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Venture Forth to New Beginnings

Despite the havoc of 2020, the American people still find themselves in the midst of voting season. Although the polls will look quite different this year, the underlying issues America faces remain the same. One of the most pressing, it seems, is whether or not immigrants contribute to uniting this country and what should or should not be done to protect those entering the country. As the daughter of a Mexican immigrant, it is clear that my thoughts and opinions on this issue derive from a different perspective, but that should not necessarily imply my position is biased. That being said, I admittedly have an understanding and deep appreciation for the importance of organizations like Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and the Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors Act (the DREAM Act). These organizations may initially seem as only beneficial to those who support immigration or to the immigrants themselves, but in actuality, they also contribute to the wellbeing of America.

The DREAM Act was initially intended to provide a path to permanent residency for many young immigrants who currently hold “alien status” (Flair). Although introduced in the United States’ Senate in 2001, the DREAM ACT has yet become law. In 2019, however, it was introduced and passed House under a different title: “the DREAM & Promise Act of 2019”. As a result of the many failings for the DREAM Act to pass in Congress, former President Barack Obama implemented the immigration policy known as DACA in 2012 citing, “These are young people who study in our schools, they play in our neighborhoods, they’re friends with our kids,

they pledge allegiance to our flag. They are Americans in their heart, in their minds, in every single way but one: on paper...these young people are going to make extraordinary contributions, and are already making contributions to our society” (Remarks by the President on Immigration). This specific program’s purpose focuses on the deferment, or delay, in deportation of undocumented immigrants from the United States if they arrive in the country as children and meet certain criteria: having entered the United States before turning sixteen or having been physically present in the country on the date DACA took effect and to continuously live in the country for five years, actively pursuing or have already obtained a high school education, pass a criminal background check and display upstanding moral character. If an undocumented immigrant meets these particular conditions, that individual would be awarded conditional residency (Ruth). While some American citizens fear that “all” immigrants may be inclined to indulge in criminal activity, DACA proves that despite passing laws to protect undocumented immigrants, the obligation to protect the citizens of the United States is greater still. It may do well to note that between August of 2012 and March 2020, 825,998 unauthorized immigrants were approved to participate in the DACA program for at least two years. To clarify, this means that almost 826,000 immigrants met all of the criteria necessary to qualify for the program including passing a criminal background check (USAFacts).

DACA also works on a renewal basis so every two years, the recipient has to reapply and be reaccepted into the program in order to continuously receive the benefits DACA has to offer. One of these benefits includes the capability to work in the United States. The allowance of undocumented immigrants to work in the United States often raises the question, “Are immigrants responsible for stealing jobs from American citizens?” Though, this is a fair notion, statistics and research shows that immigrants are not robbing Americans of their own

employment. In 2017, Attorney General Jeff Sessions announced that current President of the United States, Donald J. Trump, decided to put an end to DACA while stressing the legal and economic reasons behind the decision. In fact, Sessions is quoted as saying that the beneficiaries of the program ended up denying jobs “to hundreds of thousands of Americans by allowing those same illegal aliens to take those jobs” (Kurtzleben). Disproving this idea, Mark Zandi, chief economist at Moody’s Analytics refutes Sessions’ statement by mentioning, “There is no evidence of that. Repealing DACA is particularly wrongheaded as economic policy.” One particular reason that this holds true is that the United States’ current job market is rather healthy. Ray Perryman, president and CEO of the Texas economic research firm, the Perryman Group, makes a valid argument against Sessions by stating, “I think the primary thing that would argue against [Sessions’ claim] at this point is, that we are at full employment with more job openings than at any point in history. We desperately need workers in this country.” Giovanni Peri, professor of economics at the University of California, Davis makes a fair argument when he states, “Population creates its own jobs in some sense.” To elaborate, because the population is rising due to DACA recipients, there is also an increase in the demand for workers. Another significant detail is one that Danielle Kurtzleben points out in her article for NPR claiming that, “DACA recipients are relatively well-educated and have the capacity to make the economy that much more productive.” These specific points are definitely noteworthy in that they evince the flourishing job market and declination of unemployment indicating that recipients of DACA are not to be held accountable for “stealing jobs” from American citizens. In actuality, DACA recipients are crucial in aiding the United States’ thriving employment rates and economy.

