May 7, 2024

United States Senate  
Committee on the Judiciary  
224 Dirksen Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510  

RE: 5/8 SJC Dreamer Hearing Written Statement  

Dear Senators Durbin and Graham:

As president of Arizona State University, I will be spending this week deeply immersed in Spring graduation ceremonies. For that reason, I am unable to testify in person regarding DACA’s positive impact and the success that ASU Dreamers with and without DACA status have achieved. But commencement also means that I will witness that impact and that success first-hand: The ASU class of 2024 includes 38 graduating DACA and Dreamer students – 27 undergraduates and 11 graduate students.

Those numbers may seem small but given the challenges that these students have and will continue to face, it is an impressive accomplishment.

Our country’s current focus on admittedly important border issues obscures the importance of ensuring that DACA recipients and other Dreamers get a college education. Two weeks ago, one of our Dreamers, Maria Leon, addressed that in an opinion piece for the Arizona Republic. Her column bore this headline: “I’m a DACA recipient in college. Why it’s important to share stories like mine.” Her answer:

“As more students fill classrooms and schools, more students can share their dreams and touch hearts with our stories, so that people know we belong in the United States, our country, and the opportunities it has to offer.”

Maria will graduate next year with a degree in nursing. She plans on then getting an MD, which will help alleviate the severe doctor shortage that Arizona and many other parts of the country are experiencing.

In becoming a physician, Maria will be following in the footsteps of another ASU graduate, Dalia Larios. Dalia graduated summa cum laude from ASU in 2012 with a degree in Biological Sciences and, as she put it, “a passion for medicine.” Dalia was the first DACA recipient to be admitted to Harvard Medical School and she graduated in 2019, with honors. A year later she was working in intensive care units treating COVID-19 patients. See Larios Testimony before the Senate Judiciary Committee – Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship, and Border Safety.

In her 2022 testimony, Dalia talked about “the specter” of her undocumented status that “has shadowed every major transition” of her life. She noted that “the threat of deportation is always present,” given the possible elimination of DACA. That is why I am so very pleased to share the great news that just a few weeks ago Dalia’s concerns about the possibility of being separated from her family and her patients were alleviated when she successfully obtained an H-1B visa. After Dr. Larios finishes her current radiation oncology residency at Mass General Hospital in Boston, she will return to Arizona to work at Banner MD Anderson Cancer Center.

Dalia concluded her Senate testimony by underscoring what DACA has meant to her and to this country:

“However imperfect, DACA exemplifies the power of higher education and meaningful community integration. It showcases that the desire to succeed is not sufficient if structural and systemic changes are not implemented to provide inclusion. I could not have become a doctor without the protections of DACA.”
It is unfortunate that because of recent court decisions “the protections of DACA” extend to fewer and fewer college students. Thus, the threat of deportation weighs even more heavily on the thousands of college students who are DACA eligible but unable to apply because of current court rulings. The pride and joy that Dreamers in ASU’s class of 2024 rightfully will experience this week is tempered by the uncertain future that faces those who like Maria Valeria Garcia and Angel Palazuelos just barely missed out on obtaining DACA status.

Maria is a double major in Political Science and Transborder Studies. She will obtain a master’s degree next year through ASU’s 4+1 program. Angel Palazuelos is graduating with a degree in biomedical engineering. Their future is uncertain because they do not have the work permit given to those who have DACA status.

Allowing new applications for DACA status would help Maria and Angel. But, as Dalia’s case illustrates, it is not enough. DACA enabled her to become a doctor, but, until a month ago, her continued presence in this country was tenuous. Moreover, DACA was never intended to be a long-term solution and its fragility has become all too obvious. That is why I have been a longstanding advocate for passage of a Dream Act. It will help ASU honor its “mission to provide a quality education to Arizona’s college bound students – all of them.”

