

# Yale College Education Studies Program

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## Higher Education Access for Undocumented Students in Connecticut

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### Abstract:

There are approximately 3.2 million undocumented youth under the age of 24 in the United States according to a 2012 survey. Of those, only 65,000 graduate from high school and 5-10% enroll in higher education institutions. The small percentage of undocumented students enrolling in college demonstrates the presence of barriers preventing all undocumented students from enrolling in college. This capstone focuses on higher education access for undocumented students living in Connecticut. I argue that even with state legislation like in-state tuition rates and the prospective passage of institutional aid in Connecticut, undocumented students still face academic, financial and mental health barriers in accessing and attaining a higher education degree.

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# Higher Education Access for Undocumented Students in Connecticut

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## **Introduction**

There are approximately 3.2 million undocumented youth under the age of 24 in the United States according to a 2012 survey.<sup>1</sup> Of those, only 65,000 graduate from high school and 5-10% enroll in higher education institutions.<sup>2</sup> The small percentage of undocumented students enrolling in college demonstrates the presence of barriers preventing all undocumented students from enrolling in college. In comparison to 69.5% of all American U.S. citizen students who enroll in college, the school to college pipeline loses 90-95% of undocumented students.<sup>3</sup> Currently there are no national statistics on the percentage of undocumented students graduating from college, however it is likely to be less than 5-10% given the significant number of obstacles students face. This paper examines the range of barriers and how they function that prevent most of these undocumented students from attending college.

In 2015, I worked with the Yale College Democrats as a legislative captain to support the work of Connecticut Students for a Dream, advocates for the passage of a bill granting institutional aid— financial aid taken from state tuition revenue— to undocumented students. Unfortunately, the bill has not been passed signaling the continued disregard for the presence and needs of undocumented students in Connecticut. My brief work with Connecticut Students for a Dream inspired my capstone project.

Connecticut policies on higher education are more inclusive of undocumented students than others. State policies impact the degree of support extended to undocumented students in higher education institutions and within high schools. For example, Alabama completely prohibits undocumented students from enrolling in public higher education. Meanwhile, an

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<sup>1</sup> San Diego State University, “Undocumented and Immigrant Students,” (2016).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> “The NCES Fast Facts Tool Provides Quick Answers to Many Education Questions (National Center for Education Statistics),” accessed April 12, 2018, <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=372>.

undocumented student in Connecticut can pay in-state tuition rates but cannot receive institutional aid to afford their education.

This capstone focuses on higher education access for undocumented students living in Connecticut. I argue that even with state legislation like in-state tuition rates and the prospective passage of institutional aid in Connecticut, undocumented students still face academic, financial and mental health barriers in accessing and attaining a higher education degree.

This essay delineates how undocumented students in Connecticut are navigating Connecticut's public higher education system by examining the constraints of their legal status in affording college. It reveals the strategies undocumented students employ to afford college and analyzes the impact such strategies have on their academic achievement and mental health.

Research on their experience exposes the harm unequal college access has on students' mental health. A 2015 study on 906 undocumented students clinically diagnosed 37% of undocumented female students and 28% of undocumented male students with elevated anxiety levels in comparison to 9% of women and 4% of men in a normal sample.<sup>4</sup> I rely on this scholarship to support the argument that institutional aid cannot be the end towards ensuring undocumented students have equal access to higher education. Moreover, it delves into how public Connecticut universities are working towards supporting undocumented students and offers suggestions to Connecticut universities that do not have support systems in place.

I begin with a literature review outlining the current higher education landscape for undocumented students. Following, I present my methodology consisting of interviews and an analysis of the public hearing testimonies from the 2015-2018 Connecticut institutional aid bills.

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<sup>4</sup> Robert T. Suarez-Orozco, Carola; Katsiaficas, Dalal; Birchall, Olivia; Alcantar, Cynthia M.; Hernandez, Edwin; Garcia, Yuliana; Michikyan, Minas; Cerda, Janet; Teranishi, "Undocumented Undergraduates on College Campuses: Understanding Their Challenges and Assets and What It Takes to Make an Undocufriendly Campus," *Harvard Educational Review* 85, no. 3 (2015): 443.

The following section discusses the undocumented student narratives from the public hearing testimonies and unveils the barriers undocumented face without institutional aid and may continue to face even with institutional aid. Using my interviews, I discuss how Western and Southern Connecticut State Universities are supporting undocumented students and examine them as models for other Connecticut schools. I conclude an overview of the capstone and briefly discuss the work of UC Berkeley in California. Finally, I come back to the institutional aid bill currently in session. Despite continued activism for institutional aid and the current legislative conversation on aid in Connecticut, institutional aid will not be the end all solution towards completely expanding access to higher education for undocumented students. The way the institutional aid bills have been pushed forward represent the narrative that it will expand access but emphasis must be made that it will only expand access to an extent. In order to increase access to higher education, institutional aid, immigration reform and a variety of resources within institutions are needed. Nonetheless, the passage of an institutional aid bill would be a great step for Connecticut in recognizing its undocumented communities and valuing its contribution to the state.

### **Literature review**

Through this literature review I explore the current scholarship on undocumented student higher education with specific focus on in-state tuition and institutional aid since they are the two types of legislation at the center of undocumented student higher education activism and state legislative debates. The literature begins by delineating the different state policies and the implications they carry for undocumented students. The following section focuses on DACA and its limitations to emphasize the marginalization of undocumented students not eligible for DACA status and its benefits. The next section focuses on how scholars frame undocumented student

deservingness in an effort to push legislation that would make college affordable. The final section of the literature review provides an explanation of Connecticut's state policies and the political landscape of the institutional aid bill which has yet to be passed. The literature review aims to provide a framework for understanding the narratives of the Connecticut public hearing testimonies for the 2015-2018 proposed institutional aid bills to contend that the barriers of undocumented students cannot be remedied simply through institutional aid.

