

**Hispanic Immigration and Its Impact
On the Quad Cities Area**

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Introduction

The Quad Cities Chamber of Commerce Community Leadership Course commissioned our team to write a paper on immigration. Specifically, we were to explore immigration issues similar to those raised in Richard Longworth's book, Caught in the Middle, as they affect the Quad Cities. The group was then charged with proposing ways to combat any issues that were uncovered.

The team explored issues related to immigration in both the United States as a whole, and in the Midwest region and the Quad Cities metropolitan areas. The impacts of immigration on businesses, communities, their economies, and governmental entities were also investigated.

The team determined that Hispanic immigration is a positive influence on the Quad Cities' economy. As such, efforts should be undertaken throughout all facets of the local area to embrace both the concept and the immigrants themselves.

Background

Perceptions of Hispanic Immigration

One doesn't have to look far for the local perception of Hispanic immigration. A recent Quad City Times article on immigration flushed out a multitude of blog comments filled with ignorance, bigotry, fear and hatred (Tibbetts, 2009). While the few pro-immigration posts contained the best and most informed arguments, they were overshadowed by the sting of the more vocal and more immigration opposed contingent.

According to public opinion polls from the 1930's to the present, Americans have always been against immigration (Simon, 1995). There is consistency in the way people have forgotten where they've come from; that indeed, they too are most likely descended from immigrants. Waves of new immigrants have been viewed as having less to offer than the natives, who are themselves, overwhelmingly not Native Americans.

There seems to be no end to the opinions on either side of the Hispanic immigration debate. Each side has statistics, case studies and research to support their views. The varied views on Hispanic immigration appear mostly to be formed from cultural and economic perspectives. We have found the arguments for the benefits of immigration to be the strongest and thus our group has adopted a positive view of Hispanic immigration in the Quad Cities. The following bulleted examples both illustrate some of the more common negative perceptions, as well as present what we believe to be a more appropriate assessment.

- Hispanic immigrants take advantage of our welfare programs, and burden our various public services.
 - We feel there are several reasons that this statement is oversimplified. When immigrants are undocumented, they cannot access most of this government assistance either for fear of being detected or they simply have no means of proving entitlement. Also they are likely paying taxes which will fund programs that benefit U.S. citizens and legal immigrants. The immigrants of this era have

stumbled upon handouts that previous generations did not have, but it is hardly their fault.

- The influx of immigrants is a burden on our education system.
 - This point is hard to discredit. The complexities of language barriers and immigrant migration patterns alone point to increased need for staff and programs. However, the increased need is also due to governmental mandates (such as No Child Left Behind) and societal pressures. As education is a pillar of our economic advancement, this should be considered an investment in the future of the workforce as a whole, regardless of how they came to be in the United States.
- Hispanics send a lot of their earnings back to the home country.
 - We do not see this as an actual problem. Immigrant working here will still have to buy goods and services, housing and transportation, which all put money back into our economy.
- Hispanic immigrants will not assimilate into our culture, or even worse, overtake our culture.
 - These are often the same folks that are very vocal about preservation of the English language. Our interviews of local business, political, and Hispanic advocates revealed many examples of immigrants taking full advantage of opportunities to learn English or at least to have their children learn it, as they know it will help them advance. We also heard much agreement as to the strength of the family values and work ethic of Hispanic immigrants - two things that most would agree seem to be disappearing in our culture.
- Immigrants cause an increase in crime.
 - We could simply find no data to back this up. The perception could stem from issues of their socioeconomic status. Much of the literature noted the common sense idea that someone here illegally would be trying very hard not to be noticed by law enforcement (Kingsbury, 2008). Regarding both culture and crime, it is our opinion that native citizens must extend a welcome the newcomers or they will help turn this false perception into a reality.

Of the preceding public opinions, many are likely, at least in part, fabricated as a guise for the idea that immigrants take away our jobs. Much of the literature supports the idea that the high school dropouts and otherwise uneducated people will be in direct competition for the jobs that immigrants would do. Otherwise, for the educated Americans, the immigrants do work that natives don't want, for a lower wage than an American would accept.

