

# In Their Own Words

The Authorization Gap: The Case for Permanent Protections for Dreamer College Graduates



In partnership with





# Mission

## TheDream.US

**TheDream.US** is the nation's largest and leading organization supporting Dreamers at the intersection of higher education, workforce development, immigration, and advocacy. We provide scholarships, career support, and access to legal options that help immigrant youth break through systemic barriers, achieve social mobility, and drive change in their communities.

Through our powerful Scholar data and strategic partnerships, we work to expand equitable access to college and career success, and advocate so Dreamers can fully contribute to the country they call home.

## Equal Chance for Education

**Equal Chance for Education** enables opportunities for higher education in Tennessee without regard to race, religion or nation of birth. Our vision is to support Tennessee's undocumented students in their journey to achieve a higher education degree to secure meaningful career opportunities.

# Executive Summary

The Authorization Gap: The Case for Permanent Protections for Dreamer College Graduates is the third collaborative Alumni Survey Report from TheDream.US, with a 79% increase in participants since the inaugural [2022 Report](#). This year, we partnered with Equal Chance for Education to examine the post-graduate trajectories of over 2,500 Alumni nationwide.

This report reflects online survey data, collected in February through April 2026, and is the most comprehensive dataset available on Dreamer college graduates in the U.S. For the first time, 1 in 5 respondents are fully undocumented, without Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), Temporary Protected Status (TPS), or any other form of temporary status with work authorization.

The data reveals a consistent truth: the barrier between Dreamer college graduates and their full potential is not ability, ambition, or work ethic. It is policy.

While the majority of Dreamers, regardless of work authorization, are deeply embedded in industries of high need as employees and business owners, the disparity in all domains of life dependent solely on immigration status calls upon the urgent need for federal and state action.

This report demonstrates the cost of the authorization gap.

# Career Outcomes:

- Alumni with work authorization are nearly twice as likely to be earning income full-time as their fully undocumented peers (84% vs. 43%).
- Fully undocumented Alumni are almost five times as likely to be looking for income opportunities than their peers with work authorization (33% vs. 7%).
- The consequences reach beyond economic livelihood. One in five fully undocumented college graduates are waiting in a talent pipeline, barred from professional licensure in 43 states and Washington, D.C. — unable to practice as the nurses, teachers, lawyers, and engineers they were educated to become. This, at a moment when the U.S. faces a shortage of tens of thousands of [nurses](#), [teachers](#), and [physicians](#) nationwide.

# Family Life and Belonging:

- Dreamers are no longer kids navigating an uncertain future. Three in five Alumni have family members depending on their income. One in four are married. One in seven are parents. When policy sidelines a Dreamer, it doesn't sideline one person — it destabilizes a household.
- The toll of chronic uncertainty is measurable. Compared to last year, 76% of Alumni are more anxious about the health and safety of their family members, 75% are more anxious about their immigration status, and 68% say their sense of belonging in the United States has decreased.



Even for those with access to work authorization, stability is increasingly illusory. Threats facing the more than 500,000 DACA recipients have escalated in the past year. Hundreds have been [detained](#) and at least 86 [deported](#). Administrative backlogs and changes are causing months-long [renewal delays](#), forcing Dreamers, many of whom have been renewing their DACA for 14 years, [out of the workforce](#) and making them vulnerable to detention or deportation.

This is not a conversation confined to the immigrant community. It is an issue felt by every American who works alongside a Dreamer, lives next door to one, or loves one. Losing colleagues, neighbors, family members, and friends is a threat to the social fabric of this country we all call home. Congress must act to provide pathways to permanent status for Dreamers.



There are over

# 5,000

TheDream.US and Equal Chance for Education college graduates nationwide

They reside in 44 states and Washington, D.C. They are not concentrated  
in a single community or region. **They are America.**

Over 2,500 Alumni graduating from 120 colleges and universities in 25 states and Washington, D.C. participated in the 2026 Alumni Survey.

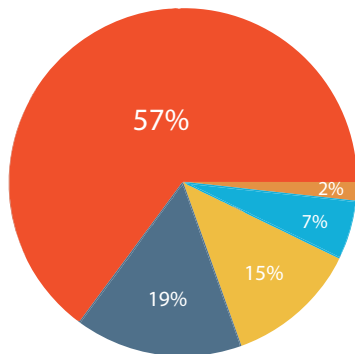
Meet this year's survey participants.

