

Opinion: California can lead on immigration reform by passing the Dream Act

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Body

This Tuesday, two visions about the future of immigrants, **California** and the nation will be debated in the Assembly Higher Education Committee in Sacramento. Assemblyman Tim Donnelly, R-Claremont, and I will present starkly different proposals for how to treat immigrants who were brought to **California** at an early age and now want to achieve educational success.

I will propose that through the **California Dream Act** and AB 130, we allow undocumented students to apply for higher education financial assistance. Donnelly will argue for the repeal of AB 540, the law that allows undocumented students to pay in-state tuition at our colleges and universities. But what we will really be discussing is two different ways of interpreting our history, our economic philosophies and our moral calculus.

My goal at the hearing will be to make a fact-based argument that undocumented students who want to become doctors, architects and engineers should be allowed to apply for financial aid.

A paradox of our political culture is that while being uniquely a nation of immigrants, we are also a nation of **immigration** restrictionists. We proclaim that we are "Proud to be Irish," or Polish, or Italian, but **immigration** policy throughout our history has often been shaped by racism, fears of foreign influence, the anxiety generated from economic downturns and by political opportunism.

At the Tuesday hearing, I will argue that immigrants have been largely a source of strength for our country and state. They have contributed to our economy with their labor and their taxes, and they have strengthened our communities with the fundamentally American values of hard work and family loyalty.

At the hearing will be students hoping to be scientists, attorneys and economists. Others want to start their own businesses. Still others yearn to take care of others by becoming doctors, nurses or teachers. A central theme of their testimony will be that they simply want to fulfill their God given talents and make a contribution to the communities they live in.

Aside from being ambitious and successful, these students have other things in common. They were brought to **California** by their parents at a very young age and through no choice of their own. Contrary to the myths held about immigrants, they learned English, embraced our culture, worked hard and graduated from **California** high schools.

Unlike other college students, they **can't** leave the country to visit the historical sites of Europe or the rich cultures of the Far East. And they **can't** apply for college financial aid. With AB 130, we **can** offer them a chance to achieve the **California Dream** and the American **Dream**.

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Our diminished moral vision holds these students back. As University of **California** President Mark Yudof recently stated, "The outstanding accomplishments of these leaders of tomorrow should not be disregarded nor their future jeopardized simply because of their legal status."

Some argue that undocumented students are "taking away" from citizens. But their fellow students regard their presence as enhancing their academic experience. They are an inspiration to their classmates of energy and drive.

Ultimately AB 130 will pass the Legislature and will end up on Gov. Jerry Brown's desk. I believe the governor will sign the bill and once again place **California** in a position of national leadership on one of the most crucial economic and moral issues of our day. While many other states head backward in time, **California** will be blazing a path toward the future.

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