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A Collage of Conversations with Undocumented Students

By Molly Pepper

As a university dedicated to social justice, how does Gonzaga University support its undocumented students? I spoke to three undocumented students about what is happening in their lives, what faculty, staff, and students can do to support them, and how the university can live up to its mission to be a sanctuary for social justice.

An undocumented student is one who either entered the United States illegally or entered legally but remained in the country beyond the legally authorized period. Many are too young to remember the trip. Others remember it very well. Many of them hold Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival (DACA) status. Deferred action means there will be no action taken to remove the student from the country for a certain period of time. DACA does not provide lawful status, but it may allow for work authorization. To qualify for DACA status, a student must have come to the United States before turning 16.

The three students with whom I spoke gave complex answers to my questions. Each had a different story to share about their time at Gonzaga. However, they shared some commonalities. First, none of them came to this country by choice. Being an undocumented student was a choice made for them by their parents. They would prefer to be here legally. Second, each one of them perceives that many of their fellow students and the faculty assume undocumented students do not attend this university. One described how surreal it was to have a class discussion about undocumented students with no one realizing that she was an undocumented student. Third, grades and achievements are important to these students. "Grades are what define you," one student told me. "That is one of the ways that we can prove ourselves."

"We are very much the same as our documented counterparts," another said. "We have dreams, aspirations, and maybe because it is so difficult for us to achieve our dreams, we value our education so much more and really want to be here in these institutions. The only thing that separates us is a piece of paper and someone's approval stating that we are worthy of claiming this land as our own even though it is the only thing we have ever known."

As for what they are feeling, all of them mentioned fear: fear that their family members will be deported; fear that, despite their DACA status, they will be deported to an unfamiliar country.

"There is a fear of being separated from your family," one student said. "The people who care for you may not be there the next day." The student said she feels she is safer than her parents are because she has DACA status. However, she says her mother is afraid for her. Her mother fears that if the student were deported, the student would not know how to live in her birth country.

One student described giving her fear to God and accepting that if she is deported, she will be all right. "I believe I will succeed wherever I go," she said. "I am not afraid."

As for my question about how the university can live up to its mission to be a sanctuary for social justice, the students described a few things the university already does well and some areas where it could improve.

The students spoke of supportive programs such as a pre-orientation program called BRIDGE that seeks to help students from multicultural and/or first generation backgrounds make a smooth transition to college at Gonzaga. The summer program gave them a cohort of friends with whom to navigate

the campus. The students also mentioned the Unity Multicultural Education Center as a safe place on campus staffed with individuals who are willing to talk about their concerns when needed. Other support comes from the student group La Raza Latina, whose goal is to educate the Gonzaga community about the Latino culture, and from well-educated resident assistants and resident directors.

The students wished faculty members were better informed about immigration issues and were more supportive. They had many examples of when faculty members did not demonstrate support or understanding. One student described a professor who lectured as if all illegal immigrants came from Mexico. Another professor asked whether students thought the wall on the U.S.-Mexico border proposed by President Trump should be built but then failed to follow up on the question when no one provided an answer. Another professor made a student feel she should not ask for help in the class but should have learned the material in high school. "You go to office hours once and get a weird feeling and do not go back again," she said.

When asked how faculty members could do better, one student mentioned it would be helpful if professors were knowledgeable about DACA issues and were willing to talk about them inside or outside of class. The student did not think many students would take a faculty member up on the offer to talk about DACA outside of class, but it would be nice to know that faculty members were willing to do so. Another student thought more dialogue could occur between faculty members and undocumented students if *intentional* safe spaces are created by the faculty.

Another student suggested faculty require all students to attend campus events about cultural issues. A popular event at Gonzaga is the Diversity Monologues, a contest in which students share experiences with diversity. One student described how a friend showed up at a diversity event because the student's professor gave extra credit for attendance. "Do these events happen all the time?" the student asked. Yes, these events happen all the time. However, the student pointed out that the same people tend to attend unless faculty members push other students to attend.

Since much of a student's time is spent in a residence hall, students suggested training for resident assistants and directors. While RAs and RDs receive diversity training, more information on DACA and immigration issues would make undocumented students feel more welcome and protected. One student described how a residence hall diversity information poster was defaced when a student scrawled "build the wall" on it.

Students see the university making progress in other areas. Gonzaga recently added "culturally" to its mission statement line: "Gonzaga models and expects excellence in academic and professional pursuits and intentionally develops the whole person – intellectually, spiritually, *culturally*, physically and emotionally."

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Another student found encouraging the current conversation about adding an optional \$2.50 charge on all tuition bills each semester to support undocumented students, similar to what students at Loyola University Chicago did. If this passes, it could not only support undocumented student monetarily but might also raise awareness and curiosity among students who may think that undocumented students do not exist on the campus.

To be the sanctuary for social justice that it promises to be, Gonzaga needs to find ways to support all its students. These undocumented students want to see the university educate itself and others on the issues.

Dr. Molly Pepper teaches classes in human resource management, ethics in human resources, management and organizations, and developing people and organizations at Gonzaga University; her research interests are in areas of mentoring, diversity, and electronic communication. She is a member of the National Seminar on Jesuit Higher Education.