New Book Exposes Undocumented Students’ Struggles

by Emily Wilson
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Undocumented University of California, Los Angeles students share their struggles to help advance the DREAM Act.

When Mario Escobar was getting a double major in Chicano studies and Spanish literature at the University of California, Los Angeles, money was so tight he often went to class hungry and wore clothes from Goodwill that didn’t quite fit. As an undocumented student, Escobar wasn’t eligible for financial aid or loans.

Escobar, who as a child fought in El Salvador’s brutal civil war where his father, grandmother and cousins were killed, is no stranger to hardship. He says getting an education was worth the sacrifices he made.

“My motto was, ‘I can lick the floor for the rest of my life, or I can lick it now,’” he says.

Escobar is no longer struggling like before. In 2007, Escobar received political asylum, and now he’s on a full scholarship at Arizona State University where he’s getting a Ph.D. in literature.

“Immigration Rights, Labor and Higher Education,” that produced the book.

Wong, who has been at the university for 18 years, says he and his colleagues noticed more undocumented students in their classes since the passage of AB 540. These students’ stories and their desire to get an education moved Wong. He partnered with a support group for undocumented students in their classes since the passage of AB 540. These students’ stories and their desire to get an education moved Wong. He partnered with a support group for undocumented students, IDEAS (Improving Dreams, Equality, Access and Success) that Escobar co-founded, to work on the book.

Matias Ramos, a leader in IDEAS whose story is in the book, says Underground Undergrads shows the undocumented students’ humanity and will help the DREAM Act to pass. The bill has never come up for a vote in Congress, but its Senate sponsor, Sen. Richard Durbin, D-Ill., intends to try again this spring.

The legislation would allow many undocumented students to adjust to conditional permanent resident status, which could make them eligible for in-state tuition. It would apply to young people who have lived in the United States for at least five years and earned a high school diploma or GED. They could eventually seek permanent residence if they complete at least two years in college or in the military.

“Our stories are crucial to define immigration policy,” Ramos says. “I think the book serves to highlight stories about goals and aspirations and families that can be multiplied by millions.”

Like Escobar, Ramos came to the United States when he was 13 years old. Ramos’ family wasn’t fleeing violence however, but the financial collapse of the Argentine economy, where his father lost his job as an accountant and his mother hers running a kindergarten. Ramos threw himself into school, but didn’t think he could afford a four-year college until he found out about AB 540, which meant he paid in-state tuition.

Paying the in-state tuition of about $8,000 (opposed to the international tuition of almost $30,000) with no financial aid was still a struggle for Ramos, as it is for Stephanie Solis, an editor of Underground Undergrads. An aspiring writer, she takes time off between quarters to work and save money at jobs including housecleaning, making cardboard boxes and tutoring.

Solis, whose family moved to California from the Philippines when she was 3 years old, grew up with almost no memories of her native country and blissfully unaware she didn’t have a paper that made her a legal resident.

“My 18th birthday was coming up so I was thinking I should get a driver’s license and register to vote,” Solis says. “Eventually after weeks of hearing ‘Oh, not now, we have to find your
papers,’ and a lot of dodging the question, my mom sat me down and said, ‘You can’t do this.’”

Solís was so upset she moved out.

“It was this huge sense of betrayal,” she says. “Like finding out you were adopted or have a secret twin or something.”

To feel she was getting on with her life, Solís decided to apply to college anyway, even though she didn’t think it was possible to go. She got accepted to UCLA.

“I thought I would just frame it and look at it as a reminder of what could have been,” she says of her acceptance letter.

But Solís met other undocumented students who were earning their degrees and saw it was possible for her to do the same. Her experience has convinced her how important it is to speak out.

When she first found out about her status, Solís thought she just needed to go to city hall and take an oath to become a citizen. She thinks many people are similarly uninformed and if they knew more about the situation, they would change their minds.

“I know because I was on the other side,” she says. “I used to just not care and think, ‘Oh, why don’t they get that taken care of?’ So I know that a lot of this isn’t hate so much as just not knowing.”
Undocumented students applying for college not only face the normal, agonizing college decisions, but many additional struggles, from not being able to afford college to being afraid to ask for help out of fear of being deported. Each year hundreds of undocumented students apply to college. But unlike their US citizen peers, they aren’t eligible for federal financial aid—including government loans, grants, or work-study money—and they often have to pay out-of-state tuition rates at public schools. Also, many private scholarships provided by various organizations are only available to US citizens. This book weaves together two distinct and powerfully related sources of knowledge: the author’s journey and transition from a once undocumented immigrant from Guatemala to a hyperdocumented academic. This book is a brilliant compilation of articles, accessible to both students and educators, that explore the dynamics of undocumented status and identity. Beyond being an exceptional scholarly work, Aurora Chang’s personal account is deeply moving and her stories are powerful. This book is truly impactful, as well as a pleasure to read. This is the first book that approached undocumented migration from the perspective of the agency of the state as opposed to something that happens because people make the decision to cross the border illegally. She’s the first that I’m aware of to bring up the question, who benefits from large-scale undocumented migration? I was talking with a student of mine yesterday about the ways in which low-wage migrant labour has made wealth possible, particularly for middle-class women. One of the things is that the workers in Conover’s book, in spite of the struggles they had getting from place to place—driving an old beat-up car from California to Florida, and flying on a plane—the movement of undocumented immigrants is even more restricted now.