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Building the American Dream one student at a time

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For DREAMers, “life” seems to happen a lot more. The unexpected circumstances, the twists and turns of everyday life appear to occur more frequently and affect more severely our undocumented youth. These life challenges occur at the same time they are facing an immigration policy in need of reform, one that leaves them in limbo with their futures on hold.

More than 2 million young immigrants have arrived in the United States as minors. They’ve attended public schools and grown up as Americans. Bicultural and bilingual, they have enriched their communities and fully embraced their adopted homeland.

Yet without work permits or access to federal grants and loans, they often struggle to finance a college education. Today, less than 10 percent of undocumented high school graduates go to college — not because they don’t want to, but because they can’t afford it. Some states bar DREAMers from attending state colleges or require them to pay out-of-state tuition

rates, as is the case in Florida.

Such is the case of Cristina Velasquez, who arrived in Wisconsin at age 6 from her native Venezuela. Later, during high school in Miami-Dade County at Reagan in Doral, she took honors classes. She got good grades. She tutored math in underserved communities and was vice president of her student government. But she wasn’t eligible for scholarships and couldn’t afford the much higher out-of-state tuition her undocumented status mandated.

With no options, she looked for work with a fading dream of a college education and a professional career. For Cristina and many others, not going to college translates to a waste of immense potential.

But today, there is cause for hope. With the executive action taken by President Barack Obama allowing for Deferred Action for Child Arrivals (DACA), eligible DREAMers can legally work and stay here temporarily. And additional help is on the way in the form of The DREAM.US Scholarship Fund (www.thedream.us).

Not content to wait for Washington to act on immigration reform, The DREAM.US founders, led by Donald E. Graham, philanthropist and chairman and CEO of Graham Holdings Company, recently announced the formation of a new national movement. Over the next decade The DREAM.US will provide scholarships and create a community of support for 2,000 highly motivated, low-income DREAMers to graduate with career-ready degrees.

To date, the co-founders have raised more than \$25 million for The DREAM.US from philanthropic and business leaders nationally, including the Graham family and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Twelve institutions of higher learning, including Miami Dade College, have signed on as partners, pledging support for the mission of this organization and reaffirming our commitment to our DREAMer scholars.

In return, the students have made a commitment to engage and work hard, and maintain a grade-point average of 3.0 or better. Thirty-nine scholars have already received The DREAM.US scholarships and made this commitment to excel. Twenty-two of these scholars are studying at MDC, including Cristina Velasquez.

She is now enrolled in MDC's Honors College and wants to become a lawyer. She'll continue tutoring and aim for a summer government relations program. Being able to study is "a weight off my shoulders," she says.

On Feb. 11, MDC hosted the first meeting of MDC DREAM.US scholars and their campus advisors. We were joined by the founders and administrators of The DREAM.US. At this meeting we congratulated our MDC students, and they, in turn, reiterated their commitment to fulfill the hopes of their families, their college, their community and nation.

In spite of great odds, these students never gave up on their dreams. And we at Miami Dade College have taken to heart the mission of The DREAM.US as it focuses on "building the American Dream one student at a time."

Eduardo J. Padrón is president of Miami Dade College.