

EDUCATORS FOR FAIR CONSIDERATION

THE CASE FOR UNDOCUMENTED STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

INTRODUCTION

“It’s remarkable for undocumented students to even apply to college. I mean, we come from another country; we have to learn English; we face a lot of adversity; and we still graduate from high school and apply to college. Who would be a better candidate for a scholarship? If we get just a little help, then I think we’ll become some of the strongest students and most successful people. I don’t see us as risks; I think of us as smart investments.”

–Irving, a student profiled in E4FC’s film American Dream Seekers and now a UC Modesto graduate

Every year, tens of thousands of students who have grown up in the United States graduate from high school with little means to participate in American society. Although they have played little to no role in their family’s decisions to emigrate to or remain in the United States without legal status, they face tremendous social, financial and legal barriers. Nearly 40% of undocumented students live below the federal poverty level.ⁱ Most live in constant fear of deportation and involuntary family separation. While federal law guarantees them a free public K–12 education, they face intractable challenges when pursuing higher education. For example, in most states they are required to pay out-of-state tuition at public colleges and universities (at over 1.4 times resident tuition).ⁱⁱ Even in California, where many undocumented students are eligible for in-state tuition, they do not qualify for state or federal financial aid, including grants, work study and government loans.

Because of their ineligibility for government financial aid, most undocumented college students depend primarily on private scholarships. Unfortunately, funding is scarce. Undocumented students are not eligible for most private scholarships, which typically require US citizenship or permanent legal residence. In this publication, we hope to encourage high school counselors, college counselors, scholarship providers and other education funders to consider the merits of these hard-working, high-achieving students. We wish to show that these youth are some of the most industrious students America has to offer, that they are powerful role models in our communities, and that we can expect their complete, legal integration in society in the near future.

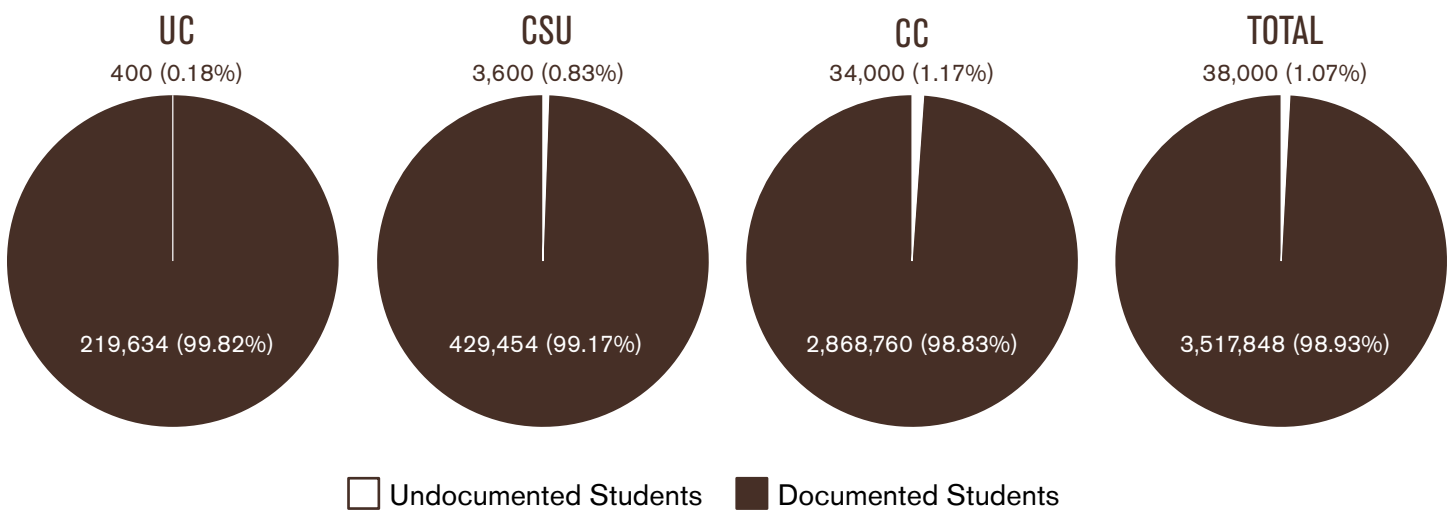
It is our most sincere belief that *all of us* would benefit from helping undocumented students contribute meaningfully to this country.

