The DREAM Act and College Access

**Text 3: The Urgency of the Passing the Dream Act: An Interview with an Advocate**

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| As you read, take notes or mark your text in order to answer these questions:  What position does the interviewee take on passing the Dream Act?  What reasons and evidence does the interviewee provide to support her position?  How do you evaluate the reasons and evidence she offers? | *Dr. Sharon Sáez (SS) is a career educator and activist on behalf of English Language Learners and immigrant students who has worked as a policy maker at the local, state and federal levels.2*  *Interviewer: You have been a long-­‐time advocate of the educational rights for English Language Learners and undocumented students. Why is the DREAM Act important?*  SS: As far back as the 1980’s the Supreme Court ruled it was illegal for public schools to deny education to undocumented students. It is the law of the land that no matter what their immigration status, all young people get free and equal schooling from kindergarten through high school. Why should this stop at college?  Let’s be clear about the numbers: There are approximately 2 – 2.5 million young people who came here as a part of their families, not on their own. They are not felons. Why are keeping them out of college education and eventual citizenship?  *Interviewer: The debate over the DREAM Act has been going on for a decade. What is so different about this moment?*  SS: We are in a much more serious situation than before. New laws have been passed in states like Arizona, Alabama, and South Carolina that limit illegal immigrants’ ability to get public services of all kinds – drivers’ licenses, health care, and rental contracts.  As a part of this, states are deciding whether |

2 Interview originally conducted November 18, updated December 26, 2011.

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|  | undocumented students can have access to public colleges at affordable in-­‐state tuition and whether they can apply for public scholarships. Without those lower rates, young people from immigrant families are not going to be able to afford college. We are on the edge of creating the conditions in which undocumented children will have very tough daily lives and very few ways to bootstrap their way out of hardship.  *Interviewer: Why is college so important? Aren’t there jobs for high school graduates?*  SS: The DREAM ACT would make it possible for young people brought here by their families to attend college. National data on college-­‐going speak for themselves.  Young people with a college education earn more, are healthier, and less likely to be involved with the law. They give back to their communities and pass along educational values to their own children. Why shouldn’t eligible undocumented students get this opportunity?  Research tells us that immigrants bring a distinct set of skills as people who are multi-­‐lingual and multi-­‐cultural. Imagine what these young people could bring to the National Guard, to health care, or to public schools.  *Interviewer: Opponents of the Dream Act argue that in these tough financial times states and communities can’t bear the added costs of supporting undocumented families and students. For instance, the budgets of public schools and colleges are being slashed to the bone. How would you answer those concerns*?  SS: Again, it is important to have the facts. First, research shows that on average, immigrants generate about $80,000 more in taxes than they receive in state, federal and local benefits over their lifetimes. So they are contributing to the economy, not draining it.  But at a deeper level this is the wrong way to think about the issue. You can spend dollars to locate undocumented children, prove they are illegal, and deport them. You can strand them here by cutting off their access to health care, public housing, and college. Or you can accept the responsibility and the costs to ensure that these children grow up healthy and educated. There are costs to each of these options, but only the third choice is an investment.  *Interviewer: Opponents of the DREAM Act also argue that these young illegals would be taking seats and scholarship dollars that ought to belong to native-­‐born students. How do you answer those concerns?*  First, let’s address the facts. The DREAM Act is not about special privileges. If it passed undocumented students would only be admitted to public colleges if they met the requirements. They would only get scholarships if their records showed they were excellent students. This is as fair as a system gets.  But again, I think that this is the wrong way to think about the issue. Already we lack enough places a two-­‐ and four-­‐ year colleges. We already have a hard time ensuring that students graduate from college, even once they are in. Fewer than 10% of low-­‐income students who enter college ever graduate. So the real issue is how to provide more high-­‐quality and affordable places, and more ways |

3 National Research Council, The New Americans: Economic, Demographic, and Fiscal Effects of Immigration, ed. James P. Smith and Barry Edmonston (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1997).

of acquiring college-­‐level skills than we have in the past. This is an issue for low-­‐ and modest-­‐income students, for students who have GED degrees, and for veterans who are returning from the Middle East with the need for higher education. Let’s think about building that larger system as our first order of business. That is much more worth our while, than figuring out how to exclude certain groups of students because of decisions that their families made.

*Interviewer: Opponents also object that the Dream Act rewards people who have broken U.S. laws, making it more attractive to others enter illegally.*

Again, I have to disagree. Look at the 2011 version of the federal DREAM Act. To earn their citizenship students have a 10-­‐year path of proving themselves. It calls for hard work.

If this is really the issue, let’s think about it more generously and creatively. What if DREAM Act students were asked to give back in some way? What if they had to perform community service as a part of paying back their scholarships? What if they trained for much needed jobs, such as those of health care workers or first responders? Rather than working to exclude them, let’s think about ways of asking them to contribute and give back.