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Undocumented Students: Unfulfilled Dreams

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Undocumented Students



Unfulfilled Dreams...

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Introduction

On May 19, 2007, the UCLA Center for Labor Research and Education convened a hearing and conference on undocumented students. State Senator Gilbert Cedillo chaired the proceeding, and the other members of the panel were Senator Gloria Romero and Assemblymembers Mike Eng, Kevin de León, and Anthony Portantino. Hundreds of students and community members from Southern California attended to obtain information about the pending California Dream Act (SB 65, formerly SB 160) and federal Dream Act legislation. In addition, twelve undocumented students from Southern California provided their personal testimonies. Their testimonies offered a human face to the hundreds of thousands of undocumented high school and college students throughout the state and nation.

This report highlights the testimonies of perseverance and hope presented by the students at the hearing. These students share not only the formidable obstacles facing undocumented students but also the hope that comprehensive immigration reform will change their lives and allow them to fully contribute to American society. In an effort to make more information available to the public about the California and federal Dream Acts as well as the broader policy issues involving immigrant youth and higher education, the UCLA Center for Labor Research and Education will release a student publication in the summer of 2007. For more information about the May 19 hearing, the student publication, or the various projects initiated by the UCLA Center for Labor Research and Education, please visit our web site at www.labor.ucla.edu.



Undocumented Students

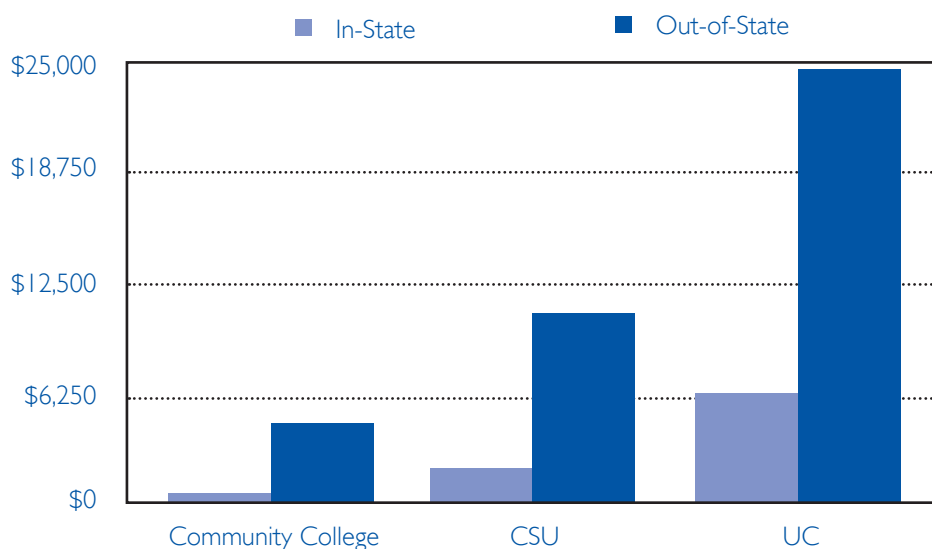
Undocumented immigrants are foreign nationals who: 1) entered the United States without authorization; or 2) entered legally but remained in the United States without authorization.¹ However, undocumented youth and students usually have no role in the decision to come to this country. They are usually brought to this country by their parents or relatives, and for many, they have spent many more years in the United States than in their country of origin. The United States Census Bureau estimates that in the year 2000, approximately 2.5 million undocumented youth under the age of eighteen were living in the United States. Furthermore, approximately 65,000 undocumented students graduate from U.S. high schools each year. Of this number, roughly 40 percent, or 26,000, undocumented youth reside in the state of California.² Many undocumented students are honor students, athletes, student leaders, and aspiring professionals. But because of their immigration status, the majority of these young people are unable to access higher education and even if they do, they are not legally able to obtain employment upon graduation.

