

“Towson University changes policy on tuition for undocumented immigrants”

The Betsy Amanda Lehman '77 Memorial Award for Excellence in Journalism

Will Fesperman, Class of 2015

After inquiries from the Baltimore Sun, Towson University has changed its policies for undocumented immigrants seeking to pay in-state tuition under two programs. And that's good news for Cindy Kolade.

The 21-year-old, who moved to Baltimore from Ivory Coast when she was 10, has been working toward a bachelor's degree at Towson. She hoped to qualify for the Maryland Dream Act, a relatively new law that allows eligible undocumented students to pay in-state tuition. But she could not provide Towson with enough tax returns to meet its standards.

She then tried to get in-state tuition through President Obama's Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program. But that didn't work, either; Towson said she was ineligible because her mother is in the country illegally.

“I thought it was going to be an easy roll with the tuition, until I got to Towson,” Kolade said. “I was really shocked.”

Until recently, Towson officials, citing University System of Maryland rules, said they would not give in-state tuition to DACA students if their parents were in the country illegally.

“It seems like there is a real lack of understanding by admissions officials about the law,” said Sheena Wadhawan, an attorney for Casa de Maryland. The immigrant rights group says it has secured in-state tuition for a number of other students through the Dream Act or DACA.

Towson had been processing DACA students like any other student, said Dave Fedorchak, the school's director of admissions. He cited university system bylaws that said students are not eligible for in-state tuition if their parents are not legal Maryland residents.

But Assistant Attorney General Kathryn M. Rowe interpreted the bylaws differently. In a June letter, she said DACA students are eligible for in-state tuition regardless of their parents' legal status.

Michael Anselmi, legal counsel for Towson, agreed, saying that "the legal status of the parent or guardian should not be a factor in determining whether [DACA students] meet in-state status."

After inquiries from the Sun, Towson said DACA students will be considered for in-state tuition going forward and retroactively, even if their parents are in the country illegally.

The university system also has changed the number of tax returns needed to qualify for the Dream Act. Its guidelines required students to show that taxes were paid annually while they attended high school.

Towson asked Kolade for four years of her mother's tax returns; she provided three years, the number required by the law. But because tax years do not align with school years, the tax returns did not cover three full academic years, officials said.

After questions from the Sun, the university system changed its Dream Act guidelines to read "at least three years."

Towson says it now has granted Kolade — who had to take this semester off to work — in-state tuition for her last semester under the Dream Act.