### ***State Policies***

In-state tuition rates and institutional aid make college more affordable for undocumented students. In-state tuition rate legislation gives undocumented students the opportunity to pay the same rates as U.S. citizen state residents. Without in-state rates, undocumented students must apply to colleges as international students and pay out-state-rates which often run higher. Currently, only seventeen states have passed legislation allowing undocumented students to pay in-state tuition rates. Institutional aid policies offer another degree of access for undocumented students because it gives them need-based financial aid taken from tuition revenue.<sup>5</sup> The term "institutional aid" will be used throughout the capstone since it is the term employed by those proposing and advocating for aid for undocumented students and in much of the scholarship on undocumented student higher education as well. The term "institutional" serves to distinguish the aid given to undocumented students from financial aid, grants given to students with legal status. Only six out of the seventeen states with in-state tuition rate policies have also passed institutional aid measures.<sup>6</sup> Even though there is no federal law prohibiting undocumented students from enrolling in public colleges, there are state laws that do so. Alabama and South

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<sup>5</sup> "S.B. No. 398 Session Year 2015," Connecticut General Assembly, [https://www.cga.ct.gov/asp/cgabillstatus/cgabillstatus.asp?selBillType=Bill&which\\_year=2015&bill\\_num=398](https://www.cga.ct.gov/asp/cgabillstatus/cgabillstatus.asp?selBillType=Bill&which_year=2015&bill_num=398).

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*

Carolina completely prohibit undocumented students from enrolling in any state public college forcing students to search elsewhere for higher education opportunities.<sup>7</sup> The other states sit in between the prohibitory legislation of Alabama and South Carolina and the inclusive legislation of those with in-state tuition rate and institutional aid policies. Figure 1 shows the different types of state policies and the number of states with such legislation. State policies range from legislation that includes in-state tuition rates and institutional aid, in-state tuition rates for DACA



students only, to no legislation whatsoever. States with no

*Figure 1: Types of State Policies*

legislation make it more complicated for undocumented students who must navigate vague policies to determine whether they can attend a public institution. Figure 2 provides a U.S. map displaying the policies each state has, showing the variety of policies and the number of states

<sup>7</sup> “Undocumented Student Tuition: Overview,” National Conference of State Legislatures, <http://www.ncsl.org/research/education/undocumented-student-tuition-overview.aspx>.



have no felonies, misdemeanors, or criminal charges.<sup>9</sup> In Connecticut there are 3,800 DACA recipients and 21% of them are enrolled in postsecondary institutions.<sup>10</sup>

Since there are no statistics on the number of undocumented people in Connecticut, nationally, many undocumented people do not qualify for DACA. Therefore, the focus of this project is on undocumented students, including DACA given the announcement of its ending. On September 5, 2017, President Trump announced he would end DACA. The Migration Policy Institute estimates that by March 2020 every person with DACA will lose their status, even those who renewed following the Trump's announcement.<sup>11</sup> DACA has given undocumented people greater employment opportunities in higher paying fields.<sup>12</sup> Without DACA, previous recipients will return to undocumented status and to low-paying sectors, one of the few spaces that employ undocumented people for their cheap source of labor. Therefore, this project considers DACA students in the conversation of undocumented students because without legislation like a Clean Dream Act, DACA students face the imminent threat of losing their current status.

### ***Undocumented Student Deservingness***

While opponents of tuition support for undocumented students argue that undocumented students take from taxpayer money and use anti-immigrant discourse that criminalizes undocumented bodies, scholars use other arguments to contend for their deservingness.

The federal government has asserted the rights of undocumented students to K-12 education, but it has not assert the rights of undocumented students to a postsecondary education.

In the 1982 Plyler v. Doe case, the supreme court ruled that students could not be denied a K-12

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<sup>9</sup> "Frequently Asked Questions," U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, <https://www.uscis.gov/archive/frequently-asked-questions>.

<sup>10</sup> Randy Zong, Jie; Ruiz Soto, Ariel G.; Batalova, Jeanne; Gelatt, Julia; Capps, "A Profile of Current Recipients by Education, Industry and Occupation" (Washington D.C., 2017), 9, <https://www.mendeley.com/library/>.

<sup>11</sup> Jie Zong Randy, 2.

<sup>12</sup> Zenen Jaimes Pérez, "How DACA Has Improved the Lives of Undocumented Young People," *Center for American Progress*, 3, 2014.

education because of their undocumented status, making K-12 education accessible.<sup>13</sup> Notably, the court stated that denying undocumented children a K-12 education would “create a lifetime of hardship and a permanent underclass.”<sup>14</sup> The court’s remarks are emblematic of the struggles of attaining a higher education degree in tandem with the growing value of higher educational degrees in the United States economy. Yet unlike K-12 education, there is no uniform policy granting complete access to higher education for undocumented students across all states. Range of supports include help with affording college and support that exists in the high school, in college and beyond. Undocumented students face other budget constraints such as providing for their families. Since higher education policies vary by state, students in California are better supported by state legislation that grants them institutional aid and in-state tuition rates.

Another argument used to persuade legislators to pass legislation benefiting undocumented is the economic argument. Antoinette Flores, a policy analyst for the Center for American Progress suggests investing in undocumented students is the greatest financial investment the U.S. could make to ensure it remains an international competitor.<sup>15</sup> The United States as a powerful capitalist country seeks to hold onto its power in the economic playing field and a workforce consisting of educated undocumented students can contribute to the country’s economic gains. The economic stance for increasing higher education access is common, but its limitation is that it views the undocumented students only in a commodified framework. This framework views the undocumented person only within the value it brings to the economy and the contributions it makes to society and culture. Educators for Fair Consideration, an

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<sup>13</sup> Nancy B. Anderson, “Promise of Plyler: Public In-state Tuition Policies for Undocumented Students and Compliance with Federal Law,” *Washington and Lee Law Review* 70, 2013.

<sup>14</sup> David H.K. Nguyen and Gabriel Serna, “Access or Barrier? Tuition and Fee Legislation for Undocumented Students across the States,” *The Clearing House*, 87, (2014): 124.