French-American author, Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, once wrote, “There is room for everybody in America” (Imbarrato). This quote leads us to another common fear of immigration

in that there is no “room” in America for anyone else other than its citizens, but it is imperative that this country’s economic health be taken into account when considering this argument. If the United States decided to get rid of a program like DACA, losing those hundreds of thousands of immigrants could take a toll on the economy. Zandi, according to the New York Times, predicted that in five years, the Gross Domestic Product, or “GDP,” would be \$105 billion smaller without DACA recipients than with those same recipients. Although this may not seem much compared to the nation’s total GDP which is around \$19 trillion per year, it is a hit nonetheless (Kurtzleben). Also, when considering the regions in which immigrants reside, it seems significantly inferior to the population of American citizens throughout the entire country. According to USA Facts, two states account for 45% of the DACA population: California with 183,460 and Texas which hosts 106,090 DACA recipients. Illinois rounds out the top three, with 33,940 which is equivalent to about 5% and Vermont ranks the lowest with 20 recipients. This is not to say that these numbers are not subject to increase throughout time, but as America continues to grow, the more tentable it becomes.

There is a common misconception when considering undocumented immigrants’ stance on what it means to be “American”. By some’s standards, it is often perceived that undocumented immigrants will never be American and are unlikely to ever achieve that status. What does it mean to truly be American? What qualifications must one have to be considered purely American? What makes an American an American? According to John Sides, an associate professor of political science at George Washington University and researcher with the Voter Study Group, “There are two lenses in which to examine the “American” question: ethnic identity or civic identity. If we think about citizenship or American identity in terms of ethnicity, we’re going to look at who people are. We’re going to ask, ‘Where are you from? What’s your

skin color? What's your religion?" As for the civic side, Sides notes that the questions take on a different tone, "We're going to ask you, 'What do you believe? Do you support American values? American ideals? American institutions?'... things like that." In the 2016 VOTER survey, also known as the Views of the Electoral Research Survey, it was found that most respondents believed a person's civic beliefs were far more important in determining whether or not they were American than one's racial, ethnic or religious background (Larsen). When this is considered, it can be acknowledged that every born-in-the-USA citizen, excluding indigenous people, can trace back to a specific person or people in their own lineage that was considered an immigrant. More often than not, the reason for that initial immigration was so that particular person or persons could begin a "new life" in order to provide a future of prosperity for themselves and potential families. So, when considering what makes an American an American, it does not seem fair to automatically conclude that an undocumented immigrant in current times can never be considered "American". As long as one follows the same concepts as every other American citizen, abides by the same rules and persistently works to acquire their own American dream, it is valid to name them an American as well. Reverting back to *The Letters of an American Farmer*, Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur writes, "He is an American, who, leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds."

In conclusion, DACA and the DREAM Act are pivotal to the United States of America because immigrants contribute to what makes this country thrive. In contrast, without these programs to protect undocumented immigrants, obtaining citizenship would feel almost impossible. My own father, for example, immigrated to Houston, Texas at the age of 11 but was not granted programs such as DACA and the DREAM Act for they had yet to exist. The fear of

deportation was constantly instilled in my brother and me despite my father following the rules, teaching himself English and working extremely hard for a better life because there was nothing to protect him should one thing go awry. Immigrants, though “alien”, are not to be feared though it is natural to be wary of what is not quite understood. They just want what we all want: a new start and a better life. What better way to define the “United” in our country’s name than to accept others and provide them with an opportunity to live out an American life while following through on the rules and regulations the programs require?

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