

Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration
Elsa M. Núñez Remarks on DACA
April 1, 2019

I want to thank Miriam Feldblum for inviting me to speak with you briefly today. I am so proud to be a member of this alliance, joining more than 400 other presidents representing more than four million students in 41 states. We have the power to effect change!

Imagine what America would be like if ships carrying European immigrants in the late 1800s had been barred from entering New York City harbor! In such a world, we might not see the Statue of Liberty declaring today, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses . . . yearning to breathe free."

The short video you just saw describes the work of TheDream.US, created by former Washington Post publisher Donald Graham, who established this program to support more than 3,000 Dreamers who are seeking a better life through a college education.

You saw two of the courageous and talented DACA students who are currently attending Eastern.

I wanted to share a brief summary of our University's experiences with this program, and offer a few suggestions for how other institutions can better serve students from immigrant families.

In fall 2016, Eastern Connecticut State University was one of two institutions in the nation to enroll the first cohort of "Opportunity Scholars" funded by TheDream.US. Today, in the third year of the program, Eastern has 169 students funded by TheDream.US, and will add 40-50 more this coming fall. In addition to 144 Opportunity Scholars from 17 other states ranging from Georgia to Iowa, Louisiana and Wisconsin, we have 25 "National Scholars" from Connecticut.

Because of the generosity of TheDream.US foundation, Opportunity Scholars at Eastern receive scholarships to fully pay for their tuition, fees, room and board at college. As Connecticut residents, "National Scholars" get their tuition paid for by TheDream.US.

No public funds are being used to support these students, and no Connecticut students are being denied admission because of the Opportunity Scholars attending Eastern from other states.

I am so proud of our Dreamers! The average GPA of our Opportunity and National Scholars is 3.4; some of them are 4.0 students. Their overall retention rate of 96 percent rivals that of Harvard, Princeton and other nationally renowned institutions.

Opportunity Scholars are also campus leaders — as members of the Honors Program, as resident assistants, as club officers and as senators on the Student Government Association.

They volunteer hundreds of hours a week to community organizations. They have established their own student club — Freedom at Eastern.

They are also working with the statewide organization "Connecticut Students for a Dream" to advocate for permanent legal status with our state legislators. At the same time, our campus has been strengthened and enriched by the presence of these undocumented students, adding to the rich cultural diversity already found at Eastern.

The key to our success has been to treat Dreamers with respect and dignity — they aren't singled out, housed in a single dormitory, or made to feel different from their peers on campus. They have access to the same services as other Eastern students.

We have a strong set of support services, including academic advising, tutoring, faculty mentors, counseling services, housing support staff, and more. Dreamers take advantage of all these services.

Our advising center staff also helps Dreamers with issues ranging from arranging for travel home during the holidays to referrals for services, to answering academic-related questions in the same way they help any student at Eastern.

When I speak to TheDream.US scholarship recipients, and I make an effort to seek them out individually whenever possible, I am struck by their gratitude and their determination to succeed.

These young people, like the native-born citizens they sit next to in class, are our nation's future leaders, doctors, lawyers, accountants, teachers and business leaders.

They are majoring in everything from biochemistry to business administration to social work. Their talents, work ethic and diversity bode well for our economy and society.

I encourage all those present today to find ways to expand and improve their support of undocumented students and other students from immigrant families. The Dreamers on our campus are exceptional students. But we also have students from immigrant families from low-performing schools, low-income neighborhoods, and at-risk households. So do you.

Most of them are first-generation students and lack the family and community supports that affluent students have.

These students may not feel comfortable seeking help, they may need extra support, they may fear to showcase their talents back home.

They need formal supports and informal mentors, so we need to be willing to develop both comprehensive systems and less formal approaches.

If you have DACA or other immigrant students on your campus, I suggest you also consider the following:

- Do you have one or more student clubs on campus that advocate for undocumented students? What support does your college or university provide them?
- Do you have statewide organizations that advocate for immigration reform and DACA protections? How are your own students involved?
- Do you encourage your students to speak publicly on immigration issues? Do you give them the support they need to be articulate and confident in their messaging?
- What stance does your university or college take on the current national DACA dialog? Who carries your message? I suggest it be one person — the president, your spokesperson or an influential faculty member — whoever it is, make sure you have a consistent, clear, and singular message.
- I also encourage you to lobby your congressional leaders to support the Dream and Promise Act of 2019 to extend the American Dream to a deserving generation of DACA students while pursuing a long-term solution to the immigration issue. In particular, the legislation would support in-state tuition for students in locked-out states, while also encouraging states to grant financial aid to DACA students, making federal financial aid available, and making it easier to travel, among other policy changes.

In its early stages, the experts are saying the bill in its present form will not pass the Senate nor receive President Trump's signature, but it is a place to start.

Giving Dreamers a pathway to citizenship recognizes the contributions they can make to our democracy, while serving as a clear signal that America remains committed to its principles.

Our country has always been bold and progressive because our strengths are the endearing values and beliefs on which this country was founded. As long as we protect those values — including the fundamental belief that all men (and women) are created equally and all have the right to pursue happiness — we can meet any challenge.