Statistics on Hispanic Immigration in the QCA

The total population in the Quad Cities increased to 310,166 in 2006, up from 300,889 in 2005; an increase of 3.1%. Of that, the racial and ethnic minority population in 2006 was 55,233, up from 51,524 in 2005; an increase of 7.2% (United Way, 2008). Data from 2000 showed that immigration accounted directly for 51.4% of the overall population increase in the Quad Cities metropolitan area (fairus.com, 2007)

The number of Hispanics in Rock Island and Scott counties jumped 82% since 1990. About one-third of these immigrants, totaling 6500 in Iowa Quad Cities and 13,000 in the Illinois Quad Cities, arrived within the past 15 years, and without proper documentation (Quad City Times, 2006, September). These individuals were lured by jobs in local industries and by the knowledge that friends and family members already live here successfully. They came to the United States for the same reasons Europeans did - to escape persecution or to find better economic opportunities

Currently, Latinos have a higher concentration of pre-school students among the population than any other race or ethnic group. During the 2007-2008 school year, there were 33,031 Latinos enrolled in Iowa elementary and high schools. Finally, in 2006 there were 2,359 Iowa Latino veterans of the U.S. armed forces. The projection for Latino population in Iowa as of July 1, 2030 is 305,900, or 9.1% of the state's total population (State Data Center of IA, IA Division of Latino Affairs, 2009).

Many retailers, in both the Quad Cities area and across the country, are embracing bilingual communications initiatives, including Spanish-language phone menus, sales associates and Web sites. The primary reason for many of these initiatives is buying power. Across the country, Latinos alone spend more than \$870 billion on consumer products. By 2015, the amount is expected to boom to \$1.3 trillion, or 12% of total U.S. purchasing power, according to Hispanic Business Inc. (Latino Business Review, 2008).

Business Cases: Examples of Hispanic Immigration in the QCA

“Mexican and other workers come to Cargill and the other plants for the same reason that the Lithuanians and Poles came to the legendary and equally appalling stockyards of nineteenth-century Chicago; they dream of a better life and are willing to do anything to get it.” (Longworth, 2007).

Our group interviewed several businesses in the Quad Cities that see Hispanic immigrants as a mainstay of their workforce. Over 20 years ago, Hill and Valley Bakery in Rock Island started with a staff of 12 employees. At that time, only one or two of those employees were immigrants. Today, Hill and Valley employs over 150 workers with 50 percent of those workers being of Hispanic origin. According to Human Resource Director Richard Harper, they didn't actively seek Hispanic workers; however, the number expanded through the hiring of existing employees' family members and word of mouth (Phone interview, January 14, 2009).

Ann Groves from the World Relief organization seconds that viewpoint, stating, “Immigrant workers and refugees are some of the best ‘networked’ people. When things are going well in a certain part of the US, that <news> typically spreads very quickly.” (Phone interview, January 12, 2009)

Hill and Valley’s immigrant workforce is not just a labor-intensive group. Immigrant workers fill a wide range of positions in their organization including leadership roles such as Superintendent, Supervisor and Foreman. Hill and Valley has also attempted to provide assistance to their non-English speaking workforce by developing an educational assistance policy that encourages their employees to further their education by enrolling in English as a Second Language (ESL) Classes.

With over 50 percent of their workforce of Hispanic origin, concern about the presence of illegal workers is always raised at Hill and Valley, particularly in the wake of an October 2008 high profile immigration raids in Iowa. There is a great deal of concern in the community that employers are not requiring the appropriate documentation when hiring immigrant workers. To combat illegal worker issues, Hill and Valley employs the services of a local law firm to audit all I-9s to ensure they are making every reasonable effort to hire only legal workers.

Proposed Solutions

It will take a multi-pronged effort to effectively address all of the perception, welfare and policy issues surrounding Hispanic immigration to the Quad Cities area. All efforts should be coordinated by a steering committee, to be comprised of representatives from local governments, business owners, religious organizations and immigration support organizations and councils. In addition to coordinating immigration-related activities, the steering committee should also consider establishing a formal process for collecting accurate data on immigration trends in the Quad Cities area. No process exists at this time, and this type of information is in demand by a variety of organizations.

Public Awareness & Education Campaign

To address the negative perceptions held by a percentage of the population, a public awareness campaign should be created that emphasizes the value that immigrants (legal or otherwise) bring to our communities. A group in the Chamber’s Community Leadership class advocates creating a campaign (We Live Here) that highlights immigrants of all races and their current involvement in our area (Baker, N., Black, J., Conklin, C., Dunn, L., Gunn, R, and Halterman, J., 2009). An offshoot of this sort of campaign could be one focused expressly on Hispanic immigrants, as they make up the largest percentage of immigrants to this area. Billboards, radio, TV and print advertisements, and even direct-mail pieces could be utilized to send messages regarding immigrants’ positive impacts on the local economy (both in terms of jobs and in spending power) and in the local community.

