

TESTIMONY OF

JAMIE P. MERISOTIS, PRESIDENT

INSTITUTE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY

Hearing on

**The Future of Undocumented Immigrant Students
And Comprehensive Immigration Reform**

**UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON THE JUDICIARY**

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON IMMIGRATION, CITIZENSHIP,
REFUGEES, BORDER SECURITY, AND INTERNATIONAL LAW**

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President, Institute for Higher Education Policy*

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Madam Chairwoman and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for this opportunity to appear before the Subcommittee on the matter of undocumented immigrant students and comprehensive immigration reform.

Improving access to higher education continues to be one of the most important investments that we can make in our collective well-being. The simple fact remains that increasing educational opportunities results in tremendous public, private, social, and economic benefits. We know that workers who have gone to college tend to have higher salaries, higher savings, more overall productivity both professionally and personally, better health, and increased life expectancy. For example, national data show that U.S. workers over the age of 18 with a high school diploma earn an average of about \$27,000 annually, while those with a bachelor's degree earn an average of more than \$51,000, or nearly double that amount. Higher earnings for college graduates result in more revenue for government expenditures through increased tax collections and through budget savings from avoided social service expenditures. Increasing the number of college graduates saves millions of dollars in avoided social costs every year, as a result of improved health, lower crime, and reduced welfare and unemployment. The social benefits of higher education range from higher voting rates to more charitable giving and volunteerism. In short, by investing in those who might not otherwise go to college, we are investing in our united future and well-being. It's not simply that it's the right thing to do, but that it is in our collective economic and social self-interest to do so.

For many immigrants, the United States is a place where, through hard work and perseverance, they hope to achieve better lives for themselves and their families. But in today's America, realizing the American Dream is almost impossible without some postsecondary education. Unfortunately, not everyone who graduates from high school and is qualified to go to college is able to equally and adequately benefit from postsecondary education. Many immigrants face significant barriers in gaining access to and succeeding in higher education. As a recent report published by the Institute for Higher Education Policy demonstrates, these prospective college students must struggle with inadequate finances, heavy work and family responsibilities, varied academic backgrounds, limited English proficiency, and a lack of knowledge about the American system of higher education—all of which can affect their ability to navigate the complex postsecondary admissions and financial aid processes, and the equally challenging process of earning a postsecondary credential.

* The Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) is an independent, nonprofit organization that is dedicated to access and success in postsecondary education around the world. Established in 1993, IHEP uses unique research and innovative programs to inform key decision makers who shape public policy and support economic and social development. The Institute's work addresses an array of issues in higher education, ranging from higher education financing to technology-based learning to quality assurance to minority-serving institutions.

Even for immigrants who arrive in the United States as children, navigating the American educational system may not be easy. Many young immigrants struggle to learn English and keep up with their classes in elementary and secondary school. A recent study of educational barriers for Latino immigrants in Georgia, many of whom were undocumented, found that these children and their parents had a limited understanding of how American schools work. Some parents didn't understand that they needed certain documents to enroll their children in school or believed that they would have to pay tuition or buy books. While they were interested in helping their children succeed in school, these parents also found it difficult to communicate with teachers and administrators when their children were having problems.

High school drop-out rates are high among young immigrants. In 2000, foreign-born teenagers ages 15 to 17 made up about 8 percent of that age group in the total U.S. population but represented almost 25 percent of high school drop-outs. Undocumented students, in particular, may be less motivated to complete high school if they believe higher education, and the better-paying jobs available to someone with a college degree, to be an unattainable goal. For many young adults from low-income immigrant families, simply graduating from high school prepared for college means having already overcome considerable obstacles.

Immigrants who actually enroll in higher education make up 12 percent of undergraduate college students—a percentage that makes this group comparable in numbers to Hispanic and Black students as well as students with disabilities. However, unlike these other groups, immigrant college students have received relatively little attention in the public policy arena. Immigrants who do enroll in college also face additional barriers to persistence and degree completion. Immigrant students have higher unmet financial need than the average undergraduate, are more likely to enroll in community colleges or private for-profit institutions, and more often earn certificates or associate's degrees rather than bachelor's degrees.

