



Leadership in Action: DACA and American Values

It is time for America to show us who we are.

We were deeply saddened – though not shocked – by the 5th Circuit Court of Appeals ruling invalidating the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, popularly known as DACA. Started in 2012, DACA is a pathway allowing immigrants who entered the country as children, and who have no other legal remedies for formal status here, to remain as long as DACA is in place. The recent court decision is therefore tragic. It directly threatens over 600,000 young people seeking to make a life in America, harming our communities in the process and injecting chaos into an already impossible immigration system.

Without Congressional action, we are almost certain to lose hundreds of thousands of young people. They have grown up in our schools, joined our religious communities, become high school valedictorians, played in our sports leagues, participated in our town fairs, and are now starting to join our workforce and tax base when we need them most.

They are part of us. We have worked in colleges and universities that have welcomed students participating in the DACA program. We believe this directly enacts the central promise of American higher education—a point of global pride—to unlock individual potential, bettering lives, communities, and economies. We have witnessed DACA students become members of our communities, enriching our classrooms and workplaces. We have also seen DACA students graduate at higher levels than citizen students. The success of DACA students is a model of excellence for our country.

We have also witnessed the damage to our students' lives when the country they call home threatens to deport them while on their path to achieving their dreams. They have done everything we have asked them to do. They have entered into a broken immigration system and shared their address and, in some instances, their family's home address, which the government can use against them at any time. DACA students have grown up here. To most, this is the only home they have known. Many may be in danger if we deport them—for instance, many LGBTQ and DACA youth face higher levels of discrimination and violence. So too, young people with serious medical issues may lose access to proper care or support networks. As educators, we lament the massive and unnecessary loss of potential in students who will have no way to continue their education. Upon earning their degrees, they stand ready to give back to the families, communities, and country that have sacrificed so much.

Deeply American values are in doubt. Over a half century ago, civil rights writer James Baldwin considered the moral urgency of American race relations and wrote, "I can't believe what you say...because I see what you do." What kind of country do we want to be? What do we stand for? Lofty pronouncements about American values of freedom, democracy, and fairness amount to nothing when hundreds of thousands of young people are threatened with deportation. Should this occur, we will tear apart our communities that have embraced DACA students. Meanwhile, American courts are validating exclusion and harm.



Now is the time for Congress to act. The latest court ruling allowed current DACA recipients to retain their status and work permits while the case is remanded to a lower court. That is good news for those already in the system, but time is running out. Congress has had over ten years to act, across multiple administrations and political parties. There is no more time. Our values – and the lives of hundreds of thousands of young people – are on the line.

We need leadership in action. We know that such leadership is hard. We write as leaders of a mission-driven college that prepares young people for meaningful lives and civic engagement. We act daily to ensure we live out our college values in practice. Against all odds, we are building a small college that is among the most diverse and accessible in the nation:

- At least one quarter of our students are the first in their families to go to college.
- Almost half are people of color.
- Three quarters are eligible for Federal Pell grants (an indicator of significant financial need), and
- Over 80% identify as LGBTQIA+.

We are proud of this community built across differences. For many of our students, this is the first time they have truly felt a sense of home. We see firsthand how that unlocks their beautiful potential. The American promise we see in action is that any person can make dreams a reality by working hard, following the rules, and serving a purpose greater than self.

Undocumented students are hiding in the shadows throughout the country. We speak now with a clear moral voice that immigrant students are valued and valuable human beings. We are doing what we can to provide access to our education by decoupling documentation status from eligibility for admission, reduced tuition, and other aid. But our options are limited.

Congress must act without delay.

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