

Column: Why DREAM Act is right for U.S., young people

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By Arne Duncan

At Miami-Dade Community College's commencement ceremonies last month, 181 students marched across the stage, each carrying the flag of a different country. As each student stepped on the stage, individuals cheered for the flag that represented their heritage. But when the last flag went across the stage — the American flag — everyone applauded.



By Rich Pedroncelli, AP Supporter: Maria Luna, a graduate in Sacramento, supports helping students here illegally

The scene reminded [President Obama](#), who was there as the commencement speaker, of

our national motto —*E pluribus unum*— out of many, one. The graduation is also a reminder that first-generation Americans are hard-working and understand the value of education. With degrees from Miami-Dade, some of those graduates will become nurses, IT professionals, and the next generation of entrepreneurs and business owners. Others will enroll in four-year universities and graduate ready to be teachers, engineers and leaders in their communities. By earning postsecondary degrees, they will earn 30% to 70% more than high school graduates. With that earning power, they will buy homes, cars and other goods to drive economic growth.

But for too many immigrants here, the doors of higher education remain closed even though they have called America home for much of their lives. These students were brought to America without documentation by their parents and are now ineligible under federal law to receive student aid.

A rigorous process

Leaders in Congress have introduced the [DREAM Act](#) to create opportunities for patriotic young people to attend college even though they don't have documentation. They will have to go through a rigorous process to qualify for the DREAM Act. They must prove that they came to the [United States](#) before the age of 16, have lived here for at least five years, do not have a criminal record, are not removable from the country and possess good moral character. They will also need to earn a diploma or a GED certificate, and they must have earned admission to an institution of higher education or serve in the military. Once they're in college or serving in the armed forces, they will have the chance to earn legal status.



Passing the DREAM Act is an important part of President Obama's comprehensive immigration reform agenda. It will unleash the full potential of young people who live by the values that all Americans cherish — a strong work ethic; service to others; and a deep loyalty to our country. It will bolster our global economic competitiveness and increase our educational standing in the world.

By creating opportunities for these bright, talented youth to attend college, a new generation of graduates will help strengthen our economy. These new Americans will be future taxpayers who will contribute much more as college graduates than they would as struggling workers moving from one under-the-table job to another. They will help secure a strong economy for America.

The students who will benefit from the DREAM Act are some of our country's best and brightest. They were raised and educated in America. They include community leaders and volunteers who are committed to service in their neighborhoods. They have deep roots here and are loyal to the country that has been the only home they've ever known. It goes against the basic American sense of fairness to punish them for the choices of their parents. We can't let them continue to live lives of fear and squandered hopes. We must rise above the heated political rhetoric and embrace this common-sense approach.

'Stronger and more prosperous'

Opening the doors of higher education to immigrants is essential to maintaining the American Dream for young people. As President Obama says, "This flow of immigrants has helped make this country stronger and more prosperous." Millions of our ancestors have come to America to be free, work hard and pursue their dreams. These immigrants have fueled our economy by starting small businesses in neighborhoods and even large corporations such as Intel, Google and eBay.

President Obama believes that it's time to finish the work we've started and pass comprehensive immigration reform. In education, that starts with the DREAM Act. We will benefit from making it possible for today's immigrants to go to college, live the American Dream and help our economy prosper.

Arne Duncan is the U.S. secretary of Education. He will testify on this issue at a Senate Immigration, Refugees and Border Security Subcommittee hearing Tuesday.

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