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Examining current issues in education that highlight the ongoing work of the faculty of the School of Educational Studies at Claremont Graduate University.

Loss of Talent? Citizenship and Higher Education Access for Undocumented Students

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Jacqueline is an outstanding student. She is also undocumented. Brought to the United States by her parents at the age of two, she has no memories of Mexico, the country where she was born. Her mother is a permanent resident while her father's application for residency was recently denied. Her father has a sixth grade education and her mother continued her studies after she arrived in the U.S., ultimately earning her GED. Jacqueline, her sister, and parents have always lived in a tiny guesthouse in her aunt's residence.

As early as elementary school Jacqueline excelled in academics and received numerous awards, particularly in Math, her favorite subject. "There was never a semester where I didn't receive anything," she remembers. In elementary school, she began to develop an interest in planes; flying and designing them. She was identified as "gifted" in sixth grade and was subsequently enrolled in GATE (Gifted and Talented Education) and honors classes. In middle school she participated in various academic competitions. In high school she was involved in student council as class secretary, the math club, and the soccer team. She graduated in the top 15% of her class.



Throughout her education, Jacqueline's parents constantly reminded her about the importance of education. For that reason, her father forbids her from getting a job because he wants her to focus her time solely on school.



School of Educational Studies at Claremont Graduate University

For more than 80 years, the School of Educational Studies (SES) at Claremont Graduate University (CGU) has been a leader in providing graduate education. Many of our more than 5,700 alumni have held positions as college presidents, superintendents, principals, award-winning teachers, and tenured professors at colleges and universities around the world.

It was not until the eleventh grade that Jacqueline learned that her undocumented status was going to be an obstacle in her higher education goals. She had always wanted to attend a nearby university with a nationally recognized aerospace engineering program. Her life goal continues to be to work for NASA as an engineer. Since she could not afford the tuition at her dream school, because she is not eligible for any type of financial aid due to her undocumented status, her teachers and counselors advised her to continue her studies at the more affordable, community college.

Making the best of her circumstances, Jacqueline became involved in her school's honors program and was admitted into the National Community College Honor Society. During her first year at the community college, she earned a perfect 4.0 GPA. She also assumed a leadership position in a student group that advocates for the rights of undocumented students. In addition to her academic and leadership activities, Jacqueline volunteers at a local elementary school tutoring students. Despite her many accomplishments, Jacqueline often feels she "has to work twice as hard as everyone else" to demonstrate her dedication and worthiness. She also worries about not being able to use her college degree after she graduates.

Jacqueline's story broadly illustrates the types of accomplishments and achievements, as well as the frustrations, anguish, and occasional hopelessness experienced by undocumented students who dedicate themselves to school in pursuit of a college degree only to find their dreams shattered. She is only one of the 65,000 undocumented students who graduate from high school every year but are not eligible to work legally nor qualify for any type of financial aid to attend college.

The Context of Education for Undocumented Students

During the last two decades, the United States has undergone a dramatic demographic transformation due to immigration. Whereas in 1990 the foreign born population was less than 20 million, by 2007, it had nearly doubled to 38 million. This change has been registered in school districts across the nation, where immigrant children represent 20% of students and are expected to become 30% of the student body by 2015¹.

Among the growing immigrant population are 12 million individuals who reside in the U.S. without legal authorization. Failed immigration policies as well as economic push and pull factors have played a central role in the growth of the undocumented population². California is home to the highest number of undocumented residents with an estimated 2.8 million, followed by Texas with nearly 1.4 million, and Florida with 850,000³. These numbers include approximately 3.4 million youths under 24 years of age, about one-fourth of the total undocumented population⁴, that were brought by their parents when they were very young, often before schooling age.

Before 1982, various school districts across the country tried to bar undocumented children from attending public schools. Access to education for undocumented students came as a result of the 1982 Supreme Court case of *Plyer v. Doe*. The Court ruled that undocumented children must be provided access to a public education, indicating that denying education to children who cannot affect their own status would impose a lifetime of hardship on them for their disabling status. The Court further stated that educating children, regardless of their immigration status, is essential for creating individuals who can function in society and contribute to the development of the United States.

