Testimony on S.B. 1819

Monday, April 6, 2015

For the Subcommittee on Border Security of the Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs and Military Installations

My name is William H. McRaven and I am Chancellor of The University of Texas System.

At the request of Senator Sylvia Garcia and given my inability to appear before the subcommittee, I am pleased to offer my views as Chancellor of The University of Texas System on the issue of the provisions of Texas law that allow undocumented students to pay in-state tuition rates.

I respect the views of those who believe the state should revisit this benefit. But I will also note, as is well known, that it was put in place by almost the unanimous action of both chambers of the Texas Legislature less than fifteen years ago.

My views are not premised on the economics of this issue for the institutions of The University of Texas System. In fact, within all of the UT System we today have fewer than 2,000 students who are benefitting from this provision of Texas law.

Allowing undocumented students to pay in-state tuition is, in my opinion and as I have previously stated publicly, the morally right thing to do.

Our job at The University of Texas System, and my assignment as Chancellor, is to help educate the young men and women of Texas. In this, I believe it is incumbent on us to educate these young men and women.

They have successfully proceeded through and graduated from one of our Texas high schools or otherwise received the equivalent of a high school diploma. They have continuously resided in our state for the three years immediately preceding their graduation. In fact, many have been residents of Texas for years and years, in some cases longer than other students who are newer residents of Texas and whom we would never think to deny the benefit of in-state tuition. They know no other home and think of themselves as Texans.

They have gained admission to one of our state’s institutions of higher education, in fair competition with their peers. They pay tuition to UT System institutions, just as do other graduates of Texas high schools. They and their parents pay taxes just as other Texans do, directly on their purchases and indirectly for their housing. We as a state have invested in their education and in their future, and I believe it is appropriate for us to continue to educate them.
We should also ask ourselves what might be the price for failing to continue to educate these young Texans. If they are denied the opportunity to study as they have done in order to graduate, to strive to better themselves, and to pay tuition like other Texas residents, what expense might the state have to bear?

I know some argue that this benefit is a magnet to those from other lands to enter the United States illegally. I cannot deny that the hope and promise of a better future for one’s family is a motivating factor for those who come to America, just as it was for the generations of our forebears who came from all over the globe to our nation. But I have yet to see any statistics that demonstrate that people are coming across our border in order to get a higher education. And even if this is a partial motivation for some, we must ask if it is right to penalize their children, our fellow Texans, who again have succeeded in our Texas public and private high schools and only wish to continue their education.

Feelings are passionate about this issue, which is good. We all want to work for a better Texas for those who will follow us, and our individual views of what constitutes the right public policy to accomplish this common good will differ. I appreciate the opportunity to share with the subcommittee my views.