The Hispanic immigrant population as a whole is particularly disadvantaged when it comes to gaining access to higher education. Latino immigrants—especially those from Mexico and Central America—are more likely than other immigrants to drop out before completing high school, even if they immigrated to the United States during childhood. Latino immigrants are underrepresented in the undergraduate student population, have low rates of bachelor's degree completion, and are more likely than immigrants from other regions to leave school without completing any credential. These facts, taken in combination, paint a picture of an immigrant group for whom college access and success remain significant challenges.

Undocumented immigrant students, the majority of whom are Latino, face all the barriers described above and more. In a time of rising college costs, when the average tuition and fees for a public university have increased by 96 percent over the last decade, many of these students must pay out-of-state tuition, or in some cases, even the rate charged to international students. Even in the ten states that currently offer in-state tuition to undocumented students who have graduated from state high schools, undocumented college students face significant barriers to college enrollment and completion. They are not eligible for the federal and state financial aid that assists their low-income classmates. They also cannot legally work to support themselves while in college. They cannot even legally drive themselves to their college classes, a burden for

those who must live with their parents in order to afford to attend college. Faced with these obstacles, students who have lived in the United States for much of their lives may well watch their high school classmates go on to a college education they cannot afford and then take jobs for which they will not be legally eligible, even if they can manage to complete a college degree. As a result, the investment already made in these students' primary and secondary education has no chance of paying off for the nation.

If you consider what our national needs are in the specific sense of human capital, it's clear that we are looking at an enormous shortage of educated workers in the not-too-distant future. Already, we are seeing corporations recruiting overseas in critical workforce sectors like technology, and by 2020, we will be looking at an employment gap of about 14 million people needed to fill jobs that require a college education, according to Census Bureau projections. Investing in those who are already here—including both legal and undocumented immigrants—is our best hope for remaining competitive on a global scale.

Recent international data from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development indicate that the United States now stands in eighth place in the proportion of 25 to 34 year olds who have a college degree. Far ahead of the U.S. are Canada, Japan, Korea, and several other nations, including many of the Scandinavian countries. Other European nations and Australia are close on our heels. We expect that as a result of what is known as the Bologna Process, which is a European-wide agreement to invest in higher education on a large scale, the U.S. will fall further behind more of the European nations in just the next few years. This precipitous decline in such a relatively short time frame tells an important story about our inability to sustain the investments we have already made in our domestic higher education. Leaving behind undocumented immigrants who are committed to earning a college degree and making a contribution to their adopted country simply makes no sense given the nation's future economic and workforce needs.

Congress can address these deficiencies in educational and economic competitiveness by making comprehensive immigration reform a reality and by passing the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act. The DREAM Act is a common sense piece of bipartisan legislation that provides these talented and industrious future workers with a pathway to citizenship so that they can support themselves while attending college and eventually use their college education to pursue their professional goals and aspirations as American citizens. It also makes it easier for states to offer in-state tuition and financial aid to students, regardless of their immigration status. Put simply, these two changes would make college a more realistic option for deserving students who have met the same rigorous academic requirements as their college-bound peers, but who now lack access to the range of financial assistance provided to other students in their states. In addition, it would allow them to work legally in the jobs for which a college education prepares them.

Without legislation like the DREAM Act to increase access to higher education for the students most in need of assistance, the United States risks falling behind in the global economy of the 21st century. The potential consequences of inaction are serious: a workforce without the skills needed to fill essential jobs, reduced economic productivity, increased social welfare costs, an

electorate less able to contribute to an effective democracy. Increased access to higher education benefits individual students, to be sure, but its most important benefits are to the nation.

Immigrant students have the capacity, motivation, and in many cases, the academic preparation needed to complete a college education, but too many of these students are forced to grapple with a system that was not designed to address the modern day barriers to their success. I urge the 110th Congress to implement the simple, rational policy adjustments contained in the DREAM Act that recognize America's changing population, and the important role immigrants play in our future global economic leadership.

Thank you again for this opportunity to appear before the Subcommittee on this important issue.