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What's happening to two undocumented Texas valedictorians says it all about the immigration debate

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A pair of high school valedictorians in Texas have become the targets of social media attacks.

Plenty of people are subject to abuse online. But those who dare to be anything other than white, straight or male had better learn to practice deep breathing. This is especially true if one is also an undocumented immigrant who graduated high school at the top of one's class.

This can be stated as simple fact because, when it became public knowledge that the two girls had not only topped their high school classes but were respectively headed to Yale University and the University of Texas at Austin, [the Internet went wild](#).

The content of online insults, rebukes and complaints shared about the two girls seems to rotate around a theme. The essence: these girls — and they are girls — have gamed the system and are proud of it. And now, they are preparing to do it again, "taking" some other students' places at Yale and UT. One mother of another child who graduated alongside one of the girls added that she never thought she would favor deporting a child who attended high school in the United States and never thought she would be a Trump supporter, but this situation had made her both.

In truth, a pretty straight line can be drawn between the public reaction to these students and the current state of American immigration politics. The overlap in the sentiments expressed by so many of those who launched an online war against the students and voters convinced that their economic prospects would improve if the country only had a border wall really should not be missed. What's happened to the two young women in Texas doesn't just speak volumes about the uncivil state of affairs online; it reveals a lot about the way that many Americans view immigration and immigrants overall.

"People tend to view the economy as a fixed pie where there is only so many jobs," said Alex Nowrasteh, an immigration policy analyst at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank. He says people think there is "only so much opportunity, and that is simply not true. People create jobs, people grow the economy. This is a failure to understand how the economy — how opportunity actually works."

The Cato Institute supports immigration reforms that would legalize most of the 11 million undocumented people living in the United States and altering the immigration system so that more people could relocate legally. As such, Nowrasteh does not regard the claims that these students have taken something that is not theirs as accurate. And he does not think that those who are angry are focused on the right things.

"Other people didn't work as hard and weren't as smart," said Nowrasteh. "I favor competition and meritocracy, so I say good for these girls. Slots at educational institutions aren't granted based on nationality, and meritocracy doesn't stop at the border. These girls were smarter or worked harder, and therefore they have the opportunities that they do."

Nowrasteh's is indeed a no-holds-barred assessment of both the girls and those angered by them.

It's worth recapping a few key points here. The college prospects of the two valedictorians on whom so much abuse has been heaped are directly — not tangentially — related to the work required to be one's class valedictorian. So the "slot" that either girl will hold at a university was earned, not taken. There is not a fixed and final set of "slots" at every college, nor are there slots that "belong" to anyone. Colleges and universities decide how many students they will admit in a given year, not students. And institutions can move these figures up or down.

What's more, among the small share of undocumented students who do head to college, an overwhelming majority do so at open-enrollment community colleges where there is no set limit of student "slots" at all. (In Texas, where the two valedictorians went to high school, [about 72 percent of undocumented students attend community colleges, and just 28 percent attend four-year universities of any kind.](#))

An undocumented student does not have legal permission to live in the United States. But once here, U.S. law does allow those students to study and learn in public schools without restriction. Some states, including Texas, allow these students to pay the same amount for college as all other in-state students. And because the state offers two semesters of free tuition to all valedictorians, one of the young women at the center of this storm is eligible for both.

Other states, such as California, do that and more. California has established a state financial-aid program for undocumented students while these same students remain ineligible for any and all aid. And around the country, at least 18 states have some type of policy on the books which aims to lower the roadblocks that keep so many undocumented students out of college.

The students are here. Right now, the combined effects of low expectations, limited-to-nonexistent financial aid and the widespread tracking of undocumented students out of courses that prepare kids for college, has created a situation in which documented immigrant students are two times more likely than undocumented ones to graduate from high school, said William Perez, an associate professor of education at Claremont Graduate University, who studies immigrant students and academic achievement. And, at present, only 2 percent of the nation's undocumented students go on to graduate from college, Perez said. Two percent.

"One thing that has really stood out for me," Perez said, "is how lost in all the uproar these two young women's incredible accomplishments and achievements have become. These are students

who excelled despite overwhelming and incredible odds and who, in so many cases, have the capacity to and are eager to contribute to American society."

Perez does not mean that in some kind of ephemeral way. Perez and his research partners have spent years surveying undocumented students in states with large immigrant populations. In the process, they have found that large shares of undocumented college students and recent graduates are interested in what Perez calls "service careers." That's teaching, law enforcement, medicine and social work, or some segment of the nonprofit sector.

Of course, the people who unleashed hell on the two valedictorians are not exactly alone in their thinking. In 2016, these sentiments have been a driving theme of presumptive Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump's campaign. The way Juan Escalante sees it, Trump has made anti-immigrant speech and policy the cornerstones of his campaign.

Escalante works as digital campaign director at the immigrant rights organization America's Voice. He's also undocumented and a person who gained the legal ability to work through a program created by the Obama administration known as DACA [Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals].

"We are currently navigating through some very, very scary, difficult and dangerous times," said Escalante. "What we are seeing, these girls being just one example, is the sentiments stirred and nurtured by the Trump campaign reflected in everyday life."

At the same time, undocumented students around the country have been "revealing" and "coming out" — terms used by undocumented student activists to describe the act of revealing one's immigration status — with growing frequency. When Perez first began researching undocumented students a decade ago, it was difficult and rare to find undocumented students willing to speak to him anonymously for his research.

There are two poles of activity, and many politicians are skilled at playing games with voters in between, said Escalante. For example in Florida, Democrats tried and failed several times to pass a bill that would give undocumented students the ability to go to college and pay in-state student costs. When it seemed as if Republican control of the legislature was at risk, the measure passed. Gov. Rick Scott (R) signed the bill into law.

In March, Scott endorsed Trump.