

STATEMENT OF
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SUBMITTED TO THE

HOUSE HIGHER EDUCATION COMMITTEE
ILLINOIS HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

AS A PROPONENT OF SB2196 “THE STUDENT ACCESSS BILL”

PRESENTED
MAY 11, 2016

Chairwoman Kelly and members of the House Higher Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony.

Since I became president at Northeastern Illinois University in 2007, I have had the honor and joy of meeting and engaging with countless extraordinary and bright students, many of whom have been undocumented. As the Midwest's most diverse and only public four year university that is federally designated an Hispanic Serving Institution, Northeastern provides education to more than 10,000 students annually, some of whom are undocumented. For example, this spring 2016, NEIU enrolled 229 undocumented students.

Northeastern has a rich history of supporting countless efforts at the federal, state and local level on behalf of undocumented students. At the University, we have reviewed and modified internal documentation from admissions applications to foundation scholarships to better serve and welcome undocumented students. Additionally, we formally created an undocumented student resource center to directly provide services and assistance to this group of students.

Over the years, Northeastern has supported State legislation that has provided relief and support to undocumented students. That's why at Northeastern the passage of Senate Bill 2159 is important. This legislation will strengthen the ongoing efforts we take to serve promising undocumented students.

Not all these students are able to stay in the U.S. For example, Eva, a Biology and Chemistry undergraduate and graduate honors student who are lost to us. Eva made many sacrifices to pay for her education; however, due to lack of opportunities for her here in the United States, she had to make the hard decision to leave the country she has known as her own, to leave her family and friends to continue pursuing her dream of higher education and employment opportunities. Fortunately for Eva, she was admitted to the Ph. D. program in Pharmacology at the University of Cambridge. Unfortunately for Illinois, Eva's talent and commitment to pursue a degree in a field where she will make great contributions are lost to us.

Or student leaders like Sergio, who transferred from a community college where he was very involved as a student trustee and as a member of various student organizations. At Northeastern Illinois, Sergio continued to work diligently to complete his bachelor's degree in History while staying involved in student activities and working to pay for his education. Sergio graduated Magna Cum Laude and is currently working to save money to be able to return to Northeastern to pursue a master's degree. Sergio's dream is to obtain his doctorate and one day become a History professor and contribute to society by engaging youth in education.

What is even more special about students like Eva and Sergio is their committed and caring character. Even as students graduate from Northeastern, they still communicate with the University to find out updates on the status of undocumented students. As different pieces of legislation continue to be debated, Eva, Sergio and many other students like them recognize that they may not be able to benefit directly from this legislation. Nevertheless, they keep the dream alive for so many other students coming after them.

Lastly, I wish to commend the determination of the chief sponsors of this legislation, both NEIU alumni that means so much for Northeastern Illinois University, for so many of our students, and for our state.

Thank you.