

BOOK REVIEW

Americans by Heart: Undocumented Latino Students and the Promise of Higher Education

Edelina Burciaga

University of California, Irvine

Americans by heart: Undocumented Latino students and the promise of higher education is an in-depth exploration of the experiences of Latino undocumented immigrant young people. Pérez's primary focus is on the factors that shape the pathway to college for undocumented Latino students. The book captures the challenges and risks associated with growing up undocumented in the United States, and also highlights how undocumented Latino students cope with these challenges. Pérez's compassionate and informative book is a welcome addition to the growing body of research about undocumented immigrant young people.

The undocumented immigrant population is currently estimated at 11.2 million. Approximately 3.2 million are children and young adults under the age of 24 (Passel & D'Vera 2011). The Supreme Court decision in *Plyler v. Doe* (1982) guarantees undocumented young people a public education through high school. It is during the critical transition out of high school that many undocumented Latino students begin to fully appreciate the full impact of their legal status and what it means for their future opportunities. Undocumented students are eligible for in-state tuition in 13 states². However, because of their legal status undocumented students are not eligible for federal financial aid; they are only eligible for aid in two states, creating a significant barrier to higher education access. In addition, as undocumented young people transition into adulthood, various rites of passage that many citizens take for granted—such as applying for a driver's license, securing a first job, and voting—each emphasize the salience of their legal status.

Drawing on data collected through surveys, in-depth interviews, and ethnographic fieldwork over the course of two years, Pérez paints a rich picture of the lives of undocumented Latino students in high school and college across the United States. One hundred and ten undocumented Latino students were surveyed for the study. Fifty-four of the survey participants were interviewed. The majority of these students lived in California, the state with the largest undocumented immigrant population. However, Pérez and his research team were able to recruit students from Texas, Virginia, Georgia, Missouri, New York, and Washington D.C., providing a much needed national perspective on the experiences of undocumented Latino students. Approximately 62% of the college participants were female, which is comparable to the overall female college enrollment rate for Latinos. The high school group was gender balanced, with 50% of the participants being female. On average, undocumented Latino student participants arrived in the United States at the age of seven, and had spent approximately 13 years in the United States. The average age of participants was about 20 years old.

Weaving together the narratives of undocumented Latino students and theories of social psychology, immigrant incorporation, resilience, and political participation, Pérez develops a comprehensive conceptual framework for understanding undocumented student achievement and Texas and New Mexico offer state aid to undocumented students. college access. Pérez's conceptual framework expands the explanatory power of these theories through application to the experiences of the undocumented Latino student population. For example, previous research on resilience in young people suggests that personal characteristics such as good communication skills, a positive self-concept, and caring attitudes increase a young person's chances of dealing with difficulties more effectively.

² Texas, California, Illinois, Kansas, New Mexico, Nebraska, New York, Oklahoma, Utah, Washington, Wisconsin, Maryland, and Connecticut offer in-state tuition rates to undocumented students.

Perez finds that the same is true for undocumented Latino students, but the ways that undocumented Latino students demonstrate these characteristics differ slightly because of their undocumented immigrant status. For instance, the undocumented Latino students that Pérez interviewed described various experiences of being told that their educational aspirations should be limited because of their legal status. Pérez finds that one protective factor undocumented Latino students develop can be characterized as a “motivation to prove others wrong.” Rather than accept a limited educational future, undocumented Latino students draw on this motivation to continue to pursue their academic goals.

Perez argues that undocumented status is just one of a complex set of factors that influence the pathway to college for undocumented Latino students. While their legal status poses a challenge and a risk, undocumented Latino students who are able to develop a strong social support network of family, peers, and teachers are also more likely to develop a commitment to education, referred to as academic engagement. Perez finds that participation in activities like volunteerism, activism, and community service not only allows undocumented Latino students to give back to their communities, but may also provide them with a sense of empowerment. A strong social support network, the experience of growing up undocumented, civic engagement and other forms of extracurricular participation, and educational aspirations all work together to influence the pathway to college for undocumented Latino students. Jacinto, a college student, expresses the following:

I remember just trying to do the best. I love learning and I love school. In high school, I decided I wanted to do more for my education so I would study really hard and get good grades. I was on the honor roll for 4 years. I remember really wanting to go to college. I knew that if you were in clubs and you had good grades, then you had a higher chance of getting into college. So that's what I did. (p. 48)

The unique value of *Americans by heart* lies in its description of undocumented Latino students not only coping with but also exceeding the academic, social and legal limitations imparted by their status. We learn that personal characteristics, individual motivations, and institutional support are integral to undocumented Latino student success. A significant portion of the book details the personal and individual motivations of undocumented Latino students. However, Pérez adds depth to his analysis by specifically examining the role that community colleges play in moving undocumented Latino students along the educational pipeline. Because of the financial constraints many undocumented Latino students face, community colleges are often the first step on the pathway to a four-year university. Pérez highlights the important role that community colleges can play in the continued educational success of undocumented Latino students by emphasizing the significance of informed staff, caring faculty, academic support programs, and a welcoming campus climate. This analysis adds an important layer to the discussion about undocumented Latino student success because it moves the discussion beyond personal and individual motivation and addresses how schools as institutions can support undocumented Latino students.

Pérez is a leading scholar in the growing field of research on undocumented Latino students. Perez's first book *We are American* introduced researchers and educators to the educational experiences of undocumented Latino students. However, in *Americans by Heart*, Pérez's analysis of the experiences of undocumented Latino students is richer, and more theoretically grounded. Pérez's contribution to this growing field of research is to examine holistically the lives of undocumented Latino students from high school through graduation from college, and beyond. Pérez details nearly every aspect of the undocumented Latino student experience including their academic and civic engagement as well as their family, peer, and school supports. This provides a much-needed perspective on the lives of undocumented Latino students across the educational continuum. It's focus on the social psychological aspects of the undocumented Latino student experience is a nice complement to research about the socio-legal and immigrant incorporation experiences of this population and I highly recommend for both researchers and educators working with undocumented student populations.

References

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1982. “Plyler v. Doe.” in 457 U.S. 202. Passel, J. S., & D’Vera, C. (2011). Unauthorized immigrant population: national and state trends 2010. Pew Hispanic Center, Washington D.C.