

UP FRONT

By Dr. Eduardo J. Padrón

BEYOND DEBATE

CHILDREN OF ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS COULD FIND
THE WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY CLOSING.

“Look down there,” urged the pilot of the small Gulfstream jet. His crew and a handful of passengers scanned a rich expanse of the Pacific Northwest. “Can you see the Canadian borderline? It’s the U.S. on one side, Canada on the other.” As they strained to pick out the magic demarcation line, the pilot began to chuckle. A few looked up, already red-faced and smiling. Clearly, the Earth did not come divided into countries with neon borders.

For better or worse, we, the inhabitants of the planet, have created an infinite variety of divisions and distinctions. And as the immigration debate flares again, we are reminded of just how complex and delicate the issue is for Americans and those who would become Americans.

The immigration dialogue has no shortage of contributors. Corporate interests that profit from cheap foreign labor, ethnic lobbies seeking to expand their influence, and civil libertarians who focus on human rights—all invest their partisan energy with the current immigration levels. Opponents of the existing course of affairs include environmentalists who warn of immigration-fueled population growth and labor advocates who point to jobs lost by citizens and the resulting depression in wages. Across the political spectrum, immigration scrambles traditional friends and foes: free marketers square off against cultural conservatives, and civil rights and ethnic advocates end up opposing environmentalists and job protectionists.

In the world of education, however, immigration is a simpler affair. Like doctors, educators are compelled to welcome all who arrive at the door. The divisions and distinctions that mark this and every other debate bear less weight in the face of the opportunity to learn.

The numbers tell us that closing the door would mean an enormous loss of potential talent. Today, the United States is home to more than 10.3 million undocumented residents. In tow, are 1.6 million children under the age of 18. As-



PHOTO: CLAUDIA CALLE

suming the debate on undocumented residents does not tilt radically toward prosecution or expulsion, their parents are likely to be here for some time. Ninety-six percent of undocumented men are working, according to the Pew Research Center, a far higher percentage than American citizens or legal residents holding jobs.

Most of those 1.6 million children have grown up in the U.S., nearly all

in low-income homes and inner city schools. And those who have beaten the odds—stayed in school, hoping to be the first in their families to attend college—hit the wall upon graduation: charged tuition that is often three to four times what their classmates since childhood will pay at state colleges and universities. After years of integrating into American society, their parents’ illegal entry long ago stands as a roadblock to a viable future.

The political debate will continue and well it should. Disparate issues of economics, security, ethics and American values converge around immigration. But the priority of access to quality higher education should be beyond debate. Healthy communities across the nation depend on shoring up low-income residents, regardless of nationality of origin. Urban America is challenged by issues of poverty, dissolution of the middle class and loss of economic, social and educational opportunity for poor and minority residents. To sever ties to education at the completion of high school is a surefire means of perpetuating the crippling cycle of poverty in those communities. Including our immigrant population in educational opportunity, however, is a critical pathway toward prosperity.

One of the wisest proverbs I ever came across reads: “If you think education is expensive, try ignorance.” We pay the price each time we limit the aspirations of the young learners in our midst. **H**

Dr. Eduardo J. Padrón is president of Miami Dade College, the largest institution of higher education in the nation.