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PUBLISHED BY

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Edward Schumacher-Matos: Why We Need the Dream Act

Posted at 5:33 AM on June 9, 2010 by Robert A. Kraft

This opinion piece in the [Dallas Morning News](#) is by Edward Schumacher-Matos, the Robert F. Kennedy Visiting Professor for Latin American Studies at Harvard University.

Of all the political fights over immigration, the one that makes the least sense concerns children who came here illegally with their parents and then graduated from American high schools.

Based on statements to the media, most of the heartless Scrooges who want to kick these innocent youths out of the country – even though most are culturally and patriotically American – are Republicans.

But the dirty little secret is that Democrats have been as responsible for short-circuiting these young lives – and for denying the nation their talent after having already paid for their schooling.

They have done so in Congress by holding hostage the so-called Dream Act, which would give these young people a pathway to citizenship by joining the military or going to college. For the past decade, this bill has been seen as a motherhood-and-apple-pie measure that would help sell comprehensive immigration reform.

That logic once made tactical sense, but no more. The immigration debate has become so toxic that, spurred by Arizona, it now threatens to turn into a downward spiral of national paranoia about immigrants, particularly Hispanics. Periodic bouts of such hysteria pockmark our history – Japanese living in America during World War II, Germans before World Wars I and II, Italians and Slavs in the 1920s, and Irish and Chinese before that.

The Dream Act is urgently needed to help break this dangerous dynamic by reminding Americans of the positive side of immigration. The terms of the immigration debate have to be changed from what now is one of enforcement – and unfounded fears, largely of crime and terrorism – to an honest assessment of costs and benefits, and of the moral responsibility of immigrants and employers.

Only Obama can do this, in alliance with Democratic congressional leaders and some sympathetic Republicans. Most of our leaders have become cowed instead by the loud, often virulent anti-immigrant backlash. Obama himself says the right things but is reluctant to act.

Opposition to the act comes in part from the hard right and the normal cabal of talk show hosts who call the bills "amnesty light." They add, as Republican Rep. Lamar Smith of Texas wrote three weeks ago, that the Dream Act "will result in illegal immigrants taking more of the limited number of spaces available for students at public universities, crowding out deserving American students."

Opponents on the hard left, meanwhile, charge that, given the low numbers of Latinos in college, the offer of citizenship through military service will become a popular default choice that condemns them to fighting in Iraq.

Nearly 115,000 immigrants are in the military today, and the Pentagon says it indeed would welcome more. Being an immigrant and a Vietnam War veteran myself, I agree with paying your dues or proving your loyalty. The immigrants don't have to stay.

But going to a university and using your learned skills is a contribution, too, and we are amazingly foolish to kick out youths in whom we already have invested so much.

Arguments such as Smith's are misplaced. States subsidize tuition because college graduates stimulate economic growth. There may be a point where those costs outweigh the benefits, but the relatively small number of students involved and the fact that they are already in each state's education system suggest that we are nowhere near this point. What the opponents are doing is shrinking their state talent pools, a recipe for decline.

The youths themselves best make their case. As a 22-year-old wanting to join the military told *The Boston Globe*, "We don't want a handout, just the opportunity to prove ourselves."

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