

GLOBAL

# How Should Higher Education Be Responding to Refugee and Migrant Crises?

By Marc Parry | JULY 27, 2018

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Chronicle photo by Erica Lusk

Esder Chong is a Rutgers student and an advocate for undocumented students across New Jersey.

The announcement came on the first day of class last year at Rutgers University at Newark: The Trump administration would rescind Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, an Obama-era program that shields from deportation undocumented immigrants brought to the U.S. as children.

At first, Esder Chong and her fellow undocumented Rutgers students felt afraid. Then they organized.

Within a year, the students' campaign of outreach to administrators, public protests, and state legislative advocacy helped to bring about new campus services and financial aid for undocumented students.

That story was one highlight of a conference convened here this week to strategize academe's response to refugee and migration crises in the United States and abroad.

The gathering of roughly 120 academics and nonprofit officials kicked off a new Rutgers-based consortium called the University Alliance for Refugees and At-Risk Migrants. Its goal: to coordinate and scale up the patchwork of university programs assisting displaced people. Participants also want to change the narrative about those people at a moment of rising nationalism and xenophobia.

Trump's DACA repeal is tied up in court. But his administration has successfully banned or restricted travel from eight countries, curtailed the flow of refugees to the United States, ramped up arrests and deportations of undocumented people, heightened oversight of the H-1B visa program for highly skilled foreigners, and tightened visa policies for Chinese students, among other steps.

Organizers of the new consortium draw inspiration from the work that leaders of American cities have done to collaborate on environmental and migration challenges even as the Trump administration shuns international compacts dealing with those issues.

The Rutgers conference amounted to a census of promising academic strategies.

These included tech projects like a platform to crowdfund refugees' educations and a massive open online course serving Kenyan and Jordanian refugee camps.

Other projects turn colleges into shelters by hosting refugee families in campus housing or placing scholars who face threats in their home countries as visiting researchers in universities abroad.

Still others try to shape public policy by developing agendas for new research on subjects like the integration of migrants.

## **In Colleges' Interest**

International and first- and second-generation immigrant students make up an average of 30 percent of undergraduate populations in the U.S., said Miriam Feldblum, executive director of the Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration. Welcoming them is important to colleges' financial health.

"The stakes are higher than ever for colleges to support immigrant students on their campuses and in their communities," Feldblum said.

One theme of the presentations was the role that personal narratives can play in bringing about change — a point stressed by Esder Chong, the DACA recipient from Rutgers University at Newark.

On Thursday afternoon, Chong visited the Chronicle newsroom in Washington, D.C., to elaborate on the story she shared at Rutgers.

Chong, a summer intern at the George Washington University Law School's immigration clinic, has an impressive résumé: track team, honors college, Bible teaching, student government, news editor for her campus paper, volunteer violinist for a nonprofit orchestra, president of an undocumented-student club called RU Dreamers. Like other ambitious D.C. interns, she hopes to attend law school and potentially run for public office.

But unlike most of them, her ambitions are constrained by the undocumented status she has lived with for about a decade.

Her parents came to New Jersey from South Korea as Christian missionaries in 2003, joined a couple of years later by Chong and her sisters. Her mother had a job as a nurse and a working visa. But she lost her hospital position during the 2008 recession, and with it the family's legal status. Chong got DACA protection in 2013.

When Trump moved to rescind the program last year, fear spread across Chong's

network of undocumented students. Their academic motivation plunged.

"I realized I need to take this club to the next step to really advocate for policies that we can change on campus level and on a state level," Chong said.

Chong's group decided to formally survey undocumented students at the Newark campus about their concerns. The two biggest issues were careers and mental stress. With that data, Chong made one request of Rutgers's president and chancellors: Hire a full-time staff member to support undocumented students. The following semester, Rutgers did.

Pumped by that success, Chong turned to state policy. In 2013, then-Gov. Chris Christie had signed a bill making undocumented students eligible for in-state tuition at public colleges. But they remained ineligible for state financial aid. Joining with advocacy groups, the RU Dreamers pressed to change that.

Chong also began to share her personal story much more widely. She accompanied a New Jersey congressman to the State of the Union address. She traveled around her state with him to speak with reporters.

More success followed. This year, Governor Christie's successor, Phil Murphy, traveled to Rutgers to sign new legislation awarding state aid to undocumented students. At the governor's mansion, Murphy gave Chong a proclamation for her advocacy.

### **'He's Here to Detain Me'**

But the campaign has taken a toll on Chong's nerves.

After the State of the Union, she went to the campus gym to work out. She had a track race coming up. Usually, she never saw police officers at the gym. But that night an officer was walking around with a clipboard. Chong had just been all over the news, identified as a track athlete at Rutgers Newark. She immediately thought: He's here to detain me.

He wasn't. But when his back turned, Chong ran to the locker room and cried. What am I going to do when I'm in Korea? she thought. I don't know Korean. I don't know the culture.

That night, she comforted herself by reading the Bible. She also called all her mentors on campus.

"Having their support was really what got me back on my feet," she said.

Many undocumented students lack such support, according to Peter Bjorklund Jr., a doctoral student at the University of California at San Diego who recently published a journal article reviewing the scholarly literature about undocumented students in higher education.

Bjorklund didn't speak at the Rutgers conference. But his research carries a message for its participants: Colleges are not doing enough to alleviate students' experiences of isolation and discrimination.

In an interview, Bjorklund listed a series of problems. Admissions officers can be unclear about whether and how undocumented students should apply. Once students are admitted, he said, a process as seemingly innocuous as getting a student ID might require a Social Security number, turning it into a scary experience that threatens to expose someone. Often, professors don't know how to react when students do disclose their undocumented statuses.

That lack of properly shared information "results in a campus climate that can frequently be unwelcoming to students," Bjorklund said.

"There are very few universities that are fully embracing the fact that these students are on campus."

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