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Could They Really Deport Me?

by Elizabeth Griego, NASPA President



My grown-up daughter came home for Sunday brunch and mentioned that she's going to Phoenix next week. "I made a T-shirt that says, 'Pull me over, I'm Mexican,' " she added. While Arizona S.B. 1070, the controversial new immigration law recently signed by Arizona Gov. Jan Brewer, doesn't take effect for nearly 90 days, I still had to caution my daughter not to be too casual—and to be sure to have her drivers' license with her, just in case. She looked serious. "Could they really deport me?" she asked.

Seriously, why should Americans have to ask this question?

As you've most likely heard, S.B. 1070 criminalizes stopping to hire day laborers as well as transporting or sheltering an illegal immigrant under any condition. The legislation allows individual Arizonans to sue agencies that fail to pursue immigration enforcement, makes private employment of illegal immigrants a state-level offense, and, most controversially, requires local police "when practicable" to check the immigration status of a person if they have a "reasonable suspicion" that the person is in the United States illegally, which is the clause that really raised my daughter's ire. Under this new law, a person will be required to produce a document or identification card proving his or her right to be in the United States.

The law states that using race or apparent origin as the *only* standard for establishing suspicion is prohibited, and state Sen. Russell Pearce, who sponsored the legislation, says that we have to have faith that police will implement safeguards against racial profiling. However, skeptics like me find it hard to imagine what other metrics agencies could use to systematically decide who might reasonably be suspected of being an illegal immigrant other than brown skin, dark hair, and accented English. If that isn't racial profiling, I don't know what is.

As an administrator and faculty member in higher education, I know that our role as educators should be to continue to urge the voice of reason. But we should also not forget that our voice needs to be the voice of principle, as well as the voice of reason. We have all experienced the hysterical and extreme internet vitriol on opposing sides of emotional issues, demonstrating the worst of communication when comments are made without personal attribution.

As president of NASPA, I am working with our association leadership to review our options regarding the 2012 NASPA Annual Conference, which is scheduled to take place in Phoenix. We are considering how best to convey our opposition to this legislation, including the possibility of canceling our conference and hotel contracts, despite the considerable financial exposure that would be incurred.

We in education have a responsibility to encourage the just and civil examination of this legislation. We need to insist on the identification of principles and facts, and we need to discourage paranoia and hysteria. We also have the responsibility to continue to convey to all of our students and the broader community, on this and other issues, that our core academic values include mutual respect, inclusivity, equity, and the value of diversity in the process of learning.

We should stand for the repeal of S.B. 1070, support the promised federal immigration reform, and sustain the ethical, respectful, and inclusive treatment of others that is essential to providing an environment for learning. Racial profiling diminishes us all.

On my own campus, students organized a protest art display in the multicultural center and invited the local community. Students, faculty, and staff marched downtown in a weekend demonstration against S.B. 1070 and in support of federal immigration reform to create a system for the undocumented workers who are already here, which President Barack Obama said was a priority of his administration. Similar events have been held on many other campuses across the country. Many have focused on the questionable constitutionality of a state law that attempts to regulate a power assigned to the federal government.

A widely referenced Rasmussen poll found that 70 percent of likely voters in Arizona favor "legislation that authorizes local police to stop and verify the immigration status of anyone they suspect of being an illegal immigrant." The same poll found that 53 percent of likely voters are concerned that "efforts to identify and deport illegal immigrants will also end up violating the civil rights of some U.S. citizens."

We know that S.B. 1070 will create heightened concern across the country about civil rights and elicit fear—and that is not too strong a word—among our Mexican-American students (as well as students from other backgrounds) for themselves and for their families. This is the major problem with S.B. 1070: *It does little, if anything, to keep people from crossing the border illegally.* But it does promote suspicion and distrust toward anyone who might look as if they did. This suspicion will be felt by everyone, not just farm workers or blue-collar workers or immigrants, but everyone who could likely be stopped—our university students and their families, our friends, our neighbors, our colleagues. My daughter. Your grandson.

The real harm of S.B. 1070 is that it creates an environment of fear and distrust that heightens and fuels resentment and ethnic divisions. It encourages the worst emotions in some of our citizenry. It motivates some Arizonans to see their neighbors through the lens of suspicion, rather than community. In other words, the sponsors and supporters of this legislation are worsening the very problem they were trying to solve.