

Key Arguments for the Immigration Debate in North Carolina

Why keep the doors to North Carolina's universities and community colleges open to undocumented students?

- North Carolina was the first university system to extend a public education to everyone. We should not be the first state to take that away.
- As long as they are qualified, these students should not be punished for pursuing an education because of a decision made years ago over which they had no control. Many of these students came at a very young age and have lived in this country nearly their entire lives. They have worked hard. They are smart enough to go to college. We should take advantage of their talents and encourage them.
- North Carolina needs more, not fewer, trained and educated people to compete in the global economy. By enrolling in college, these students have demonstrated a commitment to being productive members of our society.
- The number of undocumented students enrolled in the state's community colleges and universities is very small. In 2007, there were only 112 out of 297,000 in the state's community colleges and 27 out of 200,000 in the state's universities

Below are a series of comments you could hear in discussions about issues related to undocumented immigrants and suggested responses you might consider using.

Higher education debate

When we hear:

These people are illegal. We need to fix immigration first, and then when immigrants are legal, they can go to any university and community college they want.

Response:

We can't stop the world to wait for Congress to act. It's in our own self-interests to keep the doors open for qualified students who want to better themselves and pay a premium for the privilege.

Documents prepared by Capstrat at the request of the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation, the A.J. Fletcher Foundation, the Knight Foundation and others. May 12, 2008

When we hear:

Undocumented immigrants take seats in college away from North Carolinians.

Response:

Undocumented immigrants in North Carolina count against the out-of-state/foreign student enrollment cap at universities, not against in-state enrollment slots. In 2006-07, there were 27 such students out of a total university enrollment of 200,000. North Carolina community colleges had 112 undocumented students out of 297,000 total enrollments. That makes it extremely unlikely that they are keeping North Carolina residents from enrolling.

When we hear:

Allowing students to enter universities or community colleges rewards them for illegal actions.

Response:

These students should not be punished for a decision made years ago over which they had no control. Many of these students came at a very young age and have lived in this country nearly their entire lives. America is what they know. They've worked hard and played by the rules. They have been valedictorians and football stars. They are smart enough to go to college. We should take advantage of their talents and encourage them.

When we hear:

North Carolina taxpayers will be subsidizing the education of undocumented immigrants.

Response:

That's not credible. These students will be paying \$7,400 in out-of-state tuition to attend a community college compared to \$1,400 for in-state students, and \$21,000 out-of-state tuition at a university compared to \$5,340 for in-state students. They pay more than their fair share. They are not allowed to receive any state or federal grants or loans.

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When we hear:

Allowing students to attend our universities and community colleges will send the wrong signal and create a flood of illegal immigrants in our schools and to our state.

Response:

The cost bar is very high. The number of undocumented enrollees is tiny. Even when students are offered in-state tuition in other states, the percentage of undocumented enrollees is very small. Students cannot receive state or federal grants or loans. No state in the country has banned undocumented students from enrolling in either community colleges or universities; North Carolina should not be the first state to do so.

When we hear:

How are the students going to get a job when they graduate? It's against the law to hire them.

Response:

Immigration reform is likely to include a path for college graduates to stay in this country, work, pay taxes and contribute to our economy. In the meantime, if they want to pay their way with a high premium to attend a community college or a university, there is nothing to lose and everything to gain.

Broader immigration issues

When we hear:

Undocumented immigrants don't pay any taxes.

Response:

According to a variety of sources, each year tens of thousands of W-2s are filed with incorrect Social Security numbers. Those returns generated \$7 to \$9 billion in Social Security taxes and \$1.5 to \$1.9 billion in Medicare taken out of \$50 to \$75 billion in wages. While the IRS and Social Security Administration decline to specify how many of these are undocumented workers, there is a direct correlation between the increase in incorrect numbers and the growth of undocumented immigrants in America.

Those undocumented immigrants are not eligible to receive Social Security or Medicare, so they are in effect subsidizing those programs for the rest of us by billions of tax dollars each year.

In addition, a UNC study concluded that Hispanics contribute \$756 million in North Carolina taxes each year. On a proportionate basis, undocumented immigrants would account for about half of that.

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When we hear:

Undocumented immigrants get free medical care.

Response:

Undocumented immigrants are banned from the majority of federal health care services. They have limited access to emergency Medicaid. Only a small percentage of undocumented immigrants have employer-based health insurance. The best way to address this issue is to bring these people out of the shadows by requiring a path to citizenship that is earned by passing a background check, learning English and paying taxes over several years. That should be coupled with more security at the borders, capturing and deporting criminals, and more enforcement against employers who hire undocumented workers.

When we hear:

Undocumented immigrants are crime ridden.

Response:

Based on North Carolina and other studies, the rate of incarceration for undocumented immigrants is lower than for native-born Americans.

When we hear:

Undocumented immigrants are a tremendous burden on our society in terms of costs, especially in the area of K-12 education.

Response:

Federal law, backed by a Supreme Court ruling, requires that K-12 school systems must allow undocumented immigrants to enroll. The best solution is realistic immigration reform, including tightened security at our borders, catching and deporting criminals, and stepping up enforcement against employers using undocumented workers. That reform should include a better way for employers to legally hire temporary workers to fill unwanted jobs and pay more taxes. We also need a required path to citizenship for those already here who can pass a background check, learn English and pay taxes over a number of years.

When we hear:

We should just round up all the undocumented immigrants and do whatever is necessary to send them home.

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Response:

No one wants America to turn into a police state with road blocks, splitting up families. That's not to mention it would cost billions and billions of dollars and detract law enforcement from their normal duties to protect the public. Does anyone really think that a President of the United States or Congress is going to order the round up of 12 million people?

The more realistic approach is immigration reform that includes tightened security at our borders, catching and deporting criminals and stepping up enforcement against employers using undocumented workers. That reform must include a better way for employers to legally hire temporary workers to fill unwanted jobs and pay more taxes. We also need a required path to citizenship for those already here who can pass a background check, learn English and pay taxes over a number of years.

When we hear:

These people don't want to become citizens.

Response:

Once they are here, undocumented workers have no path to legalizing themselves. This is a problem we must solve. These people are in our communities and for most of them, they are likely to stay here. We need a required path for citizenship that includes passing a background check, learning English and paying taxes over a number of years. Those steps should be part of a realistic immigration reform that tightens security at our borders, catches and deports criminals and steps up enforcement against employers hiring undocumented workers. At the same time we need to create a better way for employers to bring in legally documented workers to fill unwanted jobs and pay taxes. There is a 10-year backlog of green cards in Mexico. These are not bad people breaking good laws they are people who want to provide for their families who are caught by a dysfunctional immigration system.

When we hear:

They are taking jobs that Americans would fill.

Response:

There are an estimated 500,000 people a year who come here for work. This problem started because American employers couldn't find enough people to work. There aren't enough Americans out of work to fill all the jobs – mostly lower income – that immigrants do.

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