

# The DREAM Act

United Coalition for Im/migrant Rights

## 1 Basic information

The DREAM Act is an acronym that stands for The Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act. Richard Durbin (D-II) introduced the legislation in the Senate as S.2205. The House version is H.R. 1275. The Senate version failed to pass by eight votes, and the House version, due to the House leadership, has so far failed to be brought to vote despite considerable support.

The DREAM Act helps undocumented students pursue their lives after high school. Roughly 65,000 undocumented high school students graduate each year, many that have been in the United States for much of their lives.<sup>1</sup>

Under the DREAM Act, if a graduating undocumented student has been in the US since he or she was fifteen years old or younger and meets certain requirements (such as having no criminal record), then the student can apply for a six-year conditional status. Within these six years, the student must graduate from a two-year college, complete two years of a four-year degree, or serve in the US military for two years or more. If these requirements are met, the student will be granted permanent residence.

Currently, many graduating undocumented students have an unclear future after high school. Some will have to go back to their country of origin, which might be foreign to them. The DREAM Act would set right this injustice.

## 2 Forcing migration: US Economic policy

Not all undocumented immigrants in the US are from Mexico, but some are, so as an example, we quickly review some of the effects that US economic policy has on the Mexican economy. This example is indicative of the United States' policy toward developing countries.

US-sponsored free-trade agreements such as NAFTA have hurt the Mexican economy. The pretense of NAFTA is for private companies to compete with one another across borders, which, proponents say, is beneficial. NAFTA lowered or eliminated tariffs (taxes on imports) that protected domestic Mexican goods by making imports to Mexico more expensive, especially agriculture. The US, unwilling to reflect its capitalist policies on itself, heavily subsidizes its agriculture, stabilizing and lowering prices. NAFTA allowed subsidized US products, especially agriculture, to compete with and destroy Mexican jobs.

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<sup>1</sup>National Immigration Law Center, available at [http://www.nilc.org/immlawpolicy/DREAM/dream\\_basic\\_info\\_0406.pdf](http://www.nilc.org/immlawpolicy/DREAM/dream_basic_info_0406.pdf).

In general, wages have stagnated or decayed for the majority of Mexicans since NAFTA.<sup>2</sup> NAFTA's devastating effect on the Mexican economy has the likely consequence of increased migration to the United States. These effects on the Mexican economy were known before the Clinton-sponsored NAFTA passed, so the US is partially responsible for these consequences.

Thus, many immigrants are in the US for work, partly as a result of US policy. Some bring children who could also contribute to the economy if the DREAM Act passed. Because of the DREAM Act's requirements, those who qualify would contribute to the economy.

Two popular arguments have been given against the DREAM Act. One is that immigrant students will take college slots away from native students as well as financial aid. However, the number of undocumented students is too small for this argument to make sense.<sup>3</sup> Regardless of that, this argument rests on the prejudiced assumption that native students are more deserving of education than are undocumented students.

The second faulty argument against progressive immigration laws such as the DREAM Act is that the increase in immigrant labor takes jobs away from US natives. Aside from this argument's prejudice against non-natives, it is empirically false—high skill labor is in demand,<sup>4</sup> and, in general, immigrant labor helps rather than hurts the economy.<sup>5</sup> This is not to repeat the argument that progressive immigration laws are justified because low-wage immigrant labor is in demand—a prejudiced argument, indeed. It does, however, show false the argument that immigrants hurt the economy.

### 3 The DREAM Act's relevance to Nevada

There were an estimated 150,000 to 200,000 undocumented persons in Nevada in 2005.<sup>6</sup> In that same year, children made up 16% of undocumented persons.<sup>7</sup> This gives us a rough estimate of undocumented children in Nevada: 24,000 to 32,000. These children could benefit from the DREAM Act should they meet its requirements.

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<sup>2</sup>Economic Policy Institute, "NAFTA at Seven," available at <http://www.epi.org/briefingpapers/nafta01/nafta-at-7.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup>NILC, available at [http://www.aifl.org/ipc/policybrief/policybrief\\_2007\\_dream.pdf](http://www.aifl.org/ipc/policybrief/policybrief_2007_dream.pdf).

<sup>4</sup>ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Jacoby, Tamar, "Immigration Nation," *Foreign Affairs*, 85-6, pp.50-65.

<sup>6</sup>PEW Hispanic Center, citing the Current Population Survey. Available at <http://pewhispanic.org/files/factsheets/17.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup>PEW Hispanic Center, available at <http://pewhispanic.org/files/reports/61.pdf>.

The Senate's version of the bill, S.2205, was eight votes away from passing. Four senators that would have likely voted for the act were not present for S.2205, so it is more a matter of four votes.<sup>8</sup> One of Nevada's senators, John Ensign, voted against the act. Considering the number of people the DREAM Act could affect, and considering a Nevada senator helped block the act's passage, this bill is important to Nevadans.

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<sup>8</sup>A statement made by supporting senators can be found at <http://www.nilc.org/immlawpolicy/DREAM/Dream008.htm>.