

EDUCATION REFORM AND ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION

Frederic Stout

A funny thing happened on the way to reinventing the American high school. The ideals of education reform ran smack into the immigration issue.

For the past year or so, I have been working on the Early College Program, a national initiative funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation that attempts to enroll students in college-level classes while still in high school as a way of instilling a “college for certain” mindset in students who might otherwise forego all hope for higher education. For me, that meant teaching an urban studies seminar at Stanford this summer for a group of students from a public charter school that serves underprivileged, underserved youth from a nearby low-income community.

I knew in advance that the challenges would be extraordinary. After thirty years of teaching only elite college students, I would now be teaching academically at-risk high school students for the first time. I prepared myself as best I could and, in the end, the experience turned out just fine – except for one thing that I hadn’t prepared for at all.

Several of my students were undocumented, the children of illegal immigrants from Mexico who wanted desperately to succeed at school but who sometimes seemed to despair of ever actually succeeding in life. They were preparing themselves for college, but would they ever be admitted? If

admitted, would they be able to pay? Some state colleges and universities in California allowed the undocumented to enroll at the in-state resident rates, but these students were ineligible for the federal Pell Grants and many other forms of scholarship aid.

When talking about these students, I use the word “undocumented” advisedly. Frankly, for a long time I used to cringe at the term “undocumented workers” when applied to people who were more properly called “illegal immigrants.” To me it seemed the height of politically correct evasion to elide the first fact of illegal immigration, its illegality. And it also seemed like a way of subtly and dishonestly conflating legal immigration, that almost everyone supports, with the illegal variety that most Americans reject. But none of this applies to the children I was teaching, and it seems ridiculous to call them “illegal students.” Their parents may have broken the law, but how can you blame the kids?

Take Maria Lopez, for example. She graduated near the top of her class and has been accepted for admission to one of the prestigious University of California campuses. She plans to study math and biological sciences and become a nurse because her greatest joy comes from helping others, especially children. She was just eight years old when her father brought her across the border near Calexico-Mexicali to join her mother who had made the crossing two years before.

Or take Ana Cordero who was only two when she came across the border with her mother. She isn't sure what she wants to be when she grows up, but she is certain about one thing. She dreams of becoming an American citizen. And why not? Now seventeen, Maria and Ana have lived most of their lives in the US. They talk on cell phones, study the latest fashion magazines, and listen to incomprehensible music. Meet them and you meet typical American teenagers.

The United States is a nation of immigrants, of course, but one needn't play on the heartstrings or recite Emma Lazarus poems to recognize that our country needs young people like Maria Lopez and Ana Cordero and not just for reasons of compassion. As America's native population ages and looks forward to retirement, our economy will need a new, young workforce that will pay into Social Security while others receive pay-outs. And that workforce will need to be educated to a very high degree of sophistication, especially in math and science, to succeed in high-tech jobs and help America compete in the global economy.

In short, these eager, young, undocumented students are exactly the immigrants that America needs as it confronts the challenges of the 21st century. And to realize their potential as future citizens, America needs humane policies that acknowledge important distinctions between the illegal acts of parents and the innocence of children caught up in one of the great demographic movements of modern history.

As it stands now, the national debate about illegal immigration is painfully polarized. On one side, radical Latino activists loudly demand justice and immediate, universal amnesty; on the other, equally loud and radical xenophobes call for sealing the border – with guns and barbed wire, if necessary. This polarization drives out reason and substitutes fear and distrust – so much so that I have felt the need to disguise the names of my students and not reveal the name of their high school.

But as the political debate evolves toward some kind of compromise, we should try to make special provision for those in special circumstances. President Bush recently called for a fast track to citizenship for one category of non-citizen immigrants: those who serve in the armed forces of the United States. Perhaps a similar fast track could be put in place for the blameless children of illegal immigrants who complete high school, enroll in college, and complete their degrees. One version of this reform is a part of the bipartisan Dream Act that has been languishing in Congress since 2003.

An education-friendly immigration policy would reap double rewards. For the undocumented student, the promise of citizenship would be a strong incentive to stay in school. For society as a whole, it would guarantee an educated workforce for America's future.

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