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A tough climb to higher ed

Immigrant status makes financing college difficult

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He spoke yesterday of hard work leading to opportunity, a principle that has helped him become his high school's valedictorian. Yet Carlos knows that all his hard work will not change his status as an undocumented immigrant.

This week, countless talented undocumented immigrant students will graduate from city high schools, their academic futures in doubt.

Undocumented immigrants are not eligible for financial aid such as student loans or Pell grants. And most can't afford to pay the higher out-of-state tuition fees charged to foreign students, making it virtually impossible for the vast majority of them to attend most colleges and universities.

"Society makes you feel like you're doing something really bad, and that makes you hurt inside," said 18-year-old Carlos, whose identity is being withheld by the Daily News. "I feel somewhat segregated because many opportunities have already been

shattered for me."

Carlos and his 3.9 grade-point average will enroll this fall at Brooklyn College. His peers and teachers had encouraged him to apply to universities like Princeton and Columbia, but Carlos knew that wasn't possible.

The City University of New York has a policy of not asking students about their immigration status. So all applicants have to do is prove that they have lived in New York for at least a year, making them eligible for in-state tuition of \$3,200 each academic year.

Carlos also will qualify for the city's \$1,450 merit scholarship that rewards incoming CUNY students who have received a B average or higher.

He said his father, a warehouse worker, has promised to come up with the rest.

Another student, Lorena, 18, has spent hours in libraries searching the Internet and books for scholarships that don't require citizenship or permanent U.S. residency. She said she found a scholarship for obese students, but even that one required U.S. citizenship.

"There weren't that many for kids like me," said Lorena, who came here six years ago with her mother from Santa Cruz, Bolivia, on a tourist visa.

"It's incredibly demoralizing," said Burt Rosenberg, an assistant principal at International High School in Long Island City, Queens. "You see their eyes well up with tears when you ask them about their college plans. They've worked hard and they ask themselves, 'Why am I not

getting the same opportunities?'"

End of the road

By one estimate, as many as 75,000 undocumented students leave secondary school each year nationwide. Board of Education officials said they do not keep statistics on undocumented students, but their presence is clearly felt.

And the barriers to college for these students often become crystal clear as graduation nears.

"I have known many college advisers who have aggressively tried to connect the kids with legal aid to try to straighten out their status, try to expedite their legal situation so they can get to school by the fall," said Judith Tario, the board's deputy executive director of student support services.

From elementary to high school, the Supreme Court has upheld that undocumented immigrant children are entitled to public education. But once they leave secondary school, they are

on their own. Most retreat into the underground world inhabited by their parents, said Veronica Thronson, a lawyer at the New York Immigration Coalition.

For many students in this predicament, school is perceived as a refuge from Immigration and Naturalization Service enforcement officers, who raid the factories where their parents work.

No one can recall a time when INS officials would target school or college-bound kids. Karen Kraushaar, an INS spokeswoman, said the agency's focus is removing immigrants who have committed crimes. She said district directors decide how to enforce immigration laws.

New York's INS district spokesman, Mark Thorn, did not return calls seeking comment.

Some support in Congress

However, immigrant advocates are encouraged by two bills introduced in Congress this month by Republican and Democratic members that would do away with parts of the 1996 immigration reform laws that barred states from offering in-state tuition fees and certain federal financial aid funds. Most importantly, the bills also would make it easier for college students under 21 to adjust their immigration status.

The lawmakers, Reps. Chris Cannon (R-Utah) and Luis Guterrez (D-Ill.) argue that parents, not the children, made a decision to come here illegally.

"We need to cultivate the minds of the best and the brightest," said Rep. Major Owens (D-Brooklyn), a co-sponsor of Gutierrez's bill.

Mark Krikorian, executive director of the conservative Center for Immigration Studies, opposes any form of amnesty. "It's true that it is their parents' fault for knowingly bringing them here into this situation, but it's not our society's fault," he said.

His status: Valedictorian

Carlos doesn't like to talk about his immigration status. He would rather talk about the advanced-placement courses he has taken, or about the latest book he's reading: "Bodega Dreams," by Ernesto Quiñonez.

When he gave his valedictory speech yesterday, he reflected on the fun-filled years he and his classmates are leaving behind and the promise before them.

"If you work hard, you will have opportunities in life," said Carlos, who was 13 when he crossed into the U.S. from Mexico with the help of a smuggler hired by his parents.

"I see my parents when they get home from work, and they look tired and stuff," said the aspiring mathematician. "I know I can do better. I'm doing it to help them."



LOST OPPORTUNITIES Carlos is city high school valedictorian who would have his pick of universities if he were not an undocumented immigrant. He'll enroll at Brooklyn College because of its policy of not asking students about their immigration status.

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