

Rutgers immigrant youth summit pushes DREAM Act

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NEW BRUNSWICK — Public opinion and youth activism in support of the federal Development, Relief and Education for Minors (DREAM) Act is growing, participants said during a talk on undocumented youths on Thursday at Rutgers University.

Organized by the university's Department of Labor Studies and Employment Relations with several partners, the summit included Sofia Campos, chair of the United We Dream immigrant youth activist group, and Kent Wong, director of the UCLA Labor Center.

They were joined by a Rutgers University student and alumnus who detailed personal experiences as undocumented youths in New Jersey. A Rutgers-Eagleton poll also was presented that indicated statewide support across all demographics for the DREAM Act, as well as state financial aid and in-state tuition for undocumented students.

With about 60,000 undocumented immigrants, New Jersey ranks fifth highest in the country, according to the Washington, D.C.-based Pew Hispanic Center.

The DREAM Act would provide conditional permanent residency to undocumented students with several opportunities to obtain permanent residence.

Wong explained how the policy set forth by President Barack Obama on June 15 to stop deporting young undocumented immigrants who match the criteria of the DREAM Act coincided with the second annual Dream Summer. Participants in the social and labor justice mentorship and internship program organized by the UCLA Labor Center's Dream Resource Center and the United We Dream Network had lobbied the White House throughout the previous year, he said.

"It was a powerful day of tremendous hope and emotion and tears of joy because now for the very first time, over 1 million immigrant youth can emerge from the shadows and apply for work authorization and can fully contribute," Wong said. "We realize, however, that this is not the end and that there is a lot more work that needs to be done."

Wong described the immigrant youth activists as modern-day "Freedom Riders," students who engaged in civil rights demonstrations in the early 1960s.

Borrowing the slogan of undocumented youth activists, "Undocumented and Unafraid" is a new book that chronicles the movement. Wong plugged it and its 2005 predecessor, "Underground Undergrads." The stories, which include activists' families being detained and deported, have built power and support, Campos said.

As a national organizer, Campos encouraged undocumented immigrant youths and their supporters to unite with other groups such as the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community.

Campos and Giancarlo Tello, a 22-year-old undocumented Peruvian immigrant raised in Bergen County since he was 6, recalled the horrors of applying for college and jobs without a Social Security number.

A Rutgers undergrad and member of the New Jersey DREAM Act Coalition, Tello also shared an emotional tale about visiting the U.S. Capitol when the Senate shot down the DREAM Act in 2010.

"I was right there in the national gallery, right above the Senate, watching senators vote on my life, on the DREAM Act," he said. "I was watching 100 old white men deciding on my life. And you know how they were voting? With a thumbs up or thumbs down. What are we, in Rome? They didn't even humanize us enough to warrant a yes or no."

Ashley Koning, a political science doctoral candidate and a graduate assistant to the Eagleton Center for Public Interest Polling, presented the results of the Rutgers-Eagleton Poll that preceded the announcement of the Obama policy on June 15.

Koning said the statewide 80 percent majority support of the DREAM Act across all political affiliations, ages and incomes could impact state legislation that would provide in-state tuition and state financial to undocumented students at public universities. Both of those issues in the poll received less support than the DREAM Act, but still a majority, she said.

"Public opinion often changes public policy," Koning said.

“The New Jersey in-state tuition was introduced in the state Legislature in 2002, and it’s been reintroduced every legislative session stopping short of getting passed a committee vote,” added Marisol Conde-Hernandez, director of the New Jersey DREAM Act Coalition.

“This is where the youth movement comes in because we have built really strong alliances. Time’s up. It’s been 10 years. We’re 10 years behind California. How many years behind New York? Come on. We’re New Jersey and no one can stop us.”