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Review: Achieving Equity for Latino Students: Expanding the Pathway to Higher Education Through Public Policy by Frances Contreras

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Achieving Equity for Latino Students: Expanding the Pathway to Higher Education Through Public Policy by Frances Contreras. New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2011. 192 pp. ISBN 978-0-8077-5210-4

In the wake of drastic demographic changes and the historic reelection of President Barack Obama, the Latino population of the United States is moving away from what Taylor, Gonzalez-Barrera, Passel, and Lopez (2012) call a “sleeping giant” to a vital force in American culture and politics. Constituting an estimated 17 percent of the total population in the U.S. and with more than 12.5 million votes for Barack Obama, Latino voters drove national media outlets to highlight the significant role that Latinos played in the 2012 election (Lopez & Taylor, 2012). In her book, *Achieving Equity for Latino Students: Expanding the Pathway to Higher Education Through Public Policy*, Frances Contreras offers a poignant appeal for examining the vital role of Latino education and political participation in the nation. Contreras’s premise for the book is a call for policy changes to recognize that the Latino population is no longer a “sleeping giant,” where she offers an intricate discussion of the need for federal, state, and local policy changes and investment in Latino education as part of her call to acknowledge the growing importance of Latinos in U.S. society.

Contreras’s organization of the book reflects the historical, political, and educational issues that have long shaped educational outcomes of Latinos in the U.S. Subsequently, as James Banks notes in the foreword of the book, the book provides a rich understanding of the interconnectedness of evident demographic shifts diversifying the nation and the nativistic sentiments that persist in shaping U.S. policy and societal perspectives on educational merit.

Interwoven throughout the book is the concept of the “Brown Paradox,” a term introduced by Gandara and Contreras (2009) to describe the contradiction of Latinos’ increasing economic and political influence in the U.S. and the minimal government investment in policies affording academic, political, and social class mobility for Latinos. This contrast in role and formal support has resulted in detrimental implications for Latino students and the nation at large, leading Contreras (2012) to argue that the “Brown Paradox” is really the “American Paradox,” since negative achievement within the Latino community increasingly affects the nation as a whole.

Among several critical points, Contreras addresses the issue of Latino student dropouts, unpacks the nature of standardized tests in education reform and sheds light on the connection to high school completion and college access. Citing the persistent disparity in academic outcomes between White and underserved minorities, referred to as the “achievement gap,” Contreras questions whether No Child Left Behind (NCLB) is an appropriate accountability framework that should be continued, and if so, whether the policy has resulted in positive outcomes for

those students scoring in the lower quartiles on statewide and federal assessments. In particular, she highlights the role of public policy in contributing to the national achievement crisis and the potential policy influence on improving the current opportunity to learn for students performing lower on standard measures. The author suggests that it is time to begin analyzing the larger systemic problems that foster or stunt academic achievement for Latino students—one of the largest student groups attending public schools in the nation. Contreras emphasizes the need to intervene in the high Latino dropout rate as we continue to lose these students to imprisonment or indentured low-wage labor, resulting in the stratification of Latinos into a low or high achieving binary function in society.

Contreras also notes the paradox of high achieving Latino students who experience educational discrimination, exclusion, and oppression through a case study of Latino undocumented students in Washington State. The author brings to light the critical role of financial aid and tuition policies for Latino students who overcome the challenges of an under-resourced public education system only to stumble into postsecondary systemic barriers. Moreover, Contreras highlights larger issues of rising tuition, personal trade-offs for taking on loans, and the consequences of working long hours in order to afford rising college costs as factors affecting baccalaureate attainment. These factors make it difficult for even the most academically talented Latino students to move beyond marginalized social and political statuses.

In the concluding chapters, Contreras shifts the conversation of the Latino crisis onto an investment crisis. The changing demographics in the U.S. and the compelling previous chapters serve as the bases for a call to greater invest in the Latino human capital. Moreover, Contreras redirects the funding conversation to hold central a dialogue of human investment of Latino students and asserts that the achievement gap is better defined as an opportunity gap. Through a catalogue of policy recommendations not previously considered, Contreras connects the issues of the Latino education pipeline to the ignored policies of the past. The inventory of policies offered by Contreras target the betterment of the “Brown Paradox,” or as she concludes the “American Paradox.” This book strongly advocates and outlines an innovative approach for investing in Latinos and also suggests underinvestment in the Latino community will have implications for American society at large.

The purpose of *Achieving Equity for Latino Students* is a call for national attention to the needs of Latino student education through an analysis of policies that have shaped educational outcomes for Latinos. Although Contreras does an excellent job of delineating problematic components of the educational pathway for Latino students’ academic pursuits, she only briefly mentions the role that community colleges play in the Latino entry to postsecondary education. Missing in Contreras’s analysis of the Latino pipeline is a look at the function of

community colleges in postsecondary access for students and the role that policy can have in shaping better achievement outcomes for students who do enter higher education through community college. With 44 percent of all college students beginning in community college and 16 percent of those being Latino (AACC, 2012), the community college ought to surface in literature that, much like Contreras's book, urges a national attention to the needs of Latinos in the path toward postsecondary education and societal mobility.

Achieving Equity for Latino Students contributes greatly to understanding the complex relationship between policy and the outcomes for Latino students in accessing higher education. Aside from a loose link to community colleges, this book serves as a valuable resource for educators and policy-makers, alike, to understand a P-20 educational pipeline that incorporates Latinos as a viable component of American society. Contreras concludes the book with a number of recommendations including redesigning P-20 school funding in order to increase equitable opportunities for learning; reframing accountability and assessment to include multiple measures that inform the achievement gap; and increasing college affordability and financial aid to improve Latino postsecondary completion. Overall, Contreras sets a strong foundation for a critical understanding of the social, cultural, and political contexts that affect the educational success of Latino students as they navigate the educational pipeline toward higher education and serve as full participants in the U.S. political and economic arena.

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Reviewer

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