

Journalistic Hostility Toward Latinos

By Edward T. Rincón, Ph.D.
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Common sense tells us that everyone needs an occasional pat on the back for a job well done. We frequently recognize and celebrate achievements in sports, the sciences, the arts, education, and many other areas. What would football be without a Super Bowl? What would the movie industry be without the Academy Awards? A recent national news story reminded me about the importance of this pat on the back.

In the news story, the Pew Hispanic Center announced a historic and unexpected event about the educational achievement of U.S. Latinos. In their analysis of recently released Census Bureau data, the Pew researchers found that:

- More Hispanic young adults (18-24 year olds) enrolled in college from 2009 to 2010 than young blacks and young Asian Americans; the number of whites enrolling in college decreased by 320,000 during that period.
- The share of Hispanic 18-24 year olds who have completed high school increased to 73% in 2010 from 70% in 2009.
- The share of young Hispanic high school graduates who are attending college increased to 44% in 2010 from 39% in 2009.

The Pew findings were incredible indeed in light of the numerous studies that have documented the alarming Latino drop-out rates and dismal rates of college enrollments. Is it possible that the many programs designed to enhance college enrollment and graduation for Latinos were finally paying off? Is it possible that a significant shift in attitudes about the value of a college education has finally taken place among Latino students and families? Regardless of the exact reasons, the dramatic shift in the college participation rates of Latinos is undoubtedly sufficient cause for celebration in my opinion.

Not everyone, however, believed that this historic event was cause for celebration. In a recent editorial in the *Dallas Morning News* ("A Small Step" 9-2-11), the editorial staff instead reminded their readers that these small gains were trivial in comparison to the alarming Latino dropout rates in Texas public schools and college enrollments that would fall short of the State's 2015 goals. The reader is also provided the likely causes for these shortcomings, such as:

- "Too many Hispanics still have modest aspirations for college, mainly because of financial pressure to support families;"
- "Latinos can help themselves by placing greater import on education, even if it means sacrificing dollars earned today."
- "A major reason that Latinos under-perform in school is because their parents don't play an active role in helping their children succeed."

Insightful explanations, to be sure, that helped the readers understand why the News staff did not find cause for celebration in the Pew findings.

These explanations, however, did little more than distract the reader from the real news story -- the dramatic shift in the college experiences of Latino students -- which was apparently not as easy to explain or accept by the News editorial staff. Moreover, there seemed to be little concern expressed by the editorial staff for the 320,000 white students who decided NOT to enroll in college during that period -- a careless oversight, perhaps, or an assumption that white students are immune to the problems related to lower aspirations, the lack of importance placed on education or the absence of parental involvement.

The apparent difficulty experienced by the *Dallas Morning News* in recognizing and celebrating Latino achievements and productivity is not new, and has become a rather established tradition. Following are a few trends that I have observed over the past years:

- According to the Survey of Minority-Owned Business in 2007, the DFW metro includes 69,265 Latino-owned business firms. However, the business section of the News rarely includes any stories related to these firms and their activities, services or products.
- Despite their availability, the business section of the News rarely covers any local studies regarding DFW Latino consumers and their economic impact on local retail establishments.
- The most common Latino business-related issue covered by the News has focused on the problems experienced by the Greater Dallas Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, while no attention is ever devoted to the problems experienced by other local chambers of commerce.
- The Viewpoints section rarely includes contributions by local Latino writers that would help to balance the perspectives in this section on key local and national issues.
- The majority of the News coverage about Latinos has focused on four areas: crime, poverty, illegal immigration, and under-achievement -- a practice that largely portrays Latinos as undesirable members of the DFW community.

Eventually, such practices can impact the readership of any publication. According to the Dallas/Ft. Worth Latino Trendline Study of 2010, Latino readership of the *Dallas Morning News* dropped from 37 percent in 2008 to 20 percent in 2010 – a possible indicator that the News is increasingly losing relevance to its DFW Latino readers who are primarily native born and English speaking.

To their credit, the *Dallas Morning News* provides more extensive coverage of the Latino community through its Spanish-language newspaper – *Al Día* – with an estimated readership of 354,033 Latinos in Dallas/Ft. Worth. However, *Al Día* is primarily read by foreign-born Latinos and includes only a fraction of the content provided by the Dallas Morning News. Moreover, current Census data shows that *Al Día*'s target audience is diminishing: since the year 2000, the proportion of foreign-born Latinos in DFW has decreased from 47% to 42%. *Al Día* may be a good vehicle to inform foreign-born Latinos and generate advertising revenue, but it has done little to change the previously discussed journalistic practices of the *Dallas Morning News*.

Perhaps it is time for the *Dallas Morning News* to re-think its relationship to Latinos in the Dallas/Ft. Worth area. Will decision-makers at the *News* continue their business-as-usual approach that effectively segregates and selectively trivializes its media audiences, or will it serve as a bridge to allow improved understanding between Latinos and non-Latinos along a broader range of their respective activities and achievements?

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