

# Hope for undocumented students

By Alisa Messer  
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**O**n the eve of an extraordinary gathering for immigrant rights in Washington, D.C., delegates to the CFT Convention received an important reminder of the power of higher education. Kent Wong, director of the Center for Labor Research and Education at UCLA, provided an overview of the Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors (or DREAM) Act.

Introduced in 2001, the bill could impact 2.5 million young people in the United States today, offering access to higher education and also a path toward citizenship. If passed, students who come to the U.S. as children and complete two years of higher education or military service could gain permanent resident status.

The DREAM Act goes a step beyond California's Assembly Bill 540 (2001), which allows California stu-

dents with three years of high school in the state and a diploma or G.E.D. to enroll in our institutions of higher education for in-state tuition and fees. AB 540 students represent an estimated 35,000 in the state's community college system, according to a recent *Sacramento Bee* article.

Founding president of the AFL-CIO's Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance, Wong has spent the last several years traveling the nation with some of UCLA's undocumented students, making sure their extraordinary stories are heard. Students in his course on "Immigrant Rights, Labor, and Higher Education" wrote, edited, and published *Underground Undergrads: UCLA Undocumented Immigrant Students Speak Out*.

"I've been teaching at UCLA for 20 years, and these are the most extraordinary students of my career," Wong says. "They care so much about their education. They have to endure tremendous opposition, yet they are succeeding. It's been a privilege to work with them."

"Now is a crucial time for the DREAM Act," Wong told CFT conventioners. "President Obama has said he will sign the bill when it reaches his desk." Introduced repeatedly since 2001, the DREAM Act has gained bipartisan support.

It is also a crucial time for AB 540 in California. Wong noted that both major Republican gubernatorial candidates, Meg Whitman and Steve Poizner, have pledged to undo AB 540. Wong warns that Poizner will run a harsh anti-immigrant campaign and wants to throw undocumented students—in elementary as well as higher ed—out of public school.

Even with the help of AB 540, these students face significant obstacles, including their inability to apply for financial aid, work legally, or drive to campus. When they do overcome the odds and obtain degrees, they cannot use them to get legal jobs. The DREAM Act would change that.

Wong introduced CFT convention-goers to Nancy (last name omitted for her protection), whose story parallels those of many undocumented students. Not only did Nancy not have any say in her parents' decision to bring her from Mexico, she grew up under the impression that she was a full U.S. citizen. It wasn't until her senior year in high school, as she discussed college, voter registration, and future plans, that she learned she was undocumented.

Nancy described the initial anger—and later the gratitude—she felt towards her mother for her in-limbo status. "My mom's choice was always to give me a better life. I can't be mad at her for that."

Nancy said many don't understand her situation and admitted that at first she also assumed there was an easy fix. Her mother had gained legal status some years before, but due to an error on the part of the immigration attorney, Nancy's own status had never been settled. She had grown up thinking of herself as an American and a U.S. citizen, and now she can't even get a driver's license—and might never be able to.

Though discouraged, Nancy enrolled at community college under AB 540. She later found IDEAS, a network of UCLA students and staff for undocumented students. Through the

group she met others in her situation and found mentors who supported her to transfer to UCLA and get her B.A. in Sociology and Education.

With no access to financial aid or a solid support network, Nancy turned down Harvard for graduate school and entered a Master's program in education at UCLA, where she is now a teaching associate in Wong's course, helping others learn about the issues that undocumented students face. She'll begin doctoral work this fall.

Having a Ph.D. in her sights gives her a feeling of hope. "I want to feel like all this hard work is going to be useful and is going to go back to my community," she said, adding that unless the DREAM Act passes, she still won't be able to work legally.

Just after the CFT Convention, tens of thousands of immigrant rights activists converged on Washington, D.C. to highlight the need for comprehensive immigration reform. Sadly, most of this historic event—including the coalitions between labor, community, religious, and civil rights groups—was overshadowed by "tea party" rallies as the Health Care Act passed.

"Our children are paying the price for Congress' inability to move. We're now a country that is denying thousands of children an education," said AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka on March 23. "There is nothing more American than the ideals that the DREAM Act embodies: hope, hard work, and self-determination. While the DREAM Act is not a substitute for broad immigration reform, it's a very important component." ([amesser@ccsf.edu](mailto:amesser@ccsf.edu))



Above:  
Kent Wong, the director of UCLA's Center for Labor Research and Education.



Right:  
Nancy(left) and her mother celebrate Nancy's graduation from UCLA.

**Want to learn more?**

Visit [aft2121.com](http://aft2121.com) for links to more information, including: an exceptional video profile by one undocumented UCLA student about one of her classmates' experiences as an undocumented student under AB 540; video footage of the recent labor, student, and community press conference on the DREAM Act in D.C.; where to order "Underground Undergrads: UCLA Undocumented Immigrant Students Speak Out" from the UCLA Labor Center; more about IDEAS, the DREAM Act, and AB 540.