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"The faculty of the School of Educational Studies believes a socially just nation educates all its diverse citizenry through networks of effective and accountable organizations that interact responsibly with families and communities..."

From our vision statement

Presently however, court-mandated equal access to education ends when undocumented students graduate from high school. Upon graduating, and after extensive public educational investment, higher education becomes an elusive dream for these young adults, with only 10% of undocumented males and 16% percent of females between the ages of 18-24 enrolling in college,⁵ a figure that ranges between 7,000-13,000.⁶ About two-thirds are of Latino descent and 40% reside in California.

Despite the efforts of immigrant advocates and immigration reform proponents, the federal government has not been able to agree on legislation to address the difficult circumstances of undocumented students. In 2001, Congress first introduced a bill, which became known as the Development, Relief, and Education of Alien Minors (DREAM) Act that seeks to benefit undocumented students who have lived in the United States before the age of 16, have lived here continuously for at least five years, and have a U.S. high school diploma. If passed, the DREAM Act would enable high school graduates to apply for conditional status, which would authorize them for up to 6 years of legal residence. During the 6-year period, the student would be required to attend college and graduate, or serve in the U.S. military for at least 2 years. If the student meets these requirements, she or he would be granted permanent residency at the end of the 6-year period⁷. As of 2009 however, the DREAM Act has not been passed into law and undocumented students remain in limbo.

Also beginning in 2001, Texas, followed by California, Utah, New York, Washington, Illinois, Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, and New Mexico, took matters into their own hands and passed legislation to allow undocumented students to be eligible for in-state tuition rates and began to open the doors of higher education to undocumented students. Three

states: Texas, New Mexico, and Oklahoma went a step further and allowed undocumented students to be eligible for various grants under their state financial aid programs. While undocumented immigrants in these states are allowed to attend college at in-state tuition rates, they are still not able to work due to their undocumented status even if they earn a college degree.

The process set in motion through the 1982 federal ruling calling for a national guarantee of basic education to all students regardless of immigration status continues to fuel debates on state policies around postsecondary admission, tuition, and financial aid for undocumented students. As a generation of

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undocumented students has come of age, graduating from U.S. high schools, they are seeking the next level of opportunity. Presently however, court-mandated equal access to education ends when undocumented students graduate from high school.

Research Study

I began studying undocumented students in the spring of 2006 to better understand the educational experiences of those who wanted to go to college or who were already in college. I invited three of my CGU students – Richard Cortes, Heidi Coronado, and Karina Ramos – to join my research team. To better understand the issue and generate and activities that most college-bound students list on their college

applications, I did not expect the high levels of community service and volunteering that they reported. These findings were particularly remarkable because these immigrant youth are so marginalized in our society. They have almost no legal rights, they can be deported at any time, are not eligible for any type of government services, cannot legally work, and most frustrating of all, they are not eligible for grants or loans to attend college.

Among the most significant findings, we discovered that as a group, college-eligible undocumented students demonstrate academic achievement, leadership participation, and civic engagement patterns that are often above that of their US-citizen counterparts. Over 90% reported volunteer and community service participation and 95% had participated in extracurricular activities. In those activities, 78% held a leadership position such as club president, editor-in-chief of the school newspaper or captain of a sports team.

We also found that undocumented students exhibit various aspects of psychological resilience, perseverance, and optimism. For example, 37% had been identified as gifted. In addition, while students had various responsibilities at home such as taking care of younger siblings, they also worked an average of 13 hours per week during high school, 30 hours per week during college, participated in extracurricular and volunteer activities at very high levels, yet they still earned high academic marks in their academically demanding courses.

However, despite public investment in their education, high levels of achievement, community service, leadership experience, and a deep sense of commitment to American society, they remain without legal status, are not considered American and thus are not eligible for any type of assistance to attend college even though over 90% of the students we surveyed aspire to obtain a Masters

degree or higher. If these qualifications do not warrant official recognition of their “Americanness,” then what does?

