

# ***We ARE Americans: Undocumented Students Pursing the American Dream***

by *W. Perez*

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Reviewed by

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In *We ARE Americans: Undocumented Students Pursing the American Dream*, William Perez describes the challenges faced by undocumented students in America. The author advocates for a better life for the undocumented students, stressing their economic and social benefits to the American way of life. He writes:

The overwhelming majority of undocumented children and young adults have grown up in the United States, attended U.S. schools, and lived in the country for virtually all of their lives. Since they were raised in the United States during their formative years, they consider themselves Americans. In fact, most know no culture other than that of the United States, as their ties with their native countries were severed years ago when they left with their parents...Without full legal rights, undocumented youth will be barred from the traditional paths of upward mobility available to other immigrants throughout U.S. history (p. xxx).

This book is a collection of personal narratives “drawn from in-depth interviews with undocumented students from diverse educational settings that included public high schools, community colleges, state universities, private universities, and highly selective four-year institutions in Arizona, California, Colorado, the District of Columbia, Georgia, Illinois, Missouri, New Mexico, New York, Texas, Virginia, and Washington” (p. xxvii). It delivers a compilation of the author’s research culminated from individual stories of undocumented students.

Perez began interviewing undocumented students in 2006, attempting to “better understand their educational experiences” (p. xvii). As his research progressed, more questions emerged. Though the undocumented students are not eligible for financial aid for college, “What motivates these marginalized young adults to be so civically involved? Why are they devoted to a society that shuns them socially and politically?” (p. xvii). These questions help to guide Perez’s research and the context of his book.

The author begins with the struggles of undocumented students, an introduction to his research, and the background for his work. He discusses the changing demographics of immigrants. He then challenges long-held negative stereotypes of immigrants. Perez asserts that immigrants “(1) contribute to the economy, (2) do not strain social services, (3) and are not prone to criminal activity” (p. xxi). The author completes this discussion by detailing legislation regarding immigrant students, including *Plyer v. Doe*, in-state tuition and access legislation, and the DREAM (Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors) Act.

The narrative portion of the text tells the stories of four high school students, four community college students, four university students, and four college graduates. This section concludes with the stories of four formerly undocumented college graduates. As Perez details the voices of 20 current and formerly undocumented students he finds a strong emphasis on family values and close relationships and support from family members. Most parents had not attained higher education;

however, parents encouraged their children to attend college to have a better life than what they could provide to their children. Through these values, the students garnered a strong work ethic and deep determination. For example Penelope, a high school student, says this about her parents: “They have always motivated us to do better than they are doing” (p. 6).

Additionally, many students cite mentors and counselors as keys to their successes. Raul, a university student, remarks, “My second-grade teacher, who I actually still keep in touch with, was always very helpful...Also, my third-grade teacher, she actually bought me a laptop before I went to college” (p. 78). Lucia, a college graduate, also emphasizes the financial and emotional support of her teachers, “My high school history teacher paid for my grad night ticket; my other high school teacher paid for my class ring” (p. 89). Julieta, a college graduate, mentions a counselor who was particularly encouraging to her: “I met one counselor who took an interest in me...He told me, despite my status, I would get far in life, whereas my other counselors would never tell me that” (p. 104).

Perez found that despite high academic achievement (earning scholarships, participating in gifted and talented magnet programs, being in the top 5% of the graduating class, completing AP classes), the students were not afforded many opportunities for college attendance, such as financial aid. Jamie, a high school student remarks, “It was tough being called the nerd in middle school, but I realize that is who I needed to be. I realize I needed to be a hardworking student... if I didn’t do it for myself, nobody else would” (p. 12).

Finances are of great concern to undocumented students. Typically, their families make lower incomes, as they are often undocumented as well. Angelica, a university student notes, “I am taking a lot more units so I [can] graduate early because I don’t have enough money to pay for the next year” (p. 61). Michael, a college graduate states, “I remember [that] out of high school, I had been accepted to seven different universities, and I had already picked one...but my situation wouldn’t let me go...Where the heck are we going to get the money [for out-of-state tuition]?” (p. 95)

The undocumented status is also an obstacle in gaining lawful employment to assist in paying for college. There were stories of students’ initially learning of their undocumented status when they applied for their first job: “That was the first time that it opened my eyes to that fact that I was limited. In school, they say you can accomplish whatever you want or set your mind to, but they don’t say that it’s just for some” (p. 40).

