

*College an elusive goal for illegal immigrants;*  
*Policies limit access - and rightly so, critics say.*  
*. . . is often out of their reach*  
*Illegal immigrants find the college dream . . .*

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## **Body**

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Carlos de los Santos loves being an auto mechanic. Fussing with a carburetor, changing a clutch, installing brakes - it all feels good, he says with a smile.

In the same breath, however, emerges a reminder that all is neither so simple nor sweet for the 21-year-old Norristown man. He drops his head, stares at scrubbed-white hands and fingernails traced in grease, and longs for something out of reach: college.

"Sometimes," he said, "what I do gets a little frustrating."

De los Santos is the son of illegal immigrants. In Pennsylvania and New Jersey, that means that he and many others like him aren't able to go to college - even though the U.S. Supreme Court gives them the right to a high school cap and gown.

Illegal immigrant populations spiked in Pennsylvania, New Jersey and other states during the 1990s economic boom, making this educational divide - and whether states should tackle it - a volatile issue.

"College is almost universal now," said Richard Fry, a former immigration specialist with the U.S. Labor Department who is senior research associate at the Pew Hispanic Center. "In a major-league way, we're denying opportunity to these youth. Their economic fortunes, their social fortunes, will be severely diminished."

To others, the answer is not further accommodation. Why, they ask, should colleges even admit illegal immigrants, let alone provide tuition discounts?

"The solution is to enforce immigration laws - not to reward lawbreaking," said Steven A. Camarota, research director at the Center for Immigration Studies in Washington. "If we have laws and then ignore them, that is far more corrosive than anything else I can think of to liberal democracy, to rule of the people, to a functioning society."

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California, Texas, New York and Utah have changed state laws to permit children of illegal immigrants to enroll in public colleges and qualify for in-state tuition rates.

In Pennsylvania, policymakers are not discussing the issue. And a New Jersey bill that would make tuition discounts possible has been overridden by budget woes and post-Sept. 11 anti-immigrant sentiment.

Elsewhere, political skirmishes have broken out - most notably in Virginia, where a clash between a community college and the state's attorney general led to a law denying tuition breaks to illegal immigrants.

As lawmakers haggle, thousands such as de los Santos remain in limbo. Brought here as children, they say, they are stuck in marginal jobs with no future.

"What we're pretty much asking," de los Santos said in fluent English, "is just to be equal to the rest of the people."

Nationally, there are more than seven million illegal immigrants, including 221,000 in New Jersey and 49,000 in Pennsylvania, according to a report issued earlier this year by the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service. Seven out of 10 are from Mexico, the largest foreign-born group in the Philadelphia area, according to an analysis by Camarota of a March 2002 Census survey.

It is difficult for foreign nationals to obtain U.S. residency without a relative, a willing employer or a sponsor. That is why many remain illegal residents.

In the absence of policies, many colleges and universities in New Jersey register illegal immigrants as international students, even if they lack student visas. Foreign student tuition is at least double the in-state rate.

That was a problem for Dyana, 23, the Peruvian daughter of a cosmetics saleswoman and a supermarket manager.

Dyana, who asked not to be identified by last name, entered the United States illegally at age 8 and settled in Paterson, N.J.

The aspiring interpreter said she had no trouble getting into Passaic County Community College. It did not question her claim that she was a foreign student. Her problem: tuition. A 15-credit semester costs her \$1,980, double the in-state rate.

Despite jobs at the mall and a computer parts factory, the former high school student council representative, yearbook editor, honors student and tennis team cocaptain stopped taking credits a year ago.

"You feel every single day, people get ahead of you and you're still in the same place," she said. "It's like having trained for years to get into a marathon, and then they won't give you a number."

For low-income students, community colleges are often the only affordable option. And just about any adult can enroll.

"It's not our nature to deny access to anyone," said Diane Bosak, executive director of the Pennsylvania Commission for Community Colleges.

But that was not de los Santos' experience.

He has lived in Norristown, home to a burgeoning Mexican population, since his early teens. His parents smuggled him into the United States from Mexico at age 7. He lawfully worked his way through Norristown Area High School. A 20-year-old U.S. Supreme Court ruling on a Texas case guarantees that right in the interest of social order.

But when the B student applied at Montgomery County Community College, he left the Social Security number blank; in the part asking immigrant status, he lied and said he was a legal United States resident.

An admissions counselor told him to return with proof.

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"I just never went back," de los Santos said.

In Pennsylvania, where higher education is decentralized, the 14 community colleges run admissions and tuition breaks as they see fit, Bosak said.

If Montgomery County Community College determines an applicant is undocumented, the student must sign a letter indicating illegal status and pay the foreign student rate, admissions head Joseph Rodriguez said.

For Pennsylvania's 14 state universities, the state policy is to deny tuition discounts to illegal immigrants.

Federal immigration laws in the late 1990s imposed the restriction, which states such as New York have overridden with new legislation, said Ken Marshall, spokesman for the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education. "If you are not a U.S. citizen and you do not have a visa, the assumption is that you are not a resident of Pennsylvania," he said. "You have to pay the out-of-state tuition."

That is \$10,946, compared with the in-state rate of \$4,378.

Though campus admissions policies vary, most state schools require proof of U.S. residency, Marshall said.

But verifying information is another story.

At Rutgers University, in New Jersey, the volume of applications makes it impossible to confirm all answers, said Mark Maben, a Rutgers spokesman.

"We are looking for things that seem unusual," he said. "When information is blank, that would flag it in some way."

Some students have become adept at working the system - providing taxpayer identification numbers instead of Social Security numbers.

A bill in New Jersey would allow illegal immigrants to pay in-state tuition at the state's three public universities, nine state colleges and 19 community colleges. They must have attended a New Jersey high school for at least three years and either graduated or received a GED there.

But the legislation has stalled since being introduced in June. Critics say passage could cost the state up to \$5 million a year.

Assemblywoman Nilsa Cruz-Perez, a Camden Democrat who cosponsored the measure, says taxes paid by illegal immigrants should count for something.

"These are kids that are raised here, in our communities, and they're not able to attain higher education," Cruz-Perez said. "This is not what this country is all about."

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## Graphic

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PHOTO;

Carlos de los Santos, the son of illegal immigrants, is an auto mechanic. He did not finish applying for college after being asked to show proof of his immigration status.

BOB WILLIAMS, Inquirer Suburban Staff

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