<sup>15</sup> Antoinette Flores, “Undocumented Students Deserve Greater Access to Higher Education,” *Center for American Progress* (2015).

immigration advocacy organization that supports undocumented higher education access also argue that the United States has already invested in undocumented students through their primary and secondary education.<sup>16</sup> Not investing in their higher education would be a waste of prior investments. Membership for undocumented students is still intertwined with the economy and the contributions they can make to help it grow. Scholars like Serna, Cohen and Nguyen write that higher education helps undocumented students become a part of the formal economy.<sup>17</sup> While Andrea Flores writes that the lack of access to higher education for undocumented students is a denial of membership in the economy.<sup>18</sup> Flores shares concern that higher education institutions are becoming neoliberal and admit students who can return the investment. Students would no longer be competing for resources such as scholarships and have to hold an identifiable amount of merit. In conversation with the previous work, Diaz-Strong critically suggests that the lack of higher education access “disenfranchises vulnerable communities” and denies students “political and economic power.”<sup>19</sup> Limiting undocumented students by creating economic barriers to higher education is a tool to limit the undocumented population enrolled in college per state. These economic barriers are created through high tuition rates, limitation of private loans and high interest rates available to undocumented students. A higher educational degree does not guarantee economic and social mobility given the current political context with the elimination of DACA, legalizing work opportunities for millions of undocumented students. Therefore increasing higher education access also includes increasing the work opportunities for

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<sup>16</sup> Fermin Mendoza, “The Case for Undocumented Students in Higher Education,” (2015): 8. <http://usp.ucr.edu/docs/undocases.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> Gabriel R. Serna, Joshua M. Cohen, and David H. K. Nguyen, “State and Institutional Policies on In-State Resident Tuition and Financial Aid for Undocumented Students: Examining Constraints and Opportunities,” *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 25, no. 18 (2017): 1-22.

<sup>18</sup> Andrea Flores, “Forms of exclusion: Undocumented students navigating financial aid and inclusion in the United States,” *Journal of the American Ethnological Society* 43, no.4 (2016): 540-554.

<sup>19</sup> Daisy Diaz-Strong, Christina Gomez, Maria E. Luna-Duarte, & Erica R. Meiners, “Purged: Undocumented Students, Financial Aid Policies, and Access to Higher Education.” *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education* 10 no.2 (2011): 107-119.

undocumented students to ensure that the maximum benefits are gained. Higher education equips students with the knowledge to pursue work in the fields and bring that knowledge back into spaces where they can push for change.

Educators for Fair Considerations focuses on the work ethic of undocumented students to argue for greater higher education access.<sup>20</sup> They contend that the work ethic and leadership skills developed through the experience of being undocumented exemplify American values and ideals of society. Moreover, greater education access would allow undocumented students membership into the U.S. economy and society.

### *The Connecticut Case*

Undocumented students in Connecticut, one of 16 states to offer students access to in-state tuition rates, still encounter the issue of affording their higher education.<sup>21</sup> Connecticut has yet to pass legislation that allows undocumented students access to institutional aid.<sup>22</sup> Even though undocumented students can attend higher education institutions in Connecticut if they pay in-state tuition rates, affording those rates is a barrier for many undocumented families. I selected Connecticut as my research site because it is one of the states that has not passed institutional aid but has passed in-state tuition rate legislation. Therefore, while it may appear that Connecticut is fully supporting its undocumented students, there are still financial barriers they must overcome to access a higher education. The organization Connecticut Students for a Dream is the leading organization working with policy makers to increase access to higher education and get institutional aid legislation passed in the 2018 legislative season.

Connecticut Students for a Dream (C4D) is an undocumented youth run organization that mobilizes other undocumented students to fight for greater access to higher education. C4D

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<sup>20</sup> Fermin Mendoza, 25.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*

gathers undocumented students and families to engage politically with state representatives by supporting members to testify at legislative hearing sessions, write letters, make phone calls and share their stories.<sup>23</sup> C4D provides support through an extensive list of resources students can use at public colleges and universities. On C4D's website, there are various spreadsheets and documents detailing the different higher education options undocumented students have and how they may get there. Every year, C4D hosts an educator's conference that gathers educators from all across Connecticut to learn how to work with undocumented students. Essentially, C4D works to provide all-around support and guidance for undocumented students in Connecticut.

In 2011, C4D helped pass house bill 6390, in-state tuition legislation increasing access to Connecticut public colleges and universities by offering undocumented students the same rates as all Connecticut residents pay.<sup>24</sup> In comparison to other states that have legislation on undocumented student higher education, this can be attributed to their lack of undocumented student driven organizations actively pushing for such legislation. Now students can pay in-state tuition rates to attend public Connecticut colleges and universities. Despite tuition access, undocumented students still face barriers, mentioned previously, in affording Connecticut in-state tuition rates. Currently, Connecticut state law prohibits undocumented students from receiving financial aid that can help them afford tuition rates. Following 2011, C4D continued to advocate for better access to higher educational institutions.<sup>25</sup>

The 2017 legislative season garnered support from statewide organizations working to advance access to education for undocumented students. Organizations like the Yale College

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<sup>23</sup> "Connecticut Policy," uLead Network, <https://uleadnet.org/map/connecticut-policy>.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> They have submitted bills with the help of state politicians calling for access to institutional aid. Each year, the bill gets closer and closer to leaving the higher education committee but has yet to be passed. In 2017, state representatives proposed both house bill no. 7000 and senate bill no. 17. They both have the same bodies of content but have different names. H.B. 7000 is titled, An act equalizing access to student generated financial aid and S.B. 17 is titled, An Act Assisting Students Without Legal Immigration Status with the Cost of College.

Democrats went to testify at the public hearing in addition to C4D members, and other stakeholders who would benefit from the passage of the bills. The 2018 S.B. No. 4: An Act Assisting Students Without Legal Immigration Status with the Cost of College is the newest proposed institutional aid bill. Together, they both propose that by fall 2018 any student who is considered an in-state student has access to receive institutional aid from any public Connecticut college or university.

