

What should we do with undocumented students?

Four years ago I helped a high school senior in a low-income school apply to college. He was a model student – head of student government, excellent grades, star on the football team, and an altar boy. He got accepted to every UC that he applied to and then I realized he had a problem – he was undocumented. His mother and father had jobs, but they were poor and needed the little money they had to help support the family.

Manuel had lived in Los Angeles for 16 of his 18 years. He had done everything that he had been told to do – he stayed out of trouble, worked hard in school, and had summer jobs. When I told him he couldn't get financial aid and he might not be able to go to college he said: "That's not fair. What are you going to do?"

American public policy is supposed to be based on fairness. The job of a child should be to study hard; the job of the rest of us should be to figure out how to create policies that enable students to go to college. Manuel didn't decide to come to the United States and he shouldn't be punished for being here.

According to the Pew Hispanic Center 1.5 million children of unauthorized immigrants live in the United States. 65,000 of them have lived in the country five years or longer and graduate from high school every year.

What do we want these young high school graduates to do?

Assembly Bill 540 allows individuals who have attended a California high school for 3 years or more to apply for in-state tuition – but they are not eligible for grants or loans. AB 540 is an emotional issue because some taxpayers don't want 'illegals' to get to pay in-state tuition. We spend approximately 100 million dollars a year on tuition waivers according to the California Legislative Office, so some question if AB 540 isn't one place we could save money.

The answer is yes. Out-of-state students who once lived in California account for roughly 85% of the funding for AB 540. So I might have attended high school in California in 1980, left the state and paid taxes in New York for the last 30 years, decided to come back to the Golden State and go to graduate school, and I get to pay in-state tuition. That's crazy. There is zero reason that California's taxpayers should subsidize out of state students.

But what about undocumented students like Manuel? The Public Policy Institute of California estimates a shortage of one million college-educated workers in our state by 2025. We need more college graduates to get our economy moving.

As a taxpayer, Manuel's question is a no-brainer. Am I better off if he went to college, got a degree, worked toward getting his citizenship, and got a job, or if he walked around the streets of Los Angeles looking for low-wage employment?

President Obama has rightly said that we need one million more people a year entering higher education if we are to remain competitive in a global economy; that means California needs about 100,000 more students a year entering our system. Congress has the “Dream Act” before it that would go a substantial way toward enabling undocumented youth like Manual to get grants or loans to go to college and work toward permanent residency status.

It’s fine to say that we must secure the borders – but that’s a different issue. We are making bad public policy when we deny students who are college-eligible the ability to go to college and instead condemn them to walking our streets trying to find dead-end jobs.

William G. Tierney is University Professor and Director of the Center for Higher Education Policy Analysis at the University of Southern California.