UNDOCUMENTED STUDENTS WHO PURSUE HIGHER EDUCATION HAVE PROVEN THEY CAN SUCCEED.

Only a small percentage of undocumented students ever pursue higher education. The Urban Institute estimates that one-fifth to one-sixth of undocumented immigrant students drop out of high school every year.ⁱⁱⁱ Only 65,000 undocumented immigrant students graduate from high school every year,^{iv} and of these high school graduates, only 5-10% go to college.

Undocumented students make up an even smaller percentage of students attending California colleges: only about 1-2% of the total population at all UCs, CSUs and community colleges.

UNDOCUMENTED STUDENT ENROLLMENT IN CALIFORNIA COLLEGES



Using enrollment data from various sources for the years 2007–2010^{vi vii viii ix x}

Undocumented students who pursue higher education constitute a small group of extremely talented and motivated youth who have already overcome multiple, unique obstacles. They have had to leave their homelands and everything they knew as children. They have had to learn English and assimilate to a new culture. They have excelled in school despite having few (or no) family members to guide them.

Here's what one educator says about Luis, one of E4FC's New American Scholars and now a freshman at UC Berkeley:



“Luis comes from an economically disadvantaged background but has not let this hold him back from exploring different opportunities to improve himself. His family of six is financially supported by his father and they all live in a one-room studio apartment in Oakland. Neither of his parents have a college education; only his father finished high school. Despite family hardships, Luis continues to nurture his aspiration to use higher education as a means of overcoming his current personal circumstances. He has excellent work habits and self-discipline. He is attracted to challenging opportunities that rigorous college life will present.”

—Dr. Judith Ned, Executive Director of Stanford Medical Youth Science Program

WE WANT THE MOST ENTREPRENEURIAL AND INDUSTRIOUS STUDENTS TO ATTEND OUR UNIVERSITIES.

“We must take advantage of the extraordinary talents of undocumented students. These are exceptional young people who have overcome incredible challenges to gain admission to great universities like UC Berkeley. As a society, we should do everything we can to support these top students who have earned the right to a college education.”

–UC Berkeley Chancellor Robert J. Birgeneau

Between 1980 and 2005, companies that were 5 years old or less created virtually all net new jobs in the U.S. Over the last decade, about 25 percent of successful high-tech start-ups, including Google and Sun Microsystems, were founded or co-founded by immigrants. Historically, immigrants—high-IQ risk-takers rich with creative energy—have played an instrumental role in making America prosperous.^{xi} The promise of an outstanding education has brought many of these immigrants to the United States.

Making it difficult for undocumented students to attend college in the United States encourages them to consider options elsewhere. With US colleges and universities competing to attract talented international students from all over the world, why should we encourage some of our most industrious American students to study elsewhere? We should hold onto undocumented students—some of our best and brightest homegrown talents.

Here’s what one educator says about Marco, one of E4FC’s New American Scholars and now a senior at UC Berkeley:



“Through my ten years at UC Berkeley, I have instructed close to three thousand students. I would consider Marco within the top 1% of those students I have worked with, both in terms of aptitude but most importantly his attitude. As testament to this ability and Marco’s efforts, I also agreed to be a co-faculty mentor for his honors thesis. At a time when all faculty are stretched extremely thin, I still could not imagine not supporting Marco in this UC Berkeley endeavor, not only because he is a joy to teach, but also because his intellectual creativity challenges my own scholastic work”

*–Victoria Robinson, American Cultures Coordinator &
Senior Lecturer in Ethnic Studies at UC Berkeley*

UNDOCUMENTED STUDENTS ARE POWERFUL ROLE MODELS.