¹ Cited from "The College and Financial Guide for AB 540 Undocumented Immigrant Students" (USC Center for Higher Education Policy Analysis)

² Statistics were obtained from the Pew Hispanic Center (<http://www.pewhispanic.org>)

Assembly Bill 540

AB 540, signed into law on October 2001, allows any student, including undocumented students who meet specific criteria, to pay in-state tuition at California's public colleges and universities (i.e. California Community Colleges, California State Universities, and University of California institutions). In-state tuition fees are significantly lower, as demonstrated in the table below. Specifically, AB 540 allows undocumented students at California Community Colleges to pay in-state fees of approximately \$780 a year versus \$4,620 for out-of state fees, at California State Universities to pay \$2,552 in-state versus \$11,010 for out-of-state fees, and at the University of California to pay \$6,780 in-state versus \$24,900 for out-of-state fees.



With the passing of AB 540, California's undocumented students qualify for in-state tuition as long as students meet the following requirements:

- Attended a California high school for at least three years
- Graduated from a California high school or attained the equivalent of a high school diploma
- Are registered or currently enrolled in an institution of higher education
- Filed (or will file) a statement with the institution agreeing to legalize his or her immigration status

AB 540 grants undocumented students eligibility for in-state tuition. However, AB 540 students are not eligible for financial aid. Even if AB 540 students are able to fund their own education and receive their degrees from institutions of higher learning, they cannot legally gain employment in the United States.

Federal DREAM Act

The Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act (DREAM Act) is proposed bipartisan congressional legislation that addresses youth who were brought to the United States without legal documentation but who have since grown up here, stayed in school, and kept out of trouble. To qualify for immigration relief under the DREAM Act, a student must have been:

- Continuously present in the United States for at least five years prior to enactment of the legislation
- Under fifteen years of age at the time of entry into the United States
- Able to demonstrate good moral character

Once a qualifying student graduates from a U.S. high school, he or she would be allowed to apply for conditional status that would authorize up to six years of legal residence. During this time period, the student would be required to graduate from a two-year college, complete at least two years toward a four-year degree, or serve in the United States military for at least two years. Permanent residence would be granted at the end of the six-year period if the student has met these requirements and has continued to maintain good moral character.³

The DREAM Act would also eliminate a federal provision that discourages states from providing in-state tuition to undocumented students, “thus restoring full authority to the states to determine state college and university fees.”⁴



California DREAM Act (SB 65)

Senator Gilbert Cedillo authored the California Dream Act (SB 65). This proposed state legislation requests that the University of California system, and requires that the California State Universities and California Community Colleges, establish procedures that permit students who are exempt from paying nonresident tuition (under AB 540) to participate in all financial aid programs administered by the State of California to the fullest extent consistent with federal law.⁵

The California State University Board of Trustees, the University of California Regents, and the California Community College Board of Governors all support the California DREAM Act.

Student Testimonies

Included in this report are excerpts from student testimonies provided at the hearing on May 19, 2007, at the University of California, Los Angeles. The testimonies offered by these students are unique, however, in that they reflect the mixed feelings of hope, expectation, frustration, and despair facing hundreds of thousands of undocumented students. Only their first names are used, and reference to their schools have been deleted due to privacy concerns. In some instances, the students asked that their photographs not be included. The authors of this report are cognizant of the dangers facing undocumented students, including the possibility of deportation. However, we feel that these concerns must be weighed against the importance of sharing these stories and bringing them to the public’s attention. The authors deeply appreciate the courage and perseverance of the students who participated in the hearing and conference and who are continuing to struggle for the American Dream.

³ National Immigration Law Center (<http://www.nilc.org>)

⁴ Most of the Federal and State DREAM Act information was obtained from the National Immigration Law Center web site and “The College and Financial Aid Guide for: AB540 Undocumented Immigrant Students” developed by the USC Center for Higher Education Policy Analysis.

⁵ “DREAM Act: Basic Information, February 2007” produced by the National Immigration Law Center

Unfulfilled Dreams...



Tam is a recent graduate from a University of California school. Her passion is in the creation of documentary films, which she hopes to incorporate in her professional career. Tam plans on applying to PhD programs so that one day she can teach at the college level. Along with teaching, her dream is to establish a nonprofit organization that assists undocumented youth in the development of oral histories. Tam is twenty-four years old. Tam recently arrived from Washington DC, where she provided her testimony to the United States Congress.

