

California Dream Act: 20,000 illegal immigrant students apply for state financial aid for the first time

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More than 20,000 college-bound students are seeking state financial aid for the first time under California's new Dream Act laws that allow them to get the help despite their immigration status.

While far from a complete picture, that number is the best indicator yet of how many students hope to benefit from a pair of laws that could radically change the college experience for a generation of students whose parents brought them to the U.S. illegally when they were young -- the same group that has taken center stage in the national immigration reform debate.

"For many of them, it's a game-changer," said Meng So, who coordinates UC Berkeley's months-old Undocumented Student Program.

As college-bound high school graduates await word of their state financial aid -- Cal Grants -- other kinds of help have begun to flow for students already enrolled in public colleges and universities.

In January, UC Berkeley freshman Jesus Lopez was one of many college students who under the same Dream Act began to receive campus grants or fee waivers based on need - help previously limited to legal residents.

The aid made a big difference in his studies: This semester, the business major from San Jose moved from a crowded apartment 1 1/2 miles from his classes to within walking distance. He joined clubs, signed up to volunteer and stays up late studying in Moffitt Library.

"Now I pretty much do the stuff a regular student does, because in a way, I am a regular student," said Lopez, whose family moved from Mexico to the United States when he was 7.

California was one of the first states to offer in-state tuition to illegal immigrants who attended one of its high schools. Now, roughly a dozen do so. Only two other states -- Texas and New Mexico -- give financial aid to this group of students, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. Oklahoma passed a similar law but reversed it.

Opponents, led by Assemblyman Tim Donnelly, R-Hesperia, tried to repeal the California Dream Act last year, arguing the state can't afford to support its legal residents,

let alone those who entered illegally. The campaign didn't gather enough signatures to qualify for the ballot.

It will cost the state about \$65 million a year by 2016-17 to extend the benefits to illegal immigrants and those granted temporary legality under the federal Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, the nonpartisan Legislative Analyst's Office predicts. The estimate does not include campus aid administered by CSU and UC, grants funded mainly through tuition.

Thousands of college students could be already benefiting from campus grants and waivers.

For example, San Jose State has given grants this term to 83 students because of the state's Dream Act, CSU East Bay has awarded 40 and De Anza College in Cupertino waived fees for 139 students.

In addition, the California Student Aid Commission expects later this year to award Cal Grants to about 6,000 students through the state Dream Act -- about one-third of those who submitted a complete application.

The commission expects to award \$19.5 million in Cal Grants this year to the newly eligible Dream Act students, about 1.1 percent of the \$1.7 billion total. The inclusion of illegal residents hasn't made it harder for legal residents to get tuition help, as the Cal Grant is given to anyone who qualifies, and the state budgeted for the grants expected this year.

The number of students receiving campus grants under the Dream Act is so small that the effect on resident students is negligible, said Rhonda Johnson, CSU East Bay's financial aid director. "It would be really hard for a student to argue that 'I would have gotten it had you not given it to those Dream Act students,'" she said.

Johnson said she looks forward to the university's Welcome Day this spring. Until now, when students told her about their legal status and asked about financial aid, she had to turn them away.

"It's very difficult to see the disappointment on a student's face when I have to say, 'I'm sorry, unfortunately you don't qualify,'" she said. "And so now I can say, 'You do.'"

Editorial: Expand college aid to children of immigrants

Young people who were brought illegally to the U.S. through no fault of their own and who aspire to college ought to be able to access State Need Grants.

Seattle Times Editorial

THE Legislature should broaden access to higher education for Washington students brought illegally to the United States as children through no fault of their own. It is an investment in our economic future.

Ensuring these students have access to state financial aid, such as the State Need Grant and the College Bound program, is the intent of Senate Bill 5655 and House Bill 1817.

As Sen. Ed Murray, D-Seattle, the author of one of the bills, puts it: "These students grew up in Washington towns, succeeded in Washington schools, paid Washington taxes and want to be part of Washington's future. We can give them the same chance that their high-school classmates have by opening the door to our state financial aid programs."

A decade ago, the Legislature allowed these students to qualify for in-state tuition rates. The next step is financial aid for low-income students.

Washington schools educate these kids. Rather than punish children for their parents' decision, lawmakers should support policies that help them get an education and become productive contributors to our economy.

Sen. Barbara Bailey, R-Oak Harbor, should rethink her decision not to hold hearings on SB 5655 in the Senate Higher Education Committee.