As I have said in the past, the decision to support Dreamers “is rather easy at the end of the day: Care for children, show them love and respect, prepare them for the future and help them start their lives. If we can do that, then we will have done our part for tomorrow to be a better day.” See Message Regarding DACA (9/3/2017). Dalia Larios is proof positive of the dividends that a commitment to Dreamers pays. As she said in an e-mail sent just a few days ago:

“ASU certainly changed my life. At a time when many universities were not accepting undocumented students, ASU took me under its wings, allowed me to receive a college education, and filled me with a sense of possibility in the world.”

I recognize, however, that for many it is not self-evident that we all benefit from the education of our Dreamers. The Annual Surveys of their scholars and alumni conducted by TheDream.US¹ as well as the Annual Survey of DACA Recipients conducted by United We Dream, the National Immigration Law Center, and the Center for American Progress more than make the case. The ninth such survey concluded in January of this year. Conducted by Tom K. Wong of the U.S. Immigration Policy Center at the University of California, San Diego, it confirms the benefits of DACA to the recipients and to the entire country.

ASU’s Office of the University Economist has reviewed that work and has also conducted a literature review of the economic and fiscal effects of immigration. While different sectors of the economy are impacted differently, the Director of the L. Seidman Research Institute and the Office of the University Economist, Dr. Dennis Hoffman, has provided me with this summary of the issues pertinent to the DACA question. Some of the following observations are specific to Hispanics, particularly from Mexico, because they have been the focus of more research and are the largest component of DACA eligible students. But I believe the conclusions are generally applicable to the entire Dreamer population, which at ASU includes Dreamers from South America² and Dreamers who are not Hispanic.

- The 2023 survey of DACA recipients shows that nearly 19 out of every 20 respondents (94.1 percent) are currently employed. This represents a significant jump over the past years, even when compared with pre-pandemic levels; the 2019 survey showed that 89.2 percent of respondents were employed.

1 ASU is a Partner College of TheDream.US, which has provided 180 scholarships to ASU Dreamers since 2015. For Fall 2023 ASU had 65 TheDream.US scholars.
2 One of our Dreamer alums, Germán Cadenas, came to the U.S. from Venezuela at the age of 15. He has two bachelor’s degrees from ASU and a Ph.D. in counseling psychology, also from ASU. See ASU DREAMzone. He is now an Associate Professor at Rutgers.
• Hispanics owned 4.8 million businesses, with $636.2 billion in receipts according to reports from the US Census.

• BLS data reveal that the Labor Force Participation Rate among Hispanics is at or above other groups and a report that reveals data on country of origin suggests that immigrants from Mexico – the largest DACA source country – have among the highest rates of workforce participation. It is quite striking that these immigrants have found their way to, and remain in, the labor force despite the impediments in their way. This would suggest that the share of labor force contributors among the DACA cohort3 might even be larger if they didn’t have to face the legal barriers to work that prevail today.

• Demographers have noted that, based on recent trends, the aging of the US population will significantly decrease the number of working age persons per retiree. And, unless birth rates suddenly reverse current trends, this will create challenges as few workers will be employed in the face of large numbers of senior entitlement recipients. There is a considerable volume of literature that illustrates the need to attract immigrants to buffer these demographic headwinds. But the DACA recipients are already in the US. We can accomplish similar goals by making sure they are allowed access to work through permanent legal pathways.

• The facts suggest that DACA recipients have great potential for the US economy provided that they are afforded both legal work status and opportunities to acquire more education and skills.

• Will they generate a fiscal surplus? Interestingly much of the public costs of educating DACA recipients have already been incurred. What remains is to eliminate barriers that might prevent these young people from generating economic benefits to offset these costs. The concept of Fiscal surplus seems to be designed to measure the net contributions of a new immigrant. DACAs are here and all that is inhibiting them from earning higher wages and generating positive fiscal outcomes are legal headwinds and lack of opportunities to contribute.

