

We ARE Americans: Undocumented Students Pursuing the American Dream

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The Hispanic Outlook in Higher Education. Mar 8, 2010. Vol. 20, Issue 11; pg. 31

We ARE Americans: Undocumented Students Pursuing the American Dream, by William Pérez. 161 pages. Sterling, Va.: Stylus Publishing, LLC, 2009- ISBN 978-1-57922376-2. \$22.50 paper.

In We ARE Americans, William Pérez chronicles the plight of 16 "illegal alien" students, representing 2.4 million nationwide, forced to delay or scrap their dreams because of their legal status. Although reared in the United States, the students learn that without American citizenship, achieving education and career goals can be a nightmare.

First-person accounts by Lilia, Sasha, Julia, Eduardo, Ignacio and others reveal more than poignant anecdotes. They illustrate that, despite myriad obstacles, some of the undocumented can obtain a higher education and a measure of success.

Michael worked two jobs and got help from his family so that he could pay for college. After earning a Bachelor of Science in molecular biology, he found he could not work as a biologist, due to his legal status.

Ignacio, like Michael and the others, faced numerous obstacles but ultimately graduated from a prestigious university, drawing inspiration from his family and his heritage. "In college, I felt like I was representing my family. I felt like I was representing all Latinos. I felt like if I gave up, what would they say about me?" said Ignacio.

Some 65,000 undocumented students graduate from the nation's high schools each year. Yet even with stellar grades and achievements, these students do not qualify for educational and career opportunities due to their legal status. In 2001, the Senate introduced the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act, commonly known as the DREAM Act. The proposed law, which would extend "conditional" legal status to the students for six years, has failed to pass.

Pérez, professor of education at Claremont Graduate University and researcher of immigrant adolescent social development, examines Plyler v. Doe, a landmark case in which the Supreme Court, in 1982, struck down a state law preventing school districts from enrolling the children of the undocumented. While the decision was a victory for undocumented immigrants, the Supreme Court ruling fell short. The law did not extend the right to a public education after high school graduation. Consequently, undocumented students who graduate at the top of their class are forced to turn down scholarships to the most outstanding universities, solely because of their status.

Pérez points out that in Plyler v. Doe the Supreme Court affirmed the right of all children in the United States to obtain a free public education regardless of legal status. But once alien students earn a diploma, they are marginalized by society due to their legal status.

The state of Texas, with its legacy of institutional discrimination against Hispanics, was again the basis for the 1982 Supreme Court decision. In Plyler, the high court said that neither Texas nor any other state can deny funds to school districts that accept and educate the children of undocumented immigrants.

The Supreme Court found that the Texas law was "directed against children and imposed its discriminatory burden on the basis of a legal characteristic over which the children have little control," namely, having been brought here illegally here by their parents. Denying the children in question a proper education, the court said, would likely contribute to the creation and perpetuation of a subclass of illiterates within our boundaries.

Although it's been many years since the historic decision in Plyler, the battle to keep undocumented immigrant youths from becoming full-fledged American citizens rages on. But the burden of being here illegally has been challenging for the students too.

"It's almost like I am tied down to the ground with a ball and chain because I don't have citizenship," said Jaime, who graduated from high school with a 4.0 GPA. Jaime came to the U.S. from México when he was 4.

After reading We ARE Americans, I realized that keeping a young Latino group in a second-class citizen status may be the new manifest destiny. Hispanics living in the shadows ensure a population at the ready; ready to mow lawns, wash windows and work in restaurant kitchens.

Pérez stresses that passage of the DREAM Act would grant undocumented students equal access to scholarships and other forms of financial aid. In defense of those brought here by their parents, he says, "It's time to do the right thing."

Rosie Carbo has a journalism degree from the University of North Texas. Her articles have appeared in Texas publications and nationwide.