

We ARE Americans: Undocumented Students Pursuing the American Dream by William Perez. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2009. 161 pp. ISBN 978-57922-376-2.

In the context of rising tuition and diminishing aid, the cost of attending higher education continues to be a serious concern for many college-bound Americans. Rightfully so, much of the attention regarding undocumented students and higher education has revolved around the financial barriers of going to college (Gonzales, 2007; Zehr, 2006). *We ARE Americans: Undocumented Students Pursuing the American Dream* moves beyond issues concerning in-state resident tuition and addresses the obstacles that limit the educational experiences of undocumented students in college. Perez chronicles the stories of 16 students and 4 formerly undocumented students at different stages in the education pipeline. Often indistinguishable from their peers, he counteracts the tendency to alienate undocumented students by arguing that they are substantive members of American society. Furthermore, the author draws attention to the missed opportunity that arises when American society does not capitalize on a pool of talent that continually shows devotion despite being shunned politically and socially.

Narrowing Opportunity and Postsecondary Advancement

Contrary to the belief that colleges and universities serve as “engines of opportunity” (Bowen, Kurzwell, & Tobin, 2005), undocumented students face a different reality: the higher they go up, the more they are excluded (Perez Huber, Malagon, & Solorzano, 2009). For many of the undocumented students chronicled in *We ARE Americans*, gaining admission to college is the easiest part (Song, 2009); however, without legal status, they are deprived of reaching their full potential. This book captures some of the missed opportunities across a broad range of diverse educational settings.

In Part 1, Perez focuses on the experiences of high school seniors. Like many of their college-bound peers, undocumented students demonstrate academic excellence, engage in meaningful activities within their community, and possess the savvy and resourcefulness that is rewarded in the college admissions process (Bowen et al., 2005; Comeaux & Allen, 2009). Unlike their peers, they are forced to limit their dreams and aspirations. As Jaime states, “It’s almost like I am tied down to the ground with a ball and chain because I don’t have my citizenship” (p. 15). For Jaime, receiving a high score on the military school entrance exam was not enough to fulfill his dreams of attending the Naval Academy at Annapolis and eventually joining the U.S. military. Perez emphasizes that even when

undocumented high school seniors surpass and exceed college eligibility requirements, college is not a guarantee.

In Part 2, he focuses on undocumented students in the community college setting. A common trend undocumented students encounter here is the idea of “trading down” their college options (The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education and Public Agenda, 2002); that is, they choose less expensive colleges rather than those that would best fit their educational goals and qualifications. Many of the community college students in this section gained admission to selective colleges and universities but the lack of financial aid coupled with limited transportation options meant that they could not attend their dream schools. Community colleges serve as a median where undocumented students do not have to compromise their dreams of pursuing higher education (Flores, Horn, & Crisp, 2006).

In Part 3, the author examines the trials and tribulations of undocumented students in the university setting. Once in college, undocumented students are further marginalized when they are restricted access to the basic resources and institutions most Americans would deem essential for survival. Angelica describes her undocumented status as a “metaphorical wheelchair” indicating that, “There are so many things I want to do and can’t do because I am being held back from my potential... I think I will do something big, I just need a chance” (p. 59). In this section of *We ARE Americans*, the intersection between public policy and the narrowing of college opportunity is even more poignant as undocumented students confront constraints that make it difficult to take advantage of the resources in the college setting. The lack of a driver license and the inability to obtain a passport means that undocumented students cannot benefit from co-curricular programs and experiential learning activities such as studying abroad, which have now become so intrinsically a part of the college experience (Teranishi, 2007; Terenzini, Pascarella, & Bliming, 1996).

In the last two sections of *We ARE Americans*, Perez contrasts the lived experiences of undocumented college graduates with that of formerly undocumented graduates. Lucia, an undocumented college graduate sums up her path to college and reflects upon her status by saying, “The biggest disappointment is knowing that there’s no light at the end of the tunnel ... at the end of my degree, there was no job for me. There was no job for my family. There was no way of me putting all this education to use that I had paid for by cleaning houses and taking care of people’s kids” (p. 91). When Lucia’s sentiments are put side-to-side with Ignacio, a formerly undocumented student who now possesses a PhD in education, we see how citizenship affords greater “life chances” and mobility (Oliver & Shapiro, 2006). Options and opportunities drastically change the course of a person’s life; Ignacio can be more optimistic because there are

greater outlets to apply his craft, whereas Lucia must continue to defer her dreams of being a lawyer.

