

Unlikely foes of Md. Dream Act

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Body

The 62-year-old Wheaton barber had earned a law degree in his native Thailand and waited eight years for a visa so he could move to the United States and begin a new life.

When he heard this year about the **Maryland Dream Act**, which would grant in-state college tuition discounts to illegal immigrants, he was outraged.

"I did the full legal process," Anuchit Washirapunya, who is deaf and cannot speak English, wrote on a notepad as he hunched in his barber's chair. "The illegal students have no right to work or stay here."

Until recently, **Maryland's** legal and political battle over in-state tuition has been seen as pitting young illegal immigrants against native residents. But in the past few months, a petition drive by opponents of the measure has attracted a small but growing number of legal immigrants, who say that they, too, are being cheated.

The issue of what to do about the estimated 11 million illegal immigrants in the United States has roiled Republican presidential debates. In recent years, it has spawned national movements that advocate a range of solutions, including forcing all illegal immigrants to return home and granting them all legal amnesty.

The **Dream Act**, which was passed by both houses of the **Maryland** legislature in April, was about to become law when an advocacy group called Help Save **Maryland**, working with Republican lawmakers, launched an online campaign to try to prevent it from being enacted. The drive garnered more than 100,000 electronic signatures, resulting in the suspension of the law until a statewide public referendum can be held next year.

One Marylander who clicked on the petition was Shakil Hamid, 44, an accountant in Gaithersburg who emigrated legally from Bangladesh in 1977. He is an enthusiastic member of Help Save **Maryland**, which opposes allowing illegal immigrants to work, drive or receive a variety of public benefits.

"These people are taking seats in college away from our kids," Hamid said. "Why should we reward their dishonest behavior?"

The issue upset him when he was a student at the University of **Maryland** in the 1980s, he said: "I have been looking for 25 years for someone to be on my side."

Such views are a minority among **Maryland's** immigrant population, which is predominantly Hispanic and of Central American origin. Many such families include both legal and illegal immigrants, depending on when and how they

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arrived and whether they found a way to apply for residency. Often, illegal immigrants arrived as children and grew up in the state. Their communities tend to judge them on grounds other than legal status and wish them success.

Jesus Alberto Martinez, 55, is an ophthalmologist and U.S. Navy veteran in Rockville who came from Colombia as a teenager, overstayed his tourist visa and eventually became a U.S. citizen. He is an impassioned supporter of the **Maryland Dream Act** and a plaintiff in a lawsuit, filed by immigrant advocacy groups including Casa de **Maryland**, challenging the petition drive that halted the law's enactment about four months ago.

"We need every immigrant kid in **Maryland** to be educated. If they go to college, they earn more, pay more taxes and become better citizens," Martinez said. "If promising high school students are denied the chance to continue, it is like cutting off their wings. If we punish kids to pay for the sins of their parents, we are only mortgaging our future as a competitive society."

The stalled measure would make illegal immigrants eligible for the lowest possible tuition fees at all community colleges and universities in **Maryland**, provided that they have graduated recently from high schools in the state and that their families have paid taxes for three years. Supporters say that foreign-born students with no hope beyond high school may drift into dead-end jobs, crime or addiction.

Ricardo Alfaro, 22, an immigrant from El Salvador, recently graduated from Montgomery College. His father, once a hospital administrator back home, works in a meat-packing plant. Alfaro, who received treatment for bone cancer after reaching the United States as a child, hopes to study medicine at the University of **Maryland** but says that his family cannot afford to pay full tuition and that his application for permanent residency is pending.

"I owe a lot to this country, which saved my life, and I want to become a doctor so I can give something back," said Alfaro, who is also an activist in immigrant student groups. "I am applying for scholarships, but I don't know what will happen. I am not asking for a privilege that I didn't earn," he said. "I am asking for a chance to give something back to this country."

Montgomery College, which has about 37,000 students from 170 countries, is at the epicenter of the tuition battle. Unlike other two-year county colleges, it offers all Montgomery County high school graduates the minimum tuition rate of about \$1,200 per semester, regardless of legal status. Out-of-state and visiting foreign students pay up to \$4,000. At the four-year state universities, tuition is much higher, and the difference between in-state and out-of-state rates is even greater.

Critics say that policies like Montgomery's drain state coffers and displace legal students from other states who could pay more, but officials at the college estimate that fewer than 1,000 of their students are in the United States illegally, and they are more concerned about reducing the rate of pre-graduation dropouts.

Legal immigrants and visiting foreign students at Montgomery, many of whom come from Asia and Africa, expressed a combination of sympathy and resentment toward illegal immigrants in their midst. Some said their determination should be rewarded; others said they should have to pay the same as those who come from other states and nations.

"Everyone wants to get an education, but you can't just come to this country illegally and think everything is free. You have to be patient and legalize yourself," said Josephine Beyam, 33, a nursing student. She arrived from the Philippines in 2008 as a full-fledged resident after waiting at home for four years, apart from her American husband, as the law required. Since enrolling, she said, she has been paying off her student loans every month.

"We have been through thick and thin," Beyam said of her reunited family. "This country is a blessing, and the government is very generous. If you are not born here, you have to start from the beginning, but I accept that, because you can still pursue your **dreams**."

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