

# Anonymous donor's gift allows Christian Brothers University to fund immigrant students' scholarships

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Mariana Hernandez's parents brought her to the U.S. at age 5 from Mexico on an immigration visa, but it later expired. She graduated as one of the top 10 students at Kingsbury High School, but couldn't afford to go to her first choice college, private Christian Brothers University. Her immigration problems even priced her out of public schools like Southwest Tennessee Community College and the University of Memphis.

So she enrolled instead at the most affordable school she could find, Mid-South Community College in West Memphis.

That was in 2013. Then last summer, her college advisor Jennifer Alejo told her that a new scholarship program would allow her to transfer to Christian Brothers after all. "Jennifer just told me to wait it out and that something would happen," said Hernandez, now 20. "And she made it happen."

Alejo and others helped create Christian Brothers' Latino Success Scholarships, backed by an anonymous donor's gift of \$150,000. The program began in the fall and is now assisting 25 people, including 14 freshmen and 11 transfer students. Organizers hope to expand the program, and say it's specifically designed for students like Hernandez who have immigration problems that hinder their access to many other colleges.

The scholarship program illustrates a broader trend: more colleges and universities nationwide are opening opportunities for teenagers who were brought into the U.S. illegally or on visas that have since expired.

A recent New York Times article attributed much of the change to the 2012 federal program Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, which allowed many of these people to register with the government and obtain Social Security numbers and work permits.

As opportunities at private universities open up, advocates are lobbying the Tennessee legislature to change the law and allow students with immigration issues to receive in-state tuition at state colleges.

Such measures have drawn criticism from groups such as the Washington-based Center for Immigration Studies, which argues for stricter immigration policies. The group says these steps offer a benefit to people who have violated immigration law and cut into a limited pot of money for needy students.

Wendy Sumner-Winter, a Christian Brothers administrator involved in the scholarship program, says the immigrant students want to better themselves, a goal that fits American values. “They are learning skills, trades to compete and contribute to the economy, to society, to future children. Their children will have opportunities that they would not have otherwise had,” she said.

She has met some of the scholarship students in a freshman composition course she teaches. “I can tell you they bring to the classroom an extraordinary sense of purpose. They know why they’re here in a way that a lot of college students their age don’t.”

The 25 students in the Latino Success Scholarships program had a grade-point average of 3.0 in their fall semester classes, higher than the grade-point average of 2.87 for all CBU students, she said.

The CBU scholarship offers a new option for students working with Alejo, who is director of the program called Abriendo Puertas, which means Opening Doors. Abriendo Puertas is a program of social services organization Latino Memphis and receives funding through entities including the Lumina Foundation, a nationwide organization that supports college access, especially for minorities. Hispanics have historically had lower rates of college attendance and completion than other groups.

When Hernandez was a senior at Kingsbury High, she registered with immigration authorities, received Deferred Action status and applied to schools including the University of Memphis. But attorneys for the state Board of Regents had ruled that Deferred Action students had to pay out-of-state tuition rates of more than \$20,000 per year and also couldn't qualify for most state and federal scholarships.

Christian Brothers offered Hernandez partial scholarships, that year but not enough to cover basic tuition, which now costs \$29,300 per year.

Today, Hernandez and the other students in the new program qualify for an academic scholarship that cuts tuition in half, to about \$14,700. The new, additional scholarship program provides a grant of \$6,000 per year. And the students also receive a loan worth \$5,000 per year.

That leaves the students and their families about \$3,650 per year to pay: a significant sum, but within reach for many immigrant families. Students also pay \$50 per month toward loan repayment while they're enrolled in school. The scholarship program also offers \$1,000 per year for books.

The program for freshman students offers a similar structure, though the grant is larger and the loan is smaller.

## **Questions and answers on the new CBU scholarship program**

### **What is Christian Brothers University?**

It's a Catholic university in Midtown that follows the tradition of Saint John Baptist de La Salle, who believed in educating young people, particularly the poor. CBU enrolls about 1,300 undergraduate students and 400 graduate students.

### **What is the purpose of the Latino Success Scholarships?**

The program is primarily for Hispanic students who have immigration problems that make public universities far more expensive. This year, for instance, in-state tuition at the University of Memphis cost an estimated \$8,619 per year. Students

with immigration problems must pay out-of-state tuition of \$20,331, and they can't qualify for most state and federal scholarships. Most of the students receiving the scholarships have lived in the U.S. since they were children.

**Does every Hispanic student at CBU get one of these scholarships?**

No, only 25 students do. There are many other Hispanic students at CBU that aren't in this program. Hispanics make up about 6 percent of the student body. Asians make up 5 percent, African-Americans 31 percent and whites 48 percent.

**You refer to these students as having "immigration problems." Why don't you just say they're here illegally?**

Because in many cases, they're living in a legal gray area. Their parents may have brought them into the country illegally or let immigration visas expire, but students in this position may apply for the federal program Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals. This allows them to legally obtain Social Security numbers, work permits and temporary Tennessee driver's licenses. However, Deferred Action is a temporary protected status, not citizenship or anything that leads to citizenship.

Also, not everyone qualifies for Deferred Action. For instance, those who arrived after June 15, 2007 can't get it.

**If these young people's parents broke immigration law, why has the government let them stay here so long and enroll their children in school?**

Across the U.S., business groups have historically lobbied against immigration raids, since such raids disrupt their workforce. Immigration enforcement in non-border areas like Memphis has historically been light, and many families that entered illegally or overstayed visas have managed to stay for years, sometimes buying houses. The 1982 Supreme Court ruling Plyer v. Doe said children brought to the United States illegally must receive a basic public education.

**Besides CBU, where else can these students go to college?**

They can go anywhere else they can gain admission and pay tuition. Jennifer Alejo with the group Abriendo Puertas said she's been successful placing students at Mid-South Community College in West Memphis, at LeMoyne-Owen College and Tennessee College of Applied Technology.

Victory University heavily recruited Hispanic students and offered many of them full scholarships, but the for-profit school unexpectedly shut down last year.

Latino Memphis and other groups are lobbying to have Tennessee law changed to allow students with immigration problems to pay in-state tuition at state universities.

### **What proportion of Hispanic youth in Memphis have immigration problems?**

Jennifer Alejo says most of the Hispanic high school and college age students that she's working with today have either Deferred Action or no legal status. She said she expects that pattern to persist at least through the cohort of students currently enrolled in eighth grade. The younger the child, the more likely they are to be born in this country, which automatically makes them U.S. citizens.