

By Dawn Anderson and Marty Blum

Is Higher Education Out of Reach

for Qualified Undocumented Students?

Maria*, born in El Salvador, arrived in the United States when she was seven, after a grueling journey. The difficulties of her illegal entry into the country is a story for another time. This is the story of Maria's efforts now, at age 18, to grasp the American dream of a college education.

Though she is from a low-income household and neither parent went to college, Maria completed rigorous college prep coursework, including numerous AP and honors courses, and knew how to apply to college thanks largely to the programs of Marin Education Fund, whose mission includes increasing college access for underserved communities. Accepted to the University of California at Santa Barbara, Maria began classes in September, thanks to an array of scholarships from private and public sources.

Those "public" sources cut to the heart of the matter. As a high school senior Maria obtained US citizenship. Because Maria is now a citizen, she is eligible for up to \$13,000 in federal and state grants, as well as scholarships from the University of California.

Now consider the case of Carolina*, who was born in Mexico and arrived in Marin County at age two. Carolina is a graduate of San Rafael High School, where she chose to participate in the Engineering Academy curriculum. Carolina is well-qualified for a four-year college, but because she is AB-540**—an arcane status that permits students in California, regardless of their residency, to pay in-state tuition fees but not receive federal or state aid—her only option is to live at home and attend the local junior college. Even that is touch and go, because her financial aid award package is a \$5,000 private scholarship. The likelihood of Carolina actually transferring schools and finishing a four-year degree is very low, based on statistics from similar populations.

Two girls, the same age, personal history more similar than not, yet one will probably become a college graduate and the other will not. Both consider our country their home and intend to stay and raise families here. Due to her AB-540 status, Carolina, if she cannot overcome the crushing financial obstacles to a college degree, will be robbed of the opportunity to fulfill her dreams, while Maria will be granted the opportunity to reach her potential, pass on to her children the cultural capital of how to become college-educated, and be part of the educated work force California needs.

Despite her desperate situation, Carolina is better off than students in many other states because California is one of the few states that allow students to pay in-state tuition at its public colleges and universities. Though eligible for in-state tuition, undocumented students are not eligible to apply for financial aid from the state of California or the federal government. This barrier alone makes the dream of going to college unobtainable for most.

Steadily growing, the population of undocumented immigrants has increased 40 percent over recent years. The undocumented popula-

tion has reached four percent of the total US population, or 12 million residents. It is estimated that about one in every six undocumented residents, or 1.8 million, is under age 18. Twenty-four percent of the total US undocumented population lives in California. (Passel 2005)

With so few resources currently available to undocumented students, more funding is clearly necessary for college to be viable for many students who are technically illegal or caught in the half-world of AB-540. Until meaningful legislative reform is enacted, it will be up to dedicated individuals and private organizations to bring college within reach for this growing segment of our country's population.

One such student, Daniel*, says, "I am glad someone is writing about undocumented students because I think there are a lot of things that need to be said. If I were able to give advice to representatives of colleges and universities, I would tell them to develop close relationships with undocumented students, become informed about their problems, and be willing to spend extra time to help them. I was able to push through and make it to college because I was lucky to have people around me who were accessible, aware of my problems and available to support me during the process." Daniel began his sophomore year at San Francisco State University in September.

At Marin Education Fund, we serve many students like Daniel, with some heartening successes. For now, the successes are still too few.

*Names have been changed to protect privacy.

**AB-540 requirements stipulate that a student must attend a California high school for three or more years; graduate from a California high school or its equivalent (GED); and file an affidavit with the state college or university stating that he/she will apply for legal residency as soon as he/she is able to do so.



DAWN ANDERSON is the director of programs and **MARTY BLUM** is the director of development at Marin Education Fund (CA). Marin Education Fund has been recognized as a national model for its work in assisting low-income and first-generation college students. Since its founding in 1981, Marin Education Fund has distributed over 30,000 scholarships totaling more than \$38 million to low-income students, regardless of their immigration status.

