

## 'We've failed them': How SC's education policy hurts Dreamers ... and costs taxpayers

While S.C. taxpayers spend roughly \$13,200 annually to educate each K-12 student, state policies obstruct one group of S.C. students from advancing their education beyond high school.

Dreamers, or young people brought to the U.S. illegally by their parents when they were children, must pay tuition at the same rate as out-of-state students at S.C. public colleges and are not eligible for state-sponsored financial aid.

As a result, many Dreamers — who number about 6,500 in South Carolina, according to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services — have few affordable in-state options once they complete high school. Some move to other states to pursue their education or don't go to college at all.

That's hurting the state's economy and workforce, say advocates of S.C. Dreamers.

The policy is "bad for those individuals, but it's also bad for all of us," said Benjamin Roth, a University of South Carolina professor who studies the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals Program, or DACA, passed in 2012 during President Barack Obama's administration, that protects Dreamers from deportation.

If South Carolina public colleges enroll Dreamers, they charge the Dreamers out-of-state tuition, according to the S.C. Commission on Higher Education. It's one of several states without tuition equality laws Dreamers, which can make a big difference in the cost of a college degree. For example, at both Clemson University and the University of South Carolina annual out-of-state tuition is about \$20,000 more expensive than in-state tuition.

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Charging Dreamers the same tuition rates as other in-state students would benefit taxpayers who are already footing the bill for their K-12 education, said Rep. Neal Collins, R-Pickens.

"The majority of (DACA recipients) would testify that America is their only home. They're going to be in our communities and they're going to live in our state," Collins said. "So we have two simple choices: Let them pursue education, get higher-paying jobs, have more spending power and pay more in taxes. Or we can create hurdles for them."

Collins introduced a bill this past legislative session to allow S.C. DACA recipients to pay in-state tuition and be eligible for professional licenses from state boards, which they are currently banned from receiving.

While the bill stalled in the House, Collins said he plans to refile it next session.

"By my calculations, we have about 300 Dreamers that are going to graduate from high school in the next week or two," Collins said. "And in a sense, we've failed them."

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Dreamers are mostly employed taxpayers.

In South Carolina, an estimated 90.3 percent of the DACA population is employed, according to the New American Economy, a bipartisan group of business leaders with co-chairs including Richard Murdoch and Michael Bloomberg. The group estimates that S.C. Dreamers pay an estimated \$6.8 million in state and local taxes.

Allowing DACA recipients to get higher degrees and better-paying jobs translates into them paying more taxes — which in turn funds the state's public school system and other government services, said Andrew Lim, director of Quantitative Research at the New American Economy.

"These are tax dollars that go back to public education for students of all background," Lim said. "It's a win-win for everyone in the state."

## **GOODBYE, SOUTH CAROLINA**

Victor Morales, 24, a Dreamer whose parents brought him from Mexico to Summerville when he was 10, knows firsthand about the challenges of attending S.C. colleges.

When he sat down to apply for colleges in his home state in 2012, he was discouraged to find that they were too expensive, he said. Annual tuition for nonresidents was about \$30,000 at the College of Charleston and \$50,000 at The Citadel.

So he moved, trading the palmettos of the Lowcountry for the rolling hills of Park University outside of Kansas City, Missouri.

Morales received an academic scholarship to the private college, which covers about a third of his \$12,000 annual tuition. He works full time at a T-Mobile store to pay the rest of his tuition, as he isn't able to take out student loans.

Other S.C. students, like Carla Teixeira, simply leave the U.S. altogether.

After earning her bachelor's degree in biology on a full ride in 2014 from Columbia College in South Carolina's capital, Teixeira decided to pursue her master's degree in health promotion in Ontario, Canada. It was the only graduate program she could afford, as a Dreamer who was brought to South Carolina by her parents in 2003.

"It's a shame because a lot of the Dreamers that I had the privilege of knowing while I was in South Carolina were some of the most hardworking, super-smart people," Teixeira said. "If they had the opportunity to go to school, they would do amazing things, like become doctors and lawyers."