• It is also important to note that providing legal protections to DACA recipients makes them eligible for entitlement programs in the US. Statistics suggest that higher income entitlement recipients generally pay more for entitlements (e.g. Medicare) over their lifetimes than do low-income recipients. And the rate structure is set up so that higher income entitlement recipients often subsidize lower income worker entitlement benefits. The statistical arithmetic of entitlement financing – especially Medicare – shows that adding purely low-income recipients to the pool will place additional pressures on the system. Therefore, it is important to provide education opportunities to DACA recipients that will allow them to become more productive members of the labor force, earn higher wages and salaries, and put them in a position to pay for greater shares of the entitlements they ultimately will consume.

• In the end, what is the primary economic case for the DACA cohort? Data suggest that the Dreamer cohort come from families that have a strong work ethic, that participate in the labor force in high numbers and who have started large numbers of businesses. This suggests that creating permanent pathways to grant legal work status will enable these young people to contribute in many ways to the US economy. Their biggest advantage as potential contributors is age and their demonstrated willingness to work. US universities can contribute by providing avenues for Dreamers to acquire education and skills that will allow them to realize their potential. And as more education and skills are acquired by the cohort, any concerns over their net fiscal burden can evaporate.

One of the findings in a February 2024 report by the National Advisory Council on Innovation and Entrepreneurship (NACIE), of which I am a member, is consistent with Dr. Hoffman’s conclusions. While not focused on Dreamers, the report, which was presented to Secretary of Commerce Gina Raimondo, included a section on “Developing Entrepreneurial Talent” and a finding that is particularly relevant to the subject before your committee:

3 Unless otherwise specified, DACA as used in this summary includes Dreamers who are DACA eligible.
Finding 2: Alongside domestic talent development, there is an opportunity to develop America’s talent pipeline with help from overseas. Over half of U.S. startup companies valued at greater than $1 billion were started by immigrants with two-thirds of all “unicorns” or U.S. billion dollar valued companies founded or co-founded by immigrants or the children of immigrants. Twenty five percent of these company founders came to America as international students. Immigrants are more likely to start companies than others even when lacking social structure or infrastructure support. To maintain this incredible success in leveraging global talent, immigrant entrepreneurs who want to launch their high growth startups in America need rapid access to work visas, permanent residency, and immigration policy stability and certainty to grow and scale their workforces and businesses.

The importance of a college education, the ability to work and a stable immigration policy are all reasons to renew the push for a Dream Act.

The continued success of ASU’s undocumented graduates is also consistent with Dr. Hoffman’s conclusions and the NACIE finding. Dr. Larios is but one example. ASU’s DREAMzone documents other alumni success stories. You will be equally impressed with Reyna Montoya, a Forbes: 30 Under 30 Social Entrepreneur. You’ll find more information about her on the website of Aliento, the organization Reyna founded and heads. Aliento’s stated mission is to serve “undocumented, DACA, and mixed immigration status families to transform trauma into hope and action.” The most recent example of transforming trauma into hope and action is the campaign that Reyna and Aliento led for the passage of Proposition 308, which now gives eligible Arizona High School graduates in-state tuition regardless of immigration status.

Another story highlighted on the DREAMzone page is that of Oscar Vasquez. His story is well known to the general public as he was a member of the high school robotics team that bested MIT and that became the subject of a documentary and a Hollywood movie. Thanks to your intervention, Senator Durbin, Oscar was able to obtain permanent residency and he later served two tours of duty in Afghanistan. Oscar did not have the benefit of DACA, but he testified before this committee in 2017 about the benefits of becoming a permanent resident, which is why the Dream Act is needed now more than ever.

I am hopeful that your committee will chart a path to a Dream Act. The importance of doing so cannot be understated. To quote Dr. Larios one more time,

“What happens with this immigration issue will define who we are as a country.”


Again, I deeply regret that I cannot be in Washington to say more about the young people whom I’ve have always called our “special international students.” But I remain fully committed to helping them obtain the college education they deserve and that our country’s continued greatness requires that they have. Please let me know if I can be of further help to you in that endeavor.

Sincerely,

Michael M. Crow
President, Arizona State University