

Dreamers Unbound: Immigrant Youth Mobilizing

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One of the most important social movements in the United States is the undocumented youth movement (Dreamers). The movement has not been successful in passing the federal Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act. It has, however, worked closely with its allies to rack up an impressive string of local and state-level victories and pressured the Obama administration to pass Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) in 2012. This latter measure provided approximately 553,000 undocumented youths with temporary relief (two years) from deportation.¹ DACA was an important victory in its own right, but it also provided the legal and political precedent for the broader immigrant rights movement to push for a similar measure to cover all undocumented immigrants residing in the country (“DACA for all”). The Dreamers also helped politicize large segments of the undocumented youth population while inspiring thousands of older immigrants to take a more assertive and contentious stance in asserting their rights to stay in the country. Youths and adults now undertake high-risk civil disobedience actions including chaining themselves to the White House, blocking deportation buses, occupying offices of national politicians, and engaging in hunger strikes, among other things. The importance of the Dreamers should therefore be understood broadly: they have achieved gains for undocumented youths, and they have unleashed political and legal dynamics that stand to alter the status of the broader undocumented population. Such dynamics contributed to an executive order introduced by President

Obama on November 17, 2014 to provide temporary residency to an expected four to five million immigrants with tenuous legal status.

This article highlights contrasting moments in the movement’s development. The first reflects a strategy of the “bounded Dreamer,” aimed to construct political messages that stressed the “deservingness” of this specific population and an organizational infrastructure that instilled disparate youths with discipline when making arguments in the public sphere. The second reflects the strategy of the “unbounded Dreamer,” enabling the incorporation of youth activists into other mobilizations and struggles, especially the anti-deportation campaigns of recent years (2011–2014). The Dreamers in this latter instance are less bound to the tight framing categories of the earlier strategy, feel freer to express broader and more contentious arguments, and make much more use of informal organizations and social media to organize their political work. This article identifies these two strategic moments and assesses the factors that helped the transition from the former to the latter.²

The Bounded Dreamer

The “bounded Dreamer” reflects a strategy developed by large, nationally based advocacy organizations and their political allies during the 2000s. The strategy aimed to create a tight discursive

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frame and organizational structure to produce a sympathetic voice for this population.

The period spanning the late 1990s and early 2000s was a particularly difficult time for undocumented immigrants.³ Anti-immigrant sentiments were high during the 1990s, and the Clinton administration responded by ramping up border security with Operation Gatekeeper in 1993; restricting welfare entitlements with the Personal Responsibility Act (1996); and strengthening employer sanctions, lowering the threshold for deportable offenses, and expediting deportation procedures with the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act.⁴ The legal climate worsened after September 11, 2001. In addition to passing five restrictive laws, the Department of Homeland Security introduced twelve different measures to strengthen borders and facilitate the detection and deportation of undocumented immigrants.⁵ These measures helped accelerate deportation rates from 200,000 immigrants per year in the mid-2000s to 400,000 by the end of the decade.

[The Dreamers movement has] worked closely with its allies to rack up an impressive string of local and state-level victories.

The effort to legalize the status of undocumented youths arose in this particularly inhospitable context. The National Immigration Law Center (NILC) worked with congressional allies to draft a piece of legislation that targeted this exceptionally “deserving” subgroup of undocumented immigrants. The DREAM Act was introduced in 2001. Subsequent efforts to pass the bill never succeeded to win a full congressional vote. DREAM Act advocates (NILC, Center for Community Change, and congressional allies, among others) orchestrated a campaign to win broad support for the measure. Leading advocates worked to create a strategy that would clearly communicate the unique challenges facing this group to a public that was generally quite hostile to undocumented immigrants. They believed gaining support in a hostile and uncertain context required a disciplined, tight, and maximally sympathetic messaging campaign. A former United We Dream leader stressed, “You have to say these things because we are trying to reach people in

Iowa, Missouri, Utah, and North Carolina. If you want to reach these people, you have to stick close to the talking points because they work really well with people in these places.”⁶

[Early DREAM Act advocates] believed gaining support in a hostile and uncertain context required a disciplined, tight, and maximally sympathetic messaging campaign.

