

INCREASED MOMENTUM AT THE STATE LEVEL TO HELP DREAMERS PAY FOR COLLEGE: SPOTLIGHT ON FLORIDA

By Jill Casner-Lotto, Director, Community College Consortium for Immigrant Education

While immigration reform is at a standstill in Congress, more and more states are taking steps to help undocumented students continue and, in some cases, finance their college education. This past year in-state tuition for undocumented students became a reality in four additional states—Colorado, Minnesota, New Jersey, and Oregon—which passed tuition equity legislation, bringing the current total to **16 states** that have tuition equity laws in place, according to the **National Immigration Law Center (NILC)**. And on February 26th, Washington became the sixth state to offer college financial aid to undocumented students.

Additionally, in 2013, several state university systems established policies through their Board of Regents or Board of Governors to offer in-state tuition for undocumented students, including University of Hawaii, University of Michigan, and Wayne State University in Michigan. Similar, but even broader based policy measures have been approved in past years by Rhode Island's Board of Governors (2011) and Kentucky's Council for Postsecondary Education (2003), which allow undocumented students access to in-state tuition at their states' public colleges and universities, including community colleges.



The majority of the country's unauthorized immigrants live in states that offer in-state tuition regardless of immigration status, according to NILC. While specific requirements vary from state to state, in general, students are eligible for in-state tuition if they have attended high school for a specified number of years, graduated from a public high school in the particular state, and show proof they are seeking to legalize their immigration status.

The Key Role of Community Colleges

The increase in tuition equity laws will likely lead to more immigrant students pursuing college opportunities. The **Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals** program, which grants eligible undocumented youth temporary relief from deportation and the potential ability to work legally in the U.S., has also encouraged immigrant students to further their education. Moreover, this summer marks the second anniversary of DACA, which means more students will be **renewing their DACA eligibility**. All of these factors heighten the need for colleges to keep their front-line personnel informed of changing federal/state policies and ways to support students and connect

them to needed financial and legal resources. CCCIE plays a critical role in **sharing best practices** among community colleges and currently partners with the United We Dream Network in co-sponsoring Educator Conferences at its member colleges as part of UWDN's **DEEP (Dream Educational Empowerment Program) initiative**.

Steep Financial Barriers

While in-state tuition rates have significantly increased undocumented students' ability to go to college, without further assistance through state aid or private scholarships, the effects of offering in-state tuition are limited. Unlike their U.S. born and documented foreign-born classmates, undocumented students are not eligible for any kind of federal financial aid, including Pell Grants, federal Work-Study and student loans. Currently, only about **5 to 10 percent** of undocumented young people who graduate from high school go on to college, compared with about **75 percent** of their classmates.

The new Washington state law, known as the Real Hope Act, expands the state's need grants for unauthorized immigrant students who meet the bill's requirements. The Senate proposal that passed allocates an **additional \$5 million** to cover the financial payments under the need-grant program. Currently, only five additional states—California, Texas, New Mexico, Illinois, and Minnesota—offer qualified undocumented students access to some form of state-based financial aid or scholarships. California, Texas, and New Mexico have passed similar publicly funded financial aid legislation as Washington, while legislation in Illinois and Minnesota establishes financial aid funded through private contributions.

Florida Dreamers, Advocates, and Legislators hopeful for in-state tuition in 2014

While several attempts to pass in-state tuition in Florida in the past decade have failed, Florida Dreamers, advocates, and several state legislators say this year could be different and are hopeful that a tuition equity bill could pass in 2014, citing **significant bipartisan support** for the legislation. The **Florida Immigrant Coalition** has launched a massive campaign for the bill's passage. The measure recently passed in the Florida House and is now being considered in Senate committees. Gaby Pacheco, an immigrant rights leader from Miami and co-founder of the **TheDream.US**, a new \$25 million national private fund that provides scholarships to assist

Victor Herrera-Ramirez, a sophomore at CCCIE member college **Palm Beach State College** studies mechanical engineering and computer science. Herrera-Ramirez came to this country from Mexico when he was a year old with his mother and graduated from a local high school. A scholarship from the **PBSC Davis Global Education Center (GEC)** has allowed Victor to take three classes this semester, but he could take more if he did not have to pay out-of-state tuition, which is \$358 per credit hour—more than three times the in-state rate. Founded in 2007 by a private donation from the late philanthropist Dr. Kathryn W. Davis, the GEC operates as a one-stop education and resource information center for immigrant students and offers college scholarships, acculturation workshops, and community referrals.

DACA-approved students, is hopeful the bill will reach the Senate floor and be approved, though it could be a tougher battle in the Senate. Governor Rick Scott, hoping to appeal to Latino voters, has **announced his support** for in-state tuition rates for undocumented students.

Pacheco, a Miami Dade College alumna, was among the four **Trail of Dream walkers** and played a critical role in bringing national attention to the plight of immigrants like her. **Miami Dade College** (MDC) offers a limited number of exemptions to DACA-approved students on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of the College. These exemptions contribute to the reduction of the tuition paid by the student. “[These students] are truly Florida residents, they’ve lived here all their lives,” Miami Dade College Registrar Dulce Beltran told the **ColorLines.com news blog**. “As Floridians,



PBSC student, Danyel del Valle, who moved to Palm Beach County from Venezuela with his family when he was three years old, dreams of becoming an attorney. Danyel also receives assistance from GEC. In an **interview** with local TV station WPTV news, Danyel said that paying in-state tuition rates would guarantee he could finish his studies at PBSC. “I think in the past two years the community has become more aware of this issue than in the past 10 years,” del Valle noted. Both he and Herrera-Ramirez emphasize they are eager to apply their education and skills in the workforce and that denying in-state tuition to Dreamers hurts the Florida economy.

we’ve already invested thousands of dollars into these students because we’ve already put them through high school,” Dulce noted. Additionally, MDC was one of 12 colleges selected to participate in the first round of awards under TheDream.US initiative. Of the 39 students across the nation who received scholarships in the first round, 22 are from MDC.

While state-level efforts have improved the educational prospects of undocumented students, DREAMers still face an uncertain future after graduation. In-state tuition and state financial aid policies are not a substitute for federal immigration reform legislation, which would provide legalization and a path to citizenship for the approximately 11 million undocumented immigrants in America today.

Other Suggested Resources/Tools:

- ❖ DACA Guide for Educators and School Support Staff
- ❖ Educators for Fair Consideration
- ❖ NILC Toolkit for Accessing Postsecondary Education
- ❖ National Conference of State Legislatures
- ❖ National Forum on Higher Education for the Public Good
- ❖ United We Dream-Tuition Equity Map