**Current Median Age: 26**  
**Median Age of Arrival to the U.S.: 4**

Our Alumni have been living in this country for more than 20 years and consider the U.S. their home.

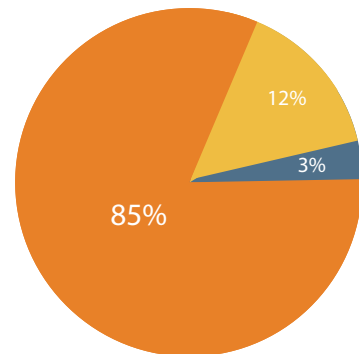
**Immigration Status**

- DACA
- Fully Undocumented
- Permanent Resident
- TPS
- Other



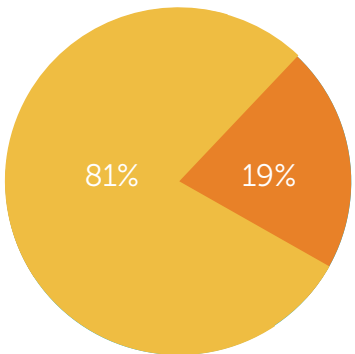
**Countries of Origin**

- Latin America
- Asia & Pacific Islands
- Other



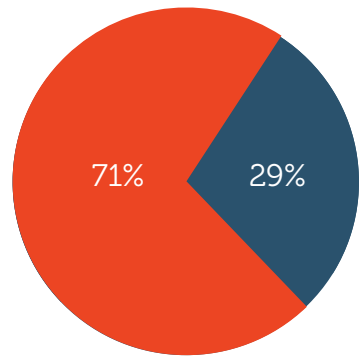
**Work Authorization**

- Yes
- No



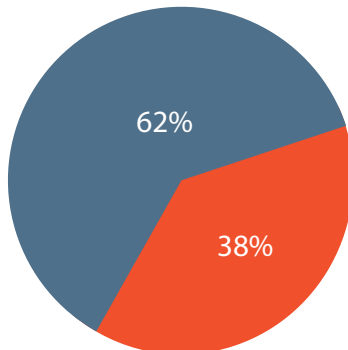
**Gender**

- Female
- Male



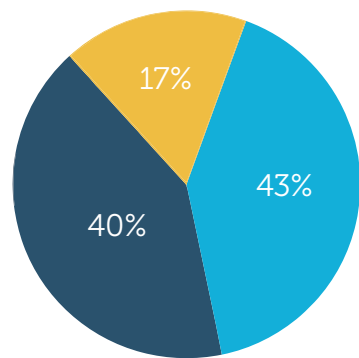
**First in Family to Attend College**

- Yes
- No



**Environment Raised in**

- Urban
- Suburban
- Rural



# Systemic disparities in career outcomes depend on access to work authorization

In our [previous reports](#) over 90% of Alumni had work authorization and employment rates were consistently over 90% – a trend that remains consistent this year.

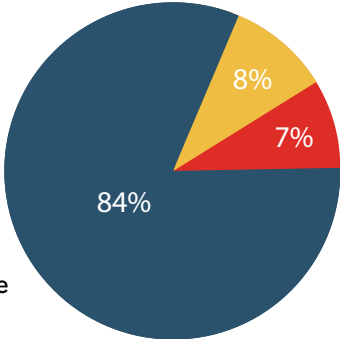
Fully undocumented college graduates without work authorization are pursuing their potential as independent contractors, business owners, and entrepreneurs. This is not necessarily a chosen career path, but one shaped by exclusion from traditional employment. It is also one with higher entry and success barriers, especially for recent college graduates that are first-generation immigrants and must navigate complex systems to establish their business entity, secure projects, develop clientele, and manage income volatility.

## 92% of Alumni with work authorization are earning an income, compared to 67% of fully undocumented Alumni.

Alumni with work authorization are nearly twice as likely to be earning income full-time compared to fully undocumented Alumni (84% vs. 43%). Fully undocumented Alumni are almost 5 times as likely to be looking for income opportunities – 33% compared to just 7% of their peers with work authorization.