Undocumented students in higher education are role models for younger family members, friends and neighbors, many of whom are legal permanent residents or US citizens. In particular, nearly 2.3 million undocumented families, about three-quarters of those who are here illegally, have at least one child who is a United States citizen, according to the Pew Hispanic Center. Nearly 400,000 of them have both citizen and noncitizen children.^{xii} Through their success and determination, undocumented students inspire a whole generation of students to do well in school, think positively about their communities and neighborhoods, and become engaged, informed members of society.

Claremont University Professor William Perez found that undocumented students in California (in UCs, CSUs, and CCCs) exhibit higher than average levels of community and civic activity.^{xiii} Through participant observation and in-depth semi-structured interviews, he concluded: “The unique experiences [of being undocumented] have led some of them to develop leadership skills and an orientation towards community service. Moreover, leadership experiences in school have provided the necessary skills to actualize their organizing and advocacy pursuits.”^{xiv}

Here’s how Miriam, a student profiled in E4FC’s documentary film *American Dream Seekers* and now a graduate of Mills College, explains how she mentors her younger documented siblings:



“Here’s what I tell my younger siblings: Maybe I don’t get federal aid. Maybe I have to pay more because I don’t get a lot of money. But I’m still going to college. I’m still making it through. Being undocumented—or being an immigrant—isn’t going to stop me. And nothing should stop them. Whatever obstacles they may reach in their lives, they shouldn’t give up on what they want to do. My dream of going to college and being a successful woman is being accomplished. I want to show them that nothing should keep them away from their dreams or their goals, whatever they might be.”

UNDOCUMENTED STUDENTS AFFIRM OUR AMERICAN BELIEF IN THE VALUE OF HARD WORK.

“This steady stream of hardworking and talented [immigrants] has made America the engine of the global economy and a beacon of hope around the world.”

—President Barack Obama

Undocumented students in higher education are not asking to be given anything. They just want the same consideration as other students who have also studied hard and are now ready to apply to college. Despite facing unique financial obstacles in their pursuit of a college degree unlike their American citizen peers, they remain resilient. Helping them pursue their dreams of higher education proves that the United States is still a country that values hard work and rewards that hard work with increased opportunities.

Here’s what one educator says about New, one of E4FC’s New American Scholars and now a freshman at UC Berkeley:



“New takes his academic career very seriously and has exceptional time management skills. It is impressive to consider the fact that he received all As in his classes last semester, since, judging by his homework and in-class performance, it seems as though he devoted every moment of his time to my class. I am convinced his motivation in terms of achieving his academic and professional goals will not wane. His enthusiasm for academia and willingness to engage in learning both in and beyond the classroom setting is inspirational.”

—Melissa Etzler, PhD Candidate at UC Berkeley

UNDER FEDERAL LAW, ALL STUDENTS—REGARDLESS OF CITIZENSHIP OR RESIDENCY—ARE ENTITLED TO AN EDUCATION.

The Plyler v. Doe (1982) Supreme Court case prohibited states from denying undocumented children a public K-12 education. According to the ruling, denying them that education would create a “lifetime of hardship” for undocumented children and a permanent “underclass” of individuals.

The Supreme Court decision makes clear that undocumented students deserve access to an education and social mobility. A high school diploma may have once been enough. However, the structure of the US labor market has changed in recent years. Today, a “high school diploma creates fewer opportunities for those entering the labor market. Arguably, the ticket to social and economic mobility has increasingly become a college degree.”^{xv}



“I’ve heard some people say that undocumented students are taking away other students’ opportunities. But I can’t take those students’ opportunities, no matter how hard I try. I don’t think I’m stealing anything. I’m just making my own path and fighting for my own opportunities. And I believe that’s why I deserve a chance.”