The framing strategy rested on an effort to cleanse the youths of the stigmas attributed to them while simultaneously stressing the attributes that made this group exceptionally deserving of the right to stay in the country. One former youth activist remarked, “We’re basically debunking all the stereotypes, promoting ourselves as people with good character—to counter all the bad stereotypes of immigrants.”⁷ The strategy rested on three basic frames or messages⁸: First, the leading advocacy organizations stressed the conformity of youths with *national* cultures and values. Reflecting this frame, a former activist with United We Dream argued, “Maybe our parents feel like immigrants, but we feel like Americans because we have been raised here on American values.”⁹ They maintained the youths were full Americans in everything except their social security numbers. Second, the youths were portrayed as the “best and the brightest” who stood to make an important economic contribution to the country. The image of the straight-A immigrant student also rebutted the stereotype of immigrant youths as delinquent. Last, advocates sought to assert the innocence of the youths and exonerate them of their “illegality” by stressing their status was “no fault of their own.” The framing strategy outlined who the Dreamers were and drew the symbolic boundaries that distinguished them from others in the broader immigrant population. It asserted that the attributes (cultural assimilation, economic contribution, innocence) shared by these youths made them exceptionally deserving of a right to stay in the country.

There was an important organizational component to the strategy. The lead advocates believed an organizational infrastructure was needed to train youths to employ and disseminate the frames in a clear and consistent way.

NILC helped form the national organization United We Dream in 2007. It became a site where national rights associations worked with youths to produce the core messages of the campaign. Working alongside United We Dream, large regional-level immigrant rights organizations (Los Angeles, Chicago, New York) helped create their own organizations for undocumented youths. The Center for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles (CHIRLA) was particularly effective in this respect and organized a statewide network made up of campus-based support groups for undocumented students (the California Dream Network). By providing intensive training in communications and storytelling, this top-down organizational infrastructure was decisive in recruiting youths and training them to campaign and make their public arguments in similar ways.

Whereas framing helped mark the symbolic boundaries of the Dreamers, the organizational strategy helped connect disparate youths to one another and provide them with a common way to talk, think, and feel about their position in the United States. The organizations, in other words, helped transform disparate undocumented youths into the group of the Dreamers, a group bound by social, organizational, emotional, and discursive ties. The strategy helped create a bounded Dreamer: a group with bright lines distinguishing it from other immigrant groups and a group with unique and exceptional attributes.

The strategy of the “bounded Dreamer” was politically effective. By 2010, a majority of Americans (54 percent) supported legal status for Dreamers, while half (50 percent) continued to favor decreasing the number of all immigrants in the country.¹⁰ Americans were not signaling an end to restrictions for all immigrants but only those with the attributes (assimilated, economic contributors, innocent) associated with Dreamers. Immigrants who failed to possess such attributes were still considered to be problem populations, which made them targets of repression and exclusion rather than exoneration.

Boundary Breaking

The original strategy was successful in winning support, but the sharp discursive boundaries

and the top-down organizational structure introduced conflicts within this campaign that would ultimately spell its undoing.

Many undocumented youths felt estranged by the tight and bounded representation of the Dreamers.

The group was differentiated from other immigrants on the basis of its deservingness. The strategy helped reinforce a cleavage between good (deserving) and bad (undeserving) immigrants rather than criticize and deconstruct it. This raised alarm bells among some of the more critical activists (both youths and older immigrant activists). Many undocumented youths also felt estranged by the tight and bounded representation of the Dreamers. For example, one Dreamer we interviewed stressed he did not have the luxury to express his pride for Mexico because he was undocumented. He explained that if he showed his Mexican side too much, he would never be considered an American or a “real Dreamer.” Other youths felt that the Dreamers did not relate to their experiences:

I really didn't care about school at some point, because it was hard, it was draining. So I actually just barely ended up graduating high school. I know most Dreamers have the story of, “I was the school valedictorian, like I was the top of my class.” But for me it was really tough to concentrate right and to put that effort into school when all that stuff was happening.¹¹

Many students had great difficulty finishing high school because of high poverty rates (approximately 30 percent lived below the poverty line¹²) and the common belief that their unauthorized status made completing high school futile for advancing opportunities.¹³ The gap between what was said about this group and the lived realities of actual working class, inner-city youths without legal authorization helped create feelings of distance and sometimes resentment with the bounded image of the Dreamer.

While tensions surfaced about the public image of the Dreamer, youth activists also began to criticize the top-down way of

organizing the youths. This critique overlapped with frustrations concerning the strategy of the leading advocacy organizations. National advocacy organizations (Center for Community Change, National Council of La Raza, NILC, Center for American Progress) in 2009 and 2010 believed an opportunity existed to resuscitate the Comprehensive Immigration Reform Act (CIRA). Many youths and some of their allies saw no opportunities for such a reform on the horizon. Lacking a realistic opening, the youths believed the movement should shift the goal and support the more achievable DREAM Act. The leading advocacy organizations balked and continued to push for comprehensive reform.

