 *Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act*, attempts to preclude undocumented immigrants from receiving any post-secondary education benefits. While several states have interpreted this as a mandate to prevent undocumented youth from accessing in-state tuition rates at public colleges and universities, approximately 18 states have adopted language that allows individuals who have met certain state residency and high school graduation requirements access to in-state tuition regardless of their immigration status (NCSL, 2015).³ However, undocumented youth in states without such policies are required to pay tuition as if they were out-of-state or international students (Flores, 2010; Rincón, 2005). In Tennessee, out-of-state tuition is almost triple the cost of in-state tuition. Tuition equality is a particularly important issue for undocumented students, as this demographic disproportionately experiences economic hardship in relation to the overall U.S. population (Terriquer & Patler, 2012) and most are precluded from access to state or federal government financial aid for post-secondary education (Gildersleeve, 2010; Gonzales, 2016). As such, many undocumented youth cannot afford to attend public post-secondary institutions due to the aforementioned economic constraints.

Limited opportunities to pursue higher education can also have social and emotional consequences for undocumented students (Gildersleeve, 2010; Gonzales, 2016; Muñoz 2015; Rincón, 2005; Terriquer & Patler, 2012). For example, Gonzales (2016) suggests that as undocumented youth transition to adulthood they often face significant barriers in achieving their educational and

2. This is a pseudonym.

3. As of June 2017, Tennessee does not offer in-state tuition to undocumented students.

career goals as a result of their immigration status, which can lead to disengagement and profound feelings of frustration and uncertainty. Despite the often-distressing challenges encountered by these young adults, scholars have also found that several undocumented youth have a strong sense of optimism (Gonzales, 2016) or “critical hope” (Hinga & Conchas, 2015) that helps them persevere and attempt to overcome these educational injustices. Moreover, individuals and networks (e.g., families, academic advisors, undocumented student groups) who provide support and guidance to undocumented youth are crucial in helping these students to gain access to and succeed within post-secondary institutions (Gildersleeve & Vigil, 2015; Gonzales, 2016; Negrón-Gonzales, 2013; Pérez et al, 2015).

Additionally, many undocumented youth have taken an active role in fighting for access to higher education as part of the immigrant justice movement. When the federal DREAM Act was first introduced in 2001, undocumented youth were central in advocating for this proposed bill, which would have provided undocumented youth with a way to adjust their immigration status to become legal residents and expanded opportunities to pursue post-secondary education. As various iterations of the DREAM Act were introduced throughout the 2000s, local undocumented youth-led groups grew in number, and networks connecting these groups emerged, such as United We Dream. As of 2017, over 100,000 youth and 55 youth-led organizations were affiliated with the UWD network. TYIJ, the undocumented youth-led group profiled in this article, is an affiliate of UWD and was initially founded in 2009 to advocate for passage of the DREAM Act.

In an effort to push for the passage of the DREAM Act, undocumented youth-led groups and networks employed a variety of tactics. For example, in 2009, UWD hosted a “DREAM Graduation” for undocumented students. The mock graduation ceremony was held in Washington, DC, to bring attention to the tens of thousands of undocumented youth who graduate from high school each year but who cannot gain access to higher education. As illustrated by the vignette at the beginning of this article, groups of undocumented youth around the country adopted similar tactics to advocate for the federal DREAM Act as well as pursue educational equity at the state level. Despite the failure of the DREAM Act to garner the necessary votes in the Senate to become legislation in 2010, undocumented youth have remained a particularly strong force in the immigrant justice movement and educational equity has been one of the key elements of undocumented youth-led resistance and activism (Nicholls, 2013).

The aforementioned studies have clearly documented the barriers undocumented students face in accessing higher education, in addition to some of the ways in which these youth contend with such challenges and find valuable sources of support in doing so. Yet, few studies illustrate the *combination* of multiple individual and collective strategies employed by undocumented students to resist the multiple barriers they face. Moreover, several of these studies are conducted in states that have a high proportion of undocumented immigrants, but few studies focus on the ways in which undocumented youth in the Southeastern U.S. contend with the abovementioned challenges. This article therefore aims to add to the current literature by delineating the ways in which undocumented youth in Tennessee both individually and collectively resist the policies and practices that preclude them from accessing higher education opportunities.

Theoretical Framework: Boundary Politics

In the case of this study, undocumented youth challenge educational injustices through a combination of everyday acts of resistance and collective action (Collins, 2000), a process we refer to here as *boundary politics*. This notion of boundary politics is informed by Patricia Hill Collins’

(2000) conceptualization of political activism and resistance, which entails both an individual's day-to-day acts of resistance as well as a collective struggle for institutional transformation, and Jane Mansbridge's (2001) conceptualization of oppositional consciousness.

A primary component of Collins' (2000) definition of political activism involves individual acts of resistance. Collins suggests that such acts of resistance denote a struggle for group survival, whereby members of marginalized groups attempt to create spheres of influence within their own social networks and the social institutions they regularly encounter. Due to the complexity and nuance of such forms of resistance, conceptualizations of individual resistance are varied among scholars. Most relevant to the findings in our study is Solorzano and Delgado Bernal's (2001) conceptualization of *internal and external transformational resistance*. Solorzano and Delgado Bernal provide the example of a Chicana student who pursues a path toward acquiring a college degree as an illustration of *internal transformational resistance*. These scholars contend that while this student may appear to be conforming to societal norms by aspiring to acquire a college degree, she is actually engaging in transformational resistance because she intends to challenge the cultural and economic marginalization that she and other Chicana individuals experience. *External transformational resistance* involves a "conspicuous and overt type of behavior...[that] does not conform to institutional or cultural norms and expectations" (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001, p. 325), such as participation in protests or the production of political writing that challenges dominant ideas and discourses.

