

VIEWPOINTS

Don't misportray us



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It seems a curiosity that during a time when the Hispanic community traditionally celebrates its cultural heritage, media attention often focuses on issues that describe Hispanics as an increasing social burden to the broader U.S. communi-

ty. Discussions tend to focus, for example, on their uncontrolled growth, limited English-speaking skills, high dropout rates, increasing gang activity and general drain on vital social services.

Subjective impressions are typically forwarded to explain how certain aspects of the Hispanic culture, such as authoritarian parents, contribute to the Hispanics' increased vulnerability to failure and underachievement.

Unfortunately, the naive reader is unwittingly led to believe that the growing Hispanic presence is something to be feared and controlled where possible. On the contrary, the historical record confirms that Hispanics assimilate rapidly and avidly embrace American ideals. A few examples will illustrate the point:

- Hispanics have contributed gallantly to the defense of our nation. As many as 500,000 Hispanics served in World War II, 12 of whom were awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor (the highest proportion of any ethnic group). In Vietnam, Hispanics comprised 23 percent of the 3,405 Texas casualties, while 13 Hispanics received the Congressional Medal of Honor (again, the highest proportion of any ethnic group).

- Hispanics are an increasing part of the American dream. The Census Bureau's economic censuses revealed an 81 percent increase in Hispanic enterprises from 1982 to 1987. Numbering 422,373 in 1987, Hispanic firms reported sales of \$24.7 billion, a non-trivial contribution to the U.S. economy.

- Linguistics expert Calvin Veltman reported in an analysis of language patterns of U.S. Hispanics that Hispanic immigrants are assimilating English more rapidly than previous waves of immigrants, and that by the time they have been in this country for 15

years, 75 percent of all Hispanic immigrants are speaking English on a daily basis.

- Hispanics believe strongly in the American political process. Between 1984 and 1990, the number of Hispanic elected officials in the U.S. increased from 3,128 to 4,004, according to the National Association of Latino Elected Officials.

- The Census Bureau's annual current population surveys consistently reveal that Hispanic labor force participation, especially for males, is among the highest in the U.S.

- The notion that Hispanic immigrants are displacing U.S. citizens in the job market is greatly exaggerated. The jobs that immigrants are more likely to get are in such areas as construction, restaurants, landscaping and agriculture. The low pay, long hours and hard work that such jobs offer are not among the most desired career tracks for the average U.S. citizen.

- Hispanic tax dollars will assume a more prominent role in support of the Social Security system as the American population continues to mature. Their youthful age structure, high labor force participation and respect for the elderly will ensure future Hispanic support for programs that target the aging population.

It is not difficult to identify many areas where Hispanics have made positive contributions to society. Indeed, the Hispanic experience is not limited to a series of crises related to immigration, limited English proficiency, underachievement, crime and poverty. Many such "crises" result from the failure or reluctance of decision-makers to prepare for changing demographics. After all, Hispanics did not arrive overnight. In Dallas County, the number of Hispanics doubled from 1970 to 1980, and doubled again from 1980 to 1990.

The tendency to depict Hispanics as a burden to society represents a journalistic blind spot that reinforces commonly held stereotypes and delays Hispanics' successful assimilation. A more balanced portrayal of the Hispanic experience in the U.S. is long overdue. Hispanics have certainly earned it.

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