"My parents escaped the Vietnam War as boat people and were rescued by the German Navy. In Vietnam, my mother had to drop out of middle school to support her family as a street vendor. My family immigrated to the United States when I was six to reunite with relatives who fled to California. It is extremely difficult to win a political asylum case. The immigration court ordered us deported to Germany. However, when we spoke to the German consulate, they told us, "We don't want you. You're not German." I consider myself an American, but as of right now, my national identity is not American and even though I can't be removed from American soil, I cannot become an American unless legislation changes.

In December, I graduated with a bachelor's degree in American literature and culture with departmental and college honors from a University of California school. I thought after all these years of working multiple jobs and applying to countless scholarships all while taking more than fifteen units every quarter, my struggles were going to pay off. I was accepted to a PhD program, and I was awarded multiple fellowships. But I had to decline the offer to the PhD program because even with the fellowships, I do not have the money to cover the tuition and living expenses.

I can't work legally even though I do have some legal status. Without the DREAM Act, I have no prospect of overcoming my immigration status limbo. I'll forever be a perpetual foreigner in a country I've always considered my home."



Carla is a full-time student attending a Southern California Community College. In 1989, Carla immigrated with her family to the United States from Guerrero, Mexico. Carla believes that education will enable her to assist her family and community. She hopes to finish her bachelor's degree at a California State University in business with a minor in journalism. Carla is nineteen years old.

"I no longer remember the struggle of crossing the border between Mexico and the United States, a struggle made by my parents for our future. The simple fact that I do not have documents turns me into a thing. I am no longer human. I live a life of fear; fear that at times I try to hide, fear that torments me at night, the fear of deportation, discrimination, and dehumanization. This is what I constantly feel.

My mom has the mentality that many undocumented individuals have, and that is they love this country as much as they love their own. They love America because of the opportunity their children could have. Education in Mexico is good, but it is an honor to attend school. Even after attending and finishing one's degree in Mexico, there are still few job opportunities. Education and opportunity is the reason we cross the border.

Give me a chance, America, to show that you have raised me right, that even if I was not born from your womb, I was still raised by you. I have learned how to be an American, but mostly I have learned to love this country as mine."

Amarah is a second-year student at a University of California institution majoring in psychology and Spanish. After graduation, she hopes to conduct research in biotechnology. Amarah is the oldest of four siblings, all of whom are United States citizens. She was born in Pakistan and came to the United States when she was only six months old.

"I was born in Karachi, Pakistan, and flew to Los Angeles with a tourist visa when I was six months old. Twenty years later, Pakistan remains an unstable, impoverished country brewing with economic, political, and religious turmoil. As a Shiite muslim and a minority, my parents grew increasingly afraid of the havoc Pakistan's instability could wreak on their lives, and the cost they would have to pay to raise a family there. They decided to gather their savings and buy plane tickets to the United States. My background, therefore, makes me Pakistani born, American raised, and American educated.

There are two ways one faces a burden. They either crumble due to its weight or let it become a part of them, accept it, and allow it to strengthen their lives. As an undocumented student, I do not exist in the legal system. However, I am adamant to tell the world that I do exist through my work, my talent, and my aspirations.

The immigration system in our country bars me from applying for student loans, scholarships, financial aid, institutional, state, and federal grants as well as from getting a work permit, having a social security number, and obtaining a driver's license. My twenty years in this country and my fifteen years of education are deemed worthless.

For decades, undocumented students have been de facto Americans. The DREAM Act will help fulfill our dreams, provide us a path to legalization, as well as better the economy and standards of education. Immigration reform cannot wait. It calls desperately for change. I implore you to act immediately, for this country is my home as much as it is yours."



Bianca is a high school junior originally from Romania. She enjoys studying math. She not only likes working with numbers but also believes it is important to solve problems, both in the classroom and in everyday life. Bianca's dream is to enter the medical field, with particular interest in pediatrics. She loves working with kids, volunteering, and giving back to her community.

"Five years of struggle, tears, happiness, and decisions have passed by since my family came here in December 2001. I am grateful for the decision that my parents made to leave everything behind in their country of Romania. They made a difficult yet important choice to come to the United States, the country called "the land of opportunity." My parents decided to immigrate because they wanted our family to have opportunities, a better life, and a better education. My father applied for a job, and he is the only one with a social security number. He works extremely hard for my family to live happily and easily. I consider him one of my heroes.