In addition to everyday forms of resistance, collective action to change inequitable policies, practices, and systems is another integral component of effecting social change (Collins, 2000). According to Snow and Soule (2010), these forms of collective action are often "positioned outside the authority structure in question either because of the absence of recognized standing or access to it" (p. 16). In the case of the immigrant justice movement, undocumented persons are excluded from legal participation (e.g., voting, running as candidates) in the political system, and thus, must put pressure on the system from outside. Mansbridge (2001) argues that this process of identifying and explicitly challenging systems of oppression illustrates the emergence of oppositional consciousness. This scholar further argues that the role of oppositional consciousness in leading individuals to engage in collective struggles for social justice and group liberation is historically contingent. Thus, for oppositional consciousness to facilitate the emergence of a social movement, Mansbridge suggests groups must simultaneously experience a collective sense of injustice that produces "righteous anger, solidarity, and a belief in the group's power," (p. 7) and have access to the political and financial capital of established or emergent institutions to support the collective interests of the group.

Formal engagement in collective action for structural transformation and acts of daily resistance together make up an interconnected and comprehensive form of political activism and resistance (Collins, 2000). We consider this to be a bidirectional relationship, in which everyday resistance and formal engagement in social movement activity are always informing and influencing actions in both spheres. As such, in this study, several undocumented youth view their experiences of operating within, navigating, and resisting oppressive elements of the social context in which they live as informing their decision to participate formally in the immigrant justice movement. Similarly, many youth may view their involvement in collective action as informing and shaping how they engage with the social networks and institutions they encounter on a regular basis. Overall, we contend that Collins' theory of political activism and Mansbridge's concept of oppositional consciousness are both essential to understanding the boundary politics of undocu-

mented youth, and helps elucidate how undocumented immigrant youth understand, reframe, contest, and endeavor to transform the unequal social and structural contexts in which they are situated.

Study Methods

This article draws on data from 24 oral histories from an ongoing multi-year participatory action research (PAR) project that began in 2013 with members of TYIJ, a youth-led undocumented-immigrant organizing group. PAR is both an epistemological and methodological orientation toward research. Epistemologically, PAR suggests that individuals that are most marginalized in society have a right to research the conditions that facilitate their oppression (Fine, 2009). Fine (2009) suggests that, “oppression breeds multi-generational wisdom, desire and tactics of subversion” (p. 3). Thus, those who experience marginalization possess “critical expertise” (Fine, 2009) regarding structural inequities, which must be drawn upon to imagine and work toward the transformation of unjust social and structural arrangements. Methodologically, PAR involves elucidating the main issues that are of relevance to a particular group or community through dialogue and collaborative data collection and analysis, and then creating and implementing a plan of action to address these issues with the intention of improving conditions within their social contexts. Thus, PAR is a collaborative and potentially transformative way to address the issues and inequities that youth face in their local communities and broader society.

For this PAR project, members of TYIJ proposed chronicling the stories of undocumented youth activists in Tennessee in relation to their migration to the U.S., their experiences growing up in the U.S., and their involvement in immigration activism. This project was developed for two primary reasons: 1) to guide the recruitment and movement-building strategies of TYIJ, particularly in terms of understanding catalysts for involvement in the Tennessee immigrant youth movement; and, 2) to systematically document and analyze key issues affecting the well-being of undocumented students via the collection of these stories, and bring these findings to legislators to influence their policy-making decisions.

This PAR project sought to democratize the research process by ensuring that undocumented youth leaders led the design and facilitation of the project. As such, the lead author of this article (who, at the time, was a graduate student) trained interested members of TYIJ in data collection and analysis methods. The first training session focused on developing interview protocols and conducting interviews. Following this session, participating TYIJ members conducted interviews with each other that explored the aforementioned themes. Next, several sessions were facilitated in which TYIJ members learned about qualitative data analysis and collaboratively coded interview transcripts.

Four TYIJ members were interested in engaging more deeply in the data collection and analysis process. As a result, these four undocumented students and the lead author formed a core research team called the TYIJ Research Collective. This core team met three to four times per month over the span of a year to analyze the 24 oral histories and to develop various dissemination strategies. To analyze the oral histories, we employed a grounded theory approach in which we sought to identify key patterns and significant processes that emerged from the data (Charmaz, 2006). Via these analyses, the theme of tuition equality was particularly prevalent in participants’ narratives of the individual challenges with which they contended and their motivation for engaging in collective action. As a result, the TYIJ Research Collective authored this article to illustrate

the ways in which undocumented youth in Tennessee individually and collectively resist educational injustice.

