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# Higher education and immigration

## Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. Letters from Academia

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In the latest scandal-du-jour of the Trump administration, the policy of separating children from their parents at the border with Mexico has brought widespread condemnation not only across the political spectrum but also across society. Religious, business, and civic leaders have also raised their voices and the Trump Administration backed down from this policy, although it is not clear what it is going to happen to the children who have already been separated from their families and dispersed across the country. But how has higher education responded to this crisis? In many interesting ways.

In unusual responses, leaders of both private and public institutions across the nation have spoken out forcefully against this policy. Take, for example, the case of Ana Mari Cauce, president of the University of Washington. She took the extraordinary step of publishing on the Internet home page of her institution an open letter titled "Separating children from their families is cruel: The evidence is clear," in which she called the policy "cruel and inhumane." She is in the privileged position of being a clinical pediatric psychologist and is therefore knowledgeable of the scientific studies that show that separating families causes lifelong health damage.

The reasons why Cauce's letter is extraordinary are many. Leaders of institutions of higher education typically avoid entangling themselves in political controversies because they do not want to alienate donors who have different political views. This, of course, is particularly

true when dealing with wealthy supporters that tend to lean conservative. It is even more impressive when these words came from the leader of a public institution that receives funding from the state legislature and their political stances may alienate the institution from certain political leaders.

Another public university leader, Janet Napolitano, the University of California system's president and a former secretary of homeland security, also issued a statement criticizing the immigration system in general, saying that "Congress and the administration must come together to pass legislation that reflects the values of our country, ensures the safety of our borders, and provides a resolution for those brought to the U.S. as children who only know this country as home. It is imperative that Congress pass, and the president sign into law, legislation that protects our nation's DACA recipients and provides them a path to citizenship." DACA, or Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, is an Obama-era program under which young people who had been brought illegally to the United States as children were temporarily spared deportation. The Trump Administration is trying to rescind the program.

Another unusual example of a college leader blasting a federal government policy came from the University of Notre Dame's president, the Rev. John I. Jen-

kins. He also condemned the practice in a written statement in which he said that "Central to the Holy Cross education Notre Dame offers is a sense of family, centered on the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, and in that spirit I call on the administration to end immediately the cruel practice of separating children from parents and parents from children."

Notre Dame this year hosted Vice President Mike Pence as their commencement speaker.

Others from higher education who have criticized this policy have been university scholars with expertise on the psychological trauma caused by separating small children from their parents. For example, Jennifer Silvers, an assistant professor of developmental neuroscience at the University of California at Los Angeles, co-authored an op-ed in the Washington Post in mid-May in which she wrote about the damaging effects of parent-child separation. She and her coauthors were hit by an avalanche of hate emails from Trump supporters.

In an open letters to Secretary Nielsen (the secretary for Homeland Security who is responsible for enforcing Trump's immigration policies) more than 1,400 scientists from dozens and dozens of colleges and universities said that "The broad consensus of the psychological and neuroscientific communities is that the current U.S. government policies on forced separation can only

be seen as a form of extreme emotional abuse on the children that are being separated. This has a real potential for causing long-term, and very possibly permanent harm. As scientists and clinicians, we implore you to end this inhumane practice and to do everything in your power to develop policies that minimize trauma to these children and families."

As this article is being published, another letter is being circulated by more than 4,000 academics accusing the Trump Administration of "government sanctioned child abuse." "The separation of minors from primary caregivers as part of U.S. enforcement of immigration laws is unethical, immoral, and goes against all human-rights conventions and laws. There is no legal doctrine that requires this, despite the falsehoods being circulated by the Trump Administration," reads the letter.

It is interesting that despite all this moral outrage, most academics have not pointed out some very important facts about immigration. For example, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the number of refugees and immigrants entering the European Union is low compared with the bloc's population, and that countries in Africa and Asia are absorbing many more people.

Further, according to Guy Abel, a statistician at the Vienna Institute of Demography has studied the dynamic flow of immigrants and found that the number of people leaving their home countries has remained stable over the past 50 years.

His latest estimates indicate that the migration rate, as a share of global population, has dropped to its lowest point in 50 years. Thirty years of data from 15 countries in Western Europe reveals that immigrants quickly benefit their hosts' economies countries. Within two years of an influx of immigrants, unemployment rates drop significantly and economic health increases. This activity far outweighs governmental costs of newcomers. Asylum seekers also benefit economies, but their effects take longer – from three to seven years – possibly because they often face restrictions on working. As economist Michael Clemens has said, "If you slash immigration for cultural or security reasons, you will pay an economic price."

So how can we explain the high visibility of the immigration issue with the reality summarized above? Very simply. Populist movements in this country and in Europe have lied about the problem, magnifying it and then using fear as a weapon for their own political goals.

Too bad that our colleagues in academia are not spending more time educating the general public, and that voters on both sides of the Atlantic are not spending more time in educating themselves. Perhaps all of this is because we live in the "post-truth era."

*Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. is a writer and college professor with leadership experience in higher education. He can be contacted through his website at: <http://www.aromerojr.net>. The opinions expressed in this column are exclusively the author's.*