I will be a senior in high school, and I will eventually apply for all the universities I have dreamed of in order to continue my education in the medical field. I want to be a nurse practitioner in pediatrics. This requires a great deal of knowledge, more education, and financial support. I fear the financial support will not be available.

The passing of the DREAM Act with its possibilities of financial aid and a path toward legalization are all things I need. I know that my future and the future of my family are in this country. Romania is where I used to live, but America is where I want to live."

Eduardo

graduated from a California State University on May 19, 2007. He received his degree in Spanish literature with a minor in marketing. Eduardo immigrated alone to the United States. He has been separated from his mother since 1998. Eduardo will complete his undergraduate degree this year, and his dream is to one day attend graduate school. Eduardo believes that many people can relate to his personal testimony of coming to the United States due to impoverished conditions in his homeland and his experience of being separated from loved ones. Eduardo is twenty-five years old.

"I came to Los Angeles about nine years ago from Mexico at the age of sixteen. I came by myself because at the age of fourteen, my father died of a heart attack. He was the main source of income to my family. Soon after that sad event, economic burdens began to overwhelm my mom. I decided to leave home and come to the United States in order to alleviate my family's economic problems. Before my departure, I told my mom that I would study hard so that I could eventually help her and my two siblings. I also told her that I would finish college.

While I was in high school, a family let me stay in their patio (six feet by eight feet). It had only three walls; the fourth wall was a cardboard box. To survive I took care of their four kids so that my rent would be waived. There were times when I only had enough money to ride on the bus from work to school with no money for food to eat. After six years living in the patio, I decided to skip a semester of school to save money and move out. I was able to save enough money to move out and this time, I moved to a garage.

The DREAM Act will help me to fulfill my dreams and the promises I have made to my mother. It will also give me the opportunity to produce, serve my community, and contribute to this great nation. In conclusion, I want to point out that patios are for plants, and garages are for cars. Neither places are suitable for human beings."



Edson

is originally from Mexico and is now a senior at a Los Angeles high school. His life goal is to become an attorney so that he can assist immigrants with their legal concerns. In addition, he hopes to one day enter politics so that he can help shape legislation relating to undocumented immigrants. Edson is eighteen years old and will attend a University of California institution next fall.

“Leaving one’s country in search for a better life is hands down one of the most difficult choices a human being can make. Uncertainty is found in every step of this journey. Those lucky enough to cross the threshold to a new life face a wide array of challenges.

Crossing the U.S.-Mexico border was the most frightening experience of my life. I was four years old, but I remember everything that occurred that day. My mother and I flew from Guanajuato to Tijuana, Mexico, on that November morning in 1993. Once we landed in Tijuana, we boarded a van that took us to the border. My mother and I hid under the seats of that Ford van waiting and hoping to cross.

Life in the United States was tough for my family. My family had to move to different cities because we simply could not afford to pay rent. Constant moving meant changing schools very often. This meant changing friends and having to adjust to new schools constantly. This is the plight of many undocumented immigrants and their children.

Despite the fact that I will not get any financial aid due to my legal status, I want to go to college to make a better life for my parents, my family, my community, and for myself. I will be the first person in my family to attend college and will not let anything deter me in my journey. I, like so many, have worked arduously to get to this point, yet the barriers in our way seem to expand each day. Please support our quest to reach our dreams.”



Stephanie was born in the Philippines and immigrated to the United States with her parents when she was three years old. Stephanie is a junior at a University of California institution majoring in English (creative writing). As an AB 540 student, she is forced to take up to a year off from school in order to work. The money that she earns working two or three minimum-wage jobs helps her to pay off tuition for one academic term. Stephanie dreams to one day become a copy editor for a major newspaper.

“I was born in the Philippines and arrived in the United States when I was three years old. My parents taught me to speak the English language exclusively from birth—as if in preparation for something.

My parents never told me that we were undocumented until I was eighteen years old. Since then, my immigration status has affected every aspect of my life. My parents are skilled and intelligent, but they float from one low-paying job to another. I share in their struggles with employment because like them, I do not have legal identification. Like a child, I cannot work, drive, or prove my age.