About 690,000 Dreamers have received DACA protection in the U.S. They now have Social Security numbers, are eligible for driver's licenses and can legally work.

But few make it through college. Of the estimated 65,000 undocumented students who graduate from U.S. high school every year, only 5 to 10 percent continue their education, according the U.S. Department of Education. Even fewer actually graduate from college: 1 to 3 percent, estimates the United We Dream Network.

Yet others argue the state should be focusing on native South Carolinians.

"My first commitment in this state is the people who are trying to get into college who are residents, and who were born and raised in South Carolina," said Rep. Rita Allison, R-Spartanburg, chairwoman of the S.C. House's education committee.

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Although she supports the state law that requires Dreamers to pay out-of-state tuition, she said she is open to discussing changes to the law if there is movement on Collins' bill.

Just how many students would be affected by a change in state law is impossible to say. It's illegal for K-12 public schools to ask about a student's immigration status.

But South Carolina has a thriving student Hispanic population, an unknown portion of which is undocumented. As of 2016, Hispanic students made up 8.6 percent of the students enrolled in the state's public schools.

In some parts of the state, including Beaufort County, that percentage is much higher. The number of Hispanic students in the Beaufort County School District climbed from 17 percent in 2006 to nearly a quarter in 2017.

## **A TALE OF TWO BROTHERS**

Once Dreamers graduate from high school, they must navigate the barriers set up by S.C. legislators who passed the Illegal Immigration Reform Act in 2008.

For Morales and his good friend Brandon Ordaz — who consider each other brothers — that meant taking divergent paths into adulthood.

One brother, Ordaz, stayed in South Carolina, working for his family's construction company. The other, Morales, left the state, looking for something more.

Morales originally came to South Carolina in 2004. About five years later, Morales recalled that law enforcement began cracking down on undocumented families.

"My parents just decided to go back (to Mexico) at that time because they just couldn't afford to live under the radar, with the pressure of (getting deported if police pulled them over) just driving to buy some groceries or going to work," Morales recalled.



A portrait of Victor Morales' parents sits in his Kansas City, Mo., apartment. Perez's parent, who are from Mexico, never had the opportunity to pursue higher education. Emrys Eller *THE HECHINGER REPORT*

But Morales was determined to stay to finish high school, so he moved in with Ordaz's family.

One night when Morales was 17 years old, a couple of cops pulled Morales over as he drove. DACA would not be passed for another year, so he didn't have a driver's license. He could only give them his Mexican ID.

The officers handcuffed Morales and drove him to a police station. He remembers being fingerprinted. He remembers staying up all night, locked up in a room with others who were waiting for bail, and crying. He remembers seeing "three or four folks" in orange jumpsuits being transferred, "all Latino."

"I felt like I was going to disappoint my family if I was going to be deported when I was almost done with high school," Morales said.

Since Morales was a minor, the police let him go after his ticket was paid. But that arrest flipped a sort of switch in him. He wanted to make something of himself. He wanted to help his community. And he knew he had to go to college to have any real chance to create change.

After high school, Morales worked the construction job for a year, saving up enough money to move to Kansas City. He studied for a short time at a community college before earning an academic scholarship at Park University.

Now, he hopes he can graduate next year — that is, before his DACA status expires. He's pursuing a double major in marketing and human resources, with the goal of working for a business or nonprofit that focuses on poverty, education or human rights.

President Donald Trump announced in September he would end the DACA program and called on Congress to pass a more permanent solution through a revised immigration law — a task that Congress has not yet finished.

For now, DACA recipients already enrolled in the program like Morales may continue to renew their legal status in the country.

Meanwhile, Ordaz works construction in South Carolina.

Enrolling in college would only complicate things, he said. As one of the major financial providers for his family, he would likely need to move his whole family to another state for him to attend college, he said. Then, he and his family would have to wait until he qualified for in-state tuition.

Ordaz is proud of Morales. But he's also frustrated by what he sees as the barriers created by South Carolina.

"From an economic point of view, it really doesn't make sense," Ordaz said. "Why would they let us finish high school if they make it too expensive to go to college?"