

# Young Lives on Hold: The College Dreams of Undocumented Students

by Roberto G. Gonzales, Assistant Professor, University of Washington

## The Plight of Undocumented Students

Children account for 1.8 million, or 15 percent, of the undocumented immigrants now living in this country. Although not born in the United States, these children have, for the most part, grown up in the United States and received much of their primary and secondary school education here. But without a means to legalize their status, they are seldom able to go on to college and cannot work legally in this country. Moreover, at any time they can be deported to countries they barely know. This wasted talent imposes economic and emotional costs on undocumented students themselves and on U.S. society as a whole.

Undocumented students in the United States are trapped in a legal paradox. They have the right to a primary and secondary school education, but then face uncertainty upon graduation from high school. While some states explicitly allow undocumented students to attend college, there are many grey areas that cloud the college admissions, financial aid and enrollment processes. In addition, undocumented students cannot legally join their native-born peers in the workforce, where Bureau of Labor Statistics data indicate educated workers are needed.

Among the findings of this report:

- About 65,000 undocumented children who have lived in the United States for five years or longer graduate from high school each year. Although they can legally attend most colleges, they are not eligible for most forms of financial aid.
- Because of the barriers to their continued education and their exclusion from the legal workforce, only a fraction of undocumented high school graduates go to college.
- Given the opportunity to receive additional education and move into better-paying jobs, undocumented students would pay more in taxes and have more money to spend and invest in the U.S. economy.

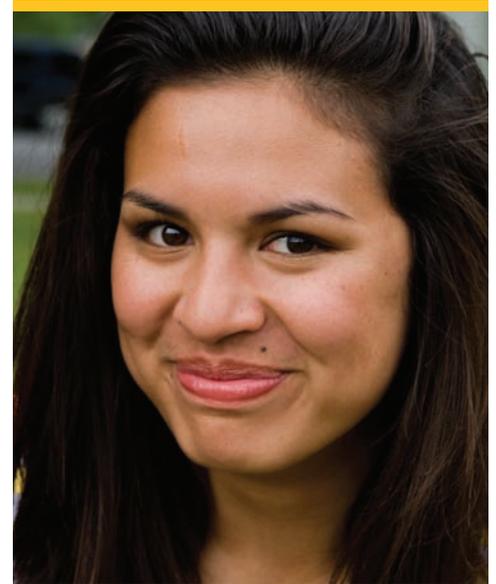
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**The DREAM Act**  
would support the  
ambitions, aspirations  
and contributions of  
undocumented students.

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- The 10 states that, since 2001, have passed laws allowing undocumented students who graduate from in-state high schools to qualify for in-state college tuition have not experienced a large influx of new immigrant students who have displaced native-born students or added financial burdens to their education systems. In fact, these measures tend to increase school revenues by bringing in tuition from students who otherwise would not be in college.
- The bipartisan Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors Act, first introduced in Congress in 2001, would fix a flaw in our current laws by providing a mechanism by which undocumented students who have lived in the U.S. since childhood may apply for legal permanent resident status if they graduate from high school and go on to college or military service.
- The DREAM Act would provide 360,000 undocumented high school graduates with a legal means to work and attend college, and could provide incentives for another 715,000 youngsters between the ages of 5 and 17 to finish high school and pursue postsecondary education.
- In strictly economic terms, the contributions that DREAM Act students would make over their lifetimes would dwarf the small additional investment in their education beyond high school, and the intangible benefits of legalizing and educating these students would be significant.



**Contradictions in our laws have created a vulnerable subset in our population — children who have been raised to dream, yet are cut off from the very mechanisms that allow them to achieve their dreams.**

Roberto G. Gonzales, Assistant Professor,  
University of Washington

## Opening the Door to College

A significant proportion of undocumented students have navigated our K-12 schools successfully despite the challenges of migration and discrimination — in addition to the typical difficulties faced by all adolescents. Many have the academic preparation to pursue a postsecondary education, but their economic and social mobility is severely restricted by their undocumented status.

The DREAM Act would provide a path to legal residence for undocumented youth. It also would open the door to college for tens of thousands of students who have the knowledge, skills and aspirations to pursue a college degree and to make a healthy, sustained and important contribution to the economic and social well-being of our nation.



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