I examine this issue in a new book titled, *We ARE Americans: Undocumented Students Pursuing the American Dream* (2009, Stylus). This book is a compilation of 16 case studies of students that are currently undocumented and four others who lived a significant proportion of their lives undocumented, but who have now legalized their status. Among these students are valedictorians, honors students, award winners, class presidents, and other exceptional student leaders.

In their own words, undocumented students reflect on their hardships, accomplishments, dreams, ambitions, and strong desire to be accepted as regular Americans. Their parents brought them to this country when they were infants in most cases. For many of them, this country is the only one they know; it is their home. They have grown up “American,” their dominant language is English, and they strongly identify as Americans, yet they are unable to pursue higher education despite their remarkable academic qualifications. Despite the numerous social, political, economic, and educational challenges they have faced, the students exhibit the same type of tenacious optimism, drive, and perseverance that fueled their parents desire to pursue a better future in the U.S.

The United States Supreme Court mandates that undocumented children be accepted as students, but given immigration policy they are not accepted as citizens. The case studies in the book suggest that the lack of access to citizenship and higher education for high achieving undocumented immigrant students represents an ongoing loss of intellectual and civic talent to American society. Their stories highlight many of the deep flaws of failed immigration and education policies in the United

States, and the subsequent impact on immigrant families and communities.

Based on findings from my research, I argue that the civic and academic dedication of undocumented students warrants at the very least official government recognition. Going a step further, the federal government can even support and encourage this type of civic commitment by rewarding such model behavior with legislation that provides a path to legalization.

Over the last decade, citizenship policy and how it relates to the integration of immigrants in host societies has emerged as an increasingly important topic of concern for public-policy makers, scholars, the media, and immigrant communities. Citizenship matters have become a major source of political controversy in debates ranging from welfare rights and naturalization rules to multiculturalism and plural nationality. The increase of scholarly literature on citizenship and immigrant integration that has been emanating from the academy in recent years suggests that a widespread re-evaluation of citizenship questions has already begun.

In the past several decades, the United States, Western European countries, and other nations have gradually extended a growing menu of rights and benefits traditionally associated with formal citizenship and nationality to different groups of non-nationals, in particular to long-term, foreign residents. Given the educational, social, and economic investment American society has placed on undocumented students as a result of the *Plyer* decision, I argue that ultimately it is in the best interest of the United States to get a return on that investment by legalizing students and providing full citizenship privileges rather than keeping them marginalized, and limiting their social and economic contributions. My recommendation echoes the arguments made by the Supreme Court 27 years ago in the case of *Plyer v. Doe*: it is in

the compelling interest of the United States to provide higher education access and formal citizenship to talented undocumented students.

Getting Involved

My research makes a persuasive case for the legalization of college-going undocumented students. Nevertheless, efforts to do so have stalled in Congress. There is a need for renewed efforts to bring this issue to the forefront. It should be noted that support for legislation to legalize undocumented students is not partisan, but rather, ranges across the social and political spectrum.

Everyone can play a role by becoming involved in lobbying state and federally elected officials, supporting grassroots and non-profit organizations that work on behalf of immigrants, and educating and encouraging others to become involved. The first step is to call and email your elected officials letting them know that you want them to support the DREAM Act and encouraging your friends, relatives, and co-workers to do the same. Another way to get involved is to donate time and/or money to grassroots and non-profit organizations that advocate and lobby for the DREAM Act. You can also join various Facebook and Myspace groups by searching for them using the keyword, “Dream Act.”