As we engaged in this PAR project, the TYIJ Research Collective often discussed the ways in which we understood the role of PAR in shaping the political and academic discourse in Tennessee regarding undocumented immigrant students. For example, during a group conversation, one member of the research team stated:

I like [PAR] because you're the one who's going through the stuff, you're the one who's doing the research, you're the one who can connect that personal story with other people and create research that most likely other people will understand instead of, like, just reading it, using all these big academic words, and professors just writing something that they don't have a clue about.⁴

This TYIJ member suggests that PAR is a way to be involved deeply in research that provides an avenue for sharing findings in a way that is accessible and relevant to the public. Similarly, another TYIJ member shared his view that PAR challenges the traditional power dynamics of research by democratizing the research process via collaboration:

I like [PAR] a lot because looking at other ways that people have researched, there's more of a power structure to it where a few people get to decide what the voices of many are. And, with [PAR], everybody works together and everybody can be a researcher, everybody has something to say and put their ideas into it and where it's headed.

TYIJ members also communicated the importance of PAR in influencing political discourse and shaping social movement activity. For example, one TYIJ member stated:

When you're trying to fight back against the political system...people don't pick just one person that's supposed to be the smartest to represent them, everybody represents themselves together, everybody's a family...So, that's why anybody in any activist movement or any type of revolution they're trying to start should know about [PAR]...because you have to speak the language of the people you're trying to fight against. They speak language by showing statistics and data and analysis, then we have to do the same thing.

Here, PAR is understood by this TYIJ member as having the potential to bolster social movements, as it equips individuals with the tools and information required to "speak the language of the people you're trying to fight against." This sentiment encapsulates one of the main reasons why TYIJ members decided to engage in this PAR project. As such, this participatory methodology was understood as an important tool in bolstering the collective action of TYIJ members and fighting the daily injustices they face as undocumented youth.

4. In relation to the point about "professors just writing something that they don't have a clue about," the week prior to this discussion, this TYIJ member had participated in a roundtable discussion on immigration with a group of professors at a local university. She described being frustrated with the lack of knowledge the professors on this roundtable seemed to possess regarding immigration policy and their use of the term "illegal" to discuss undocumented immigrants.

“I Didn’t Let All Those Noes and Shut Doors Stop Me”: Navigating the Educational Landscape of Tennessee

Many of the youth participating in this study discussed how being undocumented has shaped or curtailed their educational experiences, particularly in terms of accessing and navigating post-secondary opportunities as an undocumented student. One of the key challenges in accessing higher education opportunities discussed by many participants in this study is the prohibitive cost of college tuition, a theme that is reflected in several other studies with undocumented youth (Gildersleeve, 2010; Gonzales, 2016; Rincón, 2005; Terriquez & Patler, 2012). As noted earlier, undocumented youth in Tennessee are required to pay out-of-state tuition to attend public universities (approximately three times the cost of in-state tuition) and scholarships that do not require U.S. citizenship are few in number (Rincón, 2005; Terriquez & Patler, 2012). Rafael describes being unable to apply for many scholarships because of his immigration status:

I know that had I been legal, and throughout high school and most of my education right now at college, I wouldn’t be paying, I’d have it pretty much all paid for with the scholarships that I could have gotten but couldn’t apply for because I wasn’t documented.

Alessandra concurs: “I knew that I could get a lot of scholarships, but I couldn’t because what limited me was that nine-digit number.”

Considering the aforementioned challenges, several participants in our study remarked that their undocumented status caused them to *initially* disengage in secondary school, believing that academic success would not matter if they were unable to afford college—a pattern that corroborates findings from Gonzales’ (2016) study. For example, Rafael suggested that he felt “surrounded by apathy” as he came to understand the challenges that being undocumented would create as he pursued his post-secondary aspirations in Tennessee:

There came a point where I just kinda felt really, like, just surrounded by apathy because I just couldn’t, I couldn’t see the point to it...I started questioning, I’m like, well, what’s the point? It’s not really going to do me any good if I get straight A’s...and graduate with honors or distinguished honors because I’m undocumented. There’s probably no way I’m going to get into college.

As a result, Rafael’s grades dropped, although not significantly. Lorena similarly discusses how she began to feel depressed upon realizing that her post-secondary options might be limited:

I was getting kind of depressed with seeing that there weren’t so many opportunities for undocumented students, and how my friends just ended up working or dropping out of college, community colleges...they were as smart as me, they were going to community college and dropping out, they were automatically coming out of high school and going in to work, and they were just, like, super bright students. So, I thought that the opportunities were limited, so that made me really sad; it made me realize, like, maybe I’m wasting my time trying to pursue education.

Lorena was initially concerned that she would be forced to enter the labor force rather than attend college because she witnessed many of her undocumented peers doing so. Another participant, Eliseo, also reflects on this pattern:

Once you get older, you realize that most of the scholarships and most of the opportunities are not there for you, so...you can either go two ways, you can get the mentality that you do want to go to college, regardless, or you get the mentality that you're not good enough or you don't have the opportunities, so you become a day laborer and you just kind of get sucked into the system of cheap labor and just getting paid under the table.

Eliseo notes that the marginalization of undocumented youth may be exacerbated if they acquire post-high school employment that does not pay well because it seems to be the only plausible option. However, Eliseo also suggests that limited post-secondary options may create a greater sense of determination among those who decide that they will find a way to attend college, despite the barriers (Gonzales, 2016; Hinga & Conchas, 2015).

