

# Young illegal immigrants get chance to stay, but challenges complicate path to college degree

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MIAMI — Araceli Cortes had made up her mind: After being brought to the U.S. as a child, graduating from high school and attending some college in California, she was going to return to Mexico to pursue her dream of becoming a doctor.

She quit her job, bought an airline ticket and reserved a seat to take a medical school entrance exam.

Then, a week before her departure, President Barack Obama announced that young illegal immigrants like Cortes would be given the chance to remain in the United States and obtain a work visa. Cortes canceled her ticket and decided to stay.

This week, she and thousands of other immigrants began the application process. But she and many other student immigrants could face some tough obstacles.

“It’s not giving me much,” Cortes, 20, said. “It’s just a two-year permit.”

Obama was clear in announcing the order: This was not a path to citizenship, but rather an opportunity to avoid deportation and work.

For the students who are illegal immigrants and have graduated from college, the new policy means they will have the opportunity to work in their field of study, something they could only do as independent contractors or unpaid interns before.

For younger immigrants like Cortes — as many as 65,000 of whom are estimated to graduate from high school each year — some barriers to earning a college degree will be removed. The main hurdle, however, will remain cost. Federal loans and grants, the largest source of aid for college students, require students to have a green card or U.S. citizenship.

“There’s still going to be a challenge for these students to pursue higher education,” said Deborah Santiago, co-founder and vice president for policy and research of Excelencia in Education. “I don’t think the numbers are going to be high.”

Children who are illegal immigrants have been guaranteed the right to a K-12 education since the 1982 Plyler v. Doe Supreme Court decision.

A growing number of those students are now entering adolescence and early adulthood. They speak English, are part of after-school clubs and sports, and have the same aspirations to attend

college as their peers. Yet around the age of 16, they stop having the same opportunities. When most teens get a driver's license, a first job and start thinking about college, illegal immigrant students start to become aware of their status.

“They stay stuck while their friends are moving forward,” said Roberto Gonzales, a sociologist at the University of Chicago. “And that has tremendous implications on their own ability to achieve any upward mobility, on issues of self-esteem and on emotional and mental well-being.”

The Plyler v. Doe ruling did not address higher education. Rather, individual states and colleges have set their own policies on whether to allow illegal immigrants to attend.

Among illegal immigrants who are high school graduates between the ages of 18 to 24, 49 percent are in or have attended some college, compared with 76 percent of legal immigrants and 71 percent of U.S.-born residents, according to a Pew Hispanic Center study of 2008 census data.

Jane Slater, who teaches English as a second language at a high school in Redwood City, Calif., said fewer than half of the students who are illegal immigrants at her school go to college.

“There's that sort of hopeless feeling of ‘Why go?’” she said.

The price of tuition and fees increased 439 percent between 1982 and 2007, while the median family income rose 147 percent, according to the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education. Parent and student loans, grants and scholarships help the average student pay about 55 percent of the cost, according to a report by Sallie Mae, the largest private lender to students.

Students with no legal status in the U.S. have access to just a slice of those resources. Selected private scholarships are often very competitive because of the limited number available. In a few states, they also qualify for state aid. But in most, they end up having to pay significantly higher tuition. Only 12 states allow illegal immigrants to pay in-state rates.

The majority of those who do enroll attend community colleges but often can afford only one or two classes a semester, or may have to take breaks in order to work full time. That means it takes significantly longer for them to graduate.

Katharine Gin, co-founder and executive director for the Education for Fair Consideration, is optimistic more scholarships from corporations and other funders will become available.

“They were moved by their stories. They felt like they deserved things but said, ‘How can I justify putting money to these students when they cannot work in the end?’” Gin said. “I think that will change.”

Cortes took AP classes in high school and was accepted to every University of California school she applied to. And while California is one of the states that allow illegal immigrants to pay in-state tuition, she said it was still too expensive. A private school offered her a \$14,000 scholarship, but that would have covered only half the annual costs.

She decided to go to community college instead and found a full-time job as a cashier at a car wash to help pay. Like at many community colleges, the classes she needs to enroll in to study medicine — biology, chemistry — fill up quickly and to get in, she needs a higher credit standing. That means taking classes in other subjects, essentially paying for courses that will have little to do with her medical degree.

Frustrated, she started looking for other options. Her father, who lives in Mexico, helped her fill out the paperwork to apply for a medical school there, but because she canceled her plane ticket, she lost her seat for the exam and won't be able to take it again.

Cortes has read through dozens of news articles online and recorded Obama's speech on the White House lawn, watching it repeatedly and trying to figure out what to do.

"He was very specific in saying, Don't think the wrong way about this," she said. "This is nothing for residency or citizenship."

Cortes went to the Mexican Consulate, which put her in touch with an organization, Dream in Mexico, that helps students find educational opportunities in Mexico. She applied to El Tecnológico de Monterrey and is waiting for a reply.

If she gets accepted and is given a scholarship to cover her fees, she's leaning toward going, even though she applied to stay in this country.

Cortes figures she'll save time, money and could still end up practicing medicine one day in the United States.

"As much as I want to stay here and be with my family, I have to think of the future," she said. "I have to think what's best for me."

[http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/higher-education/young-illegal-immigrants-get-chance-to-stay-but-challenges-complicate-path-to-college-degree/2012/08/17/ec7e8962-e841-11e1-9739-eef99c5fb285\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/higher-education/young-illegal-immigrants-get-chance-to-stay-but-challenges-complicate-path-to-college-degree/2012/08/17/ec7e8962-e841-11e1-9739-eef99c5fb285_story.html)