

Guest editorial: Supporting all students through Undocumented Student Action Week

5-7 minutes

The Ventura County Community College District believes that every student, regardless of their immigration status, deserves quality, affordable education that prepares them for a rewarding career or to transfer to a four-year college or university.

The district holds inclusivity among its highest priorities as we serve approximately 31,000 students from myriad ethnicities and socioeconomic backgrounds. Our colleges are Hispanic-Serving Institutions, and many of our students are the first in their families to pursue a college education.

This is why we, along with community colleges throughout California, support Undocumented Student Action Week, Oct. 19-23. During this important week, our colleges in Moorpark, Oxnard, Ventura and Santa Paula host educational and advocacy events for students and the community, and provide support resources for our undocumented student population. These events bring awareness to the challenges of undocumented students in Ventura County, who are among the approximately 70,000 undocumented students within the California Community College system. Many of these students are participants in the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program and are young people who know other countries as home.

Although Congress ruled in favor of the DACA program in June 2020, the Department of Homeland Security issued a memo in July stating that first-time DACA applicants and Advanced Parole requests will be rejected and that while renewal requests will still be processed, work permits will be issued for one year instead of two.

Undocumented Student Action Week demonstrates not only the resilience of undocumented students and their families in the face of hardship, but also the importance of fostering support within our

communities to defend the rights of those experiencing crisis. Undocumented students often meet different and more alienating struggles than the traditional student. Their rights to education and to live free from persecution are being undermined by the current political environment.

Not only do undocumented students deserve the right to quality education, but they are needed on our campuses and in our businesses. Undocumented students influence the classroom with their dedication, unique insights and a critical dose of cultural relativism. They also contribute to our county's economic and cultural vitality. They provide opportunities for expanding everyone's understanding of an increasingly integrated world.

DACA is also incredibly important for the livelihood of undocumented youth in America. According to the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER), DACA has had significant influence among undocumented students in California, with increased enrollment, completion and motivation in schools. A substantial reason for the gap in educational attainment among members of our communities is due to the meager benefits of schooling associated with a lack of legal status, according to NBER.

There are statewide resources to combat many of the setbacks faced by students, including financial aid and tuition support of the California Nonresident Tuition Exemption (commonly known as AB 540), California College Promise Grant, California Community College Student Success Completion Grant (SSCG) and the California DREAM Act, which allows AB 540 students to access state and institutional aid. These programs directly benefit our communities by raising overall educational and training levels, creating a better future for all.

VCCCD additionally supports student success through programs on each of our campuses that provide a safe, supportive and welcoming educational environment for undocumented students and those from mixed status families. The Dream Resource Center at Oxnard College provides comprehensive services to undocumented students, their families and campus allies.

We're also proud to celebrate Hispanic & Latinx Heritage Month (Sept. 15-Oct. 15) with events empowering Hispanic and Latinx students and inspiring those from different cultural backgrounds to learn about each other's customs, traditions and values. Through

these resources, we aim to illuminate students' vital contributions and explain why their voices and DACA are critical to our campuses.

We are dedicated to defending the educational and civil rights of all students, including those who are undocumented. Let's aspire to make education in America the best it can be by focusing on what undocumented students bring to our schools and how to meet their needs so that they experience academic and career success. We also want to remember how our country has benefited through initiatives that inspire inclusivity and awareness of diversity.

As this year's action week gets underway, I encourage every Ventura County resident to learn more about the challenges our undocumented students face, and how we can help. Please consider advocating within our community and urge Congress to take immediate, meaningful action on federal policies to provide resources to ensure undocumented students have a clear pathway to success.

For information about Undocumented Student Action Week activities, visit vcccd.edu/students/undocuually.

Greg Gillespie is the chancellor of the Ventura County Community College District, comprised of Moorpark, Oxnard and Ventura colleges and Ventura College East Campus.