



The Limited Effect of the U.S. Federal Government's "Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals" Program on Higher Education for Undocumented Youth

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The 3.6 million undocumented youth who live in the United States cannot legally work, vote or benefit from most types of public services. But they share a dream with other young Americans — that education will provide a stepping-stone to a better future. Undocumented youth, however, have a harder time attending college. Although they have a constitutional right to attend public schools from kindergarten to high school, the cost of attending college is higher for them than for their age peers. In 32 states, undocumented youth who reside in the state are denied in-state tuition prices and must pay for college at much higher out-of-state or international student rates. Undocumented immigrants cannot receive federal college aid; and in most states, they are not eligible for state-funded financial aid programs either.

Despite such barriers and costs, many undocumented youth are enrolled in college. They represent some of the most determined, resilient and academically talented youth because they had to jump higher hurdles to even make it to campus. Once in college, undocumented students attain higher grades and are more likely to graduate than their peers. But their difficulties do not end at graduation, because without work authorization, they have very limited job prospects and struggle to find work that matches their skills.

In June 2012, President Obama enacted the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals — called DACA for short — which provided two-year, renewable work permits and relief from deportation to eligible undocumented young people who were brought to the country as children by their parents. DACA status allows many recipients to find better paying jobs, open bank accounts, and obtain drivers' licenses. They can thus escape poverty and make their way in American society.

Proponents hoped that DACA would encourage investments in higher education and thus boost social mobility, but those results have been considerably hampered by the specifics of DACA protections and persistent uncertainties about its political future.

Why Hoped-For Positive Effects on Higher Education Have Been Limited

DACA has increased the high school graduation rates of undocumented youth — because attaining a high school diploma (or equivalent) is an eligibility requirement for the program. However, DACA caused many undocumented youth to leave college to work. At community colleges, DACA spurred many undocumented students to take fewer classes and switch from being enrolled on a full-time basis to being enrolled on a part-time basis. At four-year colleges, DACA has encouraged many students to leave school entirely so that they can work to support themselves and their families. Ironically, the undocumented students who have decided to take fewer classes or leave college are often some of the most academically talented and engaged students. Because it provides temporary work authorization even as college costs remain unaffordable, DACA discourages some of the most academically successful students from investing in higher education.

DACA recipients are often the only ones in their families who can legally work. Because seven in every ten families headed by undocumented parents lives at the poverty level, many DACA youth who gain new legal work opportunities face pressure to take immediate jobs that can boost their families. In contrast to four-year colleges, community colleges are designed to accommodate working students by offering lower costs and more flexible class schedules, so DACA recipients in these institutions are not as likely as those in four-year colleges to leave school entirely. Many undocumented students at four-year colleges simply drop out after DACA took effect.

The temporary nature of DACA protections also matters. Unlike the proposed Dream Act — which if adopted would offer pathways to citizenship for eligible youth — DACA provides two-year, renewable work permits but no opportunities to obtain legal residency. Moreover, because DACA was instituted by executive action under President Barack Obama (rather than being enacted by Congress), any subsequent President may be able to rescind the program, as President Donald Trump is now trying to do, pending the outcome of court challenges.

Because DACA might be ended altogether, and because its work authorizations are short-term and need to be renewed, recipients cannot know if they will be able to work legally in the future. DACA has only temporarily suspended the threat of deportation, given that recipients are not protected as permanent legal residents or citizens. Recipients have little ability to plan and invest in their long-term future with any degree of certainty.

What Can Be Done?

Extending pathways to legal residency would encourage undocumented youth to attend college and invest in education. With legal residency rights, undocumented youth would know with certainty that they could legally work after they graduate from college, as well as attend college without fear of deportation. They would have the freedom to pursue their dreams along with other young people raised in the United States. For these opportunities to become available, however, Congress must pass the Dream Act or extend alternative pathways to legal residency for undocumented youth.

If the federal government cannot muster the political will to achieve comprehensive immigration reform, then state legislatures can take steps to improve the fate of undocumented youth by offering them access to state financial aid. Currently, only a few states like California and New Jersey have taken steps to extend state-level financial aid to resident undocumented youth. But many states lag behind — including states like New York and Illinois who host some of the largest share of undocumented immigrants. States could do more to encourage college attendance among undocumented young people — and they have to step up if the federal government remains hostile or gridlocked.

Read more Amy Hsin and Francesc Ortega, “The Effect of Immigration Status on the Educational Outcomes of Undocumented College Students” (Working Paper, 2018).