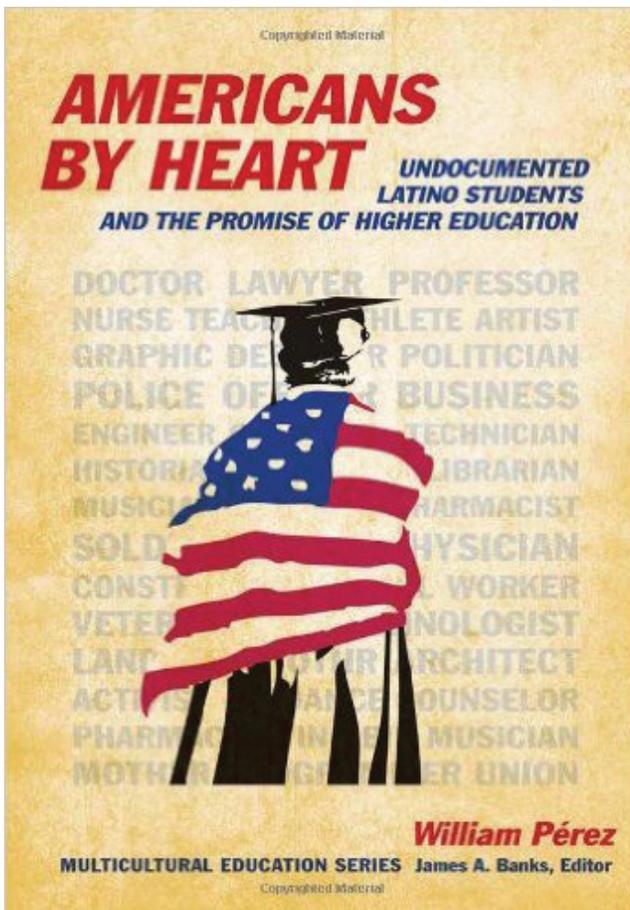


## BOOK REVIEW

# Americans By Heart: Undocumented Latino Students and the Promise of Higher Education.

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The 2016 presidential race heated up the issue of immigration, and more specifically undocumented or “illegal” immigrants once again came to the forefront of political wrangling and debate. What was often omitted in this partisan rhetoric was the fact that many who are classified as undocumented or illegal were brought to the United States when they were young, and have grown up, attended high school and lived most of their lives in America. Of the estimated 11.9 million undocumented immigrants in the United States, 9.6 million are from Latin American countries with Mexico accounting for the largest share at seven million (Gonzales, 2009). Sixty percent of undocumented immigrants between the ages of 18 and 24 have completed high school, and nearly half of these high school graduates within this age range have or are enrolled in a college or university (Pérez, Z. J., 2014). Because of their accessibility and open door policies, many of these individuals begin their post-secondary education at a community college. Additionally, with such diverse candidate views on education presented, one must question issues of equity and access for *all* students in higher education. Therefore, it is fitting that William Pérez (2012) in his comprehensive book, *American by Heart: Undocumented Latino Students and the Promise of Higher Education* focused mainly on the lives and challenges of undocumented Latino students who are attending community colleges. Pérez chronicles the hopes and ambitions of these students as well as the continuous obstacles that exist for each of them. Even though a growing number of community colleges across the nation have developed scholarship programs and implemented services specifically for undocumented students, many risks and roadblocks still exist for these individuals as they attempt to make their way through the higher education landscape.

According to Pérez (2012), 3.2 million undocumented children and adults are living in the United States and 65,000 undocumented students graduate from high school every