This sparked an effort by dissident Dreamers in Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York, Phoenix, and other cities to start their own campaign to pass the DREAM Act. The youths believed it was time to embrace aggressive, public, and confrontational tactics. Their first major action, on May 17, 2010, was the occupation of Senator John McCain's office in Arizona by four undocumented students. This was followed by a string of occupations, hunger strikes, long marches, and other forms of direct action. They moved away from privileging large and peaceful demonstrations saturated with American flags and began to embrace more targeted, smaller, and confrontational forms of direct action (with fewer flags). The aim now was to find pressure points and cracks in the system, target them with incessant direct action, and hope to pry these cracks open into real political opportunities for broader policy reforms. The youths also introduced new frames that stressed "coming out" in public (sponsoring "coming out of the shadows" events), their lack of fear ("undocumented and unafraid"), and their multiple identities ("undocuqueers"). The campaign resulted in the passage of the DREAM Act in the House of Representatives, but it ultimately failed to overcome a Republican-led filibuster in December 2010.

The rebellion by undocumented youth activists was directed at the discursive and organizational underpinnings of the previous strategy. One leading youth activist explicitly criticized the sharp symbolic boundaries created around the public figure of the Dreamer: "It's taken a

whole decade to build a movement that is not hinged on the non-profit industrial complex framing our stories in ways that are damaging and containing our migrant bodies in neat boxes with pretty labels."¹⁴ Another group of leading youth activists from Los Angeles criticized the power dynamics of the top-down organizational structure "because if we accept and embrace the current undocumented student movement, it means the social justice elite loses its power—its power to influence politicians, media, and the public debate. The power is taken back by its rightful holders."¹⁵

The Unbounded Dreamer

Whereas the "bounded Dreamer" emphasized the narrow boundaries that distinguished youths from others in the immigrant population, the "unbounded Dreamer" blurred these lines and stressed broader identities, ties, and goals. Many Dreamers are as politically active as ever but are no longer bound within the categorical and organizational limits of the past. This fluidity allows them to cut across movements (undocumented immigrants, labor, community, LGBTQ, and so on), develop new alliances, and play vibrant roles in a variety of social justice campaigns. From 2011 onward, Dreamers have become the most active and aggressive elements of the undocumented immigrant rights movement.

What explains this departure from Dream-specific organizing? This departure stems from innovative moves by leading dissident Dreamers and relations with other organizations in their broader activist networks. First, youth activists from the National Immigrant Youth Alliance (NIYA), who helped lead the rebellion against the advocacy organizations in 2010, embraced a campaign to protest state-level anti-immigration measures and push back on the Obama administration's deportation policies, whereas the leading immigrant rights organizations continued to target Republican lawmakers in Congress. In November 2011, NIYA initiated a "Week of Action" targeting Alabama's anti-immigration law, which resulted in the arrest of fifteen protesters (youths and older immigrants). This campaign made NIYA a central player in the Dreamers movement, reinforced the use of direct action tactics, and made government

restrictions and deportations a central focus of new campaigns.

Second, the National Day Laborer Organizing Network (NDLON), the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund, and the Downtown Labor Center at the University of California–Los Angeles all played crucial roles in supporting the dissident Dreamers during 2010. The Labor Center had long established itself as major source of support for Dreamers in Los Angeles, and its director, Kent Wong, worked hard to connect youth activists to the leadership of the AFL-CIO and leading voices of the civil rights movement. He also worked closely with Dreamers to place activists in internships in a variety of social justice organizations throughout the country. NDLON also played a crucial role. Soon after 2010, it launched a campaign to fight the Obama administration's central tool for detecting and deporting undocumented immigrants: Secure Communities. Secure Communities required state and local police to cross-check fingerprints of arrestees against Homeland Security's databases. For those flagged for possible immigration violations, Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents could request local enforcement officials to hold the person for federal immigration agents. Dreamers from Los Angeles were encouraged to participate in the coalition against Secure Communities. The Dreamers were happy to do so because they believed in the cause. They also felt an obligation to demonstrate they were not "selfish" youths only interested in legalizing their particular status.

We know that we are part of communities and families and we will have to ask for their solidarity. We also know that we have been supporting our communities with anti-S-Com [Secure Communities] work and that we have put a lot of our time and energy into that. In response to these critiques, we should mention our involvement in these actions and should respond to the selfishness argument by claiming that we're doing anything that pushes the pro-immigrant agenda.¹⁶

In addition to encouraging Dreamers to partake in this and other coalitions, NDLON went on to hire Dreamers as lead organizers in several

anti-enforcement and deportation campaigns unfolding in California and the country. Thus, these organizations provided Dreamers with a structured path to move beyond the boundaries of the past in politically satisfying ways.

