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Marking Up the DREAM: Recalling the DREAM Act in 2003

by [Prerna Lal](#) | June 04, 2010 | 07:50 AM (PT)

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Young staffers in Congress have a lot more power than the media recognizes.

Marking Up the DREAM is a documentary feature in a series called **How Democracy Works Now** that explores the behind-the-scenes Senate battle for the DREAM Act in 2003, which would have laid out a pathway to citizenship for certain undocumented students. The documentary features several well-known non-profit and Congressional actors, while exposing how certain young staffers were key to marking up the language of a bill from just their notes and transcripts of what their bosses agreed to during a legislative hearing.



The DREAM Act then passed the Senate Judiciary Committee with an overwhelming vote of 16-3. Ironically, the documentary is making the rounds seven years later at a time when undocumented students around the country are calling for a standalone DREAM Act to pass through the very same committee.

A statement from **Lavita Strickland**, the principal staffer for Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-CA) on the bill, particularly stood out: "Do we want a really good strong bill that would help these kids or do we want it so big and fat that it is going to get slaughtered and just killed and there is no possibility of helping anybody?" Advocates for an omnibus comprehensive immigration legislation would do well to take note.

"This is not a partisan bill. Not a liberal or conservative bill," boomed Senator Orrin Hatch, a staunch conservative Republican in favor of the legislation. "This is a good bill." But **Marking Up the DREAM** shows how a good bill got watered down by unexpected forces. Sen. Feinstein and Sen. Chuck Grassley (R-NC) stripped the DREAM Act of the provisions allowing undocumented students Pell Grants and eligibility based on community service. Later, eligibility for citizenship through military service would be added on.

After the DREAM Act sailed through the Senate Judiciary Committee with little opposition, it took staffers three months to determine the exact language of the bill. They finally decided on no grants for undocumented students, but left in the option of federal work study. By the time the bill was ready for the floor, Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist was in no mood to put it up for a vote. Had he done so, the DREAM Act would have passed in 2003 with 48 cosponsors in the Senate and 152 in the House of Representatives — more legislative support than it has at this point.

Strickland appeared frustrated, asking, "Do we want to keep having this same debate for the next 5 years?" Make that seven years and counting.

Since 2003, many of the staffers have moved on to other roles. Lavita Strickland is now LaVita Strickland LeGrys, back in government service as Assistant Administrator for Legislative Affairs at the Transportation Security Administration. Joe Jacquot, the Chief Republican staffer on the Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration in 2003 is now the Deputy Attorney General of the state of Florida.

Joe Zogby is one of the central figures who has remained on the Hill, still working for Senator Durbin as Chief Counsel for the Senate Judiciary Committee. I was taken aback by how Zogby looked like a boy out of high school in the documentary, only to realize that seven years had passed and we have all grown up fighting for the DREAM Act to pass.

One thing the legislation didn't have back then that it does now: a vibrant grassroots movement led by undocumented students.

Marking Up the DREAM is a must-watch for anyone interested in learning more about how good ideas can turn into legislation through the work of a few unelected key staffers who command power in Congressional offices on Capitol Hill. That's part of how democracy works — or maybe doesn't work — now.

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Video Credit: [HowDemocracyWorksNow](#)

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