year. Furthermore, two-thirds of all immigrants reside in six states: California, Florida, Illinois, New Jersey, New York, and Texas. Pérez (2012) asked, "What does it mean to grow up acculturating to the norms and standards of a culture that eventually put legal limitations on your potential?" (p. 112). The ideal of *growing up American* is challenged when these young adults only receive partial access to resources that promote upward mobility. *Plyer v. Doe* (1982) ruled that undocumented students must be provided a K-12 public education. However, 14 years later, the 1996 *Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act* (PRWORA) and the 1996 *Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act* (IIRAIRA) barred undocumented students from access to financial aid for higher education. Further legislation with hopes of the *Dream Act* has stalled. This has taken a great toll on a large subgroup within the United States who with higher education could contribute significantly to the productive growth of society. Passel and Cohn (2009) reported that among all undocumented adults between 18 and 24, only half are currently enrolled or have ever attended a college and are far less likely than their native-born peers to attempt the college path. Barriers, such as limited access to financial support to pay for a college education, limited scholarship opportunities, and ongoing employment restrictions, are found around every corner for undocumented youth and their future remain uncertain at best.

Pérez has advocated for educational practice reform to meet the needs of undocumented students who are growing in number and who continue to be marginalized. Expedited reform efforts must be put into action to foster positive change. We, as a society, must help these 65,000 undocumented students who graduate from high school transition into a secure future that invests them in the country. The vehicle to achieve this endeavor is higher education. Being the most vulnerable subgroup within the Latino college population, these students are in desperate need of a cohesive support network that helps them navigate the college road to success. Furthermore, Pérez (2012) argued how immigrants with more education have a greater impact on society making them more productive members of the labor force as well as contributors on local, state, and national levels. As a result, he affirmed the view that immigrants, including undocumented students, are deserving of an investment of resources and need to be included in our national commitment to foster greater access to higher education.

*Americans by Heart* is a strong mixed method study that paints vibrant color on bleak black and white statistics. With survey data, in-depth interviews and ethnographic fieldwork, the researcher reveals the unique challenges, hardships, and feelings that undocumented immigrant youth and young adults experience in their pursuit to seek higher education and becoming contributing members to society. Perez clearly demonstrated the ways undocumented Latino students are marginalized and kept from realizing their true potential. He courageously sheds light on a group that has been kept in the shadows and stigmatized with negative perceptions for far too long. This book provides understanding, hope, and opens the door for crucial conversations that need to take place on the civil and human rights front for undocumented youth and adults.

The author's central purpose for the study was to understand the factors that shaped the pathway to college for undocumented Latino students. All data for the study in *Americans by Heart* were drawn from 110 undocumented Latino high school, community college, and university students who on average arrived in the United States at seven years of age (Pérez, 2012). The participants in the study were found to reside for over 13 years on average mainly in California but also in Texas, Virginia, Georgia, Missouri, New York, and Washington, DC. The average age was 19 years old. and most worked at least ten hours per week. The quantitative portion of Pérez's study consisted of an online survey and "included measures of academic achievement, civic engagement, extracurricular participation, leadership positions, and enrollment in advanced-level academic courses" (2012, p. 13). Pérez further immersed himself in qualitative in-depth interviews and ethnographic data collection learning about the lives of these students, their struggles, and how they had made a life for themselves and their families. He also spent time with school faculty and staff, community members, and elected officials to understand the broader social and political factors which directly or indirectly impacted the lives of the participants. The in-depth, semi-structured interviews were recorded, fully transcribed, and used the process of open coding to generate themes. The rich qualitative and quantitative data allowed for triangulation as he compared anonymous survey results and interviews about familial and educational experiences of undocumented Latino students with day to day interactions observed in his fieldwork. As a result, this allowed Pérez to present the complex layers of undocumented

Latino students' life experiences, legal battles, psychosocial risks, and coping mechanisms used to survive in American society. However, it would have been beneficial to the reader if Pérez had reflected on the study's methodological limitations as well as detailed how he ensured validity, reliability, and trustworthiness throughout the study.

Pérez has challenged the reader to imagine life with an undocumented status. Several rites of passage or milestones are missed out on when one does not have legal status. This includes securing a driver's license, a library card, being hired as a professional, voting, and obtaining a credit card. These are things that are often taken for granted in the American culture. This research forces the reader to reflect and understand the feelings of guardedness, fear of persecution or deportation, isolation, the need to stay in the shadows, and potential embarrassment that many of these individuals face every day. Empathy is fostered as many of these undocumented students seek to reframe their challenges and use them as motivation. They volunteer and become invested in society through activism and making a difference in one's community. However, will these outward efforts be enough to transform negative societal views and stereotypes found in social media?

