



Guiding the way to higher education

The DREAM Act/The American Dream Act: Educational Benefits

National Association for College Admission Counseling

The DREAM Act (S 2075) and the American Dream Act (HR 5131) are bills currently pending in the 109th Congress. This legislation was conceived to remedy the situation faced by undocumented students who have legally attended and graduated from high school in this country, but for whom the law provided no clear paths to higher education or citizenship. The DREAM Act has enjoyed bipartisan support in the past, and similar legislation is in effect in ten states, with successful results. The DREAM Act would:

Improve Access to College

The DREAM Act would allow qualified undocumented students to be eligible for in-state tuition in the states where they graduated high school, providing they meet certain criteria, including national service and pursuing legal status. Currently thousands of undocumented students graduate from high school each year, many at the top of their class, who are prepared for and interested in pursuing higher education but cannot afford to do so. Because undocumented students are ineligible for state or federal financial aid, allowing their eligibility for in-state tuition would significantly improve college access. Research shows that access to financial aid improves college access for all students, from all socioeconomic backgrounds. Eligibility for in-state tuition would be the only financial aid option for undocumented students.

Reduce High School Drop Out Rate

The DREAM Act is the only federal policy that would significantly affect the drop out rate nationwide. Since the tuition and citizenship benefits of the DREAM Act would only be available to high school graduates, the legislation provides a powerful incentive to stay in school. The DREAM Act provides a variety of opportunities for higher education, citizenship, and employment for students that currently have few, if any, postsecondary options, and instead drop out to pursue unskilled, low-paying (and often illegal) employment.

Increase Educated Workforce

Over 80% of the 23 million jobs that will be created in the next 10 years will require postsecondary education (ACE, 2004). Currently, only 36% of all 18-24 year olds are enrolled in postsecondary education (NCES, 2004). Providing clear, legal paths to higher education, citizenship and employment for undocumented students will have a significant positive impact on the workforce of the future. Additionally, research shows that a more educated workforce leads to increased earnings (and subsequent increase in state and federal tax return), lower crime and poverty rates, and fewer demands on public assistance programs.

Increase Revenue for the States

Ten states have passed legislation similar to the DREAM Act, and have not seen an influx of immigration, the displacement of other students in higher education, or a drain on the education system, as many critics have feared. The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board conducted a study of their undocumented student population after enacting a law similar to the DREAM Act in 2001. The study showed a significant increase in postsecondary enrollment of these students – nearly 10 times greater from 2001 to 2004, with most enrolling at community colleges. While the percentage undergraduate students in Texas that are undocumented is small (although Texas has the second largest population of undocumented individuals in the country), the study still showed several thousand students paying tuition to state institutions that would not have prior to the 2001 passage of the law.

Make Federal Policy Consistent

The Supreme Court ruled in 1982 that undocumented minors are not responsible for their immigration status and are therefore entitled to elementary and secondary education. The DREAM Act would repeal a federal law that discourages states from providing in-state tuition to these students. This contradiction represents a wasted investment for the states, who have educated these students through high school but can't benefit from their tuition dollars or contributions to the economy or tax revenue.