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Pay it Forward

As we are absorbing the unfolding news about the college admissions scandal uncovered by Operation Varsity Blues, I'd like to invite us to take a moment to reflect on who is not being talked about, our nation's growing number of hard-working "nontraditional" college students.

According to the Center for Law and Social Policy, nearly half of those enrolled in higher education today are individuals who are older, working, and often have a family. According to data from the National Center for Education Statistics, one quarter of all college students are over the age of 30. In other words, the typical college student today is no longer an 18-year-old who has just graduated from high school.



The Carlos Rosario School is dedicated to serving the immigrant communities that call our nation's capital home. We have put in place a strong higher education transition program supporting our graduates' dreams to attend college and most would be called "nontraditional" college students. Most are above the age of 25, often the first in their family to attend college; they are working sometimes multiple jobs to pay their bills and cover college costs, and attending school part-time. 86% are employed, yet 84% live in low income households. Some are managing all of this and raising a family at the same time. They do not have a family member with the kind of connections or wealth to help them gain strong college entrance exam scores or enter through a side door based on dubious athletic abilities.

Miriam is a case in point. She came to this country from Peru, learned English at the Carlos Rosario School, completed the School's culinary arts program, and then began her studies at the University of the District of Columbia. She is a mom to a 10-year-old son and a 3-year-old daughter. On her first day of college classes her daughter was just four months old. She shared with me that there were many times when she doubted she could finish her studies. She picked her children up from school and daycare, brought them home, cooked, put them to bed, and then stayed up late studying and preparing menus for her catering business. She and her husband spent down their savings to pay for her college studies, and then she won scholarships from our School, donated by a local philanthropist and the Hotel Association of Washington, that made it possible for her to finish. She did indeed finish with an associate's degree in Hospitality Management and Tourism with a 3.87 GPA. She is now working as a pastry chef at a local embassy.

Manuel, who came to this country from the Dominican Republic, enrolled at our School's Nurse Aide Training program to pursue his life-long dream of becoming a nurse. He is now working full-time as a Patient Care Technician at the Washington Hospital Center, and is the only Spanish speaker on his ward. He is putting in long days and has little time to sleep while he works part-time toward his degree in nursing at Montgomery College. He shared with me that he doesn't have the option to do poorly with his grades, so he pushes himself hard. He expects to complete his studies in 2021 and will be the first in his family to complete college.

There is a profound disparity in opportunity for our nation's nontraditional students. Our country's employers – our hospitals, restaurants, schools – desperately need what nontraditional college graduates have to offer – their diversity, their work ethic, and life experience. Yet they are often overlooked by traditional scholarship funds or lack the resources and supports to compete for a scholarship against a high school graduate. Through their own drive and personal sacrifice, they are muscling to and through college.

If you have the means, think beyond your own family. Here are a few ways to support that you can consider. First, mentor a college bound adult or young adult – Many communities offer mentorship programs pairing an aspiring college student with a college graduate who's lived the experience and can through their own example inspire and provide guidance

Second, pay it forward by partnering with a trusted community organization like our school, your local community based organization, or the Posse Foundation and create a scholarship for a community member like Manuel or Miriam. \$1,500 covers tuition for one class? and books at many community colleges. Finally, call for universities to evolve to better support our nation's growing number of "nontraditional" students and English language learners. There are concrete changes to college culture that can make the difference in nontraditional student persistence and completion.

If you would like some inspiration on what is possible when we value the inherent strength of our aspiring nontraditional college students, then I invite you to our School's graduation where you will meet many more students like Miriam and Manuel. It is on Thursday, June 13th. Join us!

Founded in 1970 in Washington, DC, the Carlos Rosario School became the first charter school for adults in the nation in 1998. It provides education that transforms individuals, families and communities to more than 2,900 District immigrants each year. The School's award-winning model includes foundational courses in ESL, GED, technology essentials and citizenship, career training programs in

culinary arts, education, health and technology, and comprehensive support services. Through these programs students gain the skills and resources needed to excel in today's global workplace. Just in 2018, the School awarded \$125,000 in scholarship funds donated by local businesses and individuals to graduates who today are studying to become our country's next nurses, educators, nonprofit leaders, business owners, and engineers.

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