

SWARTHMORE COLLEGE

A Letter in Support of the DREAM Act to Senator Arlen Specter

Date: March 1, 2010

To: Senator Arlen Specter

From: Jovanna Hernandez, Jusselia Molina, and Evelyn Fraga

Student Leader for Proposal: Jovanna Hernandez

The Honorable Arlen Specter

United States Senate

Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Senator Specter,

I am writing as a constituent to urge you to reintroduce S 729, the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act (DREAM Act) of 2009, as a stand-alone bill. This bill addresses problems faced daily by many talented students who, like my older sister, were brought to the United States illegally at a young age.

My sister was only 12 months old when my parents brought her to California; she did not know that she was breaking the law and that 17 years later her residential status would hinder her pursuit of the American dream. Like many other undocumented students, my sister was not aware of the effects her status could have on her future. Growing up in an immigrant community among her American-born classmates, she saw no difference between herself and them. She dressed the way they did, spoke English and Spanish like they did, dreamed American dreams, and was unconsciously developing a proud American identity. But reality intruded when she started her college applications and was asked to input her social security number. At that very moment, to which I can attest, her hopes to attend college and become a psychologist were dashed.

Although my sister graduated at the top of her class and is currently attending UCLA, she struggles every day by having to work 50 hours a week for minimum wage in order to support herself and to pay for tuition and books. She also commutes at least three hours a day by public transportation and studies all hours of the night to maintain her GPA, getting little sleep. My sister, along with all undocumented students struggling to graduate American high school and attend college, may never have the opportunity to attain the American dream—to pursue a career of their choosing, to apply their knowledge in the service of others, and to participate as full members of society. However, the DREAM Act can, with one legislative stroke, change this bleak future by providing hope and restoring faith to both undocumented youth, including my sister, and in the equitable nature of the American political system.

The Legislation

Each year, 65,000 talented youth graduate from American high schools to confront their illegal status. To them, college education is economically inaccessible and their many challenges include the inability to afford an education, find internships, and foster their academic potential.

These circumstances are discouraging and consequently 46,000-52,000 undocumented students drop out of high school annually because they do not see where their future is going. The DREAM Act can mitigate this frustration by the favorable results it produces.

The DREAM Act rewards good character and moral conduct, which will be tested through a criminal background check. The DREAM Act states that if undocumented students meet all the requirements -- be between ages 12-35, arrived in the United States before age 16, resided within the U.S. for at least 5 consecutive years, and obtained a high school diploma or its equivalent -- they can be granted a six-year period of conditional residency status, by which they would be able to work, drive, and travel legally. During the six years, beneficiaries are to complete an associates or bachelors degree, or choose to serve a two-year military term.^[1] Importantly, beneficiaries will qualify for low-interest student loans and federal work-study, making higher education affordable. Furthermore, my sister and other promising undocumented students will have more time to study since they will not have to work as many hours, and they will be able to drive and therefore save commuting time. After the six-year conditional residency period, eligible students will be able to petition for permanent residency status and, thus, finally become full members of American society. The DREAM Act reinforces the principle that education is key to future generations, and to our nation's success.

Economy

The DREAM Act can substantially benefit the U.S. economy. Since more people will be employed at higher-paying jobs, there will be a significant increase in the income of the affected immigrants that will consequently stimulate spending and investment. The DREAM Act will also stimulate new tax revenues. A 1999 study showed that an immigrant woman with only a high school diploma would contribute \$42,000 more in taxes if she graduated from college; she would also reduce by \$3,900 expenses the government pays for criminal justice or welfare.^[2] The gains from increased levels of education would result in an additional \$8.6 billion in income.^[3] Higher earnings for newly legalized workers would increase tax revenues by \$4.5-\$5.4 billion in the first 3 years, as well as increase consumer spending by enough to support 750,000-900,000 jobs in the U.S.^[4] Studies show that legalized workers also open bank accounts, buy homes, and start businesses, which even further stimulate the U.S. economy. The National Immigration Law Center claims that Social Security revenues will also benefit by \$407 billion since more people will be paying taxes.^[5] This economic trend is evident from the results of 1986's Reagan-era Naturalization Act, which was shown to dramatically improve income.^[6] What our economy needs is exactly this: more highly-educated youth.

Opposition

Some might argue that the DREAM Act will cause an immigration influx. However, this is impossible because the act clearly states that immigrants must have been at least 16 years old at the time of its enactment and lived here for at least 5 consecutive years. This disqualifies new immigrants. Also, the DREAM Act does not take away money from U.S. citizens; beneficiaries qualify only for student loans and federal work-study, not federal financial aid.

A more controversial issue is whether the DREAM Act discriminates against U.S. citizens who are charged out-of-state tuition when they attend a college outside of the state in which they grew up. I emphasize, however, that students' undocumented status means they cannot access in-state tuition even in the states in which they reside. Therefore it is not discrimination but rather

recognizing the injustice undocumented students have to overcome by having to pay out-of-state tuition without any help. Some critics might also claim that this bill grants amnesty to people who were never held accountable for a crime that was committed, but we should not hold children accountable for the decision that their parents made.

Support S 729

As President John F. Kennedy said, America was founded by immigrants and it has prospered as a powerful nation because of hard-working immigrants. It is important to honor our heritage by enforcing the right to obtain an education to efficacious students who are classified as undocumented but who merit educational support. Undocumented students are not asking to win the lottery, but rather to have the opportunity to gain access to society. The DREAM Act would grant them this opportunity while boosting the economy, and would reinstitute the phrase “Anything is Possible” for many of the undocumented students who have lost hope.

The city of Philadelphia has publicly supported this legislation as has the University of Pennsylvania, and I expect that Swarthmore College will soon follow. Please give this bill your most serious consideration.

Sincerely,
Jovanna Hernandez
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[1] http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=110_cong_bills&docid=f:s774is.txt.pdf

[2] Research And Development (RAND)
http://www.nilc.org/immlawpolicy/dream/Econ_Bens_DREAM&Stdnt_Adjust_0205.pdf

[3] <http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/just-facts/economic-benefits-immigration-reform>

[4] <http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/just-facts/economic-benefits-immigration-reform>

[5] http://www.ehow.com/about_5541185_policy-analysis-dream-act.html

[6] <http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/just-facts/immigration-reform-and-job-growth>