

**Americans by Heart: Undocumented Latino Students and the Promise of Higher Education. William Pérez. New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2012, 192 pages, \$29.65 (paperback)**

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**Abstract:**

In August 2012, undocumented youth who were brought to the United States prior to their 16th birthday became eligible to apply for deferred action relative to deportation, per an administrative order by President Barack Obama. Although this action did not accomplish the same goals hoped for by Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act supporters, it did allow a portion of the unauthorized immigrant youth in this country a chance to apply for a temporary work permit and to come out from the shadows. At the start of his second term in January 2013, President Obama and a bipartisan group of Senators went to work drafting legislation for more comprehensive immigration reform. This historical moment makes William Pérez's book *Americans by Heart* all the more salient. The book is a product of his 2-year qualitative and quantitative study of undocumented Latino high school students (18% of the sample) and college students (34% attending community college, 48% at a 4-year college), mostly in California and Texas. The book illustrates what he learned about their social resources and constraints (Chapter 2), their academic and civic engagement (Chapters 3 and 4), their pathways into higher education (Chapter 5), and their status upon graduation (Chapter 6). Most important, the voices of the participants bring the reasons for deferred action and the DREAM Act vividly to life. In one participant's words, "I was really depressed because I was outstanding in school, and I was like, OK, I can't go to college" (p. 24). The determination and motivation of the participants is shown as well, as they continued to strive and often to excel against long odds.

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In addition to highlighting the students' voices, Pérez provides critically needed scholarly perspective on the social, political, and historical context that has brought the United States to this difficult place of reckoning about immigration laws. The economic realities of low-wage work and the complicity of U.S. policymakers are not ignored. After describing the context in which these youth are living, Pérez offers an overview of the psychological and academic effects of undocumented status. There are social challenges to be certain, including low-socioeconomic status families and communities, discrimination, lack of access to needed social services or financial aid, fears regarding deportation and a stigmatized identity, missed opportunities, and double the work. However, many of the participants described supports as well, perhaps partly because of the dual frame of reference that is inherent in immigrant families. "I feel that I don't take things for granted," stated one student,

I remember when I first came here in the 5th grade I would get free lunch. Back in Mexico, you have to buy all your own stuff because nothing is for free. I remember that I had friends in Mexico that would faint in school because they didn't have anything to eat. (p. 31)

These students and their families still believe in the American Dream, still feel it is their responsibility to work hard and do their best to achieve it. Family members are typically the strongest sources of optimism and encouragement, but study participants also indicated the presence of some supportive peers and school personnel. This support is critical, as family members often have little personal experience with the U.S. higher education system and are limited in terms of their ability to guide aspiring college students.

Pérez describes the daily resilience of undocumented students, many of whom continue to work hard in school and in paid jobs, even without the guarantee of attaining their dreams. He draws on psychology for a discussion of personal and environmental protective factors that help to moderate the effect of the demographic risk factors discussed previously. This effectively moves the scholarly dialogue beyond policy and educational issues into a realm that makes room for personal agency, motivation, tenacity, a sense of family obligation, and optimism. This represents an important contribution to the dialogue, as it acknowledges the important role the students themselves play in generating positive outcomes in their lives, as opposed to viewing them as victims of their situation. By measuring the degree to which these students were engaged in and valuing academic pursuits, leadership, and extracurricular opportunities, Pérez shows the effort expended by these students, some of whom did not speak English upon beginning their

schooling. Participation in the life of the school can generate a sense of belonging but also a sense of accomplishment and progress. Although Pérez cautions that “college-going and college-bound undocumented Latino students are not typical” (p. 65), the research population was skewed in that direction. Certainly, it is important to dispel stereotypes about undocumented youth as laborers or involved with gangs. Indeed, the participants described themselves as future leaders who were dedicated to a cause, activists and DREAMers in a new struggle for civil rights. Their involvement in volunteering, tutoring, social services, and other forms of civic engagement along with paid work and academic tasks was notable, especially against the discourse that casts undocumented students as lawbreakers.

The study discusses the documented trend toward utilizing community colleges as the entry point to higher education, especially for students who are not eligible for in-state tuition or need to stay close to home to support their families. However, it also notes the problems associated with that choice, such as lower degree completion or transfer rates and part-time student/part-time worker status. Even so, the community college students in the study were highly motivated to participate in higher education, to honor the hard work of their parents by achieving even a portion of the American Dream. Being undocumented was acknowledged as a challenge, but one they were working hard to overcome rather than one to which they would submit. In contrast, the students who graduated from college expressed their frustrations in the strongest possible way. One participant said, “Even if we’re finished with our education, it is a waste of talent because we can’t really participate in society” (p. 119). In some ways, having a role or task to fulfill as a student still allowed these undocumented youth an outlet for their optimism and energies, but facing a future with very few viable options for participation was crushing to them.

In conclusion, Pérez encourages readers to think more carefully about the dilemma of categorizing young people as “illegal” when they were brought to the US as minors. Rather, he suggests we focus on criteria for “membership” in a society, where youth are active participants in schools, in communities, in the work force, and in extracurricular activities and have invested their time and energy in efforts to belong and contribute to society. Further efforts to depict the daily lives and aspirations of undocumented youth could expand to areas of the country with more recently emerging immigrant communities, where the resources present would perhaps be even fewer, or to students who were not immediately college eligible but maintained aspirations of further education. The efforts of higher education to reach out to or shun undocumented students should also be documented. The need for reform of educational and immigration policy is clear. This text is highly relevant to the national conversation and is accessible to academic and popular consumers alike.

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