

Irene Olivares, PhD
Private citizen
Senate Bill 254 Opposition Testimony (Written only)
Senate Committee on Federal and State Affairs

February 27, 2025

Chair Gossage and members of the committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in opposition to Senate Bill 254. My name is Irene Olivares, and I have worked in Kansas higher education institutions since 2011 in a variety of roles, including as a graduate teaching assistant, academic advisor, and as a full-time faculty member for the last 6 years. In these roles, it has been my privilege to support students in their academic journey and to see them enter into their chosen professions. At this point in my career, I have seen my students become successful welders, educators, lawyers, doctors, psychiatrists, lab techs, entrepreneurs, etc.

I stand in opposition to Senate Bill 254 because I lived in Arizona when a similar law (Prop 300) was passed by the general electorate in 2006, and I witnessed how this law created educational barriers for everyone. In Arizona, Prop 300 required all students to provide proof of citizenship when enrolling in a higher education institution. This requirement stalled student admission and enrollment because students had to track down birth certificates or apply and pay to receive a new copy. Students also had to travel in-person to the college/university to present the documentation. For many students, this confusing process was enough to deter them from enrolling. The documentation requirement for Senate Bill 254 would create similar barriers for ALL students in Kansas. The voters in Arizona repealed this law in 2022 with Prop 308 (51.24% to 48.76%) because they realized that the previous law created barriers for ALL students. Additionally, studies show that a college degree boosts lifetime earnings potential, and, thereby, the spending power of an individual. Voters realized that the state would have a stronger economy if all Arizona high school graduates, even those without legal status, were allowed to pursue a college degree with affordable in-state tuition.

Just like in Arizona, I believe that the Kansas economy is better served if all Kansas high school graduates are allowed to pay in-state tuition in their pursuit of a college degree. According to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, Kansas has 51 workers for every 100 open jobs. Our economy needs more skilled workers, not less. Students who have worked hard and graduated from high school in Kansas should be allowed to pay

in-state tuition that will allow them to attend college and contribute valuable skills to our community and state economy.

Moreover, having served as an academic advisor to students who have aged out of foster care, I have seen how difficult it is to procure proof of citizenship documents. For example, my foster care student could not even get a university ID because they had no way of proving their identity. Similarly, when I sat with the student in my office to figure out how we could get their Kansas birth certificate, we were met with the circular requirements of this process: To get a birth certificate you need an acceptable photo ID, such as a driver's license, state ID card, passport or visa, or military ID. My student did not have any of these (again, not even a school ID). If you do not have any of these photo identification methods you need to provide two alternate forms of ID: social security number, bank statement with current address, car registration or title with current address, utility bill with current address, pay stub (must include your name, social security number plus name and address of business). My student who had aged out of foster care had none of these documents due to the itinerant nature of their housing status at that point in their lives. This process was overwhelming for a young 18-year old. I am sad to say that this student ultimately did not complete their college journey.

As I finish this letter, I think about my friend in Arizona who had to stop his college education midway because he could not continue to pay out-of-state tuition under Prop 300. We had been in the same classroom since 3rd grade. He was bright, eager, and motivated. He was smarter than me. I have a PhD today. He dropped out. Who did Prop 300 benefit in this case? No one. The state missed out on the contributions of this bright mind.

Please reject Senate Bill 254. We need to strengthen our communities in Kansas, not weaken them.

Thank you for your time.

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