

California Dream Act: 20,000 illegal immigrant students apply for state financial aid for the first time

By Katy Murphy Oakland Tribune San Jose Mercury News

Posted: Fri Mar 08 08:45:09 MST 2013

MercuryNews.com

More than 20,000 college-bound students are seeking state financial aid for the first time under California's new Dream Act laws that allow them to get the help despite their immigration status.

While far from a complete picture, that number is the best indicator yet of how many students hope to benefit from a pair of laws that could radically change the college experience for a generation of students whose parents brought them to the U.S. illegally when they were young -- the same group that has taken center stage in the national immigration reform debate.

"For many of them, it's a game-changer," said Meng So, who coordinates UC Berkeley's months-old Undocumented Student Program.

As college-bound high school graduates await word of their state financial aid -- Cal Grants -- other kinds of help have begun to flow for students already enrolled in public colleges and universities.

In January, UC Berkeley freshman Jesus Lopez was one of many college students who under the same Dream Act began to receive campus grants or fee waivers based on need -- help previously limited to legal residents.

The aid made a big difference in his studies: This semester, the business major from San Jose moved from a crowded apartment 1 1/2 miles from his classes to within walking distance. He joined clubs, signed up to volunteer and stays up late studying in Moffitt Library.

"Now I pretty much do the stuff a regular student does, because in a way, I am a regular student," said Lopez, whose family moved from Mexico to the United States when he was 7.

California was one of the first states to offer in-state tuition to illegal immigrants who attended one of its high schools. Now, roughly a dozen do so. Only two other states -- Texas and New Mexico -- give financial aid to this group of students, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. Oklahoma passed a similar law but reversed it.

Opponents, led by Assemblyman Tim Donnelly, R-Hesperia, tried to repeal the California Dream Act last year, arguing the state can't afford to support its legal residents, let alone those who entered illegally. The campaign didn't gather enough signatures to qualify for the ballot.

It will cost the state about \$65 million a year by 2016-17 to extend the benefits to illegal immigrants and those granted temporary legality under the federal Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, the nonpartisan Legislative Analyst's Office predicts. The estimate does not include campus aid administered by CSU and UC, grants funded mainly through tuition.

Thousands of college students could be already benefiting from campus grants and waivers.

For example, San Jose State has given grants this term to 83 students because of the state's Dream Act, CSU East Bay has awarded 40 and De Anza College in Cupertino waived fees for 139 students.

In addition, the California Student Aid Commission expects later this year to award Cal Grants to about 6,000 students through the state Dream Act -- about one-third of those who submitted a complete application.

The commission expects to award \$19.5 million in Cal Grants this year to the newly eligible Dream Act students, about 1.1 percent of the \$1.7 billion total. The inclusion of illegal residents hasn't made it harder for legal residents to get tuition help, as the Cal Grant is given to anyone who qualifies, and the state budgeted for the grants expected this year.

The number of students receiving campus grants under the Dream Act is so small that the effect on resident students is negligible, said Rhonda Johnson, CSU East Bay's financial aid director. "It would be really hard for a student to argue that 'I would have gotten it had you not given it to those Dream Act students,'" she said.

Johnson said she looks forward to the university's Welcome Day this spring. Until now, when students told her about their legal status and asked about financial aid, she had to turn them away.

"It's very difficult to see the disappointment on a student's face when I have to say, 'I'm sorry, unfortunately you don't qualify,'" she said. "And so now I can say, 'You do.'"

Follow Katy Murphy at [Twitter.com/katymurphy](https://twitter.com/katymurphy).