### **Methodology**

In order to examine how undocumented students navigate the Connecticut higher education system without institutional aid, I searched through the public hearing testimonies for the 2015-2018 Connecticut institutional aid bills. In total I read through 598 public hearing testimonies actively searching for ones written by self-identified undocumented students. In total I found 85 testimonies written by undocumented people who were or are students. These public hearing testimonies were available on the Connecticut General Assembly website.

The written testimonies were written in support of the proposed institutional aid bills in 2015, 2016, 2017, and 2018. While there were other testimonies written by allies and community organizations, I wanted to center the narrative on the undocumented students and how they perceive their deservingness and need for institutional aid.

I opted for the testimonies rather than interviewing undocumented students in person because of the late arrival of my IRB exemption and having received no response from Connecticut Student for a Dream leaders, whom I intended to interview.

Additionally, I decided to interview Connecticut public university representatives who work with undocumented students to understand their perception of institutional support. I began by looking at the websites of eight universities to find specific contacts to reach out to and

decided to email four state universities and four community colleges but only heard back from two schools Western Connecticut State University and Southern State University. For both of these universities I was able to find the emails of people designated to support undocumented students. For the other six, I resorted to reaching out to financial aid and admissions office only to hear from two more that they did not offer aid to undocumented students, situating the extent of their support.

I interviewed two representatives from Western Connecticut State University and Southern Connecticut State University. The two universities I interviewed are two of the only universities with institutional support systems in place. At WCSU, I interviewed Carina Bandhauer, professor of Spanish and at SCSU I interviewed Esteban Garcia, an associate bursar. Both interviews were conducted over the phone because of time and travel limitations but both interviewees were open to answering questions. Their interviews are the center of the section on institutional support because both of the interviewees contextualized their university support systems in a historical timeline and delineated the types of resources they offer.

### **Undocumented Student Barriers in Connecticut**

The public hearing testimonies of undocumented students show how the absence of aid has shaped their lives in ways requiring additional support mechanisms besides institutional aid legislation. This section focuses on their narratives and incorporates scholarship on undocumented students and the barriers they face across the United States. It situates the Connecticut undocumented students' life in contexts beyond higher education to illustrate the implications of barriers like high in-state tuition rates. By situating the narratives of undocumented students through a broader lens, the section will call on the Connecticut legislature to visualize the lives of undocumented students in spaces beyond higher education in

order to understand the various barriers they face in attaining a postsecondary degree. By drawing from a whole perspective then can Connecticut pass institutional aid and find additional strategies to support their undocumented student population.

### *Uninformed Educators*

Beginning in high school, counselors are often unaware of the financial aid and admissions policies of public institutions.<sup>26</sup> Scholars write that counselors are often unaware of university policies because of complex higher education state legislation for undocumented students.<sup>27</sup> Uninformed counselors contribute to the pool of nearly 90% of undocumented high school graduates who do not enroll in college. Students take the advice of counselors, who are in positions to shape knowledge production but who have little to no training on how to advise undocumented students in accordance with complex state financial aid and enrollment policies. Therefore, when students are considering applying to public state schools, they must learn to navigate the application process alone.<sup>28</sup> Undocumented students are forced to exert additional labor in the college process because they must take on the task of figuring out how to enroll in college and which options are best for them. Two public hearing testimonies demonstrate the impact of uninformed counselors in Connecticut, emphasizing the need for counselor training in order to ensure undocumented students are informed and supported.

In a 2016 testimony, Carlos Miranda revealed he was told by his advisor that he could not apply to college.<sup>29</sup> Luckily for Miranda, another close advisor stepped in and informed him he could apply to colleges in Connecticut because of in-state tuition legislation. Without the

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<sup>26</sup> Zenen Jaimes Perez, “Removing Barriers to Higher Education for Undocumented Students,” (2014): 17.

<sup>27</sup> Serna, Gabriel R, Joshua M Cohen, and David H K Nguyen. 2017. “State and Institutional Policies on In-State Resident Tuition and Financial Aid for Undocumented Students: Examining Constraints and Opportunities.” <https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.25.2809>. 14

<sup>28</sup> Zenen Jaimes Perez, 18.

<sup>29</sup> S.B. 147: An Act Assisting Students without Legal Immigration Status with the Cost of College: Testimony before the Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee, Connecticut General Assembly (2016) (statement of Carlos Miranda, undocumented student).

informed advisor, Miranda would have accepted the words of his advisor, a counselor seen as a source of reliable information. The power counselors have in dispersing information comes the caveat that it is deemed reliable and fact. Had it not been for the other advisor who told him otherwise, Carlos Miranda may not be in college today. Luckily, Carlos was not deterred. Negative interactions with educators can alter the socioemotional perception of a student with their undocumented status.<sup>30</sup> The uninformed counselor's advice as a negative interaction, impacts the way Miranda may view his undocumented status, as one that completely limits his access to higher education in Connecticut. While other barriers are present, Miranda could still apply to public state colleges. Rather than tell the student that he could not apply, the advisor should have said they were not sure because by telling them not to apply, they could have discouraged the student from continuing the college admission process. It only takes one person to discourage an undocumented student from applying and completing college.

Tashi Sanchez-Llaury, another undocumented student in Connecticut, was told they could only apply to Norwalk Community College.<sup>31</sup> While Sanchez-Llaury decided Norwalk community was their best choice, the initial advice removed their agency to decide which college to attend. Especially in a state like Connecticut where undocumented students can apply to any of the 17 public community colleges and state universities if they can find ways to afford it.

Sanchez-Llaury wrote:

“While this information was incorrect, it wasn't too far off; while I could have applied to other schools I would not have been able to afford the tuition.”

