

Miami Dade College welcomes DREAMers

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PEDRO PORTAL / EL NUEVO HERALD STAFF

Sisters Alicia and Alma Mendez participate in a ceremony Tuesday for students who were awarded TheDream.US scholarships and will attend Miami Dade College.

Alicia Méndez was 7 years old when her parents brought her illegally to the United States from the Mexican state of Michoacán.

Méndez, now 26, grew up in South Florida and lives in Homestead, where until recently she saw little chance of achieving her dream: going to college and becoming a business executive or owner.

But now, Méndez is on the verge of realizing her dream: She is one of the first 39 undocumented students born in another country but raised in the United States to receive a scholarship to attend college. She plans to seek a degree in business administration at Miami Dade College,

where 21 other young immigrant students received similar scholarships.

The students, known as DREAMers, formally signed papers accepting their scholarships at a ceremony Tuesday at MDC's Freedom Tower in downtown Miami.

"Without this scholarship my family would not have been able to send me to college," Méndez said shortly after she signed her papers in front of school officials, scholarship backers, television cameras, and photographers.

The word DREAMer comes from the DREAM Act, stalled Congressional legislation that would offer green cards to students brought to the United States as children.

Many of the undocumented students, who once stayed in hiding to avoid deportation, now have papers because of President Barack Obama's 2012 Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, which shields the youths from removal by immigration authorities.

Undocumented students generally have to pay much more than in-state residents to attend college.

"Undocumented students have to pay the out-of-state tuition rate, which is four times the in-state tuition rate, whether it's for an associate's or bachelor's degree," said MDC

spokesman Juan Mendieta. “And for the bachelor’s degrees at MDC it’s \$10,000 to \$14,000 for the in-state rate.”

The DREAMer scholarships are the result of a new private program called TheDream.US, co-founded by Graham Holdings Co. Chief Executive Officer Donald E. Graham, former publisher of The Washington Post; Democratic activist and philanthropist Henry R. Muñoz III; and former U.S. Secretary of Commerce Carlos Gutierrez.

MDC President Eduardo Padrón, who was born in Cuba, welcomed the scholarship sponsors and the students, saying that helping young immigrant students was a personal issue for him.

“To me it’s personal and often emotional,” said Padrón. “At the age of 16, I arrived with my younger brother to face the future filled with possibilities.”

Then Padrón talked about Méndez.

“When Alicia was asked what her greatest challenge was, her answer underscored the importance of this effort,” said Padrón. “She indicated that her greatest challenge was always the feeling of being alone.”

TheDream.US, he added, shows help is available to DREAMers.

“Today, TheDream.US is sending the message to Alicia, and to all DREAMers, that you are not alone,” said Padrón. “You will have the opportunity to pursue your dream and to reach your fullest potential. Frankly, America’s success depends on it.”