Indeed, several participants have been able to find ways to pursue higher education opportunities despite encountering the aforementioned challenges. Upon finding out that their immigration status posed numerous obstacles to obtaining higher education, several of the students in this study ended up finding and joining groups led by undocumented youth. Through groups like TYIJ, most participants stated that they were able to meet undocumented youth who had been able to attend college and access a variety of resources about applying to college as an undocumented student. Although initially dispirited, Alessandra was reignited with a sense of hope and motivation upon learning that there ways to she could go to college as a result of becoming a member of TYIJ:

After finding out that I just couldn't really get into [the University of Tennessee], and all of that. Like, that's what motivated me to get into TYIJ...What helped me a lot was being in TYIJ and knowing that there was a possibility, and then meeting other people that I know came before me and were able to get in college.

Silvia explains that looking for answers about how to navigate her immigration status led her to find TYIJ:

I first started being involved with TYIJ because it was my junior year of high school, and it was the year after I found out I was undocumented, and I kinda wanted an answer about what I could do, you know, what were my options because I didn't want to give up.

Negrón-Gonzales (2013) suggests that as youth learn about their immigration status and the associated consequences, they look for support and information from others in similar situations. This scholar contends that by seeking out and finding such support, undocumented youth often become more politically engaged and are thus more likely to become participants in collective pursuits for immigrant justice. Indeed, all of the participants in this study have been involved in collective action for immigrant justice via their involvement in TYIJ.

Upon finding resources and support regarding college access provided by undocumented youth-led groups such as TYIJ, several students in this study pursued a strategy of applying to several colleges in and beyond their home state, focusing on institutions that expressed an open

commitment to supporting undocumented students both financially and socially. Isabela explains that she was able to get significant funding from a small private college by openly explaining to university administrators the barriers she faces to accessing financial aid as an undocumented student. As a result, she states that: “Applying to college has even been a blessing because now I’m at [a small private university], and I mean, they’ve given [undocumented students] so much help. I mean, it really does feel good.” This particular college has admitted several undocumented students in the past few years (six of whom are participants in this study) and high-level administrators have openly declared their interest in and commitment to helping this demographic group access post-secondary education.

Not only has this particular college provided substantial financial aid to these students, but several of the study participants who attend this institution suggest that it has also provided additional support by trying to create an inclusive and welcoming space for undocumented immigrants. Alejandro attends this institution and suggests that because it is a historically Black college, he has found a safe space in which to reveal his immigration status:

[My university] is awesome because I feel like they don't exactly know my type of struggle, but they know what it is to have someone be prejudiced against you... And the fact that the history of [the university] is all about struggles, it kind of has helped me out a lot, just being here. It makes me feel like [I'm] in a more safe environment.

Here, Alejandro translates his experience of disenfranchisement as an undocumented immigrant to the oppression of African Americans, which Collins (2000) suggests can be an important element of movement building. Moreover, welcoming institutional spaces and policies can play a crucial role in the retention and success of undocumented students in post-secondary institutions (Gildersleeve & Vigil, 2015; Gonzales, 2016; Muñoz, 2015)

Some of the participants in this study suggested that upon realizing that they could not access the same financial aid to attend college as their documented peers, they employed a strategy to “work harder” in high school so they could acquire the most funding possible to facilitate their pursuit of a college degree. Ana discusses how she has not let hurdles, such as trying to access college, stop her from trying to achieve her goals:

I’ve tried so hard to create opportunities for myself. Like I’ve told myself, I’m not going to let this stop me; I’m going to work harder because I want to prove people wrong. So, I applied for going to college, for example... I applied to so many places and I didn't let all those noes and shut doors stop me.

According to Solorzano and Delgado Bernal’s (2001) framework, attempting to overcome educational barriers by “working harder” may reflect a form of internal transformative resistance. In this instance, Ana resists the notion that restrictive policies will prevent her from gaining access to post-secondary education, and instead engages in tactics that she expects will help her overcome some of the challenges associated with pursuing a college education as an undocumented immigrant.

Ana, in addition to other youth in this study, also suggested that she had to find creative ways to work around bureaucratic barriers while enrolled in college:

I'm always, like, "Oh, well, I need extra help with this," or "Oh, I can't pay for this," or "Oh, I don't qualify for this," you know? And I'm constantly, constantly trying to find help, constantly trying to find other ways around things, because that's what we're forced to do, we're forced to search other ways, alternate ways for everything.

Despite encountering numerous obstacles throughout her college career, Ana suggests that she often finds ways to overcome these challenges, illustrating her perseverance and creativity in the face of adversity. In an informal conversation with another participant in this study, they explained that they do not reveal their immigration status to institutional authorities unless explicitly asked to do so, thus hoping that they will avoid the tuition rates applied to undocumented students. At the time of this conversation, this strategy had been working for this particular student and they were able to pay in-state tuition rates at the community college they attended. Several studies similarly show that many undocumented youth demonstrate considerable resilience and determination in the face of adversity, finding creative ways to overcome social and institutional barriers (Hinga & Conchas, 2015; Gonzales, 2016; Terriquez & Patler, 2012). Although many of the undocumented youth profiled in the aforementioned studies were able to realize their educational attainment goals through hard work and the creative navigation of institutional barriers, attaining a post-secondary education among undocumented students is significantly lower than that of their documented peers (Chavez, 2015; Flores, 2010). In this study, at least three participants have not been able to enroll in college and another three participants have been unable to complete their degrees due to prohibitive tuition fees.

