

Chronicle of Higher Education
March 28, 2008

Why Congress Should Revive the Dream Act

By George R. Boggs

In The United States we don't typically punish people, especially children, for the actions of others. But today more than 65,000 undocumented students graduate from our high schools each year with literally nowhere to go.

The Supreme Court has guaranteed those students the right to a free public education through the 12th grade, but once they doff their caps and gowns, national policies stymie their pursuit of higher education at every turn, forcing most of them to the fringes of society, where they will never fulfill their potential.

Last year Congress failed again to overhaul the nation's immigration policies, getting bogged down in the thorny issues surrounding illegal immigrants, guest workers, and border security. Given the divisive atmosphere that has engulfed this debate, these complex problems are unlikely to be solved in an election year.

But of all the socially, morally, and economically compelling issues in this debate, there is one that I believe Congress should, and can, do something about this year.

Congress should act immediately on pending legislation to right the wrongs done to the children of many undocumented immigrants. The Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors Act, or the Dream Act, which has languished in various versions in Congress for nearly seven years, would grant conditional legal residency to certain undocumented students, who would then have to complete two years of higher education or military service within six years to achieve legal residency.

The legal status that the Dream Act would provide to those students would open several doors now closed to them. They would be able to enroll in colleges and universities that require legal status to matriculate, pay in-state tuition in states that only provide that benefit to legal residents, and receive some state and federal financial aid for which they are not now eligible - and without which college is financially infeasible for most.

Despite what the bill's opponents claim, the Dream Act would not encourage illegal immigration. It would apply only to people brought to the United States before the age of 16 and living here five years before the law is enacted. The Dream Act would extend a lifeline to students who came to this country through no fault or agency of their own, grew up here and consider America home, and now face deportation to unfamiliar countries to which they have no connection or allegiance.

The Dream Act also would directly affect our nation's economic competitiveness. As a community-college leader, I deal every day with the challenge of meeting the economy's demand for more college-educated workers. With more than 70 million baby boomers starting to retire, this is a daunting task and one that requires us to pursue every opportunity to move more people into higher education. America's economic competitiveness depends on it.

The Migration Policy Institute estimates that the Dream Act would make upward of one million undocumented high-school graduates eligible for conditional legal status, and the path to permanent legal status travels straight through higher education or military service. Furthermore, the population that the Dream Act would affect the most - low-income Hispanic students - is one for whom college-attendance rates are historically low.

The nation's business leaders must be made to see clearly the potential of the Dream Act to help produce the skilled workers they so desperately need, and they must act on that insight. While much of the business community supports comprehensive immigration reform and increases in the numbers of highly skilled foreign workers brought into the United States, it has remained largely silent on the Dream Act. But if industry were to join the wide spectrum of interests urging Congress to pass the Dream Act, 2008 could be the year we clear the final hurdle and enact this vital piece of legislation. I urge college administrators, faculty members, and students to educate their local business leaders about the importance of the Dream Act in their communities.

We must pass the Dream Act now, both to serve individual justice and for our collective best interest.

-- George R. Boggs is president and chief executive of the American Association of Community Colleges.

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