Providing Support for Immigrant Populations

According to Iowa State economist Neil Harl, many Midwesterners fear extending an invitation to immigrant workers due to the potential costs of supporting the newcomers. He highlights that fact by citing a proposal made several years ago to bring a meatpacking plant into

several small towns in Iowa including Iowa Falls, Cambridge and Ottumwa. Each of these towns turned down the proposal. Primary reasons given for the refusals included a fear of increased social costs, issues concerning greater educational costs and a burden to the health system (Iowa Public Television, March 2007).

According to Harl, local areas are often saddled with these costs; however, the economic activity, tax revenue and overall benefits produced by these immigrant workers are felt throughout the state. To combat this issue, he suggests that we need to spread the responsibility of these costs beyond the local economy. Harl also recommends that that government steps are put into place to ensure that these costs are going towards “a documented workforce that are here for all the right reasons” (Iowa Public Television, March 2007). These steps would include:

- (I) Guest Worker Program: Create a well organized guest worker program that recognizes the need for an immigrant workforce by supplying temporarily work visas and the prospect of long term visas and potential citizenship.
- (II) Screening Process: Make certain there is a successful screening process in place for all immigrant applicants to weed out the undesirables and ensure the skills and language proficiency of all applicants as they go through the process.
- (III) Employer Penalties: Make it illegal to hire anyone that has not been through the guest worker program or screening process. Financial penalties would be an incentive to ensure compliance with these rules.

Governmental Support & Backing of Immigration Policies

Over the past few years, immigration law has become more strict, with more stringent visa requirements and longer waits for administrative actions. Since 1952, the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) has governed US immigration law. The INA is frequently amended and is supported by federal regulations, which are also in constant flux. Fees and penalties have also been raised. Recently the government has started collecting biometric information from immigrants in order to better identify people in the system.

The US Citizen and Immigration Service (USCIS) can grant citizenship, which is the most important immigration benefit. Most people become a US citizen in 1 of 2 ways: by birth, either within the territory of the United States or to US citizens, or by naturalization

There are many ways to go through Naturalization:

- Lawful Permanent Residents (LPR) or “GREEN CARD”
This is a multi-step process to become an immigrant that is granted the privilege of living and working permanently in the United States. In most cases, USCIS must first approve an immigrant petition for you, usually filed by an employer or relative. Then an immigrant visa number must be available to you, even if you are already in the US, you may apply to adjust to permanent resident status. If you are outside the US, you will be notified to go to the local US consulate to complete the process for an immigrant visa.

- Immigration through employment
There is a chance to become a lawful permanent resident based on the fact of permanent employment opportunity in the US, or if you are an employer that wants to sponsor someone based on permanent employment and then you must go through a multi-step process.
- Immigration through a family member
Once again this is a multi-step process. USCIS must approve an immigrant visa petition filed by a relative which must be accompanied by proof of your relationship. The State Department must determine if an immigrant visa number is immediately available to you. You must then go to the US Consulate that services the area in which you reside to complete your processing. The sponsoring relative must meet all criteria as well.
- Apply for Lawful Permanent Residence status under the “registry” provision of the Immigration and Nationality Act.
If you have been present in the US since 1/1/1972, you may be eligible for the “registry” provision. This may allow you to obtain LPR even if you are illegally in the US now, or if you initially entered the US illegally.
- Immigration through investment
Under the section 203b5 of the INA, 10,000 immigrant visas per year are available to qualified individuals seeking permanent resident status on the basis of their engagement in a new commercial enterprise. Also 5,000 of the visas are set aside for those who apply under a pilot program involving a “regional center” (an entity, organization, or agency that has been approved as such by the service).

With the policies that currently exist, it is no wonder why immigrants, particularly those from Mexico, would choose to cross the border illegally; should they make a legal attempt, it will take years to get here (if they get here at all). While not an issue that can be “fixed” by local governments directly, the Quad Cities area governmental entities, as well as the area’s representatives in state and federal government, should support immigration reform policies.

Appendix A: Authors

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Appendix B: References

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