As illustrated above, it is evident that youth individually challenge the educational inequities arising from their immigration status on a regular basis. These forms of resistance illustrate the emergence of an oppositional consciousness and are employed as a means of challenging unequal social configurations (Collins, 2000; Mansbridge, 2001; Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). When youth engage in such forms of resistance, they disrupt the status quo by challenging the policies and practices that disadvantage undocumented students. When these individual acts of resistance are combined with collective action, as will be illustrated in the next section, the opportunity for catalyzing social change is augmented (Collins, 2000).

“We are the Future of Tennessee”: The TYIJ Tuition Equality Campaign

In addition to several undocumented youth in Tennessee individually pursuing creative ways to overcome educational barriers, all study participants have been involved, in some form, in the collective pursuits of TYIJ. The history of TYIJ is rooted in a two-week program in 2009 that was intended to provide a space for immigrant youth in Tennessee to learn about their rights, key policies that would affect them, and the principles of community organizing. One of the program outcomes was the emergence of TYIJ, in which members initially focused their energy on advocating for the passage of the DREAM Act. However, when the DREAM Act failed to pass in 2010, group members re-evaluated their organizational mission and goals. TYIJ decided that educational equity was a key priority for its members, and thus pursued various campaigns to pursue this goal. The statewide tuition equality campaign has been TYIJ's largest sustained campaign for educational equity in recent years.

In 2012, TYIJ officially launched their campaign for tuition equality. Although the state legislative session had already come to an end, the campaign was designed to bring about greater public awareness of the obstacles undocumented youth face in trying to access post-secondary

education. The tuition equality campaign was officially launched on May 19, 2012, the same day that many high school graduation ceremonies were held. That day, undocumented youth held a rally dressed in their graduation caps and gowns, as described in the opening vignette of this article. In addition to organizing this rally, members of TYIJ distributed hundreds of blue ribbons at high school graduation ceremonies across high schools in Tennessee to garner support for the tuition equality campaign.

However, tuition equality did not gain much traction among state legislators in 2012. Several legislators justified their opposition to the bill by suggesting that legal status determines who is and is not worthy of receiving state benefits. For example, State Representative, Jim Gotto (R), suggested that “to be fair to those families who legally came to this nation, it is likely that the [out-of-state tuition] law is going to remain unchanged for the foreseeable future” (Garrison, 2012). In portraying undocumented immigrants as law-breakers, Gotto, among other legislators, justified his opposition to tuition equality by suggesting that undocumented youth are undeserving subjects of the education benefits awarded to documented state residents.

Although the tuition equality campaign of 2012 did not garner the support of many state legislators, TYIJ members suggested it created a platform for beginning to educate the public about the challenges undocumented youth face in trying to gain college admission. It is also important to note the political climate regarding immigration-related issues in early 2012. One of Tennessee’s border states, Alabama, had just passed the harshest anti-immigration bill in the country. Moreover, in 2011, the Tennessee State Legislature saw the introduction of a statewide anti-immigrant bill—the *Lawful Immigration Enforcement Act* (HB 1380/SB 780). Factors such as these may have created a more challenging context in which to push for immigrant-friendly legislation at that particular time.

Considering the resistance to tuition equality in 2012, TYIJ members evaluated their activist efforts and decided to focus on stopping deportations and advocating for comprehensive immigration reform in 2013. However, affordable access to higher education remained a priority for TYIJ members, and thus in 2014 the group reignited the tuition equality campaign they had initiated in 2012. Members hypothesized that they might be able to garner more support for this bill in Tennessee now that federal immigration reform had become a common topic of discussion in American politics. TYIJ members were energized by the perception of political opportunity (Giugni, 2011; Snow & Soule, 2010). Despite the perception that the political climate might be more open to a tuition equality bill, some TYIJ members reminded the group that it took ten years for Colorado to pass in-state tuition and that a campaign capable of being sustained over a period of years would likely be necessary. With this in mind, TYIJ began planning its 2014 tuition equality campaign.

Based on advice from the Interim President of the University of Memphis, a supporter of tuition equality, the TYIJ drafted a “pilot bill” whereby in-state tuition would be provided to undocumented youth who attend public colleges in Shelby County. Undocumented youth would be eligible for in-state tuition at these colleges if they had spent two years in a Tennessee high school and graduated with a high school diploma or a GED. With this pilot bill, TYIJ members hoped to get a sense of state legislators’ openness to tuition equality before introducing a statewide tuition equality bill.

Much to the surprise of TYIJ members, shortly after the introduction of their pilot bill, Republican Senator Todd Gardenhire introduced a statewide tuition equality bill (SB 1951/HB 1992) that he had crafted without involvement from TYIJ or other immigrant rights organizations. However, the criteria for receiving in-state tuition was stricter than TYIJ’s pilot bill, requiring

undocumented students to spend five years in a Tennessee high school and meet stringent academic requirements. Despite stricter eligibility criteria than many TYIJ members would have liked, TYIJ decided to support Senator Gardenhire's bill.