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<sup>30</sup> Richard; Perez, William; Douglas Cortes, *Undocumented Latino College Students: Their Socioemotional and Academic Experiences* (El Paso: LFB Scholarly Publishing, 2011), <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/yale-ebooks/reader.action?docID=1057837&query=>.

<sup>31</sup> S.B. 147: An Act Assisting Students without Legal Immigration Status with the Cost of College: Testimony before the Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee, Connecticut General Assembly (2016) (statement of Tashi Sanchez-Llaury, undocumented student).

Uninformed educators need to provide clear guidance for undocumented students with explanations for their recommendations. Rather than solely push undocumented students towards one college, guidance counselors need to allow undocumented students to claim their own agency in order for them to understand their own power. Therefore, the undocumented student cannot be pushed aside but rather must be given choices for their own future.

Unfortunately, even with informed counselors, undocumented students still face barriers one enrolled in public Connecticut institutions.

### *Affording In-state tuition rates*

Connecticut in-state tuition rates for four-year universities range from \$10,000-\$12,000 for full time students and \$3,816 for full time status at community colleges.<sup>32</sup> These prices do not include other fees like the college services fee which is an additional \$460 for full-time community college students. The high cost of in-state tuition rates forces many undocumented students to enroll as part-time students in order to work, influencing their interaction with their academic work and mental health. Undocumented students cannot apply to federal student loans that offer lower interest rates and flexible repayment options.<sup>33</sup> There is no federal law prohibiting undocumented students from receiving private loans.<sup>34</sup> Despite no law, individual banks limit the amount on loans. Only a few banks few private loans they can apply for but they must pass credit checks, which for many young people is difficult because they may not have a credit card, and are likely to have higher interest rates.<sup>35</sup> Thus, private loans are not an option for many undocumented students. Students who want to attend public institutions must review

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<sup>32</sup> "Tuition & Fees," Connecticut State Colleges and Universities, <http://www.ct.edu/admission/tuition#rates>.

<sup>33</sup> "Financial Aid for Undocumented Students," Bankrate, <https://www.bankrate.com/finance/college-finance/financial-aid-undocumented-students.aspx>.

<sup>34</sup> Ryan Evely Gildersleeve, Corey Rumann, and Rodolfo Mondragón, "Serving Undocumented Students: Current Law and Policy," *New Directions for Student Services* 2010, no. 131 (September 16, 2010): 9, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ss.364>.

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*

whether their state offers in-state tuition rates and institutional aid in order to decide whether they can pursue a degree. Private schools function off their own regulations and tend to offer undocumented need-based aid to the same extent as for students with legal status. The question of affordability is a central barrier students must navigate when deciding to enroll and remain in college. Students find alternative ways to afford their education by working at the same time and staying in school longer. The struggle to afford college in Connecticut creates a ripple effect that permeates into the lives of undocumented students in ways that are not visible to legislative debates on higher education support.

More than 40% of undocumented youth live below the poverty line.<sup>36</sup> Only a few states offer institutional aid for undocumented students. Thus, students must make a decision between pursuing work opportunities or a higher education. Some states offer in-state tuition rates for their residents, but those are still not affordable enough to ensure all undocumented students can access a higher education. Tuition costs nearly 48% of the amount of money a low-income family makes.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, attending a public postsecondary institution requires the mutual support of families who together take on the task of attaining a higher education degree. Roberto Gonzales writes that one favorable circumstance necessary for undocumented students is the support from family for the undocumented student to work and study at the same time because studying may mean not working a full-time job as well.<sup>38</sup> The Connecticut legislature needs to imagine the undocumented student as part of a family to comprehend their contributions and responsibilities to the family unit. Support mechanisms are not only beneficial to the individual but to entire families. Undocumented students responsibilities to their families were motivators

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<sup>36</sup> Jeffrey S. Passel, "Unauthorized Migrants: Numbers and Characteristics," *Pew Hispanic Center*, (2015): 34.

<sup>37</sup> Gildersleeve, Ryan Evely, and Susana Hernandez. 113.

<sup>38</sup> Roberto G Gonzales, "Learning to Be Illegal: Undocumented Youth and Shifting Legal Contexts in the Transition to Adulthood," *American Sociological Review* 76, no. 4 (2011) 31.

for not attending school. Even with institutional aid, undocumented students will still have financial responsibilities to their families because of the pervasive nature of poverty and systemic oppression. The Connecticut legislature must recognize this and seek to continue working towards supporting undocumented students.

Allison Martinez-Carrasco submitted two testimonies to the Connecticut General Assembly in 2015 and 2017.<sup>39</sup> By 2017, Allison had stopped going to school because of the decision to end DACA. She says:

“As a method of survival I considered how it would be best to save my money should DACA die under President Trump’s administration. When I made this hard choice and stopped paying out of pocket for school it was disappointing to think back at how long we have been in this battle in Connecticut to ensure that low income undocumented students be eligible to access institutional aid.”

The fear that DACA would end meant Allison was worried her family would have no means to support themselves if she continued school. Moreover, the length of time it took her to complete her degree and the announcement of DACA further motivated her to make the decision.

Undocumented students rely on their own support systems in families and prioritize them as anyone else would.

Erik Munoz submitted a testimony in 2016, expressing his support for institutional aid.<sup>40</sup>

Erik Munoz stopped going to school because he was unemployed for two months. He writes:

“I was without a job for two months and a half and everything that I saved up during the summer, which was supposed to be for school ended up being for rent, food and transportation. I started working again in January 2015 in demolition. I worked there for two months. At first, I was paid on time but then I was not getting paid anymore. In fact, they still owe me three-thousand dollars. When they never ended up paying me for my hard work I felt robbed and helpless because that was the money I thought of using to go

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<sup>39</sup> S.B. 398: An Act Assisting Students without Legal Immigration Status with the Cost of College: Testimony before the Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee, Connecticut General Assembly (2017) (statement of Allison Martinez-Carrasco, undocumented student).