Notes

1. Fix, M., & Passel, J. S. (2003). *U.S. Immigration: Trends and Implications for Schools*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute.
2. Passel, J. S. (2006). *The size and characteristics of the unauthorized migration population in the U.S.: Estimates based on the March 2005 Current Population Survey*. Washington, DC: Pew Hispanic Center.
3. Hoefler, M., Rytina, N., Campbell, C. (2006). *Estimates of the unauthorized immigrant population residing in the United States: January 2005*. Washington, DC: Department of Homeland Security, Office of Immigration Statistics.
4. Passel, J. S. (2006). *The size and characteristics of the unauthorized migration population in the U.S.: Estimates based on the March 2005 Current Population Survey*. Washington, DC: Pew Hispanic Center.
5. Fortuny, K., Capps, R., Passel, J. S. (2007). *The Characteristics of Unauthorized Immigrants in California, Los Angeles County, and the United States*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute.
6. Passel, J. S. (2003). *Further Demographic Information Relating to the DREAM Act*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute.
7. Yates, L. S. (2004). Plyer v. Doe and the rights of undocumented immigrants to higher education: Should undocumented students be eligible for in-state college tuition rates? *Washington University Law Quarterly*, 82, 585-609.



William Perez is an applied developmental psychologist. His program of research focuses on immigrant adolescent social development (e.g., ethnic identity development, self-esteem, acculturation), academic achievement, Hispanic education, and child and adolescent well-being. He has studied how cultural brokering, family obligation, acculturation, biculturalism and ethnic identity are related to academic engagement among immigrant adolescents. A second line of work examines how physical characteristics like skin color and physiognomy are associated with the acculturation patterns of immigrant youth. In a parallel line of work, he has also studied how minority adolescents' experiences with discrimination and social stereotypes influences their academic identities. A third line of work has examined the achievement motivation and civic engagement patterns of college-ready undocumented immigrant students. Before joining CGU, professor Perez worked at various research institutes including the RAND Corporation, the UCLA Neuropsychiatric Institute, the Tomas Rivera Policy Institute, and the Stanford Institute for Higher Education Research. He has presented his research on undocumented immigrants at various national and international research conferences and has been invited to lecture at various prestigious institutions of higher education including Harvard University, Stanford University, Brown University, UCLA, Pomona College, and Pitzer College. Dr. Perez has also been quoted as an academic expert on immigrant students in various newspapers and broadcast media outlets.

Claremont Graduate University is a member of the Claremont Consortium of seven institutions of higher education (Pomona College, Harvey Mudd College, Claremont McKenna College, Scripps College, Pitzer College, and Keck Graduate Institute). It is an independent institution devoted entirely to graduate education.