—Ingrid, E4FC Ambassador and now a senior at Stanford University

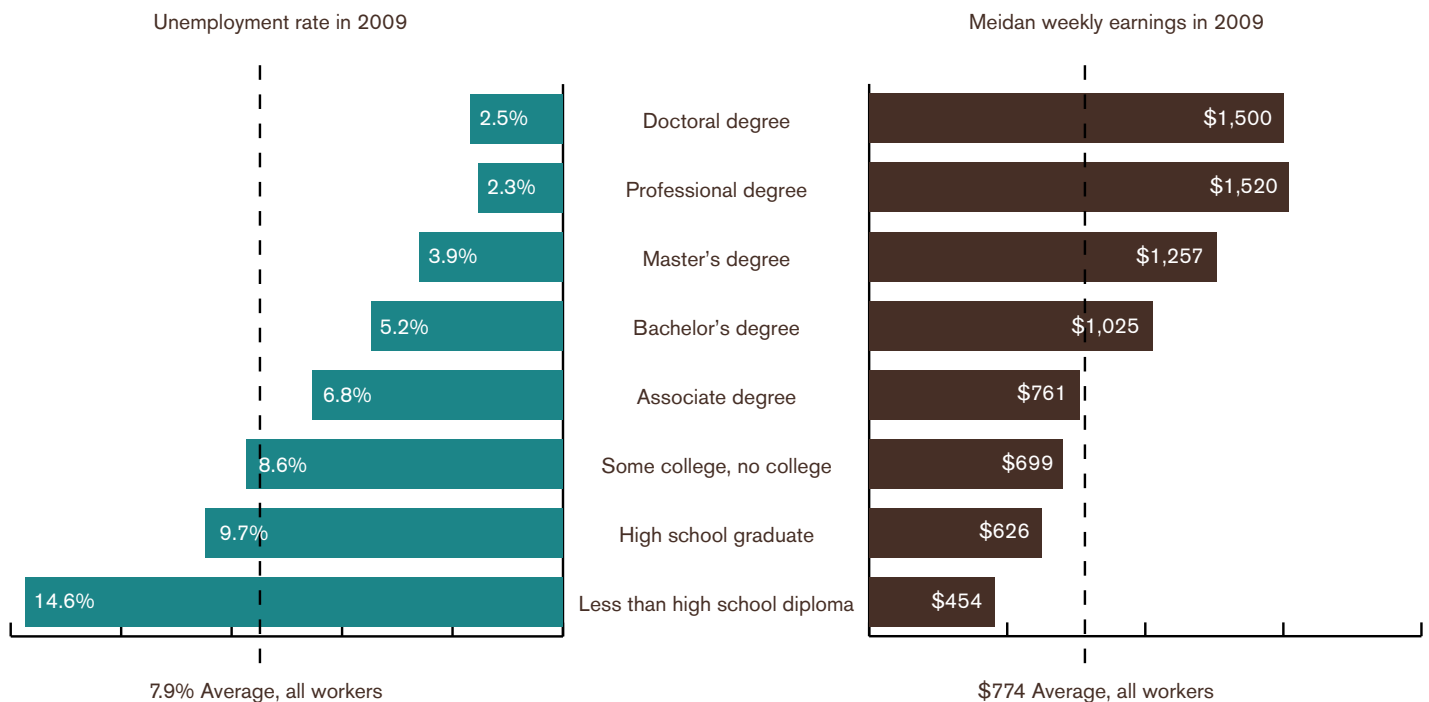
WE HAVE ALREADY INVESTED IN THESE STUDENTS' EDUCATIONS AND SHOULD MAXIMIZE THE DIVIDENDS.

Since many undocumented students in higher education were brought to the United States when they were young, we have already invested considerable resources in their primary and secondary educations. In order to realize this investment, we should help undocumented students pursue higher education so they can work and participate meaningfully in our society. With college degrees, they will be able to contribute substantially more in taxes, support their families, and be less likely to receive government assistance.

A 1999 RAND study found that, though raising the college graduation rate of Hispanics and African Americans would increase spending on public education, these costs would be offset by savings in public health and welfare expenditures and increased tax revenues resulting from higher incomes.^{xvi} A 30-year-old Mexican immigrant woman with a college degree will pay \$5300 more in taxes and require \$3900 less in government expenses each year compared to a high school dropout with similar characteristics.^{xvii}

A bachelor's degree affords recipients higher wages and a lower unemployment rate, as shown in these Bureau of Labor Statistics figures.^{xviii}

EDUCATION PAYS



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey

WHEN THE DREAM ACT PASSES, STUDENTS WILL HAVE A PATH TO LEGAL RESIDENCY AND WORK.

