

## **Steve Duin: Victor Mena and the case for tuition equity**

By Steve Duin, The Oregonian  
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Victor Mena's father figured he had two choices -- work for a Mexican drug cartel or starve -- so he bundled up his two sons 20 years ago and followed a coyote north from Uruapan into California.

"I don't remember crossing the border," Mena says. Or a gentle, uncluttered childhood in Beaverton. When Victor was 11, Oregon DHS removed him from his home for a year because his stepmother turned abusive in her corporal punishment.

He was shuttled to three different middle schools. Worked summers in the Yakima Valley, helping his father cut and bundle curly willow branches.

Discovered his undocumented status when he applied to college, then secured a non-immigrant U-visa based on that childhood abuse.

Victor Mena had choices, bitterness among them. He chose to major in criminal justice at Portland State, and minor in Persian.

Work in student government.

Intern with U.S. Probation and Pretrial Services in the federal courthouse.

Plot that career with the FBI.

All of which makes me wonder why anyone believes Oregon is better off when Mena -- and so many other undocumented students who grew up here -- are forced to pay out-of-state tuition, which all too often eliminates college as an option.

Mena has squared off, in hearings and demonstrations, against those true believers. "They think tuition equity is a path to citizenship," he says.

"Tuition equity is a path to education. It's not an immigration issue."

The Legislature will once again take up the debate this week over whether there's inalienable justice in providing in-state tuition to Oregon students who are undocumented based on their parents' residency status.

The debate must end.

"We've invested heavily in these children since kindergarten," said Brenda Lewis, a Beaverton school district administrator who met Mena when she was principal at Barnes Elementary.