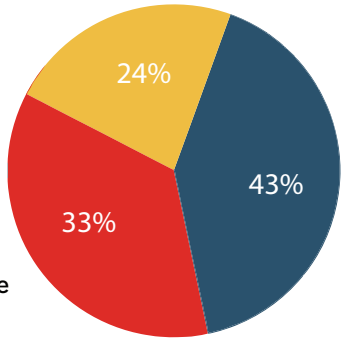
### With Work Authorization

- Earning Income Full-time
- Earning Income Part-time
- Looking for Income Opportunities



### Fully Undocumented

- Earning Income Full-time
- Earning Income Part-time
- Looking for Income Opportunities



“Entrepreneurship was a path that found us. Knowing that we needed to forge our own careers, we leaned into our networks and freelancing experiences to launch a co-op alongside fellow undocumented peers. Sunset R.O.O.T.S. is a New York City-based worker-owned cooperative providing culturally competent consulting services in back-office operations, financial management, publicity, and marketing for small businesses, nonprofits, sole proprietors, and fellow cooperatives. We hope to one day truly belong while creating an impact on the next generation, especially undocumented youth. Our goal is to give them hope, create opportunities, and give back to the communities that shaped us.”



**Zybel**  
Baruch College  
Bachelor's in Marketing  
Founding Member of Sunset R.O.O.T.S.



**Enrique**  
Lehman College  
Bachelor's in Computer Science  
Founding Member of Sunset R.O.O.T.S.

# The same Dreamer college graduate will experience dramatically different outcomes, depending solely on their immigration status.

## This is not a talent gap. It is a policy gap.

Work authorization doesn't just open doors to employment — it opens doors to meaningful work. For fully undocumented Alumni, immigration status isn't a background concern, it's a frontline constraint to activating their talent.

Eighty percent of fully undocumented Alumni report their immigration status significantly impedes their professional goals, compared to just 25% of those with work authorization.

### Immigration status is a significant barrier to reaching professional goals

**With Work Authorization**

● Yes ● No



**Fully Undocumented**

● Yes ● No



The consequence shows in career alignment. While 82% of alumni with work authorization say their current job or career opportunity reflects their long-term career interests, that figure drops nearly in half to 45% for fully undocumented Alumni — a gap that represents a lack of access.

### Current income opportunity or job aligns with long-term career interests

**With Work Authorization**

● Yes ● No



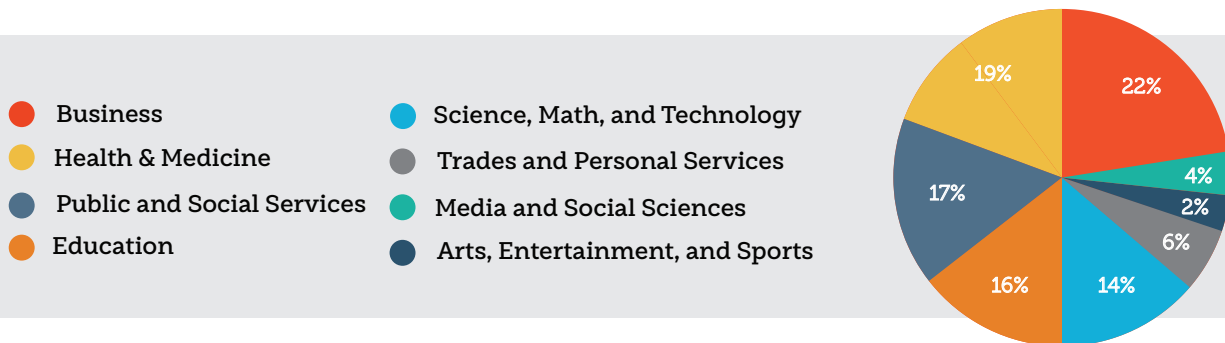
**Fully Undocumented**

● Yes ● No



# Dreamers remain a cornerstone of the American workforce, delivering in every sector of the economy

Overall, TheDream.US and Equal Chance for Education Alumni represent a highly educated cohort of professionals, embedded in industries America needs most.



## However, a licensure gap impacts all Americans when fully undocumented Alumni are educated, trained, and then sidelined.

Alumni with work authorization are concentrated in applied fields such as Health and Medicine and Education, where they are eligible to obtain state licensure to practice their craft.

One in 5 fully undocumented Alumni have taken the same educational and professional steps, but find themselves waiting in a talent pipeline, stuck in their pursuit of becoming healthcare professionals, teachers, lawyers, and engineers because they are barred from obtaining professional licensure in 43 states and Washington, D.C.

Meanwhile, the U.S. faces a shortage of over **15,700 nurses** annually, over **45,000** unfilled teacher positions, and a projected shortage of up to **86,000** physicians by 2036.