<sup>40</sup> S.B. 147: An Act Assisting Students without Legal Immigration Status with the Cost of College: Testimony before the Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee, Connecticut General Assembly (2016) (statement of Erik Munoz, undocumented student).

back to school with. I became jobless again for a month and began to look for jobs at restaurants and in cleaning.”

Munoz’s public hearing testimony brings to light the other degrees of struggle undocumented students face. As an undocumented person Munoz was subjected to wage theft and was exploited by his employer. Additionally, the money he saved ended up going to rent, food and transportation because he needed to provide for his family rather than use the money to go to school. Family weighs over education and undocumented students understand that supporting families and making sure they survive is the first priority. Having to find ways to pay for college and support families is a difficult feat young undocumented students try to accomplish. The pressure of providing for families coupled with the goal of graduating contribute to the state of mental health undocumented students cope with. While Munoz’s testimony does not reveal whether he was threatened, it also does not explain if he filed a claim against his employer. Shannon Gleeson writes that undocumented people undergo wage theft more often than U.S. citizens because employers use tactics like reporting to ICE to instill fear in undocumented employees.<sup>41</sup> This letter illuminates the anti-immigrant discourses used to support the capitalist system that infiltrate into the education system in determining who can receive one and who cannot. For Munoz, he was not able to receive a degree because of the loss of money and employer actively stole from him. In the following years that the institutional aid was proposed Munoz did not submit another public hearing testimony. Undocumented students stop going to school because it becomes too expensive to continue.

Additionally, because undocumented students have trouble affording college, they take a longer time to complete their degree and so go years doing the same process, working more than

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<sup>41</sup> Shannon Gleeson, “Labor Rights for All? The Role of Undocumented Immigrant Status for Worker Claims Making,” *Law & Social Inquiry* 35, no. 3 (August 16, 2010): 567, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-4469.2010.01196.x>.

one job while taking a couple of classes. A study found that undocumented students were less likely to earn a bachelor's degree within four years in comparison to their U.S. counterparts.<sup>42</sup> For Vivian Morelo-Zelinka, it took her 9 years to get a bachelor's degree from a public Connecticut university.<sup>43</sup> The cyclical nature of undergoing financial stress in order to achieve a degree puts undocumented in a position where they exert their mental health. The toll of working more than one job means having limited amounts of time to dedicate to school. Undocumented students who work do not have the time to spend engaging with student organizations where they may find systems of support through organizations like MEChA.<sup>44</sup> The time limitations undocumented students have means they have to carefully allocate where their time will bring the most benefits.

Undocumented students that work to pay their way through their education still encounter academic difficulties ranging from not having enough time to study to what major they can pick. Three public hearing testimonies mention the difficulty of picking a major and how it is tied to cost, for example majors like music and nursing require an additional fee ranging from \$150-\$600 per course.<sup>45</sup> When Allison Martinez-Carrasco was in school, she had to deal with the decision of picking another major that would be cheaper than Urban and Community Studies. Still, she decided to remain with the major because it was she was most passionate about. Abigail Andrade Solis writes that she had to change her major from accounting to management because the requirements for accounting meant she would have to stay in school longer. Staying in

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<sup>42</sup> Colin C. Conger, Dylan; Chellman, "Undocumented College Students in the United States: In-State Tuition Not Enough to Ensure Four-Year Degree Completion" (New York City, n.d.) 1.

<sup>43</sup> S.B. 147: An Act Assisting Students without Legal Immigration Status with the Cost of College: Testimony before the Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee, Connecticut General Assembly (2016) (statement of Vivian Morelo-Zelinka, undocumented student).

<sup>44</sup> Lindsay Perez Huber and Maria C Malagon, "Silenced Struggles: The Experiences of Latina and Latino Undocumented College Students in California," *Nevada Law Journal* 7 (2007): 852.

<sup>45</sup> "Registration Information," Western Connecticut State University, <http://www.wcsu.edu/registration/ugrad-tuition/>.

college would only elongate the cyclical nature of work and school and prevent her from helping her family as a college graduate. The financial constraints manifest itself into the academic decisions undocumented students make once in college. Joseline Tlacomulco wrote in 2017 that she applied to a music scholarship at UCONN to study music. Once she arrived and began taking courses in the major, she realized she did not like it and switched to Political Science.<sup>46</sup>

However, the switch has been a “huge barrier financially” because she lost her music scholarship. Undocumented students in Connecticut and in other states have to negotiate their interest and passion in a field of study with the practicality of their interest or they will face the financial consequences. Thus, the passage of an institutional aid bill would help students afford their higher education, but academic support is needed within institutions in order for students to thrive in areas in which they are passionate.

### ***Mental health***

The alternative ways undocumented students use to afford their education and the struggles they face along the way influence their mental health. A study by the Massachusetts Department of Mental Health research found that undocumented students experience higher rates of depression, anxiety, fear and loneliness.<sup>47</sup> The struggle of being undocumented at institutions that have no systems of support means finding ways to negotiate undocumented identity. Thus, once undocumented students are able to enroll and begin classes at a college, they still lack institutional support to succeed through the college.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> S.B. 398: An Act Assisting Students without Legal Immigration Status with the Cost of College: Testimony before the Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee, Connecticut General Assembly (2017) (statement of Joseline Tlacomulco, undocumented student).

<sup>47</sup> Rosalie Torres Stone and Nathanael Aragon Cooper, “The DREAMers Study: Undocumented College Students and Their Mental Health Needs.” Systems and Psychosocial Advances Research Center: A Massachusetts Department of Mental Health Research Center of Excellence 14 (2017): 2.

