

(This is an informative paper about the DREAM Act, with my personal experience included.)

# THE DREAM ACT/STUDENT ADJUSTMENT ACT

by BETSY GARCIA

Immigrants have been living in the shadow of the powerful and almighty government of the United States of America for centuries, and judging by the way the government is headed, it will stay this way for decades to come. Once an "alien" steps foot into the U.S.A. illegally, he/she is automatically under the lion's paw. One must live in the shadows, taking low-wage jobs with a scarce chance of ever advancing in social or economic status. With the hope that coming to America will be the salvation to their lives, immigrants come into the great United States undocumented, knowing that applying for a visa is a long process, which they do not have time for. Parents put all of their hope and dreams on their children's shoulders once they arrive, hoping that some day their children will live the American dream that they once strived for. Students are faced with an extremely limited opportunity of getting through college, and good jobs are scarce due to lack of Social Security. Through all the hardships one has to face, some immigrants manage to get by with a life as close to their dream as they can possibly get.

Education is one of the biggest issues when it comes to immigration. Speaking from a first-hand experience, being an undocumented immigrant has been tough. My family came to the U.S. when I was only 2 ½ years of age. Like any other normal child, I started off preschool at the appropriate age and now I have made it all the way to being a successful junior in high school. I am very proud of all of my achievements. I am currently the only Hispanic member of the Forks National Honor Society, which only contains about 20 high school students out of the 350 students in our school. (350 is an estimate) Most immigrant children in the U.S. came into the country at a very young age, and obviously this was not a decision that was put into their hands. The Washington State Constitution states, "It is the paramount duty of the state to make ample provision for the education of all children residing within its borders, without distinction of preference on account of race, color,



caste, or sex." Because of this ruling, every child has the opportunity to get an education from kindergarten to 12<sup>th</sup> grade without any cost to the child or the child's family. This is definitely one of the strongest parts of the U.S. government and democracy. Like any other students, immigrant students have the opportunity to get into college, but paying for college is made much harder. Many students, not only undocumented immigrant minorities, have trouble paying for college, but "illegal students," cannot receive financial aid, loans, or any other form of money through the government. Luckily in some states, such as Washington, certain types of financial aid are available. House Bill 2709, passed in 2004, made it possible for undocumented immigrant students, who are aspiring to be teachers, to apply for a full tuition scholarship that would cover their cost of

college for up to five years, and allow them to receive a visa. Students wanting to apply for this have to agree to teach in Washington State after graduating. The award has to be paid back with interest if the student does not teach in a classroom with the need of a bilingual teacher. Fast web is the most recommended source for scholarships. For U.S. citizens, fast web is the perfect place to go, but for undocumented students simply finding scholarships that they can apply for is a tricky and difficult task. When I set my search on fast web, I came up with sixty-seven results; unfortunately, I could only apply for three of them because all of the others required one to be a Legal Permanent Resident (LPR). As the American Civil Liberties Union of South California (ACLU) put it, "Current laws lock undocumented students out by barring them from financial aid programs and requiring that they pay "out of state" rates."

I am an undocumented immigrant. As I said before, I have attended school for thirteen years. I was planning to keep going for about four to six more years, but unfortunately there has recently been a tremendous twist in my life. Due to immigration problems, our family is now going back to Mexico, which is the same exact place my father and mother turned their back on many years back in hope that they could have a better life for us, their children. As of now, my future does not seem to hold much. My father was injured at work and is now being paid by Labor and Industries. My mother works at the local preschool and only makes enough money to pay for her arthritis medicine. I feel a lot of pressure because I know that soon I am going to be expected to help pay for family bills and other necessities. Whether I am accepted into a community college or



the best university in the U.S., it is likely that I will end up with a simple house cleaning job, all because I lack a Social Security Number and was brought into the U.S. by my parents who only wanted a better life for me.

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For most undocumented immigrants, community college is the only way to go because universities are much too expensive. It is not possible to apply for tuition waivers, loans, or any other financial aid. Scholarships are the only way to go. In addition, for "us", undocumented immigrants, any degree, professional or not, does not guarantee a good job or enough money to support a family. Still, many go to school hoping that one day they can live a better life than their parents. Most undocumented students choose to drop out or not go to college because they know that college will demand a lot of money for an outcome that will most likely be useless. If The DREAM Act passes, my life, along with those of many other immigrant students, will completely change. The major part of this bill is that students can become LPR's if they obtain the conditional residency for six years, graduate from a two-year college, and study toward a bachelor's degree, serve in the U.S. army for two years, or perform 910 hours of community service.

The Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors Act (DREAM) is a bill that would allow students to more easily pay for college. This act is a bipartisan bill introduced in the Senate as the DREAM Act, September 2003, by Orrin Hatch (Republican of Utah) and Richard Durbin (Democrat of Illinois). Rep. Chris Cannon along with fifteen Democratic cosponsors and fifteen Republican cosponsors introduced the bill in the House on April 9, 2003 as The Student Adjustment Act. To receive the benefits of this bill, one must have been brought to the U.S. before the age of 16, received a high school diploma or GED, gained acceptance into a college or university, lived in the U.S. at least five years before the bill passes, have good moral character, and must not have a criminal record. Currently 50,000-65,000 undocumented students graduate from U.S. high schools every year. Most of these students have been living in the U.S. for more than five years and have to face a very limited opportunity to complete their education or work legally in the U.S. Many believe that these students, that have been put in this position because their parents came into the country undocumented, should



have the same rights as other students to federal, state, and government education benefits. This bill would give undocumented students those rights, and it would also give students with good moral character the opportunity to apply for legal residency. Dropout rates would dramatically decrease, and the number of taxpayers would increase. This bill acknowledges that these children did not have a voice in coming to the U.S. and that it is wrong to blame them for an immigration status that was put on them by their parents. The DREAM Act would give these students the same opportunity to do well in school as any other student in the U.S...no more and no less.

The September eleventh attacks drastically changed the direction that immigration laws were headed. In the years 2000 and 2001 legislation seemed to be headed in a favorable direction for immigrants, but the "security measures" taken after 9/11 crushed most of the hope that was still present in many immigrants. Basically, during the few months before the Sept. 11 attacks, legalization for undocumented immigrants was most favorable than ever before.

It was estimated by the president of Purdue University, Martin J. Jischke, that there was a reduction of 30% in 2004. According to Senator Richard Lugar, in the past 2003-2004 academic year there was a total of about 12.8 million students in U.S. universities. Of them, about 600 million were immigrants that contributed about 12,900 million dollars to the U.S. economy. The following statement is from a sample letter at ACLU; "Undocumented immigrant students...have grown up here and know the U.S. as their home, but their lives are filled with uncertainty, because they cannot regularize their immigration status."

Overall, undocumented immigrants in the U.S. have had a great effect on this country in both a bad and good way. It is difficult to decide which stakeholders are right and which are wrong. Our government has been struggling with immigration for years and will keep struggling with it for many more to come. Many people are afraid that giving residency to an undocumented immigrant will only lead to an extreme growth of undocumented immigration flow into the U.S. Others think that it will help "heal" our economy. As Chung-Wha Hong, director of the coalition for immigrants, said: The American dream starts "with justice and opportunities for the entire world." You can make a difference. Simply send a letter or postcard to your senators with your view on this issue, and I assure you that your opinion will not be disregarded.