Some Dreamers became organizers in organizations like NDLON, but many also created and sustained their own autonomous organizations. United We Dream remained powerful within the general movement and has gone on to assert its independence within it. In addition to the national organization, there was a rapid proliferation of new alliances, smaller organizations, and informal groups that reflected the varied ideological and strategic preferences of youth activists. These other political collectivities have been held together through personal and social media networks. These networks are used to build a sense of groupness and commitment among the activists, and they permit the flow of information, ideas, discourses, and repertoires between them. For example, in the Los Angeles region, smaller groups have proliferated throughout the metropolitan region. Dream Team Los Angeles and the Orange County Dream Team initiated a first round of organizational splits in 2011, breaking away from the California Dream Network. These Dream Teams quickly encouraged other dissident youths to create their own Dream Teams and construct a statewide network. Soon thereafter, strategic and ideological disagreements triggered activists to break from their association with the Dream Teams and start their own groups. The process encouraged youths to create relatively small and plural groups that remained largely informal. They have used whatever resources at their disposal, relied almost exclusively on voluntary labor, and met in whatever spaces available to them. In spite of tensions, disagreements, and splits, most youth activists have retained working relations with their comrades and have been quick to show high levels of solidarity for pivotal actions.

Social media and new communications technologies (e.g., Skype, Twitter, Facebook, Reddit, Instagram, Live Streaming) have also provided powerful vehicles to stay constantly connected to others. They can talk to distant comrades on a daily basis, diffuse messages and mobilization frames, launch massive media campaigns, and disseminate powerful videos and images at

almost no cost. For example, in an ongoing study of Twitter activities associated with the Not One More campaign, we are finding that a number of activists with no connections to offline groups have become very active on Twitter.¹⁷ They create their own tweets using pre-existing hashtags, redirect messages to strategic targets (politicians, adversaries), and re-tweet messages to their own network of followers. The fractured and permeable world of social media provides these youths with ample opportunities to join the movement and assume important roles within it.¹⁸ Thus, whereas once a handful of formal and hierarchical organizations dominated this social movement space, now there are smaller organizations, groups, alliances, and networks being created by the day.

The fractured and permeable world of social media provides youths with ample opportunities to join the movement and assume important roles within it.

As Dreamers have become more drawn into anti-deportation and enforcement campaigns, their public frames shifted from stressing the attributes that made youths uniquely deserving of legality to frames stressing why all undocumented immigrants deserved a right to reside in the country. In our *New York Times* database on immigration policies and protests, 24 independent statements (out of 292 statements) can be attributed to Dreamers in 2014. Of these statements, only one mentions the exceptional qualities of undocumented youths, and this statement was made in response to Republican threats to retract DACA. All other statements reflected the general push to pressure the Obama administration to extend administrative relief to the general undocumented population. The following statement reflects a framing strategy that has become indistinguishable from other anti-deportation activists: “The president’s latest broken promise is another slap to the face of the Latino and immigrant community.”¹⁹ Full-time activists have moved beyond Dream-specific frames and only deploy them when political adversaries have threatened the group.

Public frames shifted from stressing the attributes that made youths uniquely deserving to stressing why all undocumented immigrants deserved a right to reside in the country.

The Dreamers are more active than ever, but they are no longer bound to Dreamer discourses or particular organizational structures. Self-identified Dreamers have become extremely influential in recent anti-deportation campaigns, as volunteer participants, coalition partners, and paid organizers. They have gone on to become a major force in the campaign (Not One More) to extend DACA to all undocumented immigrants. We are finding that United We Dream is a major coalition partner, the lead organizers are Dreamers, and that Dreamers from across the country have been most active online and offline.²⁰ In terms of Twitter activities using the #not1more hashtag, Dream-associated organizations have, by far, been the most active participants in the campaign.

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Notes

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2. The article stems from an earlier project on the undocumented youth movement. This research drew upon semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and a newspaper claims analysis. More research on recent developments is grounded in an extensive claims analysis of the *New York Times* (2000-2014 using the keywords “immigration policy” and “immigration protest”). This has yielded a database of more than three thousand statements by different stakeholders

- on a range of issues concerning immigrant politics. The research is also informed by an ongoing analysis of a recent anti-deportation campaign (Not 1 More, 2013-2014) and Twitter feeds associated with it. These news and Twitter sources have been combined with additional conversations with key activists (Dreamers and others).
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