<sup>48</sup> *ibid.*

Moreover, status as an undocumented person during the college application process means navigating that identity and figuring out how to reveal it to people who are supposed to support students along the way. Roberto Gonzales writes that illegality creates a “secondary border” that further motivates undocumented students to stay disconnected from their peers in high school and college.<sup>49</sup> These facets of mental health are likely developed by the fear of deportation and state of liminality as an undocumented person, a life in limbo.<sup>50</sup> Undocumented college students in Connecticut must navigate their identity at the same time as they work and study. This process requires support from institutions. Research found that students who stayed in college and remained a part of the cyclical nature were more likely to experience higher levels of socio-emotional distress because of layers of systemic oppression such as discrimination in institutions.<sup>51</sup>

Undocumented students are also likely to be the first ones in their family to go to college. As first generation students, they do not have the support from their parents or older relatives to guide them in college life. First generation undocumented students do not have the cultural capital that other students from wealthier backgrounds may have.<sup>52</sup> They must work harder in catching and learn what strategies will help them succeed, such as academic strategies. Colleges do not cater towards undocumented students and the experiences that come with their identity because many colleges do not have centers tailored to fit their needs. There are few mental health resources or academic support networks shaped for undocumented students because they require

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<sup>49</sup> Roberto G. Gonzales, Carola Suárez-Orozco, and Maria Cecilia Dedios-Sanguinetti, “No Place to Belong: Contextualizing Concepts of Mental Health Among Undocumented Immigrant Youth in the United States,” *American Behavioral Scientist*, 2013, 1175, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764213487349>.

<sup>50</sup> Roberto G. Gonzales, *Lives in Limbo: Undocumented and Coming of Age in America* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016).

<sup>51</sup> William Pérez et al., “‘Cursed and Blessed’: Examining the Socioemotional and Academic Experiences of Undocumented Latina and Latino College Students,” *New Directions for Student Services*, 2010, 37-38, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ss.366>.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

training towards understanding the undocumented experience. Institutional aid will not simply fix the mental health undocumented students face because they are years in the making.

The responsibilities undocumented students have and the impact these have on their mental health make it clear that the Connecticut legislature should not only be concerned with whether undocumented students can afford college but also whether they are in also good health. Doing so would indicate the state's recognition of its undocumented student population and further assert their belonging as residents of Connecticut.

### **Institutional Support at SCSU and WCSU**

The support systems for undocumented students in place at public Connecticut universities vary by school. Out of the 17 schools that are a part of the Connecticut State Colleges and Universities, only four are four-year institutions. Out of those four-year institutions, only two connect students with school resources developed by students, faculty and staff to support undocumented students. Those institutions are Western Connecticut State University and Southern Connecticut State University. The other two institutions, Eastern and Central Connecticut State University connect students with outside resources by referring them to organizations like Connecticut Students for a Dream because they have no institutional systems in place to support undocumented students. Beginning in 2015 and every year following, the Connecticut State University President and representatives have come out supporting institutional aid access. Despite no institutional aid legislation, at least two public Connecticut universities are have created institutional systems of support. This section examines the support systems undocumented students can access at four year public institutions in Connecticut to contend that even with the passage of an institutional aid bill, public universities need to expand their support by developing campus specific resources for their students like those at WCSU and

SCSU. Over the last two years, WCSU and SCSU created task forces to assist undocumented students on their campus. The creation of the task forces reflect what the state of institutional support in public Connecticut postsecondary schools could look like if all public schools implemented similar task forces.

In October 2016, SCSU developed its first task force for undocumented students, more than 10 years after the beginning of the student driven DREAM movement. Esteban Garcia and Dr. Resha Cardone chair the task force and explained how it began. Esteban Garcia, an Associate Bursar at SCSU interacts with students on a daily basis who come to his office to make tuition payments. Dr. Cardone is an associate professor of Spanish at the university. Together they created the task force a month before the election of President Trump.

Undocumented students relied on faculty they trusted to help them with problems they faced. Before the task force there were no specific contacts like professors or centers to reach if undocumented students needed support. Students were referred to different people because no one knew who could help undocumented students best at the university, making them feel like they did not have support.<sup>53</sup> The lack of a central place for support symbolized institutional neglect and an overall disregard for the presence of undocumented students on campus.<sup>54</sup> In an effort to centralize undocumented support into one place, Garcia and Cardone developed a task force by reaching out to other faculty. They began with only a couple of faculty but following the 2016 election, more faculty came out supporting the task force and undocumented students came out as well looking for support. Thus, the election of Trump marked a turning point at SCSU and WCSU because anti-immigrant discourse became more pervasive, instilling fear in undocumented communities. Nonetheless, the time it took for the university to create the

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<sup>53</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> *ibid.*

institution perpetuated the marginalization of undocumented students on campus.<sup>55</sup> This is one of the problems with the task force, that it was not created earlier. Trump's election made polarizing rhetoric much clearer, forcing undocumented students to come out with their stories of struggles.

The task force consists of faculty and undocumented students, though it is mostly student driven. It has three goals:

1. To identify and break down barriers undocumented students face
2. Engage the SCSU community about the realities of being undocumented
3. To advocate for policies that support undocumented students at the state, federal and university level

The SCSU task force works towards its first goal by making information on how undocumented students can attend and afford SCSU available on their website. Their website offers links to resources undocumented students can access such as academic advising.<sup>56</sup> Notably, there are links on the SCSU website directing students to mental health resources such as support groups for students impacted by the rescindment of DACA. Though it does not mention support groups for students who never had DACA status. They experienced another form of exclusion. Garcia also mentioned that all students at SCSU have access to mental health counseling free of charge and that the director has received training by Connecticut Students for a Dream about the undocumented experience. Undocumented students are more likely to experience trauma with the discovery of their status and the implications it carries.<sup>57</sup> Mental health support systems at SCSU are crucial for undocumented students.

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<sup>55</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> "Undocumented Students," Southern Connecticut State University, <https://www.southernct.edu/undocumented-students/>.

<sup>57</sup> Gonzales, 1177.

Additionally, SCSU has come up with a list of legal resources undocumented students can access. Esteban says “we direct and connect students to the resources because we don’t have many of them.” Such resources include scholarships, legal fee funds in case relatives are detained, and directions to mental health resources. Fermin Mendoza coins the term “safe zone” where students are welcomed and can access resources.<sup>58</sup> SCSU’s task force is an example of a safe zone. In regards to informing the SCSU community, the task force is working to diminish anti-immigrant discourse which luckily has not been too present on campus. The current challenge they identify is trying to get more faculty on the task force and make sure undocumented students know that the task force is there to support them.

