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Education for All

As protests over immigration escalate, fair student aid for immigrants becomes an important tenet of the debate.

By Charisse Dengler & Anne O'Dell

With around 65,000 undocumented immigrants graduating from high school every year in the U.S., the subject of immigrant financial aid is often a frustrating one.

However, understanding the different options available to undocumented students and being aware of proposed changes in legislation can make the process a little bit easier.

The current debate regarding undocumented students and financial aid focuses not only on sympathy and compassion, but also on what is best for the future of the U.S. For example, many state and federal officials feel that undocumented students should not suffer the consequences of their parents' actions by being ineligible for financial aid and unable to pursue further education, and they don't think it is fair to allow undocumented immigrants to attend elementary and secondary schools while keeping them out of college.

Proponents of allowing these students to apply for financial aid also say that officials must see the big picture and realize that these students will more than likely become citizens in the future; and if they are not able to pursue higher education, they will be citizens with only high school educations. Studies have also shown that investing more money and making it possible for more students to attend colleges and universities cut down on welfare and law enforcement costs in the end.

However, opponents feel that allowing undocumented immigrants access to financial aid and in-state tuition is unfair to citizens since it raises their taxes while most undocumented immigrants do not pay taxes since they are not able to be legally employed. The Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR) called proposed legislation to help immigrant students "a massive undocumented amnesty program disguised as an education initiative."

The proposed legislation FAIR is referring to is the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act of 2005 or DREAM Act. This act would make it possible for undocumented students who meet certain criteria to gain legal status for six years. Specifications require the students to have lived within the U.S. since before they were 16 years old and for five years before the act was proposed and to be of good moral character.

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The students would then be eligible for federal financial aid and in-state tuition rates, and they would even be eligible to apply for citizenship after two years of being in college or the military. This eligibility for citizenship is very important since most students choose not to go to college on the understanding that they won't be able to work upon graduation.

Saul Verduzco is a member of Student Advocates for Higher Education at San Jose State University; his student organization is comprised of mostly undocumented students. Verduzco and other members travel around the San Francisco Bay area educating students on the DREAM Act and what it can do for them.

"A lot of students give up and drop out when they're juniors in high school," Verduzco said in a *Hispanic Magazine* interview. "A lot of them are in a state of depression. They think, 'What's the point of going to college if I'm not going to be able to work with my degree?'"

"We try to tell them that it's not a waste of time," he said. "We give them hope with the DREAM Act and say that they may be eligible to adjust their status if they meet the requirements, one of which is to have a degree."

Students at high schools and colleges across the nation have participated in walk-outs and protests in opposition of current immigration policies and in support of proposed legislation that helps give immigrant students access to higher education.

Now on its third round before Congress, the DREAM Act has better chances than ever of being passed into law, supporters believe; but organizations continue to speak out in opposition.

Ira Mehlman, media director for the Federation for American Immigration Reform, describes the DREAM Act as unfair because it allows students with undocumented parents to attend college at the cost of students whose parents never broke the law.

"It would be wonderful to be able to provide everybody on the face of the planet with a quality higher education. The question is, 'Who is going to pay for it? How are you going to allocate finite resources?'" Mehlman said in a *Houston Chronicle* interview.

"The proponents of the DREAM Act say the children of the undocumented aliens didn't do anything wrong. That certainly is a difficult situation, and inevitably children are hurt."

"It will place American citizens in direct competition with undocumented aliens for scarce slots in freshmen classes at state colleges and universities while awarding the undocumented alien

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students with an amnesty," FAIR said in a press release. Melissa Lazarin, Senior Policy Analyst for Education Reform at the National Council of La Raza, disagrees.

"These individuals really have to work hard to earn citizenship," she said in a *Houston Chronicle* interview. "They work hard in school. They pursue higher education or contribute to our nation in the military. It's certainly not at all a free pass."

Lazarin said the proposed education gives immigrants who were brought to this country by their parents the "opportunity to live the American dream."

Earlier this month, students at the University of Houston came together in support of the DREAM Act, holding signs that read "Support Our Dream" on the lawn in front of the university's library.

Some in the general public have produced a growing concern over whether the DREAM Act will encourage more undocumented immigration.

Josh Bernstein, Director of Federal Policy for the National Immigration Law Center, doesn't think so. He told *Hispanic Magazine* that most people in other countries don't even know about current legislation such as the DREAM Act and therefore wouldn't enter the U.S. without going through the proper procedures because of it.

"The DREAM Act would have no impact on the number of immigrants that come here," he said. "People don't come here thinking of the technicalities of the law and what it will be in 10 or 15 years."

When it comes to undocumented students, aid options are limited, with most schools only offering aid to legal residents, permanent residents, or eligible non-citizens. However, some schools do allow undocumented students to receive in-state tuition rates.

Although Section 505 of the Federal Undocumented Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 stated that undocumented immigrants were not eligible for financial aid, states such as Texas, California, New York, and Washington have passed state laws that allow undocumented immigrants to qualify for in-state tuition if they meet certain qualifications. In Texas, which implemented its policy in 2001, undocumented students can also apply for and receive financial aid. Most of the legislation permits undocumented students who have attended a state high school for at least three years to receive in-state tuition rates.

In Texas, the number of students enrolling under the program has continued to increase every year, starting with 400 students the first year and totaling an average of 5,100 students this past fall.

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However, Jane Caldwell, Director of Grants and Special Programs for the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, told the *Houston Chronicle* that the numbers include undocumented students, students with visas, and other students qualifying for in-state tuition.

When it comes to applying for any federal financial aid, the first thing every student must do, regardless of his country of origin, is fill out a U.S. Department of Education financial aid application, also known as a FAFSA. A student can fill out a paper FAFSA application or complete an application online at www.fafsa.ed.gov.

Online applications yield quicker results, with students finding out their results in a week. Paper applications may take up to four weeks to process. Once a student has completed and submitted an application, they will receive a Student Aid Report (SAR).

The next step in the application process is for the student to turn his SAR into the financial aid office of the school of his choice. The student will also need to complete a NSCC data sheet, which can either be picked up at the financial aid office or printed off the web. The data sheet must be filled out and mailed to the address printed on the first page.

During this step, the student must also submit academic transcripts from any colleges or universities in which they have been enrolled over the past five years, and at this point in the application process, immigrant students will be asked to submit citizenship or immigration documents.

It's important to note that during the financial aid application process, if a student is a citizen but has one or both undocumented parents, honesty is the best policy. If the student's parents enter a false social security number or a taxpayer identification number that is specifically for work purposes, the FAFSA will not be approved.

In order to avoid confusion, undocumented parents should record 000-00-0000 in the spot designated for a social security number.

Another option for undocumented students is private scholarships. In order to locate private scholarships that do not require citizenship, students should look online. The FastWeb scholarship search at www.fastweb.com and the MALDEF list of scholarships at www.maldef.org are often good sources. EdFed.com also lists 150,000 awards in its scholarship database.