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[Make legal citizenship more accessible to immigrants](#)

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Legal immigration is such a long, expensive and extended process that it encourages immigrants to cross the border illegally. Fixing this process can curb drug and gun trafficking, MCT Campus

Immigration in America began with the wide-eyed British settlers who landed in Virginia centuries ago in their quests for a better life. Immediately after, the debate about who else should be allowed to come here began. As the immigration issue once again bubbles to the top of our social consciousness, it is clear to all that the status quo is broken. We need a new system, one that respects the humanity of immigrants and realizes they can make America strong, if we let them.

With the fierce partisan battles unfolding on Capitol Hill regarding the deficit and Libya, it would be easy to cast aside immigration reform for less hectic times. However, we are in the midst of the largest wave of immigration in almost a century. There are 39 million foreign-born citizens living in the U.S. — almost 10 million of them in California — and the influx shows few signs of slowing.

Today, we have a perverse system that incentivizes and encourages illegal immigration, while making the legal alternative virtually inaccessible. It works like an old dam, allowing legal immigration to trickle through while illegal immigration seeps through the countless cracks in the system. Without comprehensive reform, it is only a matter of time before the whole structure collapses.

For many impoverished immigrant families, applying for residency or citizenship can be prohibitively expensive. The process takes years and thousands of dollars in fees,

paperwork and lawyers with immigrants left to rot in perennial bureaucratic limbo. But for a couple hundred dollars a “coyote” can smuggle them across the border and into the loving arms of countless corporations. These profit machines then use and abuse the underpaid workers who are unable to complain about their deplorable treatment.

Nine years ago, my family and I legally immigrated to San Diego from Mexico. Since then, we’ve endured a Kafkaian bureaucratic immigration labyrinth that effectively punishes legal immigrants. We’ve spent thousands of dollars to be fingerprinted, photographed, analyzed and approved countless times. But we have yet to receive the actual green cards the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service claims are on the way.

Despite these painfully obvious flaws, immigration reform hasn’t been forthcoming because of a deep-seeded fear of new immigrants. The libertarian CATO Institute found that anti-immigration feelings haven’t changed appreciably since the early 1930s. Common fears are that immigrants take Americans’ jobs, decrease potential welfare and drag down the country’s government and economy. Yet the CATO Institute found unanimous agreement among the nation’s top economists about the positive effect of immigration.

Here is the undeniable truth at the heart of the immigration debate: Immigrants make America richer and stronger. Every year, immigration alone adds up to \$10 billion dollars to the GDP. Were we to reduce immigration by one third, GDP would decline by \$80 billion throughout the next 10 years. But if we allow immigrants to become legal citizens, able to fully participate in the nation’s economy, GDP would increase by \$180 billion.

The reason immigrants have such a huge positive impact is simple. More people means more demand for homes, clothing, food, iPods and just about everything else. But this increased demand translates to increased profits. As for jobs: Immigrants don’t just come here to find jobs, they create new ones. Immigrants have a rate of entrepreneurship nearly twice as high as native whites or African Americans. Today, nearly 30 percent of all entrepreneurs in America are immigrants.

The facts are clear and irrefutable. We need to stop demonizing immigration. Instead, we should harness its power for economic growth. To start, we need to streamline the process for legal immigration for those already here and those on their way. We need a process that allows them to work, live and most importantly, pay taxes legally while they work toward U.S. citizenship. This option needs to be clear and affordable. Given a reasonable option to come into the country legally, virtually all immigrants will do so. Then, we need to strengthen the U.S. / Mexico border to stop the trafficking of drugs and weapons. This is an obvious step, rooted in a nation’s right to protect its borders. And by allowing innocent immigrants to cross legally, it will reduce illegal traffic and free law enforcement to focus on illegal trafficking.

Reforming immigration will be far from easy. But it is time we recognize the undeniable benefits immigrants bring, and grant them the rights and freedoms they’ve earned.

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— *The views expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect the opinion of The Daily Aztec.*