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From the Los Angeles Times

Undocumented students deserve aid too

College is out of reach financially, or at least a big stretch, for the children of illegals.

By Robert J. Birgeneau

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THE UTTER collapse of immigration reform in Congress was particularly devastating to one group: undocumented students. It leaves those who have excelled academically in our high schools, but who are not legal residents, ineligible for financial aid. Such a barrier means our students, through no fault of their own, have no path to success or citizenship.

I say "our students" because that is just who they are. We have invested in these children, providing them access to public education in our K-12 schools. Our teachers have encouraged them to learn, to compete and to succeed. It is only after these eager and ambitious young people gain college admission and apply for state or federal financial aid that we turn them away. We must not penalize these young people because their parents brought them here illegally.

The futures of high school graduates are being shaped now. These young people cannot wait out yet another attempt at broad immigration reform. Every year that passes, we deny another class of talented, keen young people hopeful futures for themselves and their families and relegate another generation to an existence on the margins of society.

It's a terrible waste of young talent — talent that this country desperately needs. Each year across the nation, 50,000 to 65,000 undocumented students graduate from high school after having spent at least five years in this country. Because California is home to an estimated 40% of the nation's undocumented students, that means 20,000 or so are in this state.

Statistics on how many go on to the state's public colleges and universities are more difficult to come by. Applications don't require proof of citizenship if a student graduated from a California high school. At UC Berkeley, we may have dozens of such students, but we hear about their struggles only anecdotally or when they apply for financial aid, only to learn that they do not qualify.

Undergraduates who are California residents will pay as much as \$25,000 for fees, room and board and books and supplies for the coming school year at Berkeley. It is no surprise that 70% of them rely on state and federal financial aid. But federal law prohibits making these same grants and loans available to undocumented students. They cannot even be hired for campus jobs.

How do they manage? Many are forced out of school for a semester or longer. They work multiple low-paying jobs hoping to save enough to re-enroll. It can take them many more years to graduate, yet they are determined. But other high-achieving California students never even consider attending the University of California or other universities. Even if they could pay for it, a college degree doesn't get them any closer to legal residency status, which they need to put their degrees to work.

To address the plight of undocumented students, Congress must ensure that the well-conceived and broadly supported federal DREAM (Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors) Act goes forward. The act, which provides access to financial aid and a thoughtfully mapped-out path to citizenship for qualified students, became entangled in the latest failed immigration bill. It is time to pass the act on its own merits.

Legislation that would create a California DREAM Act, offered by state Sen. Gil Cedillo (D-Los Angeles), is moving forward in the Legislature. It allows all qualified students to apply for institutional aid at the University of California, California State University and the California Community Colleges.

Financial aid and a path to citizenship is a sound and humane investment. If we provide up-front loans and grants to talented students seeking to escape generations of poverty, society will be paid back many times over. With higher education, they will be able to raise their standard of living as they become taxpaying citizens. We must seize the opportunity to adopt these well-designed state and national policies that will be good for everyone — our students, their families, our state and nation.

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