Upon deciding to support the statewide bill, TYIJ crafted a comprehensive lobbying strategy for each of the legislators sitting on the Senate and House of Representatives Education Committees, where the bill would first be debated. At their weekly meetings, TYIJ members reviewed a list of individuals sitting on these committees and discussed the expected or stated perspectives of each legislator on the tuition equality bill. TYIJ collectively determined which legislators' opinions they believed could shift, and thus focused their energy on lobbying those individuals.

To sway legislators' opinions, TYIJ members first launched a social media campaign to encourage friends and family to call members of the education subcommittees and request that they vote in favor of the tuition equality bill. Each week before the subcommittees were to discuss the bill, TYIJ would post a flyer with the phone numbers of each Senate or House Education Committee member and a sample phone script for individuals to use when calling them. Youth also created memes of key legislators. For example, they created a meme of Senator Dolores Gresham, the Chair of the Senate Education Subcommittee, to pressure her to support the tuition equality bill. Methods such as these were used to encourage individuals who were part of TYIJ members' social networks to participate in the tuition equality campaign by calling Tennessee legislators and asking them to vote in favor of the bill. As noted by other scholars, undocumented youth activists throughout the U.S. frequently use social media to mobilize support for their campaigns (Nicholls, 2013; Zimmerman, 2010).

TYIJ members also visited the offices of specific legislators each week to share their personal stories and encourage legislators to support the tuition equality bill. These stories intended to demonstrate the personal impact that tuition equality would have on individual undocumented youth, such as the following story:

[Carmen] wants to open a small business one day, but for now that hope is on hold...Last year, she graduated from [local] High School in Nashville with the goal of enrolling at Austin Peay State University. Instead, the 19-year-old South Nashville resident helps her family make ends meet by baby-sitting family friends. "I want to help people in my community by offering jobs," she said. "Then I realized I would have to pay three times more than my friends for access to higher education."

Storytelling is a common tactic of the U.S. immigrant youth movement (Anguiano, 2011; Nicholls, 2013; Patel & Sánchez Ares, 2014). TYIJ's rationale behind sharing personal stories is to humanize the political discourse surrounding tuition equality for undocumented students. For example, Rosa suggests that by meeting undocumented youth and hearing their stories, legislators are better able to

understand that their decisions are affecting real people and real youth and real families and that it's not about politics, but it's really about people...many times they don't see that until we go [to] their office and kind of show our faces and are like, you know, here we are, and we're real. We're not just something in writing.

Isabela agrees, expressing her hope that through collective efforts to share the stories of undocumented youth, legislators will "realize that the laws that they're making, they're actually affecting

real people and that we’re not, like, I guess, sort of made of paper, or something, you know? We have feelings and we have families.” Similarly, Patel and Sánchez Ares (2014) suggest that storytelling illustrates the common humanity between undocumented persons and their documented counterparts, which can mobilize individuals, including policymakers, to become allies.

Creative collective actions were also employed by undocumented youth during the tuition equality campaign. For example, TYIJ members compiled a stack of mock applications for admission to the University of Tennessee from dozens of undocumented youth; each application included the youth’s expected year of graduation from high school, the major they planned to pursue, their future plans after college, and their thoughts about why they should have access to in-state tuition. Copies of these mock applications were administered to members of the Senate and House Education Committees. Symbolic actions are a cornerstone of the immigrant youth movement throughout the U.S. (Anguiano, 2011; Nicholls, 2013).

The aforementioned tactics employed by TYIJ members seemed to influence the opinions of some Tennessee legislators. For example, Representative Richard Floyd, the House Republican co-sponsor of the bill, was deeply moved by youths’ stories. For example, when he introduced the bill to the House Education Subcommittee in 2014, he gave an impassioned speech about why committee members should vote in favor of tuition equality. Although he was receiving pushback from his constituents, he believed that passing the bill was “the right thing to do.” While making this argument, Representative Floyd was moved to tears. Several members of TYIJ described Representative Floyd’s tearful speech as particularly a poignant and powerful moment in their campaign, and many were surprised to see a staunch Republican from rural Tennessee so moved by the plight of undocumented youth. Some youth suggested that this could mean there was greater openness to the bill than they originally anticipated (Giugni, 2011; Snow & Soule, 2010).

Building on the momentum created by Representative Floyd’s impassioned introduction of the bill, TYIJ members continued lobbying legislators and planned more actions and events to highlight the stories of undocumented youth. Despite the numerous organizing tactics employed by TYIJ members, by mid-March the youth leading the campaign were becoming concerned that the tuition equality bill would not make it out of either of the education subcommittees before their scheduled end-dates. In an effort to push for a vote on the bill so that it could move to the next level of debate in the Legislature, TYIJ staged an action that they hoped would generate enough attention to pressure committee members to vote on the bill. Several TYIJ members went to the Legislature dressed in their graduation caps and gowns. They entered carrying large checks with the cost of out-of-state tuition for various public universities in Tennessee or signs that read “Tuition Equality Now” and “We are the Future of TN.” Despite the creative nature of their action, the subcommittees did not bring the bill up for a vote that week. However, reflecting upon this action at a meeting, youth were energized by the fact that they were the center of attention and, as one TYIJ member articulated, “everyone was talking about us that day.”