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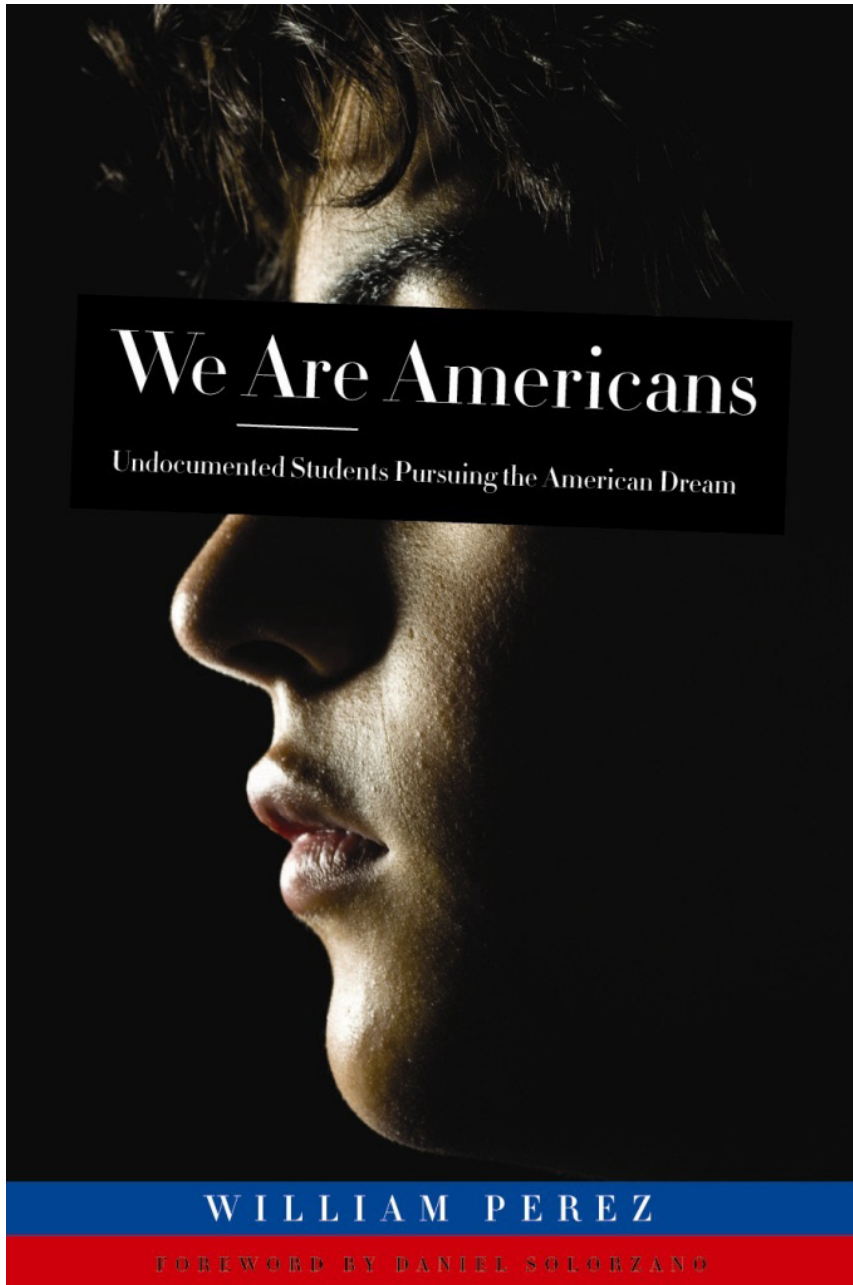
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Latest Publication by Dr. William Perez

We are Americans: Undocumented Students Pursuing the American Dream



"I was like, "I don't care if Berkeley doesn't want me. I'm going to do something else," so I used my connections. I just talked to everybody and anybody I knew. I would tell them my story and they would follow-up with me and they would say, "I don't know how we're going to help you, but we're going to help you," and they would do things like give me scholarships and just things like that."

"I didn't choose to come here. I didn't ask for my situation. I feel like it's a punishment. I did everything I was told to do. I stayed out of trouble. I stayed out of gangs. I didn't get pregnant at 16. I'm a great member of society. I know more of civic duty than most naturalized or US born citizens. I know more about politics than most US citizens. So why am I being punished?"

Over a century ago, John Dewey (1900) pushed us to pursue the antiliberalist position that "What the best and brightest parent wants for his [her] *own* child, that must the community want for *all* its children" (p. 3) (emphasis mine). I concur with Dewey and emphasize that 'all' includes undocumented students. *from the foreword by Daniel G. Solorzano, p. xiii.*

"This fascinating look at the next generation of undocumented immigrants unpacks the complexities of the debate and puts unforgettable human faces to its subjects. Perez, a developmental psychologist and professor in Southern California, plumbs the stories of students living with the constant threat of deportation for an answer to the question, "What does it mean to be an American?" Raised in this country by parents who gained access illegally, the 16 high school, college and post-graduate students profiled here (standing in for 65,000 nationwide) have each embraced our language, culture and collective dream, but are denied pathways to success. Perez, who has worked at a variety of research institutions, including the RAND Corporation and the Stanford Institute for Higher Education Research, makes a compelling argument for changing legislation on many fronts, including bottom line economics. Vitally, he argues, undocumented students are prevented from giving back to the communities that have raised them, thus limiting the country itself. No matter what one's position is on legalizing immigrants, this collection of inspiring, heartbreaking stories puts a number of unforgettable faces to the issue, making it impossible to defend any one side in easy terms or generalities." *Publishers Weekly, Starred Web Pick of the Week*