DACA recipients alone are contributing an estimated \$9 billion in federal, state, and local taxes annually — including **\$2.1 billion** to Social Security and Medicare — for a system that offers them no permanent place in it. Post-taxes they contribute nearly **\$17 billion** to the U.S. economy. Providing pathways to citizenship for Dreamers with and without DACA or TPS means more tax revenue, a stronger workforce, and a return on an investment America has already made — in their education, their communities, and their futures.

Education, to me, means opportunity. Without my college degree and access to licensure, I would not have been able to become a nurse, or care for the patients I served in the ICU. Working in critical care, I saw firsthand how meaningful it is to care for patients and support their families during some of the most difficult moments of their lives. Now, as I continue my education in nurse anesthesia, I often reflect on how far this journey has taken me to turn a dream into reality.

German

Carson-Newman University, Bachelor's in Nursing  
Carson-Newman University, Pursuing Doctor of Nurse Anesthesia Practice (DNAP)



# Dreamers are no longer kids. They are spouses, parents, and primary providers for a family counting on them.

The average age of a DACA recipient in the United States is [32 years old](#). The impact of immigration status for Alumni with and without work authorization doesn't just stay with their careers. It follows them home.



**3 in 5**  
Have family members depending on their income



**1 in 4**  
are married



**1 in 7**  
are parents

When an Alum loses work authorization, an American household that has resided in this country for decades is destabilized. When an Alum is detained or deported, a family loses its foundation. Immigration policy does not affect individuals in isolation – it determines the stability of entire family units.

**For all Alumni:**

- 78% have one or both parents who are undocumented
- 44% have undocumented siblings
- 67% live with immediate family members



My economic responsibility has increased over the past year. I now have three children to support, which has significantly raised my household expenses. Additionally, I assist my parents financially, as they have concerns about going to work.

Even with DACA, I deal with uncertainty every day. The U.S. is my home—I don't know anything outside of it. It's painful to feel like no matter how much I try to grow, give back to my community, and become more professional, there's always a limit because of immigration policy.