*Americans by Heart* further explored how undocumented Latino young adults experience divergence and living in a duality with the law by straddling the system. Classified in an illegal status, they are privy to some resources but excluded from others. For example, they have a right to attend a P-12 school setting, but are barred from receiving financial aid for higher education. Additionally, there are some lower wage jobs available, but professional jobs require legal status even if the young adult holds a degree. Such a system keeps these potentially bright futures dim, uncertain, and locked away from financial stability. Participants reported often being stigmatized by society for the illegal status and yet at the same time, many were celebrated and received recognition for successful student achievement. Additionally, participants reported multiple instances of overt as well as covert prejudice and discrimination. The range included unsupportive teachers who questioned their abilities and talents, counselors who outright suggested that they were not college material, and feelings of exclusion or isolation from their White peers (Pérez, 2012).

Undocumented Latino students who attended college experienced unique challenges. Frustrations were reported by

the participants that they were not able to take advantage of opportunities to enhance their professional and educational experiences. They often noted having to work twice as hard as their American-born peers who were eligible for all available resources. Worried that their undocumented status would be disclosed and result in negative consequences, many had chosen to "stay in the shadows" for survival even while attending school. Additionally, because undocumented young adults attending college are not eligible for financial aid, many had to interrupt their studies by taking semesters off in-between to pay for their fees.

Pérez (2012) also identified transfer barriers that exist for Latino community college students. Parents and students are often not familiar with higher education, admission requirements, and how to navigate the system. These students were found to often lack adequate high school preparation and have limited English language proficiency skills, which made accessing support networks difficult. For instance, if tutoring in mathematics is only offered in English, communication gaps and frustration may result. Therefore, Pérez's research illustrates how critical it is to provide quality counselors and educators as well as resources, such as bilingual tutors, that can support second-language learners at the high school and college level. Pérez further explained the critical importance of positive school-based relationships with adults who "served as role models, set high expectations for what they can accomplish, built their confidence by believing in the capabilities, encouraged them to apply for college, and helped them find resources to pay for college" (2012, p 35).

Living in such a divergent and unstable state requires resilience and coping skills. Pérez affirmed that the *Dual Frame of Reference* (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 1995) can help students reframe their challenges and use them as a source of motivation. The following excerpt from Lilia, a participant in the study, clearly illustrated the Dual Frame of Reference concept:

"I feel that I don't take things for granted. I remember when I first came here in the 5th grade I would get a free lunch. Back in Mexico you have to buy your own stuff because nothing is for free. I remember that I had friends in Mexico who would faint in school because they didn't have anything to eat. It's really that bad. Some people can't go to school because they have to work. One of my friends from 4th grade in Mexico, he had to work

so he kept repeating the same grade and his mom was illiterate. My friend one time came to school without doing her homework and the teacher asked her why and she said it was because they didn't have any light." It is those drastic things that make you realize you're luck just to have a roof over your head (Pérez, 2012, p. 31).

Multiple resources supported undocumented immigrant youth in fostering resilience. Pérez affirmed that social networks provided security and safety in which to process experiences, discuss issues, and to cope with feelings. These social supports ranged from mentors to peers to parents. Even if the parents had language barriers or did not understand the college process, they could still provide emotional and verbal support which went a long way in helping a student persevere. Humor and self-affirmation were important as well as perceiving themselves as law abiding students with self-integrity. The students in Pérez's study did not want their undocumented circumstances to control their lives, even if it threatened their personal safety and aspirations. Every attempt was made to minimize this aspect of their existence. Additionally, Pérez (2012) noted, "school was the principal space in which they found a sense of belonging in society that helped them cope with their fears of persecution and inspired them to establish educational goals" (p. 32). As a result, teachers, counselors, and staff had the potential to build bonds with these students, serve as role-models, and mentor them along the road towards success. Finally, participation in extracurricular activities such as sports, leadership activities, and the arts contributed to positive adjustment and higher academic outcomes.

