

Dear Kansas Legislator,

I am writing to urge you to please oppose SB 254/HB 2373, which would repeal in-state tuition for ALL undocumented students and eliminate the ability of higher education institutions and nonprofit organizations to serve vulnerable students.

As someone who went through my entire educational journey as an undocumented student, I can confidently say that in-state tuition helped me graduate as a Mechanical Engineer from Wichita State University. However, my education did not start there. My educational journey began in 2010 in Garden City, Kansas, when I arrived in the United States with my family at the age of ten. I didn't speak a word of English, but I managed to excel in my academics, especially in math.

Three years later, my parents relocated to Scott City, Kansas, where I continued my education from eighth grade to my senior year of high school. I finished high school with a GPA of 3.78 but declined to join the Honor Roll society because I simply didn't see the point in even taking pride in my work. During my graduation, I received the honor of completing the most challenging curriculum in the state of Kansas. However, I didn't seriously consider higher education because I believed it was impossible for someone like me—undocumented—to attend university. The reality was that the money my parents were earning was not enough to put me through school.

I graduated high school and saw my peers heading off to higher education. I had worked and saved up \$2,000 to attend community college, but realistically, that amount wouldn't have lasted me even a semester. I did search extensively for opportunities for undocumented students, but all scholarships in Kansas required a social security number, which I did not have. I decided to pave the road for myself and work even harder. For a year and a half, I worked wherever I could and managed to save \$18,000, out of which I paid federal, state, medicare, social security taxes, and legal fees to obtain a legal status.

At those jobs, I saw engineering everywhere: at the grocery store where I worked part-time after high school, at the pig farm where I worked after I graduated high school, at the feed yard where I spent two summers working during my community college years, and in the crop fields where I worked every day from dawn till dusk. During this time when I worked as a crop field worker, I decided to prepare for the ACT, and enroll in an online class through Hutchinson Community College. I remember writing my essays on the way to work at 4 a.m. because I might be too exhausted at the end of the day.

I never complained about the amount of work; in fact, I was grateful for all those jobs, and was inspired by how hard the people around me worked. I also realized that each one of those jobs

required tools. If it weren't for engineers designing and manufacturing those tools, the jobs wouldn't have been possible.

While working as a crop field worker, I fully committed to follow my passion for engineering. Fortunately, I had incredible people supporting this idea, encouraging me not to give up, even if my immigration status prevented me from working in the engineering field. I scheduled a tour at Hutchinson Community College, and my dad accompanied me. Our conversation mostly revolved around whether we could afford community college. We had no knowledge of Kansas Bill HB 2145 until an admissions representative informed us during the visit. Suddenly, my dream of becoming an engineer didn't seem so impossible. If I worked hard during the summers at the feed yards and served as a waitress during the school year, I could probably afford at least two years of my degree.

Fall came and I went on to attend in-person classes at HutchCC, where I had to pay everything out of pocket for four semesters and summers. I paid tuition, books, dormitories, living expenses, and any related travel for school activities. During my time there, I made invaluable friendships, my advisors encouraged me to keep working hard, and I was also inspired by my instructors to always strive for excellence, no matter the subject. In my second semester, I finally took the math courses I had been looking forward to. All though, it took me an extra semester to catch up to the engineering curriculum because I was behind on the required math courses. I finally took Calculus and Physics, and it only fueled my desire to learn more about engineering.

Sadly, I was only able to complete 60 credit hours at Hutch CC and had to transfer to another institution to finish my degree. Once again, I worried whether the money I had saved would be enough to get me through the final four semesters. My friend and I toured three major institutions: K-State, KU, and WSU. While most of my peers opted for K-State and KU, I couldn't pass up the opportunities I was being offered at Wichita State University. I received two private scholarships and a transfer student scholarship that covered a significant portion of my tuition. This opportunity allowed me to delve deeper into engineering through clubs, research, and volunteering opportunities.

While at Wichita State, I worked at a tutoring facility in Andover, Kansas. Through the school year, I worked ten hours a week because the scholarships provided me financial stability. I had the honor to receive the Adelante Scholarship, Raza Scholarship, and a scholarship for being a transfer student with a 3.49 GPA. This financial help allowed me to invest time to revive a dead student organization, the American Society of Mechanical Engineers, which now participates in the Collegiate Wind Competition sponsored by the U.S. Department of Energy and the National Renewable Energy Laboratory. My efforts to teach software and theory allowed students to catch up on wind turbine design topics. I also tutored 8 mechanical engineering courses, sharpened my professional skills, and contributed to sustainable materials research. I also joined clubs like 3D

Printed Prosthetics, the Society of Hispanic Professional Engineers, and Go Baby Go. Additionally, I mentored first-generation students starting out at Wichita State.

What I am most grateful for, however, is having the time to focus on my classes and create meaningful connections with my professors and staff. I was able to engage in all these activities because the financial burden had eased. During the summers, to cover living expenses, I worked at a donut shop from 1 a.m. to 6 a.m, while still taking summer courses. The money I earned was just enough to cover rent, bills, insurance, gas, food. Unfortunately, my scholarships didn't cover summer classes, so I used this income to pay for them as well.

In my final semester, I was fortunate that my status had progressed. I received my work permit in February 2024 and started applying for internships in March 2024. However, no one was willing to hire a soon-to-be-graduate as an intern. As a result, I had to shift to applying for full-time jobs with no prior work experience. After submitting over sixty applications, I landed a position near Scott City, Kansas, where my family lives. I was hired by Superior Essex as a Manufacturing Engineer. My focus is on improving production efficiency while ensuring our Ethernet cables meet industry standards. Through my project initiatives, I aim to reduce costs on raw materials, ensure worker safety, and keep the plant updated with the latest technology. This will allow us to continue manufacturing cables that not only support the effort to keep manufacturing in the USA and boost the local economy, but also help drive engineering advancements in the USA, from AI to patient care—all of this, in rural Hoisington, Kansas.

Since starting my position at Superior Essex, biweekly I contribute \$278.51 in federal income tax, \$166.96 in Social Security tax, \$39.04 in Medicare, and \$139.16 in Kansas state taxes. This totals \$623.73 biweekly in income taxes. So far, since I began my position, I have paid \$4,531.99 of taxes in just under three months. It is expected that I will contribute over \$16,000 in income taxes, which is *nearly* equivalent to what I earned before starting college. With my job, I have the benefit of saving for retirement, contributing 10% of my paycheck. I also have enough income to afford health insurance, dental insurance, and vision insurance. I receive paid vacation, which means I will have the chance to contribute to the economy through tourism. I also have tuition reimbursement if I decide to return to university for graduate school, which I plan to do at some point. As an engineer, not only do I contribute to the economy and support the social safety nets funded by the government, but I also get to contribute to the local community. I plan to remain involved in the area for as long as I live here, whether through volunteering or supporting the local economy in Barton County.

Obtaining a higher education opens many opportunities and allows individuals like me, who grew up with very limited resources, to contribute to the economy. My motivation moving forward is to advocate for education. If it weren't for current state policies, I wouldn't be where I am today. Undocumented students do not receive any type of state or federal funds for their education. It is already difficult enough to obtain a higher education as an undocumented student,

so I ask that you do not make it even harder. The future of this nation relies on the contributions of all its people, regardless of their background. By ensuring equal access to education, you empower individuals to contribute directly to the economy and the future success of our country.

Sincerely,

Melisa Alfonso

1611 Morphy St.

Great Bend, KS 67530

[Melalfonso.barahona@gmail.com](mailto:Melalfonso.barahona@gmail.com)

(620)-287-4676