

Cal creates \$1M fund for undocumented students

Tuesday, December 11, 2012

BERKELEY, Calif. (KGO) -- A new million dollar scholarship fund established at UC Berkeley will offer financial aid to undocumented students. It's the first of its kind in the nation and it's not without controversy.

Uriel Rivera escaped from the violence of his hometown in Mexico when he was only 16. He landed in Los Angeles. A few years later, Rivera graduated with honors and was the only student at his high school to get into UC Berkeley.

"Everyone was happy except me because I was like, 'Yeah I got in, but how am I going to go,'" he said. "I won't be able to go. How am I going to pay for it?"

Because he is undocumented, Rivera is not eligible for any federal aid, including Pell grants. He's had to take on odd jobs to help pay for college. But that hasn't been enough.

"Many of us decided to drop out, to say we are no longer able to be students," Rivera said.

Rivera and others reached out to Chancellor Robert Birgeneau. Birgeneau decided to spearhead a scholarship program with the help of The Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund, which just donated \$1 million. About 200 undocumented students at Cal will receive a portion of the private money.

"It's an investment in them, their futures and what they will do for this state and this country over time," fund spokesperson Ira Hirschfield said.

Another \$300,000 was recently donated by Elise Haas to help create the Robert D. Haas Dreamers Resource Center, where undocumented students get the support services they need.

"It provides student access to a UC Berkeley education and tells the students and family, 'If you get into UC Berkeley, we are going to support you,'" program coordinator Meng So said.

In 2011, the California legislature passed a bill giving undocumented students access to state grants starting next fall. AB 131 has always been controversial.

Glynn Custred co-authored Proposition 209, which ended affirmative action preferences in the public sector.

"The state of California turns around and says we will ignore the federal law and the federal government doesn't seem to do anything about it," Custred said.

"Some people feel that if anyone didn't go through the process that they don't belong here, that's a political view and I can't do anything about that; these are extraordinary, talented people and furthermore in the current era with all of the challenges we have in California, we cannot afford to waste this kind of talent," Birgeneau said.

Ju Hong, an undocumented student from South Korea, is taking that to heart.

"Education is the only way to help my family and help myself and to contribute to our society," Hong said.

About 200 students will benefit from the scholarship. It will cover only a portion of their fees, about \$5,000.

Other universities like Texas and Michigan like what they see at Berkeley. They too want to start a similar scholarship program.

<http://abclocal.go.com/kgo/story?section=news/education&id=8916013>