Notwithstanding the collective efforts of TYIJ, Senator Gardenhire withdrew his bill on March 24, 2014 because he lacked enough votes for it to pass. Despite this setback, on TYIJ member suggested that the collective efforts of undocumented youth in Tennessee would not cease: “Immigrant youth have advocated for this bill for two years and we won’t quit until every student can pay a fair price for college. Our dreams are what’s at stake, and we will never give up.” Shortly after the bill had been pulled by Senator Gardenhire, Carolina reflected:

I knew it wasn't gonna pass, for the reason that we didn't have all the votes from the people that we needed, but I still had hope. But hopefully, we can try it again, and try, and try it, and try it, and hopefully one day, we can at least have that right to have equality of tuition.

Here, Carolina suggests that there may have been less political opportunity than perceived (Giugni, 2011), but that through the continued collective efforts of TYIJ, there may be a chance that the bill will pass in future legislative sessions.

Although several TYIJ members were disappointed that the bill was not voted on in either of the education subcommittees, many believed that misinformation among legislators about the bill (e.g., that in-state tuition would be a financial loss for the state rather than a gain) hindered its success. Despite the challenges they encountered during the 2014 campaign, TYIJ members highlighted many successes of the campaign. For example, members suggested that tapping into their in-person and online social networks was an important component of building a growing base of support for the bill. Also, they were proud of the numerous actions, events, and meetings that they led over the campaign period. In particular, they considered going to the Legislature in their caps and gowns a particularly powerful action, as it brought much attention to their cause. Furthermore, TYIJ members considered the regular media attention throughout the 2014 campaign as essential in bringing the issue of tuition equality to light. Finally, TYIJ members believed that one of the major successes of their tuition equality campaign was that it contributed to a discursive shift, as illustrated by the remarks of one member:

We changed the conversation. One of our goals this year was to shift the narrative about tuition equality, helping people to understand the issue and recognize the real impact of tuition policies on Tennessee students. And we succeeded. We were in the media several times every week during the legislative session, bringing [undocumented youths'] stories into living rooms across Tennessee. Journalists noted the changing tone and softening stance of legislators on this issue.

Their ability to change the conversation and garner the support of several legislators was a source of pride for many TYIJ members. TYIJ members stressed that during their tuition equality campaign in 2012, there were no similar victories.

In an attempt to build on the momentum generated in 2014, TYIJ launched the 2015 tuition equality campaign and youth members worked with Senator Gardenhire to reintroduce the tuition equality bill he brought forth in 2014. Undocumented youth employed similar tactics to the 2014 campaign by reigniting their social media campaign, continuing to share their personal stories and aspirations with legislators on a regular basis, and engaging in creative actions (e.g., dressing in graduation caps and gowns and greeting legislators as they entered the Legislative chambers). To the surprise of several TYIJ members, many more legislators voiced their support for the tuition equality bill in 2015. TYIJ members continued to exert pressure on members of the Legislature using the aforementioned tactics throughout the 2015 legislative session, thus ensuring that the issue of tuition equality remained a central topic of discussion among policymakers. The bill passed through all committees and in April the Tennessee State Senate voted in favor of the tuition equality bill,⁵ which was considered a significant success by TYIJ members. However, and the bill

5. 21 legislators voted "yes" and 12 legislators voted "no" in the Tennessee Senate

failed to pass the House floor by only *one vote*.⁶ As a result, another year passed in which undocumented youth could not access in-state tuition rates at public colleges and universities.

Despite the devastating reality of the tuition equality bill being one vote short of passing in 2015, members of TYIJ expressed hope and optimism that the bill would pass in 2016. Rather than reintroduce the bill in 2016, the bill could go straight to the House floor for a second vote on the same tuition equality bill that had been introduced in 2015. However, before the bill could go back to the House floor for another vote, it was necessary for 18 members of the Calendar and Rules Committee to vote in favor of doing so. TYIJ members again engaged in sustained collective action during the 2016 legislative session, however the 18 votes needed from members of this committee did not materialize. In informal conversations with members of TYIJ following the 2016 legislative session, several believed that the anti-immigrant rhetoric pervading much of the 2016 Presidential campaign influenced state legislators to withdraw their support for the bill or at least not publicly admit their support for it. One study participant remarked that several legislators with whom she talked during the 2016 session told her that it was too risky for them to vote for a bill that supported undocumented youth during an election year and that undocumented youth would find more support among legislators once the election had passed.

Unfortunately, this hope has not become a reality as of yet. During the 2017 state legislative session, the tuition equality bill was introduced again but did not pass through the House Education Administration and Planning Committee. One of the committee members who voted against the bill, Eddie Smith (R-Knoxville), attributed this to a shift in political discourse around immigration:

[with] the election of President Donald Trump I decided to vote against [the tuition equality bill]...I think we should give the new administration and Congress (time) to fix our broken immigration system before we act as a state on issues related to immigration” (Tamburin, 2017).

Despite such resistance from some state legislators, TYIJ members remain determined to fight for equal access to public institutions of higher learning in the coming years.

