

FOREWORD

IN late March of 2006, thousands of high school students across the country walked out in support of better-quality schools in Latina/o communities and for the rights of undocumented students at all levels of the education pipeline. On May 1, 2006, well over a million people throughout the United States demonstrated for the rights of undocumented people and against proposed federal legislation titled the *Border Protection, Antiterrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act* (H.R. 4437). This proposed law would have mandated a felony charge against any undocumented person found to be residing in the United States, and it barred undocumented residents from ever gaining legal status in the United States. Although the demonstrations were seen as important milestones in the historical struggle for immigrant rights, they are part of a larger history of struggle for human rights in the United States, and indeed around the world. This period also became a significant catalyst for an important body of research on the undocumented community generally and undocumented students in particular. Professor William Perez has become an intellectual leader in this critical area of research; in the spring of 2006 he began the project from which the 20 interviews for his book *We ARE Americans* are drawn.

Although quantifying the number of undocumented Latina/o immigrants residing in the United States remains a challenge, current estimates provide a sense of their significance within the U.S. population. The U.S. Census Bureau (2004) estimates that in 2004 there were 34 million foreign-born residents in the United States. Of these 34 million people, almost 53 percent were Latina/o. In the same year, just over 9 million foreign-born residents lived in California, of whom 55 percent were Latina/o. The U.S. Census does not report the legal status of foreign-born immigrants, but in a recent report the *Pew Hispanic Center*

estimates that around 12 million undocumented people live in the United States (Passel, 2006). When we look at the Latina/o educational pipeline, we see enormous leaks at high school graduation, baccalaureate completion, and graduate and professional school degrees (Perez Huber, Huidor, Malagon, & Solorzano, 2006; Yosso & Solorzano, 2006). When we examine Latina/o non-citizens, the numbers are even worse (Guarneros, Bendezu, Perez Huber, Velez, & Solorzano, 2009; Perez Huber, Malagon, & Solorzano, 2009).

Whether in legislation, public policy, or the media, utilizing a language of exclusion and charges of economic and social cost are key constructs in framing the Latina/o immigration issue. The terms *illegal alien*, *illegal immigrant*, *illegals*, *undocumented workers*, *undocumented immigrants*, *guest workers*, *temporary workers*, *braceros*, and “*wetbacks*” have been used throughout U.S. history to refer to Latina/o immigrants crossing the border and residing in the United States. However, no matter how the issue is framed, one thing seems to hold constant: The framing of the debate around “immigration reform” has focused primarily on immigrants themselves, void of any significant discussions about the forces or structures that create the international migration of people. From a historical and economic standpoint, immigration reform has stratified Latina/o immigrants in a way that encouraged their incorporation into the U.S. labor market economy while denying them full membership into U.S. society. The exclusionary nature of immigration reform has been its most characteristic feature since the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848 (Perez Huber, Benavides, Malagon, Velez, & Solorzano, 2008; Velez, Perez Huber, Benavides, de la Luz, & Solorzano, 2008). However, there is a growing body of research that reframes immigration and immigrant issues and focuses on the vast array of social and cultural wealth these communities bring to the world generally and to the United States in particular (Abrego, 2006; Gonzales, 2007, 2008, 2009; Olivérez, 2007; Perez, Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado, & Cortes, 2009; Perez Huber et al., 2008; Perez Huber & Malagon, 2007; Rangel, 2001; UCLA Center for Labor Research and Education, 2008; Velez et al., 2008, Yosso, 2005, 2006). Dr. Perez’s book, *We ARE Americans*, is an essential part of that research.

We ARE Americans begins by placing undocumented people at the center of the story and in a much-needed historical and contemporary context. Professor Perez provides the evidence to challenge the notion that undocumented people are a drain on social services and makes the argument that they have contributed, and continue to contribute, significantly to our nation's economic and social well-being. Starting with Penelope, a highly motivated and tenacious high school senior and ending with Nicole, a newly minted Ph.D., Professor Perez has crafted 20 compelling portraits of resilience and survival in a social and educational world that continuously places barriers in the paths of these gifted and talented scholars.

Over a century ago, John Dewey (1900) pushed us to pursue the anti-elitist 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. Professor Perez's research provides persuasive evidence that the talent we lose when we exclude undocumented students is a devastating loss to the United States and to our values of “equal justice under law” and “equal educational opportunity.”

Daniel G. Solorzano

Professor of Social Science & Comparative Education
Graduate School of Education & Information Studies
University of California, Los Angeles

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