

## Article 37

### **The Effects of Barriers, Acculturation, and Academic Goals on Latina/o Students' Academic Performance**

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#### **Abstract**

The current study explored 112 Latina/o college students' perceptions of barriers, acculturation, academic goals, and academic performance. Acculturation to the Anglo culture and academic goals were positively related to college performance. Perceptions of career barriers also had a positive relationship with college performance. A discussion regarding the importance of these findings is provided and implications for counselors are offered.

*Keywords:* Latina/o students, acculturation, higher education, counselors

The Latina/o population has been one of the fastest growing groups in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Despite improved educational services and career awareness for the growing Latina/o population, the achievement gap between Latina/o students and their peers remains in areas such as grades, test scores, high school completion rates, and college attainment (American Council on Education, 2012). Numerous barriers might contribute to Latina/o students' lower academic achievement, including low expectations from high school counselors or teachers (Malott, 2010), minimal college information (Martinez, Cortez, & Saenz, 2013), or experiences in non-advanced placement (AP) coursework (Cavazos & Cavazos, 2010). These barriers have potential to negatively impact Latina/o students' academic performance and educational

aspirations (Ojeda & Flores, 2008). Researchers who investigated this domain found that acculturation to the Anglo culture predicted students' decisions to apply to college (Castillo, Lopez-Arenas, & Saldivar, 2010), academic performance (Lopez, Ehly, & Garcia-Vasquez, 2002), and social belonging. However, little is known about the role, if any, played by acculturation, enculturation, and perceptions of barriers on Latina/o students' college performance, particularly among students who attend predominantly Latina/o universities. Such an investigation is important given that Latina/o students at predominantly Latina/o universities might not perceive cultural shock, discrimination, cultural incongruity, or negative perceptions of campus climate (Gloria & Castellanos, 2003). That is, Latina/o students at predominantly Hispanic institutions might have different educational experiences compared with Latina/o students who attend other institutions. The purpose of the current study is to examine the relationship among perceptions of barriers, acculturation, enculturation, and academic goals on Latina/o students' college performance.

In the current article, we provide a literature review regarding perceptions of barriers, acculturation, and enculturation. Next, we present findings from a quantitative study with 112 Latina/o college students. Finally, we present implications for counselors to help Latina/o students improve academic performance.

## **Literature Review**

### **Perceptions of Barriers**

Researchers have investigated career and educational barriers that impede Latina/o students from pursuing and succeeding in higher education (Luzzo & McWhirter, 2001). Educational barriers might refer to negative experiences with high school teachers, counselors, or the school system. Some Latina/o students reported low expectations (Cavazos & Cavazos, 2010), lack of college information (Kimura-Walsh, Yamamura, Griffin, & Allen, 2009), discrimination (Edwards & Romero, 2008), poor advisement (Vela-Gude et al., 2009), and lack of support (Malott, 2011) as negative educational experiences. As one example, Cavazos (2009) noted that Latina/o high school students were exposed to low expectations from teachers.

Career-related barriers include workplace discrimination, gender discrimination, or low self-efficacy related to career performance (Luzzo & McWhirter, 2001). The impact of career-related barriers on the educational experiences of Latina/o students and other minorities has received some attention. Luzzo and McWhirter (2001) surveyed 168 female and 118 male undergraduate students about perceptions of career-related barriers. A number of important findings emerged: women perceived greater career-related barriers compared with men, and students with ethnic minority backgrounds perceived more career-related barriers compared with Anglo students. Additionally, Ojeda and Flores (2008) examined contextual factors related to educational aspirations among 186 Mexican American high school students. They found perceptions of barriers significantly predicted educational aspirations for Mexican American students.

### **Acculturation and Enculturation**

Acculturation refers to the degree to which individuals adhere to the dominant Anglo culture (Aguayo, Herman, Ojeda, & Flores, 2011). Enculturation refers to the

degree to which individuals adhere to their Mexican heritage culture (Aguayo et al., 2011). Rivera, Chen, Flores, Blumberg, and Ponterotto (2007) examined effects of perceived barriers, acculturation, and role-models with regard to career self-efficacy and career possibilities among 147 Hispanic female community college students. These researchers illustrated that acculturation to the Anglo culture positively contributed to career self-efficacy regarding female careers. Additionally, Flores, Ojeda, Huang, Gee, and Lee (2006) looked at acculturation and career self-efficacy on academic aspirations among 105 Mexican American students. They found that orientation to the Anglo culture and effective problem-solving capabilities predicted academic goals. In another study with Mexican American college students, Aguayo et al. (2011) highlighted the importance of acculturation and enculturation on Latina/o college students' college performance and college self-efficacy. A bi-cultural identity was positively related to academic success as measured by grade point average. Finally, Castillo et al. (2010) found acculturation to the Anglo culture significantly predicted Mexican American high school students' decisions to apply to college. Taken together, much of the literature suggests that acculturation to the Anglo culture is positively related to academic achievement, social belonging, and educational persistence. However, few studies have been conducted with Latina/o college students who attend predominant Latina/o universities.

The current study fills several gaps in the literature. First, the investigation of the experiences of Latina/o students who attend predominantly Latina/o universities is important. Most quantitative studies compared the experiences of Latina/o students with students from different ethnic backgrounds. Extant quantitative research regarding factors that influence Latina/o students' college performance in a predominately Latina/o context is lacking. Researchers contend that Latina/o students might have unique and different experiences in a predominantly Latina/o cultural context. Finally, results from the current study can provide counselors with important recommendations to help Latina/o students improve academic performance.