As illustrated above, TYIJ members have employed conventional forms of organizing, such as lobbying, to make their desire for tuition equality known to those in power. They then escalate to creative actions when political representatives seem to resist their demands or fail to act in favor of tuition equality. The actions undertaken by TYIJ have caused several legislators to change or become more committed to their stance on supporting tuition equality. However, these shifts, while impressive, have not resulted in the passage of a tuition equality bill as of yet. Moreover, several TYIJ members believe that the 2016 presidential campaign and the current presidential administration hampered some of the support they garnered from state legislators in previous years. Some TYIJ members also attribute the political resistance they have encountered to the conservative nature of Tennessee. Carolina contends:

As we know, Tennessee [has] more Republicans, so it’s more strict. And it’s really hard to at least convince them [to] at least to think about how immigrants have to deal with all of this. And it takes a lot of time to do it.

6. 49 legislators voted “yes” and 47 legislators voted “no” in the Tennessee House of Representatives; 50 “yes” votes were needed for the bill to pass in the House.

Similarly, Linda suggests that because of Tennessee's conservatism, statewide immigration policies are less likely to be influenced by the immigrant justice movement than federal policies: "Locally, it's pretty hard [to influence policy], I think, because it's a Republican state and they listen to Tea Partiers, and just the really radical right wing part of the party."

Continued efforts by TYIJ reflect Price and Diehl's (2004) assertion that despite "the South's long and difficult history, as well as the political ascent of the Right throughout the region," youth continue to organize in the South because although "change may be difficult ... it is possible" (p. 12). Although the tuition equality bill has not been passed yet, TYIJ has been successful in building substantial momentum around this issue over the years despite the setbacks they have faced. Moreover, their efforts over the past few years to promote tuition equality seem to have created a base of powerful supporters and generated public conversation about educational equity for undocumented students. As such, it remains the hope of several TYIJ members that despite the current presidential administration, state legislators can still be moved to support tuition equality. However, what remains to be seen is exactly how Donald Trump's presidency will influence the nature of statewide policies that affect the lives and well-being of immigrant populations. Notwithstanding the concerns among TYIJ members about the influence President Trump will have on immigration policy, undocumented youth in Tennessee are resolute in their commitment to continue fighting for educational equity.

Conclusion

Overall, many youth remarked that the emotional toll of navigating their immigration status in relation to future educational opportunities was particularly challenging, a finding that is reflected in other studies conducted in other states across the U.S. (Gildersleeve, 2010; Gonzales, 2016; Muñoz 2015; Rincón, 2005; Terriquez & Patler, 2012). Several youth suggested that the barriers to accessing post-secondary education caused them to become angry, distraught, or depressed. Although initially dispirited, many participants resisted the notion that the high cost of tuition would prevent them from gaining access to post-secondary education. Youth thus employed a variety of creative strategies to acquire post-secondary education considering these constraints, such as seeking out supportive institutions of higher learning, negotiating with university administrators, or finding ways to sidestep bureaucratic barriers. Such tactics illustrate the "critical hope" and determination of these students to find ways to secure access to a college education (Gonzales, 2016; Hinga & Conchas, 2015).

In addition to the individual level tactics employed by undocumented students to access post-secondary education, the youth in this study have also engaged in collective action to advocate for the right of all undocumented persons residing in Tennessee to receive in-state tuition. Via TYIJ, undocumented students across the state launched a tuition equality campaign in 2012 that has built momentum and garnered significant support among state legislators over the last few years. During this campaign, undocumented youth in Tennessee have engaged in a variety of creative collective tactics, such as sharing their personal stories with legislators and the media, delivering stacks of mock university applications to state legislators, or going to the State Legislature dressed in their graduation caps and gowns. Such actions represent an oppositional consciousness among undocumented youth in Tennessee that has ignited a powerful social movement (Mansbridge, 2001). However, with the recent wave of anti-immigrant rhetoric and policy priorities of the Trump administration, the ability to pass a tuition equality bill in Tennessee may become harder

to do in coming years. Despite these challenges, members of TYIJ have made it clear that they will not back down from the fight for educational equity any time soon.

Overall, we suggest that the individual and collective efforts of youth in Tennessee to increase undocumented immigrants’ access to post-secondary education provide an informative example of how youth are engaging in a comprehensive form of boundary politics and acting as agents of change within the educational landscape of Tennessee. It is hoped that this analysis can be extended to inform scholarly discussion of how the *combination* of everyday acts of resistance and the social movement participation of undocumented youth are influencing educational policy and practice in contemporary American society. Future studies could similarly examine the multiplicity of tactics used by undocumented youth to gain access to post-secondary education and how these tactics are shaped by local social and political contexts. Additionally, participatory action research could be employed more often in future studies to ensure that undocumented students are able to guide the analysis and dissemination of findings, as in the case of this study.

This article also hopes to inform the work of those engaging in movement-building work to address serious injustices. The tactics and strategies employed by TYIJ members to influence state policy are noteworthy, particularly as TYIJ has garnered impressive levels of support from legislators who were initially reluctant to vote in favor of tuition equality. Although tuition equality is not yet a reality in Tennessee, undocumented youth have “changed the conversation” by engaging in these collective efforts. Thus, an examination of the tactics used by TYIJ could be helpful to other social movements and collectives, particularly those operating in conservative social and political contexts. A final consideration for those engaging in movement-building work is the role that participatory action research could play in bolstering this work. As noted by members of the TYIJ Research Collective earlier, PAR democratizes the research process and generates important information that can be used to influence the decisions made by those in positions of power.

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