

## Regional

# Higher education should monitor its students

Immigration is not only a political issue for the United States, but also one that has a far-reaching impact on higher education. According to most estimates there are somewhere between 11 and 12 million undocumented immigrants in this country, people who either came to the country without proper authorization or who overstayed their visas.

What does that have to do with higher education?

In the latest plan by the Obama administration, the federal government is set to provide a pathway for the legalization of about 5 million individuals. Of those, at least 250,000 will be people ready to enter college. And that is a significant number.

Yet, undocumented immigrants have been going to college in this country for a long time and that has prompted state legislatures to take legal action – in one direction or another.

According to a recent analysis by the National Conference of State Legislatures, 18 states provide by law in-state tuition for those immigrants and five even provide financial aid. Three (Arizona, Georgia and Indiana), specifically deny that discounted tuition, while two (Alabama and South Carolina) prohibit their admission in any state institution of higher education. Other states have complicated legislation that place a number of conditions and exceptions to different policies.

In summary, there is a patchwork of laws and regulations.

In any case, these numbers show that the majority of states favor providing greater access to college to undocumented students, a trend that has been growing in recent years.

## Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. Letters from Academia

The reasons given by some state leaders for denying greater access to higher education to undocumented individuals include not wanting to reward breaking the law, fewer resources for those who are legally in this country and the inability for them to get a legal job even if they graduate.

Arguments used in support of helping these students include that the way they came to this country was not their decision, but that of their parents. And because they are usually graduates of the American high school system, these provisions provide incentives for them to complete college and contribute to the local economies. Them paying for college, some also argue, helps to make it more affordable for other students.

Equally important is that by giving students hope of attending college, the high school dropout rates decrease, which, in turn, reduces crime rates and the costs of running prisons.

Yet, one reason never stated by some supporters of making college more accessible to undocumented immigrants is the need of certain public higher education institutions to increase their enrollments. In many states, including Illinois, the number of high school graduates has either decreased or just flattened out in recent years.

While politicians of all stripes have had their say on this issue, those we rarely hear from are the undocu-

mented individuals themselves.

Through a report released in January by researchers at the University of California at Los Angeles and funded by the Ford Foundation, we have learned a number of things that were unknown to the vast majority of Americans.

The report, titled, “In the Shadows of the Ivory Tower,” is based on a survey of 909 undocumented students from 55 countries attending postsecondary institutions in 34 states.

According to this report these students have spent the majority of their lives (15 years on average) in the U.S., 61 percent come from households whose total annual income is less than \$30,000, and 90 percent of them plan to become U.S. citizens. Twenty-eight percent of them are in the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) fields. That is not surprising since a significant number of first generation college students are particularly interested in pursuing careers in fields like the health sciences.

In addition to coming from very poor families, these students live in constant fear of deportation. More than half of them have personal knowledge of someone who has been deported. In fact, between 29 and 37 percent of them suffer from anxiety, which is much higher than that for the general population. Other issues are financial pressures and work/time management. Seventy-four percent of these students drop out of college because of financial concerns, which is the same proportion of those students who work while attending college.

Half of the students reported attending four-year public colleges or universities, and more than 40 percent

attend community or technical colleges. Nearly 10 percent attend private colleges. Contrary to what one might expect, only two thirds of them are first-generation college students.

It is important to note that according to this study, these students feel isolated and feel that they are being treated unfairly because of their immigration status. Among the recommendations made in the report are to create safe spaces for them, just as has been the case for other traditionally discriminated against groups, such as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender students.

Based on all these facts it seems that support for providing greater access to higher education to these individuals is a sensible alternative, not only because of humanitarian reasons but also because of practical ones.

Institutions of higher education should be taking the lead in these efforts by creating a welcoming atmosphere and by providing safe spaces for them. These efforts should include measures to train staff on how to deal with the special needs of these students. Legal clinics would also be of great help to them. A beneficial side effect of this would be that law and social work students could gain experience in immigration issues, a likely growing field of practice in the next few years.

Whatever policies are put in place, the final goal must be the full integration of these students into American society.

*Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. is a writer and college professor with leadership experience in higher education. He can be contacted through his website at: <http://www.aromerojr.net>*