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Enior J. Jimenez doesn't remember crossing the border from Mexico to Arizona, since he was only 5 years old at the time. But he has heard his parents talk about how easy it was to drive straight through security checkpoints in the early 1990s — so long as you acted white enough.

"My parents didn't speak English, but they knew what to say," said Jimenez, now 24. "If you can do the act, you'll probably have more chances of getting through."

The Costa Rican native spent the next several years living within five minutes of the southern border, completely surrounded by Mexican influence and culture.

It wasn't until his family moved to New York when he was 12 years old that he began to feel the pangs of assimilation. Until then, it was never an issue.

"Even though I lived and grew up in the United States, everyone around me (in Arizona) spoke Spanish," said Jimenez, whose family ultimately settled in Spring Valley. "It was harder to transfer from Arizona to New York. I had a very tough time."

This all happened long before the immigration debate would explode in Arizona following the passage of a contentious new law that aims to identify, prosecute and deport illegal immigrants.

Even so, life did not turn out to be any easier for Jimenez

His girlfriend conceived a child when he was 16 years old, prompting him to drop out of Spring Valley High School as a junior. The two were quickly married, and he went straight to work logging long hours at two local gas stations.

It was also around this time that Jimenez first volunteered at Adonai Christian Church in Spring Valley. He would go on to be senior pastor there, one of his life's greatest callings.

Yet through it all, giving up on his education was a scar he could not erase from his consciousness.

"My parents always drove it into me that education is really important, especially in our situation," Jimenez said. "It was my mistake."

He would eventually find his way back into the classroom at his local community college — which is a path the majority of Latinos follow into higher education.

Once enrolled, however, the high hopes many Latinos carry with them are too often dashed by life's unexpected twists and turns.

Beyond the footnotes

Latinos represent about 17 percent of the nation's 6.6 million community college students. Nonresident aliens of unspecified ethnicities represent 1.5 percent.

As the Latino numbers swell, the ultimate success of these students — whether judged by degree completion or transfer rates — is proving to be one of the nation's biggest educational hurdles.

President Barack Obama's pledge that the United States will again have the world's highest proportion of college graduates by 2020 has only upped the stakes. By then, the Census Bureau predicts, Latinos will be 22 percent of the nation's college-age population — making low graduation rates a threat to the mission.

"Now's the time that we're looking at Latinos rather than just as a footnote, but we're looking at them as a central point to meeting our nation's goals," said **Deborah Santiago**, vice president for policy and research at Excelencia in Education. "It was a perfect opportunity to say, 'You can't meet this goal without Latinos.' "

Casting a spotlight on Latinos in community colleges reveals a world of determination despite all odds — though too often the odds can overpower even the most resolute of the bunch.

Studies have found Latinos enroll in community colleges at a disproportionately high rate compared to other ethnic groups.

In 2008, roughly 50 percent of all Latinos in higher education were enrolled in a community college compared with 36 percent of blacks and 32 percent of whites, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

Latinos who start at two-year institutions, however, are twice as likely to drop out as compared to those who start at four-year institutions, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

After six years, nearly half of those who started at two-year institutions during the 1995-96 academic year had quit without a degree and were no longer enrolled. Only 35 percent earned a degree.

As for the more coveted bachelor's degree, only 5 percent of Latinos who started at two-year institutions had attained a bachelor's degree six years later. That's compared with 11 percent of white students and 44 percent of Latinos who started at four-year colleges.

The Community College Consortium for Immigrant Education, founded in 2008 by Westchester Community College and now consisting of about 20 organizations nationwide, has been working to identify practices that could boost Latino achievement.

Some of the most beneficial programs revolve around supporting Latinos in a wide range of services outside of the classroom.

"The obstacles are not always academic. They are issues — like all of our community college students — of family, of funding, of transportation, of other obligations such as work or taking care of family members," said Teresita B. Wisell, executive director. "It might take them longer and their stories are sometimes discomfoting and yet compelling, but it's because of that can-do spirit that they really very often succeed."

Money matters

Ultimately, a degree disparity has lasting implications for both the individual and society.

Those with a bachelor's degree earned an average of \$58,600 in 2008 compared with \$31,280 for those with only a high-school diploma, according to the Census Bureau.

Studies have also found college graduates enjoy better health, are more likely to engage in volunteer work, donate blood more frequently and produce children with higher cognitive skills.

The earning power of a college degree is not what drove Jimenez to go back to school, though.

He had already been earning a decent living as senior pastor of Adonai Christian Church, where he continues to thrive as the leader of the Hispanic ministry.

What focused his energies on education was an unrelenting feeling that he had failed to fulfill his potential.

"I felt terrible," Jimenez said. "I tell young people in my church to go to school. I want to set the example."