I was always successful academically. I started high school at the age of twelve and college by sixteen. Now I am an

undergraduate at a UC studying English. However, due to my constant struggles to pay for tuition and my ineligibility for financial aid, I frequently take time off from school to raise tuition money. Currently I am not enrolled, and I do not know when I will be able to return.

My ultimate goal is to join the publishing world as a copy editor, proofreading and revising text all day. I believe this is in my blood. I don't feel very Filipino. I'm told I'm not American, but the one thing that rings true to me is the English language."



Paola is completing her associate of arts degree from a Southern California Community College and has been accepted to a University of California institution. She is hoping to attend in the fall so long as she is able to obtain financial support. Paola's dream is to perform professionally (theatre) while at the same time engaging closely with community arts programs. Her commitment to the arts was first sparked as a youth struggling to find adequate outlets for her artistic expression. Paola grew up in an agricultural community of California's Central Valley. She came to the United States from Mexico when she was four years old.

"I have been a student in this country since I was four years old. I am now twenty-one years old, and I will soon graduate at the top of my class, just like I graduated at the top of my high school class.

Despite my immigration status, I have been able to succeed in my academics. I attribute my success to the examples I have at home. My mother has also been a student since her arrival, and she too is currently working toward her high school diploma. My mother has always been involved in my education and continues to offer unlimited support. I recently received my acceptance letter to a UC institution. I was accepted as a theater major for the fall of 2007 but due to my financial reasons, I might not be able to enroll.

If the DREAM Act were to pass, it would give me the ability to work and receive financial aid and scholarships so that I can finish school. The DREAM Act would also allow me to use my degree in this country to good use. Most importantly, if the DREAM Act passes I will have a path to legalization in a country that has been my only home."



Urmee is a fifth-year student at a University of California institution majoring in psychology. She hopes to attend pharmacy or medical school in the near future. Urmee believes it is important to share her testimony and convey the financial and emotional battles she constantly undergoes in her pursuit of a higher education. Urmee is from Bangladesh and she is twenty-one years old.

"I was born in Bangladesh and was brought to America when I was eight years old. One year after my graduation from high school, my parents tried to force me into an arranged marriage. I refused due to my desires to start college. As a result, my parents stopped paying for my schooling. After missing two quarters of classes, I had no other option except do what my parents wanted. But four years have passed, and my parents have not found anyone for me to marry.

When problems arise in my parents' life, they feel that is it due to the fact that I am still not married. It is a constant fight for me to stay strong mentally, spiritually, and emotionally. In my community, I am one of the few students attending college. I believe it is my responsibility to make sure that the youth in my community are encouraged to learn and to strive for their dreams.

Whenever I can, I advise the youth in my community. I hope to continue serving my community. I need the DREAM Act to pass not only for my own aspirations but also for the many students like me who need a comprehensive path towards legalization."



Hector graduated in June 2007 from a University of California institution. He received his degree in both sociology and Chicano/a studies. Hector will pursue postgraduate studies either in law school or in a PhD program. He hopes to utilize either of those avenues to defend and promote human rights. Hector is active in the statewide campaign to ratify the California DREAM Act.

“The first moment I became aware of my undocumented status and the difficulties it would bring, I experienced an overwhelming feeling of helplessness and disillusionment. I believed that my schooling, my dreams, and my future had been shattered to pieces. I thought that all I had been working so hard to attain was wasted.

Today I do not see my life or my struggle as a waste. I am a part of a collective journey toward liberation. The passage of the California and Federal DREAM Acts, in its simplest explanation, is an avenue for thousands of undocumented students struggling to obtain the American Dream of freedom, liberation, and self-determination. As undocumented youth, we cannot fully exercise our rights because we are unable to finance our schooling, to obtain drivers' licenses, and to use our degrees in job professions. In other words, we are not free to determine our future.

Undocumented students are burning with the desire to be freed from oppression. We ask for your support in our struggle to pass both the California and Federal Dream Acts. For so long we have been in the shadows, and we can no longer wait for more time to pass. Our dreams and our lives cannot wait.”