“The DREAM Act would throw a lifeline to these students who are already working hard in our middle and high schools and living in our communities by granting them the temporary legal status that would allow them to pursue postsecondary education. I believe it is in our best interest to educate all students to their full potential.”

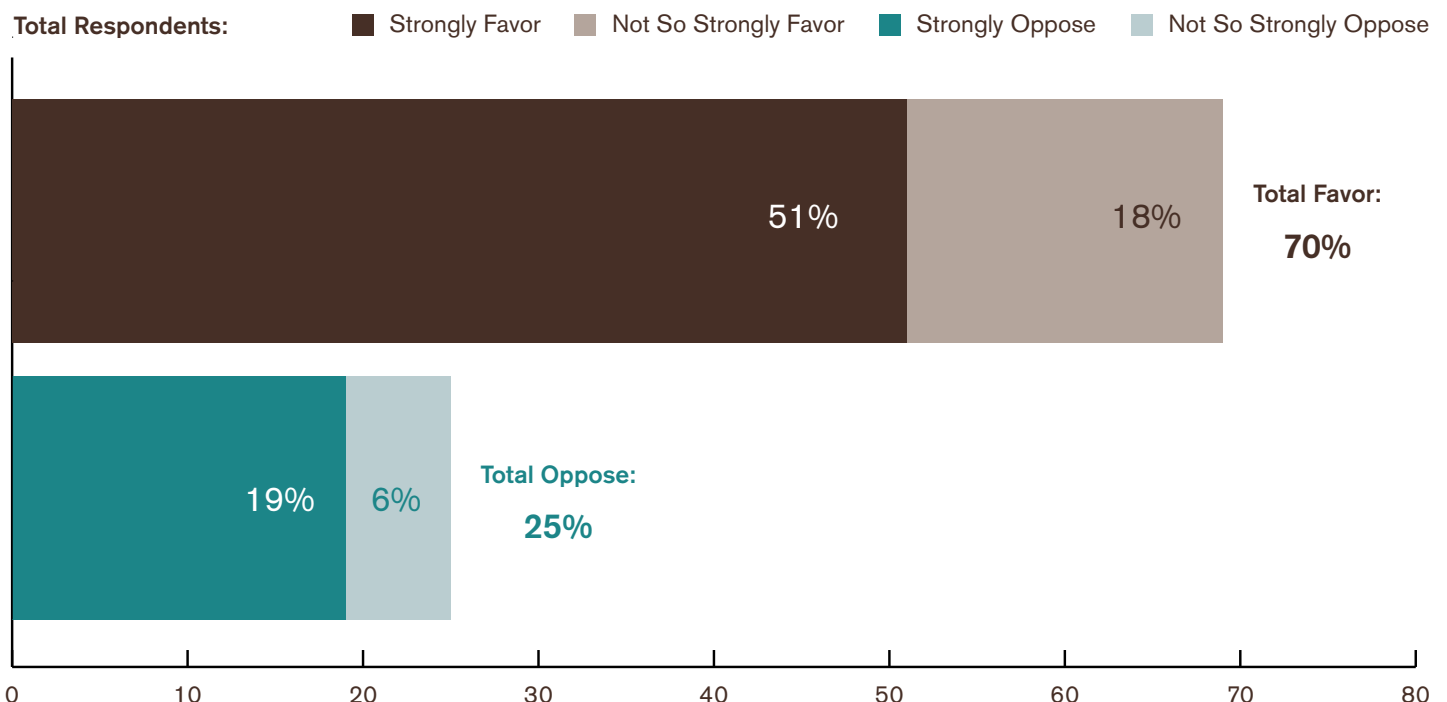
—Harvard University President Drew Faust

The DREAM Act would extend conditional legal status to undocumented youth who meet the following criteria:

- » Entered the United States before age 16
- » Have been continuously present in the United States for at least five years prior to the legislation's enactment
- » Have obtained a high school diploma or its equivalent (i.e., a General Education Development diploma or GED)
- » Are less than 35 years of age.

