September 20, 2023

Dear Esteemed Members of the President's Advisory Commission on Advancing Educational Equity, Excellence, and Economic Opportunity for Hispanics,

We, TheDream.US and the Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration, are two nonprofit organizations dedicated to supporting immigrant students. TheDream.US scholarship program has proudly empowered over 10,000 undocumented immigrant youth to attain an affordable college education, with an overwhelming 80% being Hispanic/Latino students. Meanwhile, the Presidents’ Alliance is a coalition comprising 550+ college and university presidents and chancellors from public and private institutions – collectively educating over five million students across 43 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico – who have come together on the immigration issues that impact higher education, our students, campuses, communities and nation. The Alliance works to support undocumented, international, and refugee students and to advance forward-looking immigration policies and practices at the federal level, in our states, and across our college campuses.

With the utmost respect, we approach your Commission to share vital insights concerning educational equity and economic opportunity for immigration-impacted Latino students in higher education. Consider the following trends:

- According to a recent Migration Policy Institute & Presidents’ Alliance commentary on immigrant-origin students in higher education, 18% of Latino students enrolled in higher education are first-generation immigrant students, while an additional 50% are second-generation immigrant students. While we acknowledge the importance of distinguishing between Latinos with varying legal statuses and generational backgrounds, it is imperative to recognize the substantial population of first-generation immigrant students who are navigating complex and often more arduous paths to higher education, as well as the experiences of second-generation immigrant Latino students living in mixed status families.

- The Presidents’ Alliance, in collaboration with the American Immigration Council, also found that there are over 408,000 undocumented students actively pursuing higher education, of whom close to half (48%) are estimated to be Latino. Two-thirds of the
undocumented student population in higher education now lacks Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) status, in part due to ongoing legal challenges to the program that have barred younger Dreamers from applying for DACA status. Despite their inability to access DACA, these undocumented students have largely grown up in the United States; over one-third (34%) arrived before age 10, and over 76% arrived by age 16.

- Finally, as detailed on the Higher Ed Immigration Portal, approximately 100,000 undocumented students are expected to graduate U.S. high schools annually in the coming years. The potential contributions of these first-generation immigrant students are immense, but state and federal action to support these students’ college and career equity is vital.

Among the latest cohort of 1,800 Dreamers supported by TheDream.US, 28% are pursuing STEM fields, 20% are dedicated to health and medicine, and 19% are focused on business studies.

Despite federal inaction, a handful of states, such as Maryland, have proactively passed legislation allowing undocumented immigrant students to sit for occupational license exams in healthcare fields, enabling them to leverage their degrees as contractors, consultants, business owners, etc. These are policies and laws we should lift and encourage other states to pass. Furthermore, strides have been made in improving access to higher education for first-generation immigrant students over the past two decades. Today, 24 states extend in-state tuition policies for undocumented students and 18 states offer state aid to this population.

Even as we have witnessed huge achievements by Dreamers over these past years, access to higher education in states that welcome immigrant-origin students usually stops at the undergraduate level, and other states still do not enable their undocumented students to access in-state tuition, financial aid, or licensure. There remains an urgent need to facilitate greater tuition equity for undocumented students nation-wide and to inspire institutions of higher learning to do their part to open graduate school programs, fellowships, scholarships, internships, and similar opportunities to this critical student population.

We firmly believe that the Commission should prioritize initiatives aimed at ensuring that colleges, universities, K-12 institutions, high school counselors, and teachers are well-informed about their roles and responsibilities in supporting first-generation immigrant college students. It is crucial to dispel harmful misconceptions, as undocumented students may wrongly assume they are barred from attending college in the United States. We must unequivocally affirm that federal laws do not prohibit the admission of undocumented immigrants to U.S. institutions of higher education.
Sadly, some institutional admission policies do vary, with some mandating proof of citizenship or legal residency. In several states, public institutions admit undocumented students but classify them as foreign students, rendering them ineligible for state aid and resident tuition rates. We urge the Commission to advocate for a fair and consistent approach, correctly categorizing these first-generation high school graduates and now college students as state residents and domestic students.

We stand in unwavering solidarity with the Commission's mission to ensure that Latino students access higher education. We respectfully request that, when referring to Latinos, the Commission intentionally incorporates first-generation immigrant students, regardless of their immigration status.

Lastly, we wish to share two sets of crucial data and insights recently published by the Presidents' Alliance, the first in collaboration with the American Immigration Council and the second in collaboration with the Migration Policy Institute:

The report, "Undocumented Students in Higher Education: How Many Students Are in U.S. Colleges and Universities, and Who Are They," reveals that there are over 408,000 undocumented students in higher education, with a growing proportion pursuing graduate and professional degrees. Over a third of undocumented graduate students hold undergraduate degrees in STEM and healthcare-related fields, playing a vital role in addressing workforce gaps nationwide. The new estimates also confirm the diminishing number of students with DACA on college campuses, as those students without DACA now account for approximately three out of four undocumented students in higher education.

The commentary, "Investing in the Future: Higher Ed Should Give Greater Focus to Growing Immigrant-Origin Student Population," highlights that immigrant-origin students, including Dreamers, represent the fastest-growing segment in U.S. higher education, accounting for an impressive 80% of all domestic enrollment growth from 2000 to 2021. Among the findings, immigrant-origin students now account for 31% of all domestic students in higher education. The report also highlights that over 80% of the immigrant-origin student population is composed of minorities: 44% (or 2.5 million) were Latinos, followed by 24% (1.3 million) Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) students, and 13% (744,000) Black students.

In closing, we would like to thank you for your valuable time and consideration. We eagerly anticipate the opportunity to continue serving as an indispensable resource and source of
information regarding first-generation immigrant Dreamer college students. Together, we can propel educational equity and economic opportunity forward for all Hispanics and Latinos, including first-generation immigrant students.

Sincerely,

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