Before he could even think about going to college, however, Jimenez needed to earn a General Educational Development diploma, which he did at the age of 19.

Yet because he was still undocumented, he was ineligible for any federal or state financial aid. College would have to wait.

While community colleges are one of the nation's most affordable options for higher education — with average annual tuition and fees costing roughly \$2,500 compared to \$7,000 for public four-year colleges and \$26,270 for private four-year institutions — paying such an expense is still one of the biggest barriers for Latinos.

Undocumented students especially struggle to make ends meet, considering they do not qualify for financial assistance other than private scholarships or loans.

A 1982 U.S. Supreme Court decision entitles illegal immigrants to a free education from kindergarten through high school. There are still wide disparities regarding what to do with the estimated 65,000 undocumented students who graduate each year from high school, though.

New York is one of only 10 states that allow undocumented students to pay resident tuition — meaning the same amount any citizen would pay — so long as they meet certain requirements.

The state law, enacted under former Gov. George Pataki in 2002, circumvents a federal law in part by basing eligibility on the attainment of a state high school diploma or GED equivalent .

Court challenges abound and controversy likely will continue until the U.S. Supreme Court weighs in with a decision.

Immigration advocates have praised the legislation for opening doors to those who are seeking a better life, especially students who arrived in the United States as youngsters and view it as their only home.

Opponents, however, have fought the idea in courts nationwide, arguing that such a benefit not only hurts American citizens, but also encourages illegal immigration.

"It would be stupid to think they (illegal immigrants) would not move for this," said William Gheen, director of Americans for Legal Immigration. "They literally have American citizens paying tax money to replace their own children in the limited seats in college with illegal alien adults."

Pursuing a dream

Many in and around community colleges have also been debating a legislative proposal known as the Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors Act, better known as the DREAM Act.

The proposal would provide a conditional path to citizenship for immigrants who entered the United States before the age of 16. Among other requirements, these individuals would also have to complete a college degree or two years of military service to qualify.

The idea has been floated since 2001 and remains controversial, though Obama and some of his top advisers are among those who have offered their endorsement.

"You'll find a champion of the DREAM Act in me," said Martha J. Kanter, undersecretary for the U.S. Department of Education, speaking to a group of journalists and community college experts in Manhattan last year. "Americans should do the right thing."

Mention the DREAM Act to students in El Club Hispano Americano at Westchester Community College, and many will tell you it gives them hope.

El Club Hispano represents the vast diversity within the Latino community itself, with students from Mexico, Guatemala, Colombia and Ecuador among those coming together each week.

The leader of this group is a 23-year-old Salvadoran immigrant who goes by the nickname "Albey."

Cautious yet confident, he was born to farmers and remembers hiding from the bloodshed of his country's violent civil war. He does not want to return to such a life, so he fills his hours working as a cook to support his studies in mechanical engineering. Being deported is one of his biggest fears.

"But at the same time I think like, if some law comes and they approve it or whatever, to give us documents, then I'll be OK because I'm educating myself," Albey said. "Once I set up a goal, I go for it. I never let it die."

What to do about the country's 13 million illegal immigrants has always been a divisive topic, and it likely will grow even more polarizing as the country debates what steps it should take next.

The new Arizona law makes it a crime not to carry immigration documents and gives police broad powers to detain anyone suspected of being in the country illegally. Obama has criticized the bill as irresponsible, and the Justice Department is weighing a court challenge.

Jimenez looks back at his childhood in Arizona and knows something needs to be done — he's just not sure what.

"It's an issue that has to be looked at both ways," he said.

He was only able to make the leap into higher education when he gained legal status as a resident alien at the age of 20, thereby qualifying him for financial assistance such as federal Pell Grants, state aid and other scholarships.

He turned to Rockland Community College soon afterward, ready to finally prove himself in the classroom.

"Me applying to any (other) college at that time, I would have been rejected right away," Jimenez said. "I didn't have anything to show for it other than a GED, but I guess the experience and the desire was there."

Now graduation is just weeks away — but that doesn't mean it's the end of the road.

Jimenez has been accepted as a transfer student at Columbia University, where he plans to study neurology with a concentration in Middle Eastern studies in the fall.

Annual tuition at this Ivy League school is upward of \$40,000. He has been guaranteed a scholarship for at least \$8,000, leaving the bulk of his tuition to be paid through student loans. He also will be commuting to the city from Spring Valley to save money on room and board.

The plan is to go straight to medical school once he's done.

“As soon as I got residency it was like my world changed. When you don’t have papers, the opportunities are there but you can’t take advantage of them,” said Jimenez, who also hopes to apply for citizenship within the next year and a half. “I’m definitely not going to stop this time.”