After the six-year period, students with conditional status could apply for lawful permanent residence if they have a) obtained a degree from an institution of higher education, completed at least two years in a program for a bachelor's degree or higher, or honorably served at least two years in the US military; and b) have maintained good moral character while in conditional resident status.

The DREAM Act is likely to pass in the near future. Proposed in 2001, the bill continues to gain bipartisan support and now enjoys the support of both the House and Senate leadership and President Obama.^{xix} In addition, a recent opinion poll conducted by Opinion Research Corporation (ORC) using a national probability sample of 1008 adults found the following public support for the DREAM Act:



Poll Source: http://www.firstfocus.net/sites/default/files/dreampollbreakdown_0.pdf

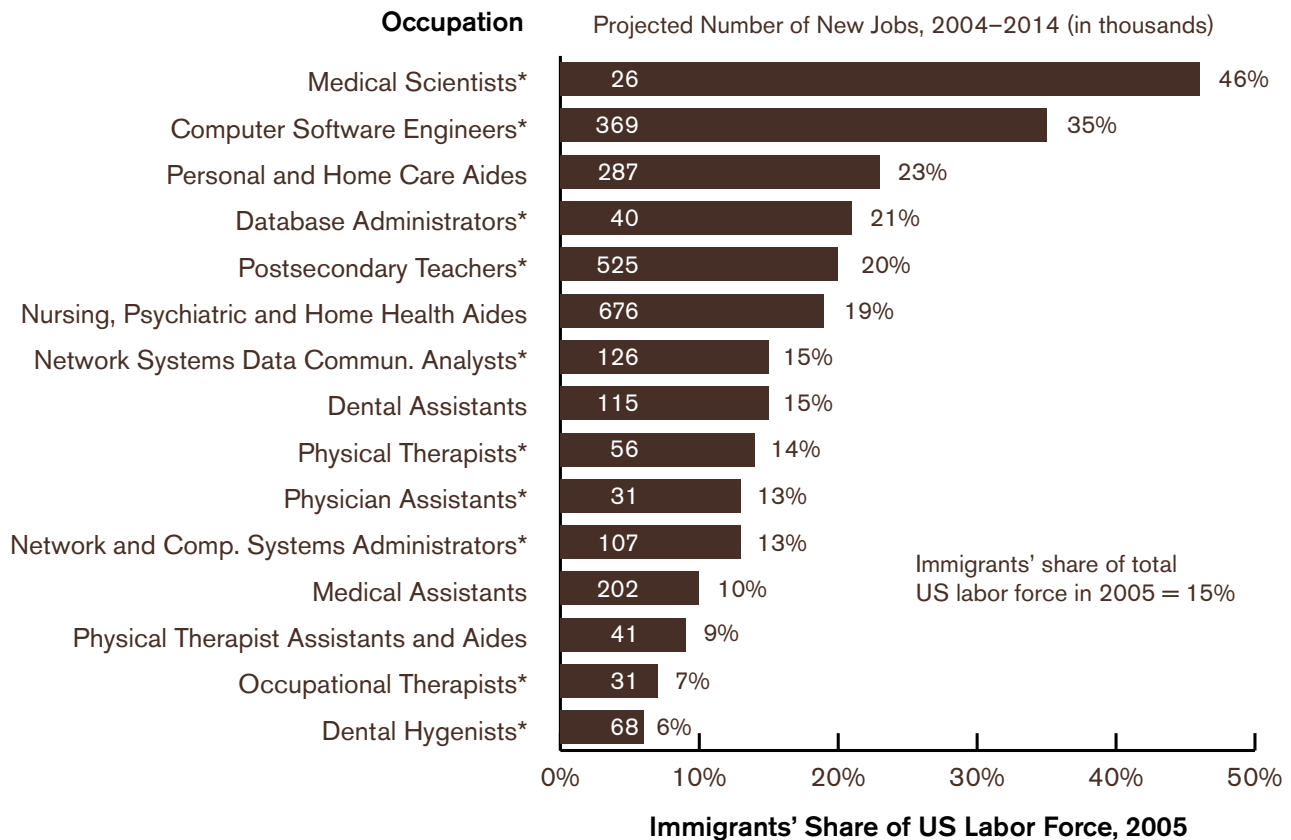
UNDOCUMENTED STUDENTS ARE AN IMPORTANT PART OF OUR FUTURE ECONOMIC STABILITY.

