

# **ELENA THE ENGINEER WILL MAKE A GREATER CONTRIBUTION TO THE ECONOMY AND THE TAX BASE THAN ELENA THE SALES CLERK A COLLEGE GRANT IS ACTUALLY AN INVESTMENT**

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## **Body**

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**ELENA** comes from the Philippines at the age of 12 as a legal immigrant, thanks to the sponsorship of an aunt. Her parents work hard but don't **make** much money. **Elena** does well in school and qualifies for San Jose State, where she hopes to study **engineering**.

If **Elena makes** it through **college**, she **will** be a more productive worker, probably a more informed citizen. She **will** pay a lot more **taxes** for the next 40 years.

**Elena** needs a **grant**, loan or work-study job. But she's turned down for federal **college** aid because her sponsoring aunt's assets and income, added to her parents' earnings, **make** her too "wealthy" to qualify.

That's not the way it works now, but if the welfare reform bills now in Congress aren't amended, many foreign-born students **will** be cut off from **college** aid.

Currently, sponsors guarantee immigrants **will** not become a "public charge." They don't guarantee that newcomers won't seek help in getting a good education. The welfare legislation radically expands the definition of "public charge."

In the House version of the bill, an immigrant family would be the financial responsibility of the sponsor, including education aid, until they become naturalized citizens.

As a practical matter, **Elena's** aunt isn't **willing** or able to send her brother's children through **college**.

The Senate version goes farther. Even as citizens, an immigrant family would be the sponsor's financial responsibility, and therefore ineligible for most federal aid, until they'd earned enough money to pay income **tax** for 10 years. Naturalized citizens no longer would have the same rights as native-born citizens.

If **college** aid is simply welfare, there's some logic in denying a handout to newcomers who haven't contributed to the country.

But **college** aid isn't welfare. It's an **investment**. The reason the federal government helps needy students get a **college** education is that it pays off for society as a whole.

According to the American Council on Education, a **college**-educated male earns \$12,000 more a year on average than a man with a high school degree; for female **college** graduates the differential is \$9,200 a year.

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That represents \$400,000 to \$500,000 in added productivity over a working life. By contrast, the largest grant for low-income students is \$2,340 a year. Elena the engineer will make a greater contribution to the economy and the tax base than Elena the sales clerk.

According to a draft report by the General Accounting Office, restricting college aid to legal immigrants would be devastating to California students and to California colleges.

Statewide, 120,000 legal immigrants receive nearly \$200 million in federal college aid. A third of low-income students who receive Pell grants, the major need-based program, are legal immigrants. It's estimated most of these students would be made ineligible.

Including loans and work-study programs, 75 percent of college aid comes from federal sources, the American Council on Education estimates.

Most students already are working part time to help pay for college. Most parents already are helping to the best of their ability. Most colleges are tapped out on scholarship money.

"I believe these students just wouldn't be able to attend school," says Jack Bradbury, associate director of financial aid at San Jose State, where 41 percent of Pell grants go to legal immigrants.

There's some logic in limiting welfare benefits to newcomers and in holding sponsors accountable for keeping new immigrants off the dole.

But college aid isn't welfare.

The idea of welfare reform is to discourage dependency. So why make it harder for immigrants to achieve independence?

College doesn't pay off for indifferent students, but it's the essential ladder of social mobility for capable, motivated young people, and who cares where they came from? What matters is where they are now and where they're going.

Elena's future is in America. America's future is in Elena's mind.

## Notes

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### COMMENTARY

Joanne Jacobs is a member of the Mercury News editorial board.

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