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Moses, Wilson: On providing a college education for immigrants

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MANY of New Jersey's undocumented immigrant students came to the United States as early as age 1, and know only one home: the United States. These students find that after overcoming challenging social and economic barriers, they hit another obstacle when they enroll in an institute of higher education because of their documentation status.

There are many myths projected onto this susceptible group. We must set the record straight about immigrants and consider long-term solutions toward erasing these negative perceptions.

Most economists concur that there is absolutely no link between rising immigration and falling wages. In fact, immigration produces a positive effect on earnings. The Public Policy Institute of California at Berkeley published a study last year that revealed wages paid to undocumented workers actually serve to increase American-born workers' earnings by more than 4 percent.

In this economic downturn, there is another misperception that centers on the fear that undocumented immigrants are "stealing" American jobs. A 2006 Pew Hispanic Center Study found virtually no evidence that large increases in immigration cause higher unemployment among American-born workers. Unfortunately, it is also the case that many individuals in this group come from cycles of poverty, driven by low levels of education and income.

It is the focus of Bergen Community College to offer academic and support services at tuition rates within reach of these students.

The college is distinguished by its diversity and is highly conducive to providing exceptional opportunities for students and staff to experience the nuances of divergent cultures. It has experienced a significant increase in its student population over the past five years and offers comprehensive support services to over 15,000 students who come from more than 140 countries. These international students include a vulnerable group, which the college has identified as possible undocumented immigrants.

The institution provides students with an International Center, staffed by professionals who help students navigate academic programs that prepare them for the workforce.

The Ciarco Learning Center, located in Hackensack, provides English as a Second Language classes to address the language needs of immigrants and to enhance their employability.

## Innovative solutions

It is imperative that we create new and innovative solutions to aid immigrants, who are suffering in silence. We have personally witnessed the tremendous transformation that happens to immigrants when they realize that education is the ultimate means of achieving a lifetime of economic independence. Some of the institution's most distinguished alumni started at the college as immigrants and have become executives who are now living the American dream.

A college education is the way out of poverty and can transform immigrants into productive tax-paying citizens.

It is our hope that Congress passes comprehensive immigration reform that includes the DREAM Act, which would address the many challenges facing undocumented students who enroll in institutions of higher education.

It is also our hope that the Legislature will pass laws that will create uniformity in the state's colleges and universities regarding in-state tuition for undocumented immigrants.

New Jersey is the Garden State. A garden is diverse with many flowers that blossom from their seeds. Our students are our seeds, their education is their blossoming and our diversity is our garden.

Let's give this vulnerable student population the opportunity to participate in the blossoming of the Garden State.

Stephen J. Moses is the chairman and Cid D. Wilson is the secretary of the Bergen Community College board of trustees. Moses is a member of the governor's Blue Ribbon Panel on Immigrant Policy, and Wilson is a member of the Association of Community College Trustees' Diversity Committee.

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