The coming decades will see a significant shortage of highly skilled workers in the US labor force. We need undocumented students to graduate from college, get well-paying jobs, pay taxes, and contribute to our future economic stability.

During the last two decades, fewer and fewer native-born workers have been available to join the US labor force. As the overall rate of growth in our labor-force has declined steadily, immigrants have played a larger and larger role. Their importance will continue to grow in the coming years. As the Bureau of Labor Statistics shows, a significant percentage of immigrant workers currently make up the occupations predicted to grow the fastest in the next few years. Some researchers estimate that immigrants and their children will be responsible for the entire growth of the US labor force between 2010 and 2030.^{**}

Many of our fastest-growing occupations will rely on highly educated workers. By investing now in the higher education of undocumented students, we will enable them to fill these important jobs in the future.

IMMIGRANTS' SHARE OF US LABOR FORCE IN 2005 IN THE 15 OCCUPATIONS PROJECTED TO GROW FASTEST DURING 2004–2014



*Requires an associate degree or higher.

Sources: Bureau of Labor Statistics, "2006–2007 Occupational Handbook," Table IV–1. Occupational employment and job openings data, 2004–14 (<http://www.bls.gov/emp/optd/home.htm>); American Community Survey 2005

CONCLUSION

“All I yearn for is an opportunity to give back to this country that has given me so much. I want to prove to everyone that nothing is impossible if you reach for the sky. I am the first out of my 156 cousins to apply to college.”

–Christian, E4FC New American Scholar and now a sophomore at UCLA

College-ready undocumented students have proven they can succeed academically despite seemingly insurmountable social, financial, and legal barriers. Indeed, they are some of the most industrious and entrepreneurial students our country has to offer. They also serve as powerful role models in our communities, paving the way to higher education for siblings, cousins, neighbors, and friends. Their hard-won success affirms our belief in the value of hard work and education.

We believe undocumented students should be given the financial support they need to pursue higher education, quickly becoming a requirement for social mobility in this country. We are confident that the DREAM Act will pass in the near future and these students will finally be able to live and work legally in this country. By giving them the financial means to pursue higher education, we are realizing the investments we have already made in their primary and secondary educations. We are also positioning them to contribute meaningfully to our future economic stability.

Undocumented students need us. We need them.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

FERMÍN MENDOZA was born less than two miles south of the Rio Grande in Tamaulipas, Mexico and immigrated to the United States at the age of four. A Public Policy major at Stanford University, he has advocated for undocumented youth through the Stanford Immigrant Rights Project and as an intern with Educators for Fair Consideration. He has also advocated for LGBT rights as a member of the Stanford Students for Queer Liberation and as a former volunteer in the “No on Proposition 8” Campaign.

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ABOUT US

EDUCATORS FOR FAIR CONSIDERATION (E4FC)

E4FC’s mission is to help immigrant students realize the American dream of college and citizenship. Specifically, we provide direct support and advocate for low-income immigrant students who have grown up in the United States but face challenges due to financial need and immigration status. We offer a uniquely tailored suite of programs and services to address the financial, legal, political, professional, and socio-emotional needs of low-income immigrant students who do not yet have permanent residency or citizenship in the United States.

For more information about Educators for Fair Consideration (E4FC), please visit www.e4fc.org.

SOURCES

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