

Higher Education Benefits and Undocumented Students: An Explanatory Model of Policy Adoption

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Abstract : Undocumented immigrants in the U.S. face many challenges when looking to progress in society, especially when pursuing post-secondary education. The majority of research done on state-level policy adoption pertaining to undocumented higher-education pursuits, specifically in-state resident tuition and financial aid eligibility policies, have framed the discussion on the potential and actual impacts which implementation can and has achieved. What is missing is a model to view the social, political and demographic landscapes upon which such policies (in their various forms) find a route to legislative enactment. This research looks to address this gap in the field by investigating the correlations and significant state-level variables which can be operationalized to construct a framework for adoption of these specific policies. In the process, analysis will show that past unexamined conceptualizations of how such policies come to fruition may be limited or contradictory when compared to available data. Circling on the principles of Policy Innovation and Policy Diffusion theory, this study looks to use variables collected via Michigan State University's Correlates of State Policy Project, a collectively and ongoing compiled database project centered around annual variables (1900-2016) collected from all 50 states relevant to policy research. Using established variable groupings (demographic, political, social capital measurements, and educational system measurements) from the time period of 2000 to 2014 (2001 being when such policies began), one can see how this data correlates with the adoption of policies related to undocumented students and in-state college tuition. After regression analysis, the results will illuminate which variables appears significant and to what effect, as to help formulate a model upon which to explain when adoption appears to occur and when it does not. Early results have shown that traditionally held conceptions on conservative and liberal identities of the state, as they relate to the likelihood of such policies being adopted, did not fall in line with the collected data. Democratic and liberally identified states were, overall, less likely to adopt pro-undocumented higher education policies than Republican and conservatively identified states and vis versa. While further analysis is needed as to improve the model's explanatory power, preliminary findings are showing promise in widening our understanding of policy adoption factors in this realm of policies compared to the gap of such knowledge in the publications of the field as it currently exists. The model also looks to serve as an important tool for policymakers in framing such potential policies in a way that is congruent with the relevant state-level determining factors while being sensitive to the most apparent sources of potential friction. While additional variable groups and individual variables will ultimately need to be added and controlled for, this research has already begun to demonstrate how shallow or unexamined reasoning behind policy adoption in the realm of this topic needs to be addressed or else the risk is erroneous conceptions leaking into the foundation of this growing and ever important field.

Keywords : policy adoption, in-state tuition, higher education, undocumented immigrants

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