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California Dream Act Offers Path to College for Undocumented Students

The new law, which goes into effect in 2013, waives community college fees for low-income students.

By [JOANNE JACOBS](#)

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When the California Dream Act passed in October 2011, making undocumented students eligible for state college aid, [Downtown College Prep's 540 Club](#) celebrated. The San Jose, Calif., charter school's club is named for an earlier state law, AB 540, that made undocumented students eligible for [in-state tuition](#).

Nearly all of DCP's "540 students" enroll in community college, work part time, and live at home to keep costs down. The new law waives community college fees for low-income students. When 540 students transfer, often to [San Jose State University](#), they'll be able to apply for Cal Grants to pay tuition.

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But it's not just about money, says Jennifer Andaluz, the school's executive director. Students see the new law as a "symbolic win," perhaps a step toward a federal law that would include a path to citizenship. And even without that, most believe they'll find a way to legalize some day, somehow, Andaluz says. "They're very optimistic, very hopeful, very resilient."

Undocumented college graduates find jobs, too. "They're resourceful," says Andaluz.

Seventy-five percent of the state's Latino college students are enrolled in low-cost community colleges, [Excelencia in Education](#) estimates. The 540 students are even more likely to choose a community college.

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When the California Dream Act goes into effect in 2013, about 2,500 undocumented college students will qualify for waivers, Cal Grants and other aid at a cost of \$59.1 million, predicts the Department of Finance. That includes \$15 million in community college fee waivers.

That's a small price to pay, argue advocates for expanded college access.

California's economy will need a million more college graduates by 2025, says Audrey Dow, community affairs director of [The Campaign for College Opportunity](#).

However, the state's community colleges already are struggling to educate more students with less money. Community college fees rose from \$26 per unit to \$36 per unit in fall 2011 and will go to \$46 a unit in May 2012 to partially offset a \$100 million midyear cut in state funding. By summer 2012, New Mexico's community colleges will pass California as the most affordable in the nation.

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California Assemblyman Tim Donnelly (R-San Bernardino) is [leading a campaign to repeal](#) the "California Nightmare Act" before it can go into effect. Volunteers hope to collect more than 500,00 signatures by the first week in January to get a repeal initiative on the November 2012 ballot.

If voters decide the issue, the dream could die: In a recent USC Dornsife/Los Angeles Times survey, 55 percent of voters said they oppose state aid for undocumented students. While 79 percent of Latinos supported the Dream Act, only 30 percent of whites agreed.

Nationwide, [Latino college enrollment is surging](#), with most of the growth at community colleges, reports the Pew Hispanic Center. Forty-six percent of Latino college students are enrolled in a community college, much higher than the rate for other ethnic and racial groups.

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However, Latino graduation rates are low. In California, 47 percent of first-time, full-time white college students complete degrees compared to only 35 percent of Latinos, reports Excelencia in Education.

It's not clear how many undocumented students earn a college degree.

Only 5 percent to 10 percent of undocumented high school graduates [enroll in college](#), estimates the Immigration Policy Center. Those who do are highly motivated.

"They hunger for education in a way that, sadly, some students in our country do not," says Isa Adney, a student life coordinator at [Seminole State College](#) in Florida.

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who are citizens or legal residents, says Andaluz. "Their attitude seems to be: 'My parents sacrificed so much for me. I can't squander my opportunities. The golden gates are going to open and I need to be ready.'"

Joanne Jacobs writes *Community College Spotlight* for *The Hechinger Report*, an independent nonprofit education news site. Jacobs also [blogs about K-12 education](#) and is the author of *Our School: The Inspiring Story of Two Teachers, One Big Idea and the Charter School That Beat the Odds*.

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