

Young, undocumented immigrants are finding it increasingly hard to attend college as South Carolina and other states restrict in-state tuition or ban them altogether

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Students at Arizona State University protest against a Republican student group encouraging people to report undocumented immigrants in January 2025 .

Ross D. Franklin/Associated Press

The Trump administration's aggressive deportation policies have heightened stress among the country's approximately 14 million immigrants who are living in the U.S. without legal authorization.

The sharp rise in dramatic arrests and deportations of immigrants over the past year has received widespread media attention.

A less publicized issue is that many young, undocumented immigrants are also finding it harder to apply to and stay in college.

As someone who researches teacher training and was a high school teacher in South Carolina, I have researched how restrictive education policies make it harder for immigrant students, particularly undocumented students, to receive a college degree.



The University of South Carolina is the largest public university in the state.

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Bumpy path to higher education for undocumented students

In 1982, the Supreme Court ruled that students could not be discriminated against based on their immigration status.

This ruling ensured that immigrant students could not be denied entrance to public K-12 schools.

The caveat is that the ruling did not extend to higher education.

In 1996, Congress approved the Illegal Immigration Reform and Responsibility Act, which made it harder for undocumented immigrants who are deported to reenter the U.S., among other changes to increase border security.

This law also said that states could not provide in-state tuition to undocumented students at public universities, unless they gave the same benefits to out-of-state American citizens.

Then, in the early 2000s, a bipartisan group of Texas representatives helped pass a bill that opened up in-state tuition to undocumented students. The bill based tuition and scholarships on specific residency requirements, such as graduating from high school in the state, allowing the bill to circumvent the 1996 federal law.

Also in the early 2000s, California, Illinois, Washington and New York also passed similar legislation that allows undocumented immigrants to receive in-state tuition – and in some cases, state scholarships – at state universities.

Even some conservative states, such as Utah, Oklahoma and Kansas, passed such legislation during the early 2000s that let undocumented immigrants pay in-state tuition at public universities and colleges.

The tide turns

But just a few years later, things began to shift.

In 2008, South Carolina became the first state to ban undocumented students from studying at public colleges and universities altogether.

Georgia and Alabama quickly followed suit with similar bans.

In 2012, after Congress created the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program to allow immigrants who came to the U.S. as children to temporarily work, study and stay in the U.S., some schools in South Carolina briefly banned DACA students from attending public universities – despite the new federal law.

The schools reversed course the next year following a lawsuit by the American Civil Liberties Union of South Carolina, but still required DACA students to pay out-of-state tuition.

Until 2015, South Carolina even denied in-state tuition for some American citizens with undocumented parents. The state reversed the policy following a lawsuit.

The trend toward more restrictive policies toward undocumented students has continued during the Trump administration.

In February 2025, Florida passed a law that revoked in-state tuition for undocumented students. Florida still allows undocumented immigrants to enroll at public colleges and universities, as long as they pay full tuition.

And over the summer, the Department of Justice challenged Oklahoma's and Texas' in-state tuition policies, which had allowed all undocumented students to pay in-state tuition.

Both states quickly ended their policies.

Texas and Oklahoma still allow DACA recipients to attend public universities and pay in-state tuition rates.

As of 2025, 22 states and Washington D.C. allow undocumented students to pay in-state tuition. The remaining states, meanwhile, either do not have a state policy, require undocumented immigrants to pay out-of-state tuition, or bar them entirely from attending public universities.

A challenging environment

Overall, these shifts make it harder for many undocumented students to go to and stay in college.

The price of in-state tuition at public universities varies, but it typically offers in-state residents a much lower tuition rate than students coming from out of state. While the average in-state tuition at public colleges costs about US\$11,610 for the 2024-25 school year, out-of-state students paid \$30,780, on average, during this same time frame.

Undocumented students do not qualify for federal financial aid, so paying out-of-state tuition at a public university usually prevents immigrants from pursuing a college degree.

Some research shows that in-state tuition policies help reduce undocumented college students' dropout rates by about 8%.

In-state tuition policies also increase college enrollment of noncitizen Latino students by 54%.

A blockade for students

I began teaching social studies at a high school in South Carolina in 2012, soon after many of these restrictions on immigrant students were enacted. I found that many educators and students were not aware of these restrictions until students applied to colleges or sought state licenses.

My students included DACA recipients who completed a two-year program in areas like cosmetology, only then to be told they would not be allowed to practice in the state.

My later research focused on DACA students who aspired to become educators but had to either stop pursuing that goal or go out of state to teach. Other immigrant students I surveyed in my research said they lost motivation in the high school classroom due to the restrictions to pursue higher education.



Students stage a walkout at a high school in Charlotte, N.C., on Nov. 18, 2025, protesting Border Patrol operations targeting undocumented immigrants.

John Moore/Getty Images

Carryover effects

Policies that make it easier for undocumented immigrants to attend college don't just affect individual students and their families – they also have a positive effect on local economies.

Research from 2025 shows that when undocumented students can pay in-state tuition, they become more likely to have a job after graduation.

Another study from Clemson University and the nonprofit group Hispanic Alliance found that South Carolina could be losing up to \$68 million a year in revenue due to the license policy for DACA recipients.

I have known undocumented people who are aspiring doctors and teachers and moved to other states since they could not study or receive professional licenses in South Carolina.

Restrictive education policies could mean that some of the most talented immigrant students will leave their respective states. However, the average undocumented immigrant student will not usually pursue or delay higher education if the tuition is not affordable.

I believe these policies will ultimately mean a less educated and productive society.

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