Western Connecticut State University shares a similar story. Carina Bandhauer is a professor at WCSU. Carina Bandhauer started the task force by inviting all faculty to go to an educators conference hosted by Connecticut Students for a Dream in December 2016. Following, many faculty were on board and took positions on the task force. Before its creation, Carina was the only staff that was addressing the needs of undocumented students. She remembers it was not on her radar until 10 years ago when the DREAM movement was becoming more visible. A student approached her telling her about the discrimination they encountered on campus for their undocumented status. Bandhauer became a professor undocumented students reached out to when they needed support. She described the forms of discrimination as very blatant and that students were “struggling on so many different levels.” As a professor with tenure, she saw no problem with emailing the entire faculty an invitation to Connecticut Students for a Dream Educators Conference. If she were not a tenured professor, she may have not made the same decision.

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

Bandhauer was able to gather a team of five faculty and staff to attend the Educators Conference where people from other universities also attended. The dean of WCSU was one of the staff in attendance. In the Fall 2017, the dean suggested that they invite Connecticut Students for a Dream to the first faculty of arts meeting before classes started. C4D presented on how educators can best work to support their students, especially when 2015 study found that undocumented students face discrimination from their professors.<sup>59</sup>

Following the faculty of arts and sciences meeting, more faculty showed their support and asked to be on the task force Bandhauer was creating. The task force became so large Bandhauer created subcommittees. WCSU's task force goals are to:

1. Work with Chief Diversity Officer to set up trainings for faculty and develop an awareness of undocumented student presence among the student body.  
Essentially, to stop discrimination on campus.
2. Find strategies to support undocumented students financially, like connecting them to outside organizations like Connecticut Students for a Dream which has scholarship lists.
3. Get the university to speak more boldly about institutional aid.
4. Make the WCSU website more clear that there is a support system in place for undocumented students.
5. Train academic centers on how to work with undocumented students and provide best academic support.

WCSU's goals are still developing since the task force is newer than the one at Southern.

Nonetheless, WCSU can work from SCSU's model and increase its level of support by providing clear information on the mental health resources available to students. Currently, there is only a

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<sup>59</sup> Yuliana Garcia et.al. 446

link directing students to the counseling office but no information on support groups specifically for undocumented students.

SCSU and WCSU have created task forces working towards helping undocumented students attain degrees. The reality is that even with the extensive list of resources both universities have created to support students, there are no specific career services or contacts that can help students once they graduate. With the end of DACA, undocumented students who receive postsecondary degrees will face difficulty finding jobs because of their status. Therefore, in addition to institutional aid, Connecticut needs to find ways to ensure that undocumented students who graduate from its colleges are able to find work within the state in the fields they have academically prepared for.

### **Conclusion**

Undocumented students in Connecticut face barriers in accessing higher education that go beyond being able to afford in-state tuition rates. Even with the creation of task forces at Southern Connecticut State University and Western Connecticut State University the current state of immigration will require a deeper level of support similar to the program created at the University of California at Berkeley. The Undocumented Student Program at UC Berkeley is a fully funded center with a paid director and student staff offering academic guidance, mental health counseling, legal services, grants/scholarships, and directions on how to apply as an undocumented student.<sup>60</sup> The program began as a task force and unfolded into a full on center

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<sup>60</sup> “Undocumented Student Program,” University of California at Berkeley, <https://undocu.berkeley.edu/>.

with a dedicated space.<sup>61</sup> Public postsecondary institutions should be striving towards developing centers because undocumented students are here to stay.<sup>62</sup>

Ultimately, the goal is to pass an immigration reform that provides relief for all of the undocumented people living in the United States. In an ideal perspective, undocumented students would receive legal status, as would their parents. They would be able to envision their future in the United States without fear. Through a realist perspective, immigration reform is unlikely, at least in the near future. With the end of DACA, the future is unclear. The uncertainty makes the passage of institutional aid and other mechanisms like increased institutional support more critical. These systems need to be in place across all colleges and universities in Connecticut so universities can begin or continue to develop spaces of trust. Arizona's case on in-state tuition is an example of what could happen in Connecticut if the political climate changed.

On April 9, 2018, the Arizona Supreme court ruled that DACA students were no longer eligible to receive in-state tuition rates.<sup>63</sup> DACA students along with undocumented students must pay nearly triple the cost of in-state tuition rates in order to begin or continue their studies in the state. Even with student advocacy the court decided that only people with legal status could enroll in public state colleges at in-state rates. Connecticut on the other hand seems to be moving towards the passage of institutional aid.

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<sup>61</sup> "History: Undocumented Student Program," University of California at Berkeley, <https://undocu.berkeley.edu/>.

<https://undocu.berkeley.edu/home/our-history/>.

<sup>62</sup> United We Dream, <https://weareheretostay.org/>.

<sup>63</sup> Nicole Acevedo, "Arizona Supreme Court: No in-State Tuition for DACA College Students," NBC News, April 9, 2018, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/arizona-supreme-court-no-state-tuition-daca-college-students-n864106>.

On April 18, 2018 the Senate passed S.B. No. 4 with a vote of 30-5.<sup>64</sup> Democratic house leaders suggest that 2018 is likely to be the year that institutional aid passes in the house. The Connecticut General Assembly session ends on May 9th. By May 9th, undocumented students in Connecticut will know if they are able to receive institutional aid or if they will have to continue the legislative fight. Regardless, institutions, community members and allies must work with undocumented students to ensure the levels of support continue to expand.

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<sup>64</sup> Jacqueline Rabe Thomas, “Legislators predict financial aid for undocumented will finally pass,” CT Mirror, April 18, 2018, <https://ctmirror.org/2018/04/18/legislators-predict-financial-aid-undocumented-will-finally-pass/>.

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