

Illegal Immigrants Get College Scholarships

The New York Times

March 9, 2012 Friday, Late Edition - Final

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Section: Section A; Column 0; Metropolitan Desk; Pg. 26

Length: 667 words

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Body

Among all the numbers that populate Nataly Lopez's life -- including phone digits, addresses, pass codes and friends' ages -- there is one that she never forgets: the cost of a semester's tuition at Baruch College, where she is a sophomore.

Ms. Lopez, 21, is an illegal immigrant from Ecuador and has struggled to make ends meet, working several jobs to be able to pay for school.

"Two thousand eight hundred and five," she said. "I know that number because I have to reach it to get to the next semester."

State proposals that would make government financial aid available for illegal immigrants like Ms. Lopez are pending in Albany. Frustrated with the pace of federal and state legislative action, advocacy groups, with the support of New York City officials, have developed a stopgap solution -- for a small number of needy students, at least.

On Thursday, the groups announced the recipients of a new college scholarship specifically for illegal immigrants, the first such program in the state, they said.

The program is financed by foundations and private donors, not public sources. But it has received crucial financing and support from the Fund for Public Advocacy, a nonprofit arm of the office of the city's public advocate, Bill de Blasio, a likely candidate for mayor in 2013.

"We all have to make up for the madness of our national policies," Mr. de Blasio, a Democrat, said at a news conference to introduce the 10 recipients, including Ms. Lopez. "As an American and the grandson of immigrants, I'm offended we even have to be standing here having this discussion."

The first round of scholarships, called Dream Fellowships, was open only to undergraduates in the City University of New York system. The program allocates \$2,000 toward a semester's tuition per recipient. It also places the students in a leadership-development program and provides them with internships at immigrant-advocacy organizations across the city.

Last year, the California Legislature passed a bill allowing illegal immigrant students access to state financial aid. In the absence of similar legislation in other states, advocates have created private scholarships specifically intended for illegal immigrants, though they remain rare.

More than 100 students applied for the fellowships, which are coordinated by the New York Immigration Coalition and receive additional financing from the Korean American Community Foundation, as well as small contributions by several labor unions.

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The initial group of fellows immigrated from East and South Asia and Central and South America. In the news conference, they said that the internships were an opportunity to broaden their education, and that the money was a much-needed windfall to help allay tuition.

They spoke of their ambitions to pursue advanced degrees and become highly trained professionals -- in the United States. But they also described the stresses of living in legal shadows, juggling jobs and classes while pressing forward toward an uncertain future.

Yohan Garcia, 25, said he dropped out of high school in Mexico and came to the United States nine years ago. While holding various low-wage jobs, including washing dishes, he learned English and enrolled at the Borough of Manhattan Community **College**. He now attends Hunter **College** and hopes to become a human rights lawyer or senator.

"I am a dreamer," he declared.

Ms. Lopez, who immigrated at age 4, said she dropped out of **college** in 2009 when she could no longer pay for her classes. As the gravity of her legal situation dawned on her -- "the realization that I can't do anything in this country," Ms. Lopez said -- she pitched headlong into depression.

It took her a year to return to **college**. Now in the last semester of her sophomore year and pursuing a major in the psychology of language, she works full time as a waitress and is also a social media consultant for a Web design company and an English tutor.

"Our stories represent 65,000 students who are in the same position," she said.

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Graphic

PHOTO: Nataly Lopez, at lectern, and nine other City University of New York students received financial aid packages Thursday. **Illegal immigrants** do not have access to government aid under state law. (PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL APPLETON FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES)

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Subject: CITY GOVERNMENT (90%); IMMIGRATION (89%); **ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS** (89%); **SCHOLARSHIPS & GRANTS** (89%); APPRENTICESHIPS & INTERNSHIPS (89%); STUDENT FINANCIAL AID (89%); STUDENTS & STUDENT LIFE (89%); TUITION FEES (89%); CITIES (88%); LEGISLATION (78%); IMMIGRATION OF MINORS (76%); PUBLIC POLICY (74%); MUNICIPAL FINANCE (74%); NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS (74%); LEGISLATIVE BODIES (74%); INTERNATIONAL ASSISTANCE (74%); US STATE GOVERNMENT (74%); ASSOCIATIONS & ORGANIZATIONS (73%); PRESS CONFERENCES (72%); FOUNDATIONS (72%); ASIAN AMERICANS (71%); MAYORS (69%); POLITICAL CANDIDATES (67%); LABOR UNIONS (50%); GRANDCHILDREN (50%)

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Person: BILL DE BLASIO (79%)

Geographic: NEW YORK, NY, USA (79%); ALBANY, NY, USA (72%); NEW YORK, USA (93%); CALIFORNIA, USA (79%); UNITED STATES (93%); ECUADOR (79%); SOUTH AMERICA (79%); SOUTHERN ASIA (65%)

Load-Date: March 9, 2012

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