

“Hoping For the Best But Expecting the Worst”

A Review of *Undocumented Immigrants
and Higher Education: Sí se puede!*

By Alejandra Rincón, LFB Scholarly Publishing, 2008
Reviewed by Ellen Badger



BOOK NOTES

AS THE DIRECTOR OF THE INTERNATIONAL STUDENT OFFICE at a public, medium-size university in New York State, I have the opportunity to meet with many students from countries throughout the world. This includes students similar to the ones described in Alejandra Rincón’s new book,

Undocumented Immigrants and Higher Education: Sí se puede!

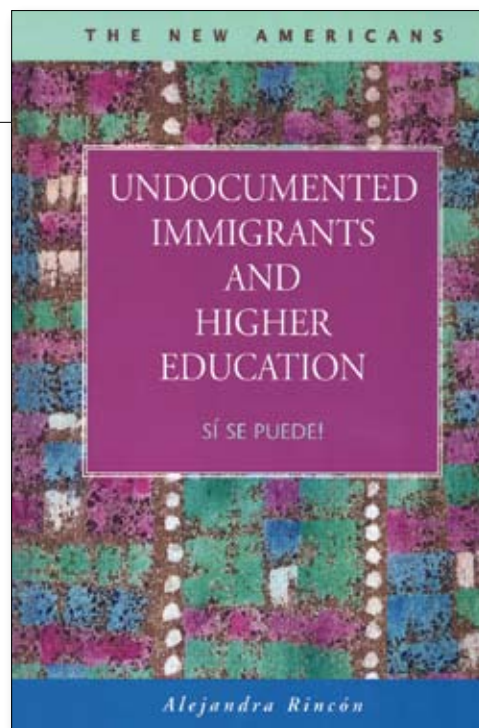
Rincón’s thoroughly researched book provides a comprehensive history and discussion of the court rulings, legislative actions at the federal and state levels, and advocacy efforts related to undocumented immigrants at U.S. colleges and universities, including her own state of Texas, where she has been a tireless advocate on this issue. It is an essential reference for courses that discuss U.S. immigration history or U.S. immigration law, as well as for those who advocate on behalf of immigrants; including social services professionals, attorneys, higher education administrators and faculty, legislators, students, and advocacy groups. Readers will find inspiration in Rincón’s telling of the now decades-long effort to support the rights of undocumented immigrants to attend school.

Not too long ago, a junior business major from Trinidad came to meet with me. She had an excellent academic record in one of our most competitive programs. She had been offered a part-time summer position in a university office, and her supervisor had recommended that she speak with me to see if she was eligible to accept the position.

I learned that she had entered the United States with her family a number of years ago, attended secondary school in New York State, but did not have a legal immigration status. I asked if she had any document issued by the U.S. government that authorized her to work in the United States. She did not. I had to explain that she would not be able to accept the position.

New York is one of only 10 states that currently allow students who have attended New York State high schools but lack a legal immigration status to be eligible for in-state tuition rates at its public colleges and universities. However, for many undocumented students, even in-state tuition is not enough to allow them to attend, since they are not eligible for any federal or state need-based financial aid programs. Many who can attend face the prospect of not being able to seek employment in their chosen field of study upon graduation, even if it is a field that has a shortage of workers.

Rincón notes the dilemma facing these students, who have been educated through the twelfth grade level in the states where they reside, have begun to graduate with



college degrees, but now find themselves unable to launch their professional careers. They are thwarted by federal laws that bar such students from legal employment, even if they have graduated from a U.S. college or university. Attempts to address this problem in Congress, including federal legislation such as the DREAM Act, have been co-opted by the larger debate over “comprehensive immigration reform” and the failure of Congress to enact such legislation.

What sets this book apart from other works on the subject are the contexts introduced by Rincón, the “historical, social, economic, and political circumstances surrounding the debate.” Dr. Rincón discusses the “long-standing contradiction whereby a significant part of the [U.S.] economy is built on the backs of undocumented workers, yet their children are denied the opportunity to attend college at nondiscriminatory rates.”

Rincón traces the history of immigrants’ access to public education which is “nearly as old as the history of U.S. public education itself,” and provides references and a discussion of U.S. immigration legislation that dates back to the 1700s.

Rincón's book elevates the immigration debate to a new level by introducing a discussion of how the current arguments in support of in-state tuition for undocumented immigrants can be problematic to their cause. Rincón makes the case that some of these arguments are in fact, insulting and denigrating. Those problematic arguments, frequently used to rebuke anti-immigrant attacks, include economics ("if these students attend college, they can then be productive members of their community"; crime deterrence- ("if these students are not educated, they will instead turn to a life of crime"; assimilation (these students have grown up in the United States, have learned English and have abandoned their national heritage); and lastly, that their lack of immigration status is not their fault, in effect claiming that the parents have victimized their own children by bringing them here illegally. Certainly, these young people should not be penalized for the actions of their parents. Yet, these students and their families do not view the issue in that framework. Instead, they view the issue as a matter of equality.

Rincón puts forth the idea that the discussion of higher education access for undocumented immigrants should include the fact that denial of access is discrimination based on race and national origin rather than solely an issue of immigration status, and that advocacy efforts be framed in the context of equality, equity, and denial of democratic, human and civil rights and the impact this has on society as a whole. An entire population of students is being punished simply "for the crime of having been born somewhere else."*

*cited as T.R. Marshall (2001) in the book.

Reviewed by **ELLEN H. BADGER**, director of international student and scholar services at Binghamton University, State University of New York.

NAFSA Welcomes New Volunteer Leaders

The following individuals were elected to volunteer leadership positions as a result of NAFSA's 2008 national election, held this past fall:



President and Chair 2010; Member, Board of Directors 2009 and 2011:

Christopher J. Viers
Indiana University



Vice President, Education and Professional Development:

Mary Reeves
Commission on English Language Program Accreditation (CEA)

MEMBER, Board of Directors:

Fanta Aw
American University

Bonnie S. Bissonette
Northcentral Technical College

Francisco Marmolejo
Consortium for North American Higher Education Collaboration

Joy Olson
Washington Office on Latin America

CHAIR-ELECT, Knowledge Community for Education Abroad:

Cynthia Banks
AustraLearn/AsiaLearn/EuroLearn

CHAIR-ELECT, International Education Leadership Knowledge Community:

William I. Brustein
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

CHAIR-ELECT, Knowledge Community for International Student and Scholar Services:

Sandy Soohoo-Refaei
Linfield College

CHAIR-ELECT, Recruitment, Admissions, and Preparation Knowledge Community:

Evelyn Levinson
American University

CHAIR-ELECT, Teaching, Learning, and Scholarship Knowledge Community:

Gayle A. Woodruff
University of Minnesota

CHAIR, Leadership Development Committee:

Patricia I. Jones
Western Illinois University (Retired)