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**Immigration-Reform Plans Offer a Path for Students**

By Kelly Field

President Obama and a bipartisan group of senators announced separate but similar immigration-reform plans last week that would ease the path to citizenship for students who are in the United States illegally, and would make it easier for some foreign graduates of American universities to remain in the country to work.

The plans would allow immigrants who came to the country illegally to apply for legal status, though they would be granted green cards only after every other individual who was waiting for such a card received one. But the plans would create a faster process for students who were brought to the country as children, a group known as "Dreamers" after a long-stalled bill to grant them citizenship.

In addition, both plans would grant more green cards to people who have received master's and Ph.D. degrees in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics fields. In a statement describing its plan, the bipartisan Senate "Gang of Eight" argued that it "makes no sense to educate the world's future innovators and entrepreneurs only to ultimately force them to leave the country at the moment they are most able to contribute to the economy."

The plans don't say if Dreamers would be eligible for federal student aid, as some versions of the proposed Dream Act would do. Congress last considered that bill in 2010, when it fell just five votes short of the 60 needed to overcome a Senate filibuster.

While the bill has languished, President Obama has taken steps to help students who are in the country illegally. In June he announced that young immigrants who had come to the United States illegally as children would no longer be deported and would be eligible for work permits. Thousands of students have applied for the reprieve, known as deferred action, since August, at a rate of almost 4,000 a day. **As of January 17, 394,533 had been tentatively approved, pending background checks, and only 13,366 had been rejected, according to government data provided by Michael A. Olivas, director of the Institute of Higher Education Law and Governance at the University of Houston.**

One successful applicant, Alan Aleman, was invited to the president's speech on immigration proposals and held up as an example. Mr. Aleman, who was brought to the United States from Mexico as a child, was one of the first people in Nevada to receive approval.
"He's working hard every single day to build a better life for himself and his family," Mr. Obama said of Mr. Aleman, who is in his second year at the College of Southern Nevada, studying to become a doctor. "And all he wants is the opportunity to do his part to build a better America."

It's unclear if legislation based on the twin plans would have the votes to pass Congress. Although the Republican Party has softened its stance on immigration in the wake of the 2012 presidential election—in which Mr. Obama won roughly 70 percent of the Hispanic vote—many individual lawmakers remain staunchly opposed to "amnesty" for people who entered the country illegally. Moreover, more than half of the Republican members of the House of Representatives serve districts that are more than 80 percent white, according to the National Journal, a Washington publication; if their constituents aren't pushing for legalization, those members may have little incentive to stick their necks out and risk defeat in their next primary.

Even supporters of the plan are skeptical that it will move quickly. As Stephen Yale-Loehr, a professor of law at Cornell University, put it, the nation's immigration system "took 20 years to get broken; it can't be fixed overnight."

In his speech, President Obama acknowledged the challenges facing his proposal, saying that "immigration has always been an issue that inflames passions."

"The closer we get, the more emotional this debate is going to become," he said. He urged Congress to "remember Alan and all those who share the same hopes and the same dreams."

"Remember that this is not just a debate about policy," he said. "It's about people."