The study indicated that undocumented Latino students had a positive orientation towards school and learning as well as academic resilience. According to Pérez's literature review, resilience is defined as "overcoming the negative effects of risk exposure, coping successfully with traumatic experiences, and avoiding the negative trajectories associated with those risks" (2012, p. 43). Risk factors that can cause academic disengagement and negative psychosocial outcomes include having one's academic capabilities questioned by faculty or staff, attending impoverished and unsafe inner city schools, and low teacher expectations. This is certainly the case for both first-generation immigrants and second-generation students. The more resources students have to pull from during stressful experiences, the better the chances of resilience and positive outcomes.

Undocumented Latino students who demonstrated high levels of academic resilience had "personal protective factors" that pushed them through times of dissonance and challenge. Pérez (2012) noted these personal protective factors included having: (1) a strong academic identity; (2) optimism; (3) competitiveness; (4) tenacity; (5) motivation to avoid the same negative fate as peers; (6) obligation to be a role model for siblings; and (7) family obligation to take care of their parents in the future. Additionally, Pérez noted the significance of Steele's Self-Affirmation theory (1988) in the lives of undocumented Latino students. In essence, humans have a need to maintain a positive self-image and be considered morally good, competent, and stable. Therefore, they will create rational narratives designed to protect themselves from perceived threats.

In order to cope with life experiences in American society, undocumented young adults often appealed to the "greater sense of common good through which they have earned their belonging" (Pérez, 2012, p. 82). Therefore, this group is more likely than others to volunteer through civic engagement which includes: (1) providing a social service; (2) working for a cause/political activism; (3) tutoring, coaching, child-care, or academic support; and (4) functionary work (cleaning, maintenance, or administrative tasks). In elementary, middle, and high school, most of these students participated in functionary work, while college students were more likely to provide a social service or engage in activism.

How are undocumented students working to shift current views? Activism allows undocumented Latino students to affirm and demonstrate themselves as good people and model citizens. Pérez (2012) found that 34 percent of the participants volunteered at least 1-10 hours regularly during elementary school. Similarly, 46% of the participants volunteered at least 1-10 hours regularly during middle school, 67% during high school, and 58 percent during college. He also noted that undocumented students are far more likely than their U.S. born peers to volunteer and give back to society. As a result, the author was able to argue that such activism fosters the self-perception of being law abiding citizens and counters negative perceptions on immigration.

It is important to note how college going or college bound undocumented students have different academic profiles than that of Latino students in the United States. Interestingly, Pérez's research (2012) confirmed that undocumented students on average have "higher average participation

rates in Gifted and Talented Programs, Advanced Placement Programs, higher grade point averages, and more academic and extracurricular awards" (p.65). This positive social orientation toward learning and school is a factor that helps support success. Additionally, this helps breakdown the stereotype that lumps all Latino students into one category.

With election outcomes that have left many unsettled and a myriad of viewpoints being hurled steadfast at the American public daily, it is time to shed light on misconceptions and fear of the unknown. It is time to understand the needs and rights of all those living in American society. This study illuminates the lives of many students in need of support and advocacy for their rights and who yet remain overlooked in the shadows. Pérez contributes greatly to this multicultural educational series that explores concepts of social justice and equitable learning practices, culturally responsive teachings, and the philosophy of American education in an ever-changing diverse landscape. Future research should update this study with the latest information regarding the issues at hand, and should include other immigrant cultures for comparison. Additionally, it should continue to dig deeper into the impact of technology as well as poverty, the role of assimilation and acculturation, and family experiences on undocumented Latino students living in the United States. These various aspects can yield a richer understanding in the marginalized plight of these promising students.

This is not only part of the civil rights that should be shared with undocumented immigrants, but human rights as well. As Sasha, an undocumented college student in the study affirmed, "This is the only home we know. We are ready to contribute. We are ready to be a part of American society" (Pérez, 2012, p. 133).

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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