When a federal judge temporarily blocked Trump’s ban a few days later, Elyazgi hastily booked another flight back to Virginia to finish her last few months as an undergraduate.

Now at the Ed School, she is again in limbo. “I can stay in the United States legally; I just can’t leave,” she says. She also can’t have relatives or friends from Libya visit her — visitor visas for Libyans are not being granted to the United States. More than likely, when she graduates in May, she’ll have to repeat what she did at her George Mason graduation: During the ceremony, while in her cap and gown, she’ll have to FaceTime with family and friends in Tripoli.

“It’s a sacrifice,” she says, “but I’ve been waiting to be part of Harvard for a long time, so I couldn’t refuse the chance.”

One thing isn’t in limbo: She knows that after she graduates from the Ed School, she will — finally — head home. She already has a job lined up with the Ministry of Education, which offered her scholarships to attend George Mason and Harvard after she earned the highest grade point average among all Libyan students the year she graduated from high school.

“I will be working on designing a better education system,” she says. “Right now the system is very old-fashioned, based on memorizing information. Classrooms have boards and chairs only, and the curriculum is dense but dry and hard to grasp. I will be working with colleagues on designing a new education system for the long term and modifying the current one for immediate application.”

Until then, Elyazgi is happily settling into her second semester after a warm welcome to campus.

“I was embraced with love and care even upon my arrival to Cambridge,” she says. “I have received emails full of support and help from all the faculty members at the Ed School, as well as many of my peers. Upon my arrival, everyone from the Office of Student Affairs to all my professors welcomed me and made me feel like I am home and not alone. I wish that every Libyan student receives the same greetings as I, and sees the true American manners. We come here to get an education. You can’t generalize on nationality. I’m not a threat.”

“Today, if you’re a young immigrant who received Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) status, you may be working an internship. You may be applying to medical school. Or you may be planning a trip to see a cousin get married this weekend. But next month, or next year? It’s all uncertain. President Donald Trump or — ordered the end of DACA more than a year ago. Since then, its survival has relied on court decisions, with members of Congress unable to come to an agreement on immigration reform. The most recent court decision to extend DACA’s period in purgatory came in August, when a Texas judge ruled that DACA can continue for now — although he warned it will likely be deemed illegal in the long run.

And yet, even while its future is uncertain, DACA’s results are not. When it comes to helping the immigrant students who have used the program transition to adulthood, DACA works, according to newly published research from Professor Roberto Gonzales, who has been chronicling the effects of the policy since it went into effect in 2012.

The Findings
Gonzales and his co-authors describe adolescence for undocumented immigrants as “a waking nightmare,” a time when young people realize that the goals they had thought possible are, in fact, out of their reach because of their immigration status. He described this uncomfortable awakening in his 2015 book, Lives in Limbo. When DACA began, it unlocked previously unavailable rites of passage to students who immigrated to the United States without documentation. For students able to gain wider access through the program, the nightmare was largely over.

To understand more about the program’s impact, Gonzales and his colleagues analyzed interviews, conducted in 2015, of 408 beneficiaries of DACA, ages 18–32, about their experience with their new immigration status and how it affected their transition to adulthood — things like being able to work.
The interviewees discussed how, once they were documented and given access to new jobs and spaces, they were more secure in their identities. DACA allowed previously undocumented youth to obtain drivers licenses, open bank accounts, and get jobs that gave them financial independence, rather than the low-wage, dead-end jobs that undocumented immigrants are often forced to take. Having DACA status came with other benefits, too, like a greater sense of belonging.

Among recipients who were older than 21 when they became DACA holders, the program allowed them to pursue dreams deferred. Younger students were able to stay on the trajectory enjoyed by their documented peers, heading toward the types of job opportunities that would allow financial independence.

“DACA in the short term is, I think, inarguably the most successful policy of immigration integration we’ve had in the past three decades. It’s provided a boost to immigrants and their families,” Gonzales says. But for all its speed in helping students integrate into society and achieve independence, DACA has limitations.

For one, its benefits have not been felt to the same degree across the United States. Local context shapes both the legal limitations and the daily experiences that immigrants and undocumented people have. In another paper, Gonzales and his co-authors note that DACA recipients who live in places like New York, where DACA recipients can get a tuition break to state schools, have entirely different experiences than recipients who live in places like Georgia, where they are legally prohibited from receiving in-state tuition, and in fact banned from attending some postsecondary institutions.

What’s more, the federal government still blocks DACA recipients from receiving federal financial aid. It offers no relief to students’ family members and offers the students themselves no path to citizenship. This means that the opportunities DACA has conferred can be a mixed blessing, especially in places where local and state governments are focused on restricting immigration. In California, undocumented immigrants can obtain professional licenses and drivers’ licenses, even without DACA. But in states like South Carolina or Georgia, a DACA beneficiary might be the only person in their family authorized to work or even drive.

“This is a double-edged sword,” Gonzales says. “In one way, you can see that DACA has benefited not only the little over 800,000 [DACA beneficiaries], but also their family members. In other ways, it’s really tethered DACA beneficiaries to their families. It’s added another layer of burden.”

An Uncertain Future
Right now, the status of DACA itself is precarious. Gonzales is beginning another round of interviews to see how the current climate around immigration is affecting DACA recipients. They started seeing a shift as anti-immigrant rhetoric from the 2016 presidential election became reflected in federal policy.

“Some of our respondents didn’t reapply for DACA in certain areas and they’re strained in ways they weren’t before, especially thinking about that double-edged sword and their responsibilities to their families and their worries about their family members,” Gonzales says.

While the courts decide the fate of DACA, and Congress decides whether or not to create federal legislation that would reform immigration, a lot is left up to state and local policymakers, who can pass laws that make it easier for immigrants to thrive.

“The climate is also really important,” Gonzales says. “You’ve got an opportunity for schools and community institutions to play a really important role in creating places of belonging, providing opportunities, providing resources, for immigrant students and their families.”

READ REPORT: GSE.HARVARD.EDU/ED