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Addresses

Regarding 2009 Senate Bill 170: “Non-discrimination in determining amount paid for higher education”

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Immigration is one of those issues guaranteed to create hot feelings no matter how you argue it. On the one hand, we're a nation founded by immigrants. Historically, we depended on immigrants to grow. Nearly all of us have family lines that started in some other country. Openness to immigrants is part of our national identity.

But it's also true, as Irish, Italian and other Catholic Americans know very well, that dislike of immigrants also belongs to our history. We welcome immigrant labor because we need it. We often don't welcome the human complications that come along with the people who do the work. This resentment of newcomers gets worse during economic hard times, and it's made worse by today's understandable concerns for domestic security.

Good people can disagree on the details of immigration policy - in other words, how best to balance justice for immigrant workers with our public safety and the solvency of our institutions. But we can't ignore the "human complications" of undocumented labor without brutalizing ourselves and our whole system. Here's an example: Hundreds of thousands of young adults have grown up in the United States with no memory of any other country. They're indistinguishable from their peers who were born here. They have no other country to "go back" to. But they're not American citizens. They didn't choose their circumstances. They didn't decide to migrate here; their parents did. They shouldn't be penalized for a problem they didn't create.

Federal law mandates free public education K-12 for all young people in the United States regardless of their immigration status. But in recent years, state-level efforts have been made across the country to bar undocumented young adults from the benefits of in-state tuition breaks for higher education.

This is bad public policy for several reasons. Young people who pursue a college degree tend to produce more, become better leaders, enrich our economy through the development of their talents, and depend far less often on social assistance. On the other hand, those who don't complete high school are more than 25 percent likelier to need public aid such as food stamps, welfare, or subsidized lunches for their children than individuals who complete at least some college. States with a large percentage of college-educated residents have greater productivity. They're also much more likely to attract new industries.

Ten other states, mostly in the west, have now passed "tuition equity" bills that allow qualified undocumented young people to access in-state tuition rates for college. The early research suggests exactly what we might expect: i.e., that the resources "lost" in providing in-state tuition are recovered from reduced crime rates and dependence on social assistance. Unfortunately, Colorado is just one of three states, along with Arizona and Georgia, that explicitly bars in-state tuition for resident, undocumented students. As a matter of justice and common sense, this needs to change.

State Senators Paula Sandoval, Abel Tapia and Chris Romer, along with supportive colleagues in the Colorado General Assembly, are trying to fix this problem with Senate Bill (SB) 170. They deserve our gratitude, and more importantly, our active support, because SB 170 is legislation we need.

SB 170, if enacted, will require that any individual receiving in-state tuition must have attended a Colorado public or private high school for three years. The person must also have graduated from a

Colorado public or private high school or obtained a Colorado general equivalency diploma (GED). But students who meet these significant and verifiable standards, and qualify for in-state tuition, will not be required to verify lawful presence in the United States. This last factor is crucial for those many young people who have grown up in the United States, know no other home, but don't have American citizenship.

Politics is not the only, nor even the most important, way that Christians live their faith publicly. Most of the really vital things in life have nothing to do with politics. But politics does involve the use of power in the pursuit of justice, and that has moral and human consequences. In Colorado's short annual legislative session, certain issues really do matter. SB 170 is one of them. Please consider the young people who will help build Colorado's future if this bill succeeds. SB 170 needs and deserves our support.

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