Advancing Undocumented Students in Higher Education

Perez challenges the belief that in-state resident tuition is the only barrier that inhibits undocumented students from pursuing their college dreams. While others have documented the impact in-state resident tuition has had on college enrollment rates (Flores, 2010; Flores & Chapa, 2009; Perry, 2006) and college persistence (Flores & Horn, 2009), very few researchers have explored the larger impact political and social constraints have on undocumented students' college experiences. In states like California, the dreams of many undocumented students have come closer to reality with the passage of California Assembly Bill 540 (Guarneros, Bendezu, Perez Huber, Velez, & Solorzano, 2009), yet without citizenship, undocumented students are not fully incorporated into the campus community. As this book illustrates, undocumented students' college experiences differ greatly from that of their peers: the inability to participate in work-study opportunities, study abroad programs, and even to obtain a driver's license contribute to feelings of loneliness and isolation. As a result, these factors inhibit undocumented students from truly immersing themselves and benefiting from higher learning. This phenomenon has serious implications beyond academic success; it calls attention to the need for legalization and a direct pathway to citizenship.

Missed Opportunities: Loss of Intellectual and Civic Talent

In addition to illuminating the alienation undocumented students experience in higher education, Perez calls attention to the level of altruism and significant contributions undocumented students make in their communities. One of the primary purposes of college is to develop citizens who effectively and responsibly contribute to their communities and professions (Astin, 1999; Hurtado, 2003, 2007). Therefore, investing in students who utilize their education to make valuable and distinctive contributions is a form of societal advancement (Bowen & Bok, 1998). From seniors in high school to college graduates, a common thread across *We ARE Americans* is the idea of civic duty. Although lacking legal status, undocumented students want to contribute to society; however, they are not afforded the opportunities to do so (Gonzales, 2007). As Alba, an undocumented college graduate with a teaching credential in math recounts, "I finished college and I know I want to be a high school math teacher, but I can't teach. Initially, I was doing nothing. I was frustrated, I was depressed, I was sad ... now, I started school again, but I am going to be a dental assistant"

(pp. 111-112). Despite a shortage of math teachers across the country, Alba cannot apply her talent. Similarly, Michael, another undocumented college graduate with interests in public health, describes having to defer his dreams of being a doctor because of his legal status:

I worked a lot, but I was not getting paid a lot. Then I got a job at a laboratory and for the first time I felt like someone recognized the talent and potential that I had. I was doing a lot of microscope work analyzing DNA and human chromosomes. I was the first person without a college degree to be able to work in that place ... but then they found out that I didn't have a social [security number], so they let me go. After that ... I went back to working in toy stores and retail. (pp. 95-96)

Hurtado (2003) suggests redefining “citizenship” to include diversity and a commitment to civic equality. In every sense, undocumented students are full-bodied, engaged citizens; however, their achievements and talents continue to be under-utilized.

Charging Forward: Furthering the Goals of *We ARE Americans*

Perez illuminates the extraordinary accomplishments of 20 young people and amplifies the underexamined contributions of undocumented students. The voices in *We ARE Americans* are powerful and compelling and the author does an excellent job capturing the nuances of a “silenced struggle” (Perez Huber & Malagon, 2006). Perez argues that institutions of higher education must move beyond greater access and take seriously its mission of inclusion and educational equity.

The author’s organization of the book contributes immensely to understanding the complex relationship between citizenship and the experiences of undocumented students in higher education. *We ARE Americans* illustrates how financial concerns dictate education options for undocumented students in ways that do not impact other college-going populations. In addition, Perez highlights the compounding impact political and social constraints have on students’ college success (Rincon, 2008). While the author calls on researchers, policymakers, practitioners, and theorists to rethink current immigration policies, his sparse analysis and criticisms makes it difficult to unravel how each stakeholder can tap into their unique spheres of influence. At the same time, Perez’s approach opens the door for critics and supporters to engage in meaningful dialogue to address how to untie the hands of many capable undocumented students. These efforts are necessary for cementing a path towards legalization.

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Reviewer

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