Standing on the Precipice: Comprehensive Immigration Reform Vital for Students

As leaders of national universities, it is incumbent upon us to feed and foster the future of higher education and the students who depend on us to open doors of opportunity. I would contend that this is the mission of higher education: to equip our nation’s talent with the knowledge and skills to achieve success and go out into the world to institute positive change.

This objective lies on the dual foundation of our students’ varied strengths and the diversity that empowers their contributions. As a nation, we are standing on the precipice of an opportunity that can forever alter the fabric of our universities, the life-changing education we extend to students and the even larger economic benefits for our country.

Comprehensive immigration reform is key to realizing each of these advancements. It is vital for the prosperity of our country and for its future. The United States was built by immigrants, indeed its very strength lies in the wide-ranging ideas, cultures and perspectives of its diverse citizenry. With such universal ramifications, we cannot afford to remain silent on our critical, pervasive need for comprehensive immigration reform.

We need highly trained, highly skilled workers for the 21st century. We need the best and brightest from all over the world. The United States has a shortage of highly qualified workers, especially in the critical science, technology, engineering and mathematics arenas. By turning away undocumented students who are eager to contribute their skills – especially in these competitive STEM fields – we severely restrict our potential on a global scale.

According to hi-tech giants, such as Microsoft and Facebook, the U.S. needs to raise the number of H-1B visas from 65,000 to over 300,000 a year to remain the leader in new jobs and industries. The Institute on Taxes and Economic Policy reports that undocumented workers paid more than $91 million in 2010 to Texas state, local and school taxes and revenues.

The same is true for children of undocumented parents raised in the United States, the “DREAMERS.” A recent study estimates that if the 2.1 million such students were given work permits and a pathway to citizenship, it would generate an additional $329 billion for the U.S. economy by 2030.

The University of Houston-Downtown (UHD) has 250 such DREAMERS. These students want to become doctors, lawyers, social workers and educators. They want to contribute to society and their combined potential is immeasurable. Without critical reform legislation, we are making it impossible for them to succeed. Without their sure contributions, we cripple our own future innovations, imagination and much-needed
leadership. Their opportunities are greatly diminished, and our country as a whole follows in their decline.

This story is best told by those undocumented students who desperately seek the American dream while battling insurmountable obstacles of our current immigration policy. One of these students, Isaac Valdez, has not let his citizenship status hinder his ambitious goals or impactful contributions. He serves as president of the University’s Student Government Association while pursuing a bachelor’s degree in applied mathematics and remaining an active, outspoken proponent of immigration reform in the community.

Isaac’s parents brought him to the United States when he was 11 years old in hopes of providing him with better educational opportunities. But despite his 3.5 grade point average and strong education, without immigration reform, his American dream will remain a distant hope.

At a recent congressional hearing, he shared, “My name is Isaac Valdez, I am undocumented and unafraid, a DREAMER on a legal crusade.”

We need more intelligent, accomplished graduates like Isaac entering our workforce and bringing to it the unique skills and passions at the heart of their efforts.

Now is the time to make our voices heard and to stand up for what clearly is best for our students and our country. According to the American Council on Education, every major institution in higher education in the country supports immigration reform.

In The Composite Nation, published in 1869, Frederick Douglass said, “If we would reach a degree of civilization higher and grander than any yet attained, we should welcome to our ample continent all nations, kindreds [sic], tongues and peoples; and as fast as they can learn our language and comprehend the duties of citizenship, we should incorporate them into the American body politic. The outspread wings of the American eagle are broad enough to shelter all who are likely to come.”

Our future lies with our most gifted young students – including those who are undocumented. By closing doors to these young people, we’re holding our country back in the process. And our future depends on their success.

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