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## Luis Martinez's Story

I was born in Mexico and legally moved to the United States at the age of 3. I began pre-k at the age of 4 and continued my education through high school. I come from a family of only one high school graduate out of 8 brothers and sisters. I quickly figured out that I would not be able to rely on my family members for help when it came to schoolwork. I didn't have anybody to ask for help with a math problem or with revisions for my essays. And since many of my friends had little to no interest in academics I was left to fend for myself. Many would call this an obstacle, but I see this as one of the integral parts to my way of perceiving the world. I believe that this is the reason why my problem solving skills have become so refined over the years. However, this refinement would not have happened without attending Central Academy.

Attending Central Academy has been an important part of my life, an escape from reality. Central Academy is focused on preparing students to thrive in college. The atmosphere that Central has is something that is very hard to find anywhere else. I began attending Central Academy in 7<sup>th</sup> grade as part of the Prep Academy program, a program that is intended to increase the representation of minority and low-income students at Central Academy. I was surrounded by many of my friends from my home school. The typical Central Academy student had a very different background from that of my group of friends. We mostly came from lower income households with diverse cultural roots. As the year progressed, I began to realize that things were going to be very different in the coming year because some of my friends were not returning to Central Academy. They didn't see the point in continuing a college readiness program if they had no plans to attend college. Their legal status discouraged some of them from even considering college to be an option. Because I had permanent resident status I was never told that I couldn't attend college due to lack of federal student aid or even admission requirements. Even though the thought of college had not really crossed my mind through most of high school, as my junior year arrived, I began to seriously consider college and where I wanted to go.

I knew that I was as academically qualified as any other student that had taken similar coursework at Central. The problem was that some of the schools that I was interested in had more than just academic or extracurricular requirements for admission. Some of the requirements they had were things I had no control over, such as my legal status. I was interested in attending the United States Naval Academy, and I met all of the requirements except that of citizenship. Although I was in the U.S. legally, I was only a permanent resident and was therefore ineligible to attend. I cannot describe the feeling of being considered inadequate over something you have no control over. I didn't think that my legal status would ever prevent me from being able to attend a college that I was interested in. When I think back at some of my friends from the Prep Academy, I realize that they had the ability to do great academically at Central but they didn't have the motivation because they

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knew that they were not able to attend college due to their legal status and that I could have been in their position if my legal status was similar to theirs.

I remember feeling that my legal status was a topic that should be avoided when possible. What I didn't realize was that I was letting something that I had little control over affect my future. Legal status, which is a result of familial background and financial situation, should not restrict anybody from acquiring a higher education. I believe the college application process is hard enough and having to think about how your legal status will affect your college decision is the last thing any prospective college student should be worried about. **Because the staff at Central Academy provided me with financial, moral, and legal support I was able to become a citizen. However many students in the past have not had this resource.** Being aware of legal status issues is the first step in helping future minority students receive the support that they need to attain legal status and go to college.

### **Kris Hilton: How You Can Help**

I can clearly recall when I began working at Central Academy. I could count the number of students of color on one hand. Our minority student population was around 3% and it is now around 30%.

Increasing the diversity of our program has been a major priority for us and we are well aware that it will require continued effort on our part. One issue that has arisen as part of this effort is an increase in the number of undocumented and non-citizen students who are applying to college from our program. These are also most always first-generation college students for whom the entire process is overwhelming. Dealing with the lack of citizenship and the barriers that imposes adds one more hurdle.

We have had the good fortune of being able to connect with a Central Academy alum who has, through the generosity of her law firm, agreed to work with the neediest of our students. We have had two recent cases she has helped us work through that have ended positively for both of these strong students. Her firm has agreed to handle some of these cases pro bono, but the students are still required to pay a filing fee which has been around **\$700**. This has posed a hardship for these families. We have been able to "pass the hat" at Central Academy and the faculty has covered the cost for these two young men. It would be wonderful to have a fund set up that could sustain these efforts in the future. Every little bit helps.

Kristin Hilton  
Counselor, Central Academy

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## Donate

1. Donate [HERE](#) to help students with citizenship and DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) filing fees
2. Type "Citizenship" in the Special Instructions box