Even though most undocumented students consider United States to be their home rather than their country of origin, the American government does not recognize them as citizens. Lucila, a community college student, says, “I don’t belong in Mexico, and I’ve always been here. This is the only place I know...If I go back there, I’m a little White girl who can’t really speak Spanish very well... I don’t belong here because I don’t have my papers, so it’s kind of like I’m in limbo” (p. 46). Sasha, a university student, echoes Lucila’s sentiments, “A lot of undocumented students embrace higher education. We just want an opportunity to show that we feel that this is our home.... We are ready to contribute” (p. 70).

Despite their continued financial and political hardships, many undocumented students are driven to pursue work in political action, public service, the military, advocacy, teaching, law, and the medical field. Jeronimo, a high school student wanted to be involved in the Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC), but was unable to because he could not obtain formal identification or citizenship. This may come as a surprise to some, but many of the students feel a strong sense of patriotism to the United States.

## **Strengths and Limitations**

Perez's text is well written and demonstrates the "thick description" typical of qualitative research. The author demonstrates the challenges that undocumented students face on a daily basis while highlighting their accomplishments. Perez interviewed mainly high-performing students, which may not be representative of the entire population of undocumented students in the United States. Additionally, while the text shares the experiences of the students, it provides a seemingly biased view of the issue. The author is passionate about the rights of undocumented students; however, he tends to only advocate and propagate his views on the subject.

## **Application**

### *Areas of Concern*

This book could be a meaningful text for a first-year experience curriculum; however, a few areas of concern exist. While the stories speak to the uniqueness of the experience for each student, the message is repetitive at times. This text is a compilation of narratives, so it does not read like a novel. The nature of the book may lend itself to a first-year curriculum, but it also may be challenging for some traditionally-aged college readers.

### *Discussion Opportunities*

Since the book is a compilation, a resulting benefit is that individual stories could be selected for focused discussions. The students' stories can be taken separately, a few at a time, or as a whole without losing the meaning for the reader. In fact, this book may be well-suited as a supplemental reading as opposed to a primary text. One major benefit of this book is that Perez provides a "Reading Group Guide" with a list of discussion questions to assist in facilitating group conversation as a whole. This may be a helpful tool for the first-year experience or orientation coordinating staff.

Excerpts from this book could be used in a first-year experience class, as part of new student programming or in a unit involving diversity. Discussion could surround immigration laws or the importance of strong mentoring. Or the book may work well as part of a discussion on transitions in an FYE course. The instructor could ask students to think about current adjustments they are making to college, and to imagine how that would be different if they were undocumented students.

Some outside offices that may be interested in assisting with programming and/or facilitating discussion may include partners in financial aid, commuter services, international programs, social work, multicultural centers, and student groups (specifically groups targeted to underrepresented populations, student political organizations such as College Republicans/Democrats, and advocacy groups). Financial Aid staff could assist in helping students understand the complex governmental aid structure during group discussions. Commuter Services could also benefit from the thoughts and voices of undocumented students, as many undocumented students are true commuters, often utilizing public transportation.

## **Other Institutional Applications**

Community colleges may find this text of particular interest because it emphasizes that for the undocumented high school students, the only affordable option for higher education (despite their academic achievement) might be to attend a community college. Some community colleges offer bachelor's degrees; in other cases, students may later transfer from a community college to a university. Therefore, community colleges play a unique role in educating undocumented students. This text would be useful to those people in the states where the research was conducted (Arizona,

California, Colorado, the District of Columbia, Georgia, Illinois, Missouri, New Mexico, New York, Texas, Virginia, and Washington), as these are the specific areas of larger concentration of undocumented students. A beneficial discussion may also arise from a regional conversation. For example, students in Maryland may benefit from reading stories from students in Virginia and/or the District of Columbia.

Perez challenges the reader to think about the positive contributions of the undocumented student and to advocate for equal protection for them. The book offers a variety of opportunities for discussion among first-year students as it increases awareness that “legal incorporation of undocumented youths and their families is a question of dignity and fundamental human rights” (p. 154).