

Higher Education: A Dream for Undocumented Students

Education is always one of the most controversial topics when it comes to discussions in the government and within students. But who is right about the importance or significance of education? It is really difficult to come up with a specific understanding of higher education since everyone has its own perspective on it. Many see education as a way of obtaining jobs with higher pay, and others see it as a way of becoming someone superior in life. However, there is a group of individuals that have their unique way of defining “higher education”. These individuals are the undocumented students. They perceive higher education as a dream that is significantly difficult to achieve, yet not impossible. They face many obstacles in their journey to obtaining a higher education, but they seem to never give up. This shows their motivation and perseverance in becoming productive people in life. But who has the right to deny the opportunity of a higher education to these students? Instead of pushing them away from their own dreams, undocumented students should have the same opportunities and benefits as any other student trying to seek a higher education.

It will be impossible to experience what undocumented students struggle unless you are in their position. Undocumented students certainly did not choose to be “illegal” as they are referred by many. A significant portion of all undocumented students were brought to the United States without their consent. Their parent brought them here at an early age; therefore they did not know whether it was the correct thing to do. Most of them do not even know they are undocumented until they want to apply for college. This is when they realize that they be treated differently from other students and that obtaining a higher education will be a great challenge.

Sara Hebel, the writer of the article “Educational Benefits to Illegal Immigrants Are a Hot Presidential-Campaign Topic” points out that “...the debate over illegal immigrants and whether they should be granted access to such benefits as cheaper, in-state tuition rates and federal student aid has been fraught with emotion and political peril.” But why is there such a debate if the only thing that differentiates “undocumented” students from “legal” students is a social security number. Besides that, a significant portion of these students have the potential, motivation and desire of obtaining the education that will make them productive individuals just as any other legal student. They obtain high grades in high school and meet all the criteria to be admitted into the UC’s or CSU’s systems. But having all these requirements is not enough for undocumented students. Different from other students, they have to face different boundaries when pursuing their “American Dream” of obtaining a higher education.

The word “undocumented” is the boundary that builds that barrier between the students and their education. Being undocumented means having restrictions when it comes to attaining the opportunities of an education beyond high school. These students are not able to obtain the same benefits as other students even if they are working as hard or even harder. Not having legal documents limits them from obtaining any type of financial aid. They are unable to acquire any type of federal or state aid; therefore, they are financially challenged.

Every student that attends a four year college or university has to go through this challenge. In his periodical article “New Book Exposes Undocumented Students’ Struggles,” Wilson includes a true story concerning an undocumented student’s struggles.

“When Mario Escobar was getting a double major in Chicano studies and Spanish literature at the University of California, Los Angeles, money was so tight he often went

to class hungry and wore clothes from Goodwill that didn't quite fit. As an undocumented student, Escobar wasn't eligible for financial aid or loans”.

This is an example of some of the hardships that these students have to struggle in a daily basis. It also shows that undocumented students are willing to deal with any obstacle that they might face throughout their journey of achieving their dream.

On October 21 2001, Governor Gray Davis passed the California Assembly Bill 540 also known as AB540. This bill allowed undocumented students to pay in-state-tuition. For example, the student would pay approximately \$4,500 annually for in-state-tuition compared to \$11,350 annually for non-residents. In order to be eligible for this bill the student had to fulfill a certain criteria. This criterion included that the student must have attended a California high school for at least 3 years, have graduated with a diploma from an accredited high school, must be enrolled in a institution of higher education and has applied to obtain a legal status. Even though this bill was undoubtedly helpful, it was still not enough for undocumented students. Paying for tuition, books, and other expenses is too much for these students. Some of them postpone their education for a couple years to save up in order to afford it, and some go to debt for thousands of dollars. What undocumented students need is the support of the government by providing them with financial assistance.

“Senator Gilbert Cedillo authored the California Dream Act (SB 65). This proposed state legislation requests that the University of California system, and requires that the California State Universities and California Community Colleges, establish procedures that permit students who are exempt from paying nonresident tuition (under AB 540) to participate in all financial aid programs administered by the State of California to the fullest extent consistent with federal law” (Amaya, etal). The dream of the undocumented students came true when Jerry Brown signed the

DREAM Act. “The bill, passed Sept. 2 by the Legislature, would give illegal immigrant students about \$40million in financial aid and fee waivers. Anti-immigration groups say the legislation makes even less sense when considering California's financial plight” (USA Today).

As Dr. Jim Riggs and others supporters of the undocumented students, I also believe that a higher education should not be denied to anyone status no matter their leg. In the conference held at the University of Stanislaus Dr. Riggs mentioned how he did believe that undocumented students deserved and opportunity to receive financial benefits and that he supported the DREAM Act. No one will ever know what these undocumented students can provide to this nation unless they are given the opportunity to show it. Maybe one of these students will invent the cure for cancer, but if they don't have the support from anyone then they will never have the chance to us how productive and efficient they can be if they obtain a higher education.