Bailey and some other GOP lawmakers are concerned about added pressure to our state's financial-aid system. About 75,000 Washington college students received a State Need Grant last year, but 32,000 qualified students were turned away because of a lack of money. Expanding access could add 800 to the waiting list, according to a Times story based on figures from the Latino/a Educational Achievement Project.

The policy ramifications and fiscal impacts of these proposals offer more reason to hold committee hearings and allow lawmakers to vote on a much-needed shift in policy.

RECORD ENROLLMENTS GIVE OREGON UNIVERSITIES BIG RESERVE ACCOUNTS

By Harry Esteve, The Oregonian, February 20, 2012

SALEM -- Record enrollments coupled with higher-than-ever tuition rates have helped give Oregon's higher education system something almost unheard of in this time of civic austerity -- a fluffy cushion of cash reserves.

At last report, the state's seven universities were on track to have combined reserves of just under \$200 million by June 30. The amount stands in stark contrast to the comparatively paltry \$56 million the state has in its Rainy Day Fund and school reserve account..

At a time when people are clamoring for more state services, and students are looking for tuition relief, the reserve fund looks like a juicy target. But higher education officials say the reserves will help hold down future tuition increases, and budget writers at the Legislature say they're more impressed with than envious of higher education's expanding piggy bank.

"The university system is doing absolutely the right thing," says Rep. Peter Buckley, one of the co-chairmen of the Legislature's main budget committee. He said there are no plans to "raid" the reserves, as the state has done in the past.

"It's part of a five-year plan for stability," Buckley says.

Healthy reserve accounts are relatively new to Oregon's university system, which is better known for frequent pleas of poverty and calls for better treatment by state budgeters. A combination of circumstances has changed all that.

Last year, the Legislature approved a bill that gives universities more autonomy from the state and makes it harder for lawmakers to do what they have done in the past -- sweep chunks of tuition payments into the general fund to pay for unrelated state programs and services.

On top of that, the economic recession has sent scads more Oregonians back to college, whether because they lost jobs or because they decided they needed to up their academic credentials to find one. Furthermore, jumbo-sized tuition increases in California made Oregon schools seem like a deal -- even at non-resident rates -- and hordes of students came across the border.

"We have record numbers of students, and we have more students coming to us from out of state and internationally," says Jay Kenton, chief finance officer for the Oregon University System.

Also, on orders by the state, the campuses slowed spending two years ago, which helped build the current nest egg, he said. And on top of that, the state front-loaded its allowance to the university system, giving it 54 percent in the first year of the biennium, which allowed universities to invest the extra money and recoup some interest earnings.

"It's kind of a calamity of errors almost, in terms of how we got to this point," Kenton said.

Not that he, or anyone in higher education, is complaining.

"We're a \$2.6 billion enterprise," Kenton says. "If you talk to most corporations, they don't drain their treasury every year. Granted, right now our reserves are a little high, but that's due to the herks and jerks by the Legislature."

Admission policies also helped pad higher education's bank accounts. The University of Oregon's popularity has soared outside the state, aided by multiple appearances at national championship football games.

Now, one out of every two freshmen admitted pays out-of-state tuition.

"They're paying \$27,000 a year in tuition, while the average cost to educate them is \$11,000 to \$12,000," Kenton says. "So they're a net gain." The higher tuition rates helps subsidize in-state UO students, who pay about \$6,000 in tuition, he says.

Roger Thompson, UO's vice provost for enrollment, says all those non-resident and international students aren't pushing out Oregon high school graduates. Just the opposite -- they help Oregon high school graduates to consider staying in state, he says.

"Our primary goal is to enroll and educate Oregonians," Thompson says. The UO enrolls about the same number of in-state students each year, but the real growth has been in non-resident admissions.

The state has been consistently "disinvesting" in higher education, and the extra tuition paid by non-residents helps offset those losses, Thompson says.

Students say the reserves should be used to reverse a trend of skyrocketing tuition increases. Over the past four years, tuition at the state's bigger campuses has increased 70 percent, says Tiffany Dollar, chairwoman of the board of the Oregon Student Association.

"We know we have shrinking services on our campuses -- fewer advisors, fewer counseling appointments, also increased class sizes," Dollar says. "We're in a really tough spot."

Students have proposed limiting tuition increases to no more than 7 percent over the next two years. She said he hopes the Oregon University System, with its bigger reserves, "does their part."

Buckley, the House member who is helping craft a revised state budget, said the reserves give universities some wiggle room as student preferences and the economy change.

"It's not like they have these big reserves and they're just sitting on it," Buckley says. Some schools have had to add faculty and staff. As the economy picks up steam, enrollment is likely to