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Chicano studies are an important part of Arizona's curriculum

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Earlier this month, the Tucson, Ariz., school district, responding to pressure from the state superintendent of education, eliminated the Chicano studies curriculum in that district.

Courses in the high schools on Chicano studies had been taught for a few years with no negative reaction until recently, when extreme right-wing politicians began to say that the Chicano studies classes were characterized by expressed racial hatred of whites and possessed no academic value. They further added that no classes should focus on just one ethnic group.

These allegations came from some of the same people who, a year earlier, supported and passed state laws giving local police the authority to arbitrarily stop anyone they suspected of being an undocumented immigrant despite the fact that immigration is a federal responsibility. That law has been challenged by the administration of President Barack Obama and will be adjudicated by the U.S. Supreme Court.

All of this is part of a nativist, anti-immigrant and anti-Latino movement in Arizona as well as in other states. What these reactionaries are responding to are their unfounded fears that they are losing control of "their country." They incorrectly believe or are made to believe that Latino immigrants are inundating and taking over the United States. They further believe, just like many of them believe that Obama is not a "real American," that Latinos, whether U.S.-born or not, do not represent "real Americans." To them, all Latinos are foreigners.

All of this, of course, is nonsense.

Latino immigrants represent only a small percentage of all people in the United States. In fact,

immigration from Mexico, for example, is significantly down and almost non-existent today.

Latinos, the majority being born in the United States, have been part of this country for centuries and have worked and contributed to its wealth and security. Thousands through the years have proudly served in the U.S. military, and many have given their lives for the red, white and blue.

With respect to Chicano studies, I have been teaching Chicano studies classes for more than four decades, and I have never encountered a Chicano studies professor who preaches anti-whiteness. My colleagues, like me, teach that racism too often practiced in this country has significantly been directed against Mexican-Americans and other Latinos. This racism through the years has been predicated on maintaining most Latinos as sources of cheap labor. Teaching about racism is necessary in teaching about the history of racialized minorities such as Latinos and African-Americans.

I have also never met a colleague in Chicano studies who only teaches about Chicanos in isolation. You cannot teach about Chicanos -- or any other ethnic group, for that matter -- without also referencing the relationship of that group to other ethnic ones. For example, when I teach about the initial mass movement of Mexican immigrants to the United States in the early 20th century, I tell my students how at the same time many new immigrants from eastern and southern Europe, such as Russian Jews and Italians, were being recruited or encouraged to come to the United States because of the labor needs of the burgeoning new American industries. These were the so-called "New Immigrants."

I also tell my students about the horrible discrimination that these immigrants faced because "older-stock" Americans perceived them as being the wrong kind of Europeans. They were too Jewish, too Catholic, too Mediterranean. I conclude by telling my students that Mexican immigrants faced the same forms of discrimination in the Southwest and California as they still do, but that knowing how all of our ancestors were badly treated is, in part, what should bind us together. We all have similar histories.

This is how I teach Chicano studies and how many, if not all, of my colleagues in Chicano studies teach.

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Moreover, Chicano studies in the last 40 years have produced countless solid academic research in the form of published books in major university and non-university presses as well as in major academic journals. Many of these publications have received awards from the leading academic associations in this country. The idea that Chicano studies is simply political rhetoric flies in the face of voluminous evidence of significantly and nationally recognized scholarship.

What is happening in Arizona is not unique to that state. Anti-immigrant and anti-Latino sentiment and movements are disguises about what is really happening to our country, and it has to do with the extreme disparities of wealth and power and the need for working class and middle class Americans to join together to stop being cheated and exploited by the small ruling elite of this country. In this sense, all of us have a stake in what is happening in Arizona.

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