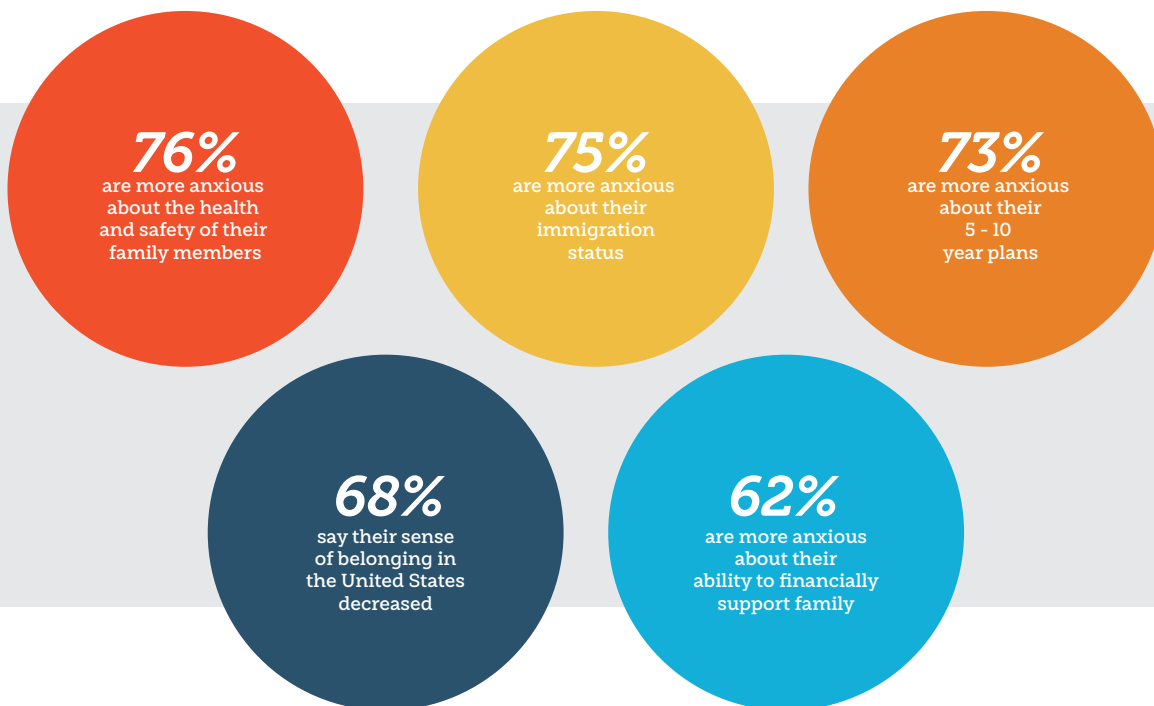


**Marisol**  
University of Houston  
Bachelor's in Physiology  
Business Owner and Entrepreneur

# The cost of chronic uncertainty is measurable

All Alumni with and without DACA or TPS are feeling the strains of living in a prolonged state of limbo and heightened uncertainty about their safety. A population that cannot make long-term plans, cannot travel freely, cannot drive without fear, and cannot know when their economic livelihood may be stripped is a population living under conditions of chronic stress.

Compared to last year:



Hundreds of DACA recipients alone have been detained and at least 86 deported. Months-long renewal delays are forcing Dreamers, many of whom have been renewing their DACA for 14 years, out of the workforce and vulnerable to detention or deportation.

“My biggest concern is not knowing what the future looks like. As someone whose life was changed by an opportunity to complete college and now applying my degree to serve my community, I hope to see an America that will open doors for generations to come. There are so many young people who are hardworking, determined, and full of potential, and all they need is opportunity and someone who believes in them.”



## Gehinah

Florida International University  
Bachelor's in Criminal Justice  
Deputy Clerk and Court Specialist IV

# Letter from TheDream.US President & CEO

When I graduated from high school, I faced the same reality many of our current Scholars face today. I was in the top 3% of my class, the highest-ranking officer in JROTC, had completed over 1,000 hours of community service, and had earned the Florida Bright Futures Scholarship.

None of it seemed to matter. After hearing “no” over and over again, I was finally admitted to my local community college, Miami Dade College. By 2009, I had earned three degrees. Even then, I could not be hired as a teacher because I didn’t have work authorization, so I turned to entrepreneurship and built a successful tutoring and educational consulting business.

Everything changed in 2012 when DACA was announced. For the first time, I was able to receive a work permit. A year later, I joined the effort to help build TheDream.US. Thirteen years later, TheDream.US has reached a milestone that once felt impossible: 5,000 college graduates.

Had I not been given the chance to go to college, I would not be where I am today.

I have been asked before, “Why invest in a student who cannot legally work?”

To me, that is like asking why you would water a seed before it becomes a tree. Education is how Dreamers prepare for the day they finally get the chance to fully contribute.

A college education is about far more than a job. It is the realization of their sacrifice, resilience, and hard work. It is hope. It is preparation for the future they know they are capable of building.

It took me 30 years from the day I arrived in this country to become a U.S. citizen. Throughout the years, I was preparing for the opportunity to serve, lead, and give back when that day came.

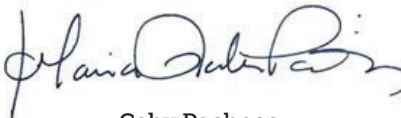
Every one of our Scholars deserves that same chance.

What this report shows is simple: “Opportunity Changes Everything,” as Dr. Eduardo Padrón, former Miami Dade College president, would say.

**We cannot wait for conditions to be perfect. These students need us now.**

As you read this report, I ask you to do two things: [donate](#) whatever you can — or become a monthly donor — and call your member of Congress to ask them to finally pass legislation that provides Dreamers with permanent protections.

Because **Talent Knows No Status**. And we should never waste a young person’s dream, potential, or desire to contribute to the country they call home.



Gaby Pacheco

We believe  
***Talent Knows No Status***

Dreamer college graduates are already contributors – to our economy, our healthcare system, our schools, and our neighborhoods. What is missing is not their commitment to this country. It is this country's commitment to them.

“



For as long as I can remember, becoming a physician has been my dream, though there were many moments when it felt out of reach. Earning my medical degree is something I view as an extraordinary privilege. While I look forward to starting residency, I also carry uncertainty about the future of DACA and the possibility that my immigration status could interfere with the work I have dedicated my life to: caring for patients.

**Murilo**

Florida Atlantic University, Bachelor's in Biological Sciences  
Nova Southeastern University, Doctor of Osteopathy (DO)  
Internal Medicine Resident at Broward Health

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**Get in touch**

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