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"Science and DACA"

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Science and **DACA**

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By Dr. **Sonia ZA!rate**

On April 14, I joined thousands of people who took to the streets to join the March for Science. We united to reaffirm that science for the common good only happens when science is accessible to everyone. Our economy and the nation's scientific and technological advances depend on the strength of its contributions and that strength is amplified when the contributions are derived from a diverse group of people.

And yet, many bright young minds who are committed to scientific and technological advances face an uncertain destiny under the threat of deportation. There are an estimated 241,000 **DACA**-eligible students enrolled in college as of 2014 and 800,000 current **DACA** recipients. Aside from upending the lives of hundreds of thousands of young people and losing out on the sheer intellectual power of their diverse perspectives, ending **DACA** will create a tremendous disruption for businesses, including 72% of the top-25 Fortune-500 companies who count **DACA** recipients among their employees.

Evelyn Valdez-Ward is one of these talented dreamers. Evelyn is a Latina scientist pursuing a Ph.D. in Ecology and Evolutionary Biology at the University of California Irvine. She will speak at the science march in D.C. to represent Dreamers in STEM. Evelyn felt called to a career in science when a professor told her class that plant biologists would be the ones saving the world as our global population grows to exceed 9 billion people. This inspired Evelyn to seek answers to questions such as, "How do we sustain that many lives and also understand the impact on the planet?" Despite the obstacles she faces being undocumented, Evelyn works with a team of researchers studying how climate change impacts plants and soil microbes, the building blocks of plant productivity and restoring our agriculture. The answers her team uncovers could provide critical understanding of the ways in which GMOs and drought-tolerant crops impact the fertility of our soil for generations to come.

Scientists like Evelyn with undocumented status do not have a path to citizenship. So while we are developing the brightest minds, we miss out on their potential scientific contributions to society. Shouldn't we do everything in our power to not only cultivate diverse scientists but provide them the opportunity to give back? Dreamers are a critical part of the American STEM community.

Investing in the diversity that makes up the fabric of the United States, which includes our undocumented students, would result in a more impactful and long-term solution for our nation to

remain scientifically and technologically competitive.

We have the opportunity to train the greatest diverse STEM workforce in the world by also cultivating talent from the populations in STEM higher education that are furthest from parity when compared to national demographics: Native American, Latino and African American communities. Let's commit to not miss this opportunity by reflecting on our role, both as an individual and as an institution, in helping and hindering the success of all STEM students. Together we can build a bigger table so that everyone has a seat. Together we can create a more inclusive environment that values and incorporates the lived and learned experiences of the entire community.

It is vital for our nation that we not lose any perspectives because it is that diverse perspective that has been shown to positively impact decision making and drive innovation. We are better together. United, we march on for science.

Dr. **Sonia ZA!rate** has a Ph.D. in plant molecular biology and serves as the President-Elect of Society for Advancement of Chicanos/Hispanics & Native Americans in Science (SACNAS).

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Highlights: DACA, Sonia ZA!rate, On April 14, I joined thousands of peopl...