Carmen came to the United States from Mexico in 1993 when she was seven years old. Her family immigrated in search of a more stable environment, especially for her brother Francisco who has cerebral palsy. Carmen is a second-year student at a Southern California Community College and will transfer to a University of California institution in the fall of 2008. Carmen plans to obtain her degree in English and/or Chicano studies. Her dream is to attend law school. Carmen hopes her testimony will serve as a doorway for further discussion.

“Whenever tough times would face the family, my parents would always say: “Carmen, mija, focus on school, and we will take care of the rest.” I listened to my parent’s advice. I worked very hard to demonstrate that I was not a “law-breaking, illegal alien.”

But as time grew near for me to start college, I wondered, “How can I focus on school if I have to place so much of my energy on paying for tuition?” I am now twenty years old, I have not had a summer off since I was fifteen, and during the school year, I work full-time. I help my parents care for my brother, who has special needs. It is difficult to stay in school, but I refuse to leave. I am learning tools that cannot be deported. I hope to use these tools with all my energy to make society better.

I am just one example of the countless others who make up the diverse undocumented student experience. We are all hard-working and when it comes to education, we are passionate. We hope to utilize our education and skills to improve our communities. Regardless of our immigration status, we will be the future teachers, doctors, lawyers, and public leaders. People say we are the future. I agree with that statement, but there is one part missing. We are not only the future—we are also the present.

I was always told, “Carmen, mija, focus on school, and things will get better.” Now I tell all of you, focus on the DREAM Act and comprehensive immigration reform, and things will get better.”



Ernesto is a second-year student at a University of California institution majoring in both Chicano studies and political science. In 1996, Ernesto, along with his mother and two brothers, immigrated to the United States to reunite with his three sisters. He is a first-generation college student raised by a single mother. Ernesto plans to attend law school and his ultimate dream is to serve his community as a member of the California State Assembly.

When I was eight years old, two of my brothers, my mother, and I crossed the Mexico-U.S. border. Crossing the border and crossing into the U.S. at a young age, I didn't really understand what that really meant. I know that my mother made a choice for us to move to this country for us to get a better education.

It was here when my American challenge began. My mother prepared me as best she could. She said, "When you enter elementary school, mijo, you are not going to be able to understand what people say to you. They will speak to you in a different language and you won't understand everything they say."

After high school, I applied to a UC campus. It was my mom's dream was for me to go to college. When I got accepted, that was the greatest day of my life. I remember calling my mom and telling her, "Mom, I am going to college." She put the phone down and she started to cry.

But going to college meant that I was leaving my safety zone. I had to face how I was going to get to school. Getting to school takes two hours by bus, train, and the metro. I wake up at 5:00 in the morning just to get to class at 9:00, and once class is over, I go to work for another five hours. It is 9:00 p.m. by the time I get home. I haven't seen my mom or my family for the whole day, but my free time is dedicated to my homework.

This is the struggle I have to go through every day because I am an undocumented student. We are not able to get any kind of financial aid, no scholarship, no loans, no grants, nothing. Campus housing is unaffordable. I am a second-year Chicano studies and political science double major, and my struggles continue every day.

Together with other undocumented students and other student allies, we are writing a book to talk about our experiences. I am committed to continue the fight for the Dream Act. Thousands of undocumented students like me are going through the same struggle. It's my struggle, it's my family's struggle, and it is a people's struggle.

CONCLUSION

Support for the DREAM Act has increased since its introduction to Congress in 2001. According to the National Immigration Law Center, "the DREAM Act has a better chance of enactment this year than it has ever had. It continues to attract bipartisan support and now for the first time also enjoys the strong backing of the House and Senate leadership and all of the relevant committee chairs."⁶



QUOTES FROM THE HEARING



"Immigration reform cannot be a discussion about building a wall. It cannot be punitive. Immigration reform is near and legalization is on the horizon."

-Senator Cedillo



"Hopes, dreams, and plans must be realized. There is no other option. I will be joining as co-author. [The DREAM Act] has to pass—there are no other options."

-Assemblymember Eng



"This hearing is one of the most powerful presentations that I have heard about the DREAM Act. It inspires me when I hear [the students] because what they say takes so much courage."

-Josh Bernstein, National Immigration Law Center

⁶ "DREAM Act: Basic Information, February 2007" produced by the National Immigration Law Center

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