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Boys and Girls Club Mission - "To enable all young people, especially those who need us most, to reach their full potential as productive, caring, responsible citizens."

To provide "hope and opportunity" to these members of the organization.

### The Irony of Higher Education

#### Part I:

Cussing, interruptions, and impatience were some of the challenges I was faced with during my volunteer work at the Boys and Girls Club in North Seattle. Most of the members were Black, Hispanic, and Pacific Islander. They came from lower class families, and I noticed that they had trouble learning and focusing. I took an interest in observing the staff because they had great patience for the kids, and they also had unique teaching skills that I wanted to learn. When members would misbehave, Elayna, one of the staff members, would tell them, "would you rather go pick up garbage or help me wash the dishes?" The kids quickly chose the option to help and did not even talk back to her. I realized they had great respect for her, something I had not yet gained from members. I struggled to help the kids with their homework. I would receive an occasional "I don't need your help" or "that's not the way my teacher does it." Eventually, I began helping the quieter kids, since I knew they probably would not bad mouth me. Even though I did not know what to expect when I started volunteering, I knew from the beginning I was going to learn and listen. I would only help when needed, mainly because I did not know the group's culture or even if they wanted my help. The staff had a unique leadership style, something I did not have, and I realized how much they cared about the kids. If they did not care, they would not be working at the club because it is not an easy task to handle students that are always interrupting and cussing at each other. Even though I feel that I did not change

anyone's life, I offered a helping hand, even if it was just to wash dishes so the staff, could have more time with the members. I gained a great admiration for the staff and I believe they taught me more than I taught them. I see that they are passionate about the BGC mission, and they want to see these students be successful and reach their full potential. Education is their top priority.

There is one thing I find frustrating. The mission of the club is to “enable *all* young people, *especially* those that need us most.” This statement is frustrating because it ignores certain students – specifically undocumented students. These students cannot apply for financial aid in college, cannot legally work in the US, obtain a driver's license or pay in-state tuition in some states, along with many other barriers. While there are staff members that dedicate their lives to help students reach their full potential, in the case of undocumented students, sometimes real change is needed - an institutional change. Organizations like the BGC spend millions of dollars in order to equip students with the skills for a job and higher education, but for whom do these clubs speak? Undocumented children are part of a minority that take advantage of these after-school programs, but even after they are equipped with the skills necessary for higher education, their options are limited, and thus they cannot reach their full potential. This is why I believe that, in order for the club to complete their mission, institutional change is needed – immigration reform for undocumented students.

Part 2:

Throughout my readings, experience, lectures, and research, I realized that volunteers are always trying to help those in need; teachers are preparing students with skills necessary for higher education or a good job, and programs are being created to target minority groups. The common theme here is to provide people in need with the resources necessary for a less stressful life, but I also learned that the law plays a large role in the implementation of real change.

For example, I attended an event called “Underground Undergrads” and I learned that an UW alumnus, Jorge Chehade, is on the verge of deportation. He has assimilated into the majority culture by adopting American values. He was one of the many students who take advantage of after-school activities, programs, conferences, and events to help them be successful in college. Many teachers supported his dreams of attending the Michael Foster School of Business, and he said that he owed thanks and appreciation to these teachers upon his graduation with a business degree. Unfortunately, this support is now very limited. Chehade has the skills necessary to reach his full potential, but because of his immigration status, he cannot legally work in the US. Just like Chehade, there are many undocumented students from different countries that struggle after their college graduation in the US. These are students that have been educated with the skills necessary to give back to the community. Isn’t this what schools, organizations, and programs work to achieve - educated students with the skills to give back to those who need it? The report released by the College Board contends that “K-12 education mandated by the Supreme Court in 1982 is wasted if the U.S. continues making it difficult for undocumented students to attend college” (Donnell 1). It is a waste of time, money, resources, and talent to prepare students for college when they will find the door to college closed because of legal exclusions and lack of financial aid. It is also a shame to educate students and then deny them a place in US society upon successful college completion.

In his article, “Where Sweatshops are a Dream”, Nicholas Kristof mentions that there are US organizations fighting for labor rights in Cambodia, for Cambodians. He argues that working in a sweatshop is a dream for many Cambodians, because they would rather do that than be working long hours in the hot sun, in garbage dumps (1). He claims that tightening standards adds to production costs and leads to factory closures and that these factories are, in fact, a way

out of poverty (2). Tightening labor standards may cut into the profits of these factories, but he fails to address something very important – the idea of human rights. I believe it is important for US organizations to fight for human rights, but not just in Cambodia. There are many countries that look to the US for help in social justice, but these countries must also realize that there are human rights worth fighting for right here in the US. In the case of these undocumented students, legalization is needed for humanitarian reasons – to preserve their human dignity. How is it dignified for the US government to say “you may attend college if you pay full-tuition, you cannot apply for financial aid, and after graduation you cannot legally work.” US volunteers, activists, and organizations that help to fight for international rights must be aware that there are human rights worth fighting for here in this nation. Organizations such as the Boys and Girls Club offer “hope and opportunity” for undocumented students, but real change is needed to protect their human rights. Therefore, law remains important because legal backing is necessary for the effective protection of most human rights and the realization of opportunities for students to reach their “full potential.”

Part 3:

Even though there are great teachers and great programs, such as the Boys and Girls Club, sometimes it just is not enough to offer hope and opportunity for specific students. Undocumented students live in the shadows and are seldom talked about. It is a complex issue. Even though they have the skills acquired from great K-12 education, and may have achieved higher education, their assimilation to US society is politically oppressive because they are denied the right to use their education. So, what is the change I want to see in the world? In order for undocumented students to reach their full potential and use the skills they acquired to give back to the community, they must be allowed “to make a healthy, sustained and important

contribution to the economic and social well-being of our nation” (Roberto Gonzales 9). This requires immigration reform. The Development, Relief and Education of Alien Minors Act, also called the Dream Act, was introduced in the Senate in 2001, but unfortunately it fell short of votes. The purpose of this bill is to allow undocumented students, who meet certain requirements, to enlist in the military or go to college; they will also be given a path to citizenship (Dream Act Portal 1). Most undocumented students were brought to the US by their parents. They had no say in their decision. Living in the US since they were young, these children have adapted to American cultures and values. They were brought to America for a better life, including the privilege of higher education. Yet, our broken immigration system does not allow for them to legally work or even in some states, such as California, obtain a driver’s license. This is not only unjust. It is dehumanizing for students who only want the opportunity to give back to the community. There are about 65, 000 undocumented students that graduate from high schools every year in the US (Dream Act Portal 1). Most of these students do not reveal their status’, therefore it is difficult to know how many are attending public schools or taking advantage of after-school programs. Yet, we can assume that they are out there and, without knowing it, counselors, teachers, coaches, and managers are putting their time and effort into these students to help them graduate from college. The BGC has about 65% minorities, and I can assume there are undocumented children among them. Yes, it is great that schools and programs invest so much money and time into educating students, but in this case, change is needed at the institutional level. I will re-iterate Robert Gonzales’ claim that “this wasted talent imposes economic and emotional costs on undocumented students themselves and on the U.S. society as a whole” (9). Therefore, the Dream Act needs to be approved in order to “enhance the

nation's social and economic security" (11) and to ensure the mission of the BGC really applies to *all* young people.

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