Undocumented College Students: Not a Burden

I was born in the United States, but I feel like much less of an American since I grew up in Haiti. Although I am not personally an undocumented student, I understand the immigrant experience. So, when Professor Wilber gave the essay topic, I knew I would be writing about the issues that those students with no legal paper who have been brought to the United States as children face. They adopted the American culture and embraced the country as their own. Undocumented college students should benefit from in-state tuition across the country as allowing so will decrease the incrimination attributed to those students, increase college attendance rates as well as their hope in a better future, and improve the economy.

Some states recognize the importance of providing undocumented students with a cheaper cost of college. In this case, we are referring to the undocumented students who came to the United States as infants and had no power over their fate. According to Kristina Rogan in her article, “Defining Residency: in-State Tuition Implications for United States Citizens Who Are Children of Undocumented Immigrant Parents,” there are twenty states, including Florida, that offer in-state tuition to undocumented students (186). Since the Supreme Court ruled that it is up to the states to decide on the cost of college for undocumented students, those twenty states found loopholes in federal legislations such as the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PROWRA) and the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant
Responsibility Act (IIRIRA), which both “limited the eligibility of undocumented immigrants for state and local public benefits,” to support their stance on the matter (Rogan 183, 184, 187). However, in these states, the undocumented students must fall under some criteria; they must have entered the United States as youths and lived in the state for a period (Rogan 185).

Nevertheless, Katherine Mangan states in her article “Undocumented Students Can't Simply 'Fix' Their Status” that there are ways for the undocumented to obtain citizenship such as getting an employer to sponsor an immigrant employee, being a victim or a witness of a serious crime or marrying a United States citizen (A23). It is important to note, though that in each case, the process remains lengthy. Therefore, the remaining states that limit undocumented students should provide them the support they need at least in one area, their education. That benefit might even help the undocumented in their path towards citizenship.

Initially, granting undocumented students with in-state tuition will decrease the incrimination attributed to them. In other words, if students who grew up in the United States with no legal papers receive in-state tuition from universities, people may slowly stop blaming them for their parents’ decision to come here illegally in the first place. Rogan states, “The Supreme Court noted that withholding benefits from undocumented students ‘direct[s] the onus of a parent’s misconduct against his children.’ Such legislation does not comport with fundamental conceptions of justice” (182). Those students are not their parents and should not be held responsible for their mistakes. It should not be when undocumented students decide to go to college that they realize that the law “treats them as indefinite accomplices to a crime committed when they were toddlers” (Johnson 16). Also, Eric Johnson expresses the unfairness of the policies regarding undocumented students inability to obtain in-state tuition in some states in his article “The Moral Absurdity of Denying Financial Aid to Undocumented Students,” “If the
daughter of a drug addict shows up at my financial-aid night seeking aid and advice, I congratulate her on overcoming a tragic obstacle. But the daughter of a fieldworker who hiked across the Arizona desert a decade ago? I'm supposed to turn her away” (16). What these adolescents are going through is not fair to them as all they are asking for is for open doors when it comes to their education.

These undocumented students have lived in this country practically their whole life but are alienated as if they made the decision to come illegally in the first place. They are as American as the children they went to secondary school with and who were born here. They grew up in the American culture and became patriots. Getting in-state tuition will show them that we acknowledge that they belong here and are not criminals for growing up here illegally. As a society, we would be missing on “the generational leadership we’re going to need in a demographically changing America” (Johnson 16). The documented students in the country should learn to accept those other teenagers and the lawmakers should understand that the United States is becoming more and more diverse and that it should remain the welcoming country that the Founding Fathers wanted it to be. It is not because the undocumented are a minority in the country that they do not count; there should be a reform in the education system.

In addition, lowering the cost of college for undocumented students will motivate them to attend college and push them to become the dedicated professionals they aspire to be. According to Nienhusser et al., in their article “BRIDGING THE GAP: Guiding the College Search of Undocumented Students,” “[A] mere 25 percent of undocumented immigrants between the ages of 25 and 64 have either attended college or received a postsecondary education degree, compared to 53 percent of documented immigrants and 62 percent of individuals born in the United States” (31). If the states that do not grant undocumented students in-state tuition started
allowing them to do so, the percentage of undocumented students to attend college would increase as most of them do not have enough funds to pay for the out-of-state tuition. Those states should start creating programs in universities to support the undocumented in order to attract and support those students and make them feel welcomed. Rogan underlines, “States allowing illegal immigrants to pay in-state tuition have seen, on average, a thirty-one percent increase in that population’s college attendance rate, as well as a fourteen percent decline in undocumented high school dropouts” (192). It is important to underline that usually colleges seek hard-working and dedicated students and most of the time, undocumented students fall into that category but are limited by their status. “Every politician … has called for more graduates in science and mathematics, more young people with solid career ambitions and the drive to succeed in higher education” (Johnson 16). By pushing away many of those students we are decreasing the nation’s chance of actually having those graduates. With a degree they would have the opportunity to pursue a career of their dream. Undocumented students already have the devotion and big dreams; they only need at least one open door to do wonders in this country and succeed the way they are meant to.

Furthermore, undocumented college students contribute to the growth of the United States’ economy. Rogan states, “A more educated society can benefit the economy as a whole; it leads to increased earning potential and decreased reliance on public assistance” (179). The more people with at least a college degree, the more qualified employees there will be and therefore, the more money a country makes. There is a correlation between the number of people who attend college and the growth of the economy of a country. By limiting the undocumented students’ ability to pursue a post-secondary education, we are also putting limits to our nation’s economic growth.
However, many people believe that undocumented immigrants are a burden to our economy, and that they want benefits without contributing to the economy’s growth. Opposing this popular belief, “A study by the Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy entitled *Undocumented Immigrants’ States and Local Tax Contributions* found that, as of 2016, the 11 million undocumented immigrants living in the United States collectively paid $11.64 billion in state and local taxes” (Rogan 191). In addition, in *Plyler v. Doe.*, the Supreme Court stated that there is no proof that undocumented immigrants drain our public resources but rather “contribute to the funding of education as do citizens or legal residents” (Nguyen and Serna 125). Undocumented immigrants do their duty as good citizens without even having this status. Granting undocumented students in state tuition would be a step towards valuing their efforts in the community.

In conclusion, although the undocumented students seeking for in-state tuition did not come to the country legally, they learned to love and cherish America as their own country. They need to feel that love in return but limiting their access to a post-secondary education will only push them away. Those students need the deduction in their tuition as most of the time they come from low-income families. For them to advance economically, especially in today’s world, they need a college degree. They will not be the only beneficiaries, as not only the economy and college attendance rates will improve, but society will learn to accept them. It would be a misfortune to let those dedicated students’ minds go to waste.
Works Cited


