



Policy Brief:  
**Expanding TRIO to Be Inclusive  
of All Students Regardless  
of Immigrant Statuses and  
Providing Federal Financial Aid  
Funding for Undocumented,  
TPS, and DACA Students**

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## Who We Are

### **Katherine Trejo, George Mason University**

Katherine Trejo is a senior majoring in Conflict Analysis and Resolution with an individualized concentration in Community Engagement with Displaced Populations, which includes an emphasis on youth in conflict at George Mason University. On campus, she's President of the Mariposas Mentoring Program, Co-Public Relations Chair of F1rst Gen Mason, and a Student Transition Empowerment Program scholar, as of 2018. Off campus, Katherine is an advocate and organizer in the Virginia, D.C., area with the Black Lives Matter movement and the immigration movement. She also works with first-generation high school students as a college academic success coach, helping students prepare for their FAFSA and other college-related applications. Finally, she is an *Avanzando* Fellow for UnidosUS, the nation's largest Hispanic civil rights and advocacy organization.

### **Amy Patricia Morales, Florida State University**

Amy Patricia Morales grew up in Miami, Florida, by way of Honduras and Cuba. Amy has been involved in Student Senate and also Global Scholars, an undergraduate research-abroad opportunity program that led her to Tijuana, Mexico. Amy also currently serves as the co-vice president of the Central American United Student Association on campus. Amy is also involved in Dream Defenders and Engage Miami in the local community. Ending family detention and supporting low-income and mixed-status families is what drives Amy and is what inspired her to join the *Avanzando* Fellowship.

## Background

Undocumented students in the United States struggle to pay higher education costs, which prevents them from accessing higher-paying jobs. Federal financial aid such as loans, scholarships, grants, or work-study funding is inaccessible to undocumented students. Forty percent of 18- to 24-year-old undocumented students do not graduate due to cost constraints, increasing the likelihood that they will experience poverty.<sup>1</sup> Further, undocumented students already experience poverty at twice the rate of students with U.S.-born parents.<sup>2</sup> Access to federal assistance such as loans, grants, and scholarships will help undocumented students alleviate some cost constraints. Reducing some of the financial stress associated with pursuing higher education may help undocumented students graduate at the same rate as their U.S.-born peers and prepare them to make beneficial social and economic contributions in the United States.

## Our Ask

- Amend the Higher Education Act (HEA) to authorize Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) recipients, Temporary Protected Status (TPS) holders, and other undocumented students to be eligible for federal student aid provided through the HEA.
- Ensure state-funded college-readiness programs such as TRIO are inclusive and supportive of all undocumented students. Programs like TRIO work to provide first-generation, low-income, and economically disadvantaged students the opportunity to prepare for achieving higher education by providing a constant support system that follows them from middle school through college.

## The Need

COVID-19 has brought to light the disparities faced by undocumented students, TPS, and DACA recipients in the United States. On February 4, 2020, the public charge rule went into effect, stating that “aliens are inadmissible to the United States if they are unable to care for themselves without becoming public charges.”<sup>3</sup> An undocumented student's inability to access healthcare assistance due to the public charge rule has instilled fear of being detained by ICE when seeking out medical attention. This is further exacerbated by the need to be seen by a medical professional for testing during the pandemic. Along with this issue, immigrant families and students across the nation disenrolled from the public benefit programs for which they were eligible. An estimated one-in-seven (13.7%) adults in immigrant families, and more than one in five (20.7%) adults in low-income households, reported avoiding public benefit programs for fear of risking future green card status.<sup>4</sup> Disenrolling from public benefit programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) means losing access to food security, which negatively impacts the functionality of students in a school setting.<sup>5</sup>

Undocumented students must be given federal financial assistance to reduce the number of labor hours they must expend to help support their families and pay for tuition. One survey showed that 57% of students who worked lost their job due to the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>6</sup> Further, it is likely that the students who are still employed are working in high-risk jobs. One study revealed that 69% of undocumented workers hold “essential” or “frontline” positions.<sup>7</sup> The number of multi-status students working in high-risk roles during the pandemic shows a high level of commitment to both their education and their families.

As of 2019, close to 100,000 undocumented students graduate from U.S. high schools every year.<sup>8</sup> A 2020 report revealed that approximately 2% of college students are

undocumented immigrants.<sup>9</sup> By 2060, the Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts that Latinos will comprise 30% of our workforce.<sup>10</sup> Most jobs require a college degree for a viable salary, so pursuing higher education is necessary for most individuals. Without a job and a degree, undocumented students and their families may face financial insecurity and housing instability. College affordability means investing in Latino students regardless of citizenship status to ensure they have an equitable chance of attaining their degree.

Programs such as TRIO are an extension to education that goes beyond the classroom in ways that seek to elevate and encourage students to pursue post-secondary education by providing academic tutoring, assistance with college applications, and mentoring. Ensuring and expanding state funding for such college-readiness programs also provides a sense of community among the students within the program who face similar obstacles and share similar anxious sentiments about their ability to succeed in higher education.

## Impact

Undocumented immigrants pose a higher risk of developing depression and anxiety.<sup>11</sup> Immigration-related stressors, including fear of deportation, social marginalization, and employment problems, mean that undocumented students are likely struggling with mental health issues and might be susceptible to other psychosocial disorders.<sup>12</sup> The inability to provide supportive spaces and resources to undocumented students prevents them from succeeding in educational institutions and society.

In 2015, an estimated 24.5% of the undocumented population lived below the poverty threshold.<sup>13</sup> Financial instability coupled with limited access to higher education makes it close to impossible to realize a future where one can live beyond paycheck to paycheck. One 2013 study projected that by 2020, 65% of jobs would require some type of college degree.<sup>14</sup> Currently, undocumented, TPS, and DACA recipient students struggle to complete college due to tuition costs. These students will be denied social mobility and financial freedom if no action is taken. In Virginia, Senate Bill 1387, which calls for federal financial assistance to be made available to undocumented, TPS, and DACA recipient students, passed this 2021 legislative session. Virginia joins states such as Connecticut and Washington, among others, who realize the urgency in providing federal aid to undocumented, TPS, and DACA recipient students, further proving that this is an attainable goal.

Denying access to federal financial assistance programs such as FAFSA and federal student emergency aid like the CARES Act will continue to attack the economic stability of undocumented scholars. The added stresses of events from earlier in 2020, the SCOTUS decision on DACA, the current status of TPS and its recipients, the COVID-19 pandemic itself, the threat of unemployment, and the fear of being tested for COVID-19 due to the previous administration's harsh immigration policies all take financial tolls on undocumented scholars and their families.

## Endnotes

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