

COMMENTARY

College Presidents Must Be Loud and Clear in Support of Immigration

By David Oxtoby and Nancy Cantor JUNE 21, 2018



Eduardo Luzzatti for The Chronicle

Over the years, higher education has played a major role in immigration. Colleges and universities, which have brought young people from overseas to this country as undergraduates and graduate students, have helped them become highly productive members of society. Many stay after receiving their degrees to take jobs or to start up new ventures. Such immigrants are [more than twice as likely](#) as U.S.-born citizens to establish new businesses, including many at the cutting edge of technology.

For other immigrants, higher education is a path to success for their children, enabling those sons and daughters to receive the skills to succeed in ways that their parents could only dream of. All of our campuses have first-generation students with inspiring stories of overcoming adversity to achieve success. At Harvard's Class Day celebration, in May, a Korean-American graduating

senior from New York City spoke emotionally of how his parents (his father a line cook in a restaurant, his mother a nail-salon worker) had inspired and encouraged him to succeed.

These positive stories are under threat now more than ever, with the federal government's increasingly negative attitude toward immigrants. International students are being discouraged from applying to study at United States colleges through a variety of measures adopted by the government in the past year. These include direct bans on visas to citizens of certain countries (especially a number of predominantly Muslim countries), delays in granting visas to others, and a perception of a hostile environment in this country. There are concerns about policy changes that could lead to more students being identified as [falling out of status](#), that opportunities will be reduced for students to work after graduating on [Optional Practical Training](#) visas, and that it will become even harder for them to obtain [long-term employment](#) authorization. Visas issued to international students to study at U.S. institutions dropped by 17 percent last year, with countries like Canada and Australia attracting more applications because of their more open attitudes toward international students.

Even greater challenges face many first-generation immigrant students. Those who were not born in this country, even though they have lived most of their lives here and graduated from American high schools, are under particular attack. While some of these "Dreamers" have been able to benefit from the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program to attend college and hold jobs, that program was terminated last September by President Trump. Renewals of DACA continue because of a court challenge, but the courts cannot provide a permanent solution, and in a challenge to the nationwide injunction, seven states have filed a countersuit to end the program immediately. Congress failed to act this spring, and prospects for a legislative fix do not look encouraging before the midterm elections, despite support in both parties to pass a permanent solution to DACA. Indeed, the recent failed bipartisan efforts in the House of Representatives to force a debate and vote on DACA underscored the difficulty in making any progress, even as public-opinion surveys show that the majority of Americans believe that Dreamers should be provided a path toward citizenship.

What can college leaders do to help? Higher-education associations, like the American Council on Education and other national groups, have been working both publicly and behind the scenes to encourage congressional action to help undocumented students. They have also offered public comment on proposed changes in visa policies that affect international students. But this is a critical moment, when it is not enough just to ask our representatives in Washington to speak for us. College presidents and other leaders need to become directly involved, because these actions strike at the heart of our mission as higher-education institutions.

One step is to send letters to elected officials and write op-eds to educate the public about the importance of these issues for our colleges and our country. Grass-roots efforts often carry greater weight than those organized from the top down. In November 2016, [a letter from college presidents](#) to President-elect Trump supporting continuation and extension of the DACA program was initiated at Pomona College and within one week obtained more than 250 presidential co-signers, with more than 700 signing eventually. Many of those who signed issued press releases or wrote their own op-eds, leading to extensive coverage in both the national and local news.

What is needed now is sustained engagement by leaders of higher education on issues of immigration, with a particular focus on vulnerable students on our campuses. Last November 20, college leaders meeting in Washington established the [Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration](#). Within days of the announcement of the new organization and its founding principles, more than 100 presidents had signed on. Now more than 350 presidents and chancellors have joined the alliance, and [all are welcome](#). The two of us serve as co-chairs of the steering committee.

We believe that messages can be most powerful when delivered by local college presidents. Despite concerns about the eroding trust in higher education, a New America [poll](#) released last month shows that four out of five Americans have a positive view of the higher-education institutions near them.

Openness to underserved students in our country, as well as to the talents brought by international students, are at the heart of our mission as institutions of higher education. Today, recognizing the heritage of immigrants to this country, and making sure that we continue to be open to the future contributions of immigrants, should be top priorities for colleges — and the people who lead them.

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