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A project to help immigrant students looks for a boost

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Kiana Cardona, 19, and Sonja Serrano, 19, registering for Target 2020 Florida Summit in Miami Beach on Friday, June 1, 2012. Both are students at Palm Beach State College, Lake Worth Campus, and are representing a civic engagement project that was entered in a competition to receive funding from the Mobilize.org.

For Aylwing Olivas, a 21-year-old college biology major at Miami Dade College InterAmerican campus, there is a troubling problem that plagues his peers. His colleagues, many who are bilingual immigrant students, are dropping out of college at high rates.

Olivas believes this is partially due to the unique challenges that immigrant students face. Some students are undocumented or the children of undocumented immigrants and as a result have little or no access to financial aid and work opportunities during their studies. Others are first generation Americans who are unaware of their education options after high school.

Olivas, who was undocumented himself, understands these challenges and wants to be sure that future generations are prepared so they

are not discouraged from pursuing an education.

"I sympathize with the issues and barriers that undocumented students face," Olivas said.

To address the problem, Olivas – between his biology course requirements and his duties as president of the InterAmerican campus student government – organized a group of motivated peers to create an outreach program that will address the challenges immigrant students face.

The project uses social media to educate immigrant high school students in Miami-Dade on their options for higher education and helps immigrant students develop a plan to go to college.

"We're trying to use this project as a catalyst to get people to become more involved in their own lives and their own cause," Olivas said. "There is a sense of urgency right now to get people involved and aware of things."

On Sunday, Olivas and his team will pitch their proposal at the Target 2020 Florida Summit at Deauville Beach Resort in Miami Beach, where more than 100 South Florida community college students have spent the weekend discussing and tackling the biggest challenges facing young South Floridians.

The InterAmerican program is competing with 13 other student-led projects from community college campuses around Miami-Dade, Broward, and Palm Beach that specifically address the problem of high school and college retention. At the end of presentations, students will select five to receive part of a \$25,000 grant from Mobilize.org and the Knight Foundation.

“By becoming more invested in your community, students are more likely to commit to their own education to get the skills that they need to become meaningful citizens and to become meaningful contributors to their community,” said Amber Cruz, program manager of Mobilize.org.

On Friday, the first day of the summit, Mobilize.org released the Miami Millennials Civic Health Report, a study that measured the levels of civic engagement among Miami Millennials specifically looking at voter registration and turnout, volunteering, community engagement and other indicators that suggest a healthy civic society. Miami residents consistently ranked lower than their counterparts across the state and the nation.

For the project at InterAmerican, the problem of civic engagement and college retention is more pressing. Olivas points out that as the number of Hispanics in the U.S. grows, Latino involvement in civic life is increasingly important.

“The demographics of this country are changing and we're trying to get ahead of that,” Olivas said. “A free country only works if all the people in that country are educated.”

If the students at InterAmerican win the award this weekend, their program would get a boost in funding and technical support that will help build on work they've already started in several Miami-Dade public schools. Olivas and his team have also established a partnership with the Florida Immigration Coalition to expand their program model beyond South Florida.

But Olivas insists that while the support would be great, the work will go on regardless of what happens this weekend.

“If we don't get the funding it will be a bump in the road,” Olivas said. “But it's not about winning this project, we're just trying to help people.”

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