Based on previous research, we explored the following research question: To what extent do academic goals, perceptions of career barriers, perceptions of education barriers, acculturation, enculturation, and age predict academic performance among Latina/o college students?

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

One hundred twelve students enrolled in an Educational Psychology course provided data for this study. This sample included 41 males (37%) and 71 females (63%) who attended a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) in the southwestern United States. The average age for participants was 22.54 years ( $SD = 6.47$ ). Additionally, only participants who self-identified as Hispanic, Mexican, or Mexican American were included, resulting in one participant (Anglo) removed from data analysis. The remaining participants self-identified as Latina/o (69%), Mexican (2%), or Mexican American (24%). Moreover, 41 students (37%) reported that English was their first language and 71 (63%) cited Spanish as their first language. The mean grade point average for the participants was 2.76 ( $SD = .46$ ). Related to generation status, the participants identified the following: first

generation (14%), second generation (68%), third generation (5%), fourth generation (9%), and fifth generation (4%).

### **Measures**

All participants were given a packet that included a demographic form, Perceptions of Barriers (POB) scale, Acculturation Rating Scale for Mexican Americans (ARSMA-II), and information regarding IRB approval. The demographic form focused on participants' ethnic background, gender, age, language preference, generation status, class standing, and grade point average.

**Perceptions of Barriers Scale** (POB, McWhirter, 1997). The POB is a self-report inventory (McWhirter, 1997) to measure perceptions of barriers. All participants responded to statements evaluated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly agree* (5) to *strongly disagree* (1). Reliability coefficients for scores on the total scale and subscales were measured in previous samples using coefficient alpha. Luzzo and McWhirter (2001) found an  $\alpha = .90$  in a sample with college students, and Ludwig and Warren (2009) found an  $\alpha = .96$  in a study with high school students. Reliability of the total score on the POB in the present sample was .93. Reliability coefficients in the present sample for scores on each subscale were strong: career-related barriers ( $\alpha = .91$ ) and educational-related barriers ( $\alpha = .91$ ).

**The Acculturation Rating Scale for Mexican Americans-II** (ARSMA-II; Cuellar, Arnold, & Maldonado, 1995). The ARSMA-II is a self-report inventory to measure students' orientation to the Mexican and Anglo cultures. This scale consists of 30 items measuring acculturation and marginality toward the Mexican and Anglo cultures. Seventeen items measure acculturation to the Anglo culture (AOS) with 13 items measuring enculturation to the Mexican culture (MOS). Reliability coefficients for scores on the total scale and subscales were measured in previous samples using coefficient alpha. Reliability of scores in the original sample for the MOS and AOS were .88 and .83, respectively (Cuellar et al., 1995). In subsequent studies, evidence of reliability of scores on the AOS (.89; Dumka, Gonzales, Bonds, & Millsap, 2009) and MOS (.95; Dumka et al., 2009) were strong. Reliability of scores on total ARSMA-II for the present sample was .88. Reliability coefficients in the present sample for scores on the AOS ( $\alpha = .73$ ) and MOS ( $\alpha = .91$ ) scales also were strong.

**Academic goals.** We measured academic goals by asking students if they had educational goals of (1) 4 year degree or less, or (2) graduate/professional degree. This method of assessment is similar to Castillo et al. (2010) who dichotomized Latina/o high school students' decisions to apply to college.

**Academic performance.** All participants reported GPA on a 4.0 scale. This method of measuring academic performance has been used in previous research (Aguayo et al., 2011).

### **Procedures**

Several steps were implemented to gather data. First, we obtained permission from the Institutional Review Board at a university in the southwestern United States. We selected this university based on demographic population (i.e., over 90% Latina/o). Second, we informed participants that participation was voluntary, participation would not affect their grade or affiliation with the university, and they had to be 18 years of age

or older to participate. Informed consent was obtained from all participants in the current study. Finally, participants were provided a survey packet that included a demographic form, POB scale, and ARSMA-II.

We used multiple regression to predict the criterion variable of academic performance as measured by GPA. Multiple regression is the appropriate statistical analysis when researchers predict a continuous variable based on other variables (Dimitrov, 2013). Predictor variables included academic goals, perceptions of career barriers, perceptions of education barriers, acculturation, enculturation, and age. Because of the large number of non-traditional Latina/o college students in the current study, we felt it was important to include age in the regression analysis.

## Results

Replacement with imputed values is desirable when the extent of missing data is significant. In the current study, existing information was used to estimate what missing data would have been based on any significant relationships between the variable with missing data (i.e., either classification or GPA) and other factors of interest in the current study, resulting in a statistically significant regression equation for each factor. For classification, the statistically significant regression equation was: Classification = 1.37 + (.019 x Coping Career),  $F(1, 97) = 4.12, p < .05$ . For GPA, the statistically significant regression equation was: GPA = 2.06 + (.343 x Goals),  $F(1, 81) = 17.32, p < .01$ . For cases where data was missing for factors of classification and GPA, these regression equations were used to replace missing data with imputed values.

Descriptive statistics, including Pearson R correlation coefficients, are included in Table 1. We used an alpha level of .05 for the current study. Academic performance scores appeared normally distributed. We examined boxplots to confirm homoscedasticity and linearity (Chandler, Balkin, & Perepiczka, 2011).

Table 1  
*Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Between Measured Variables*

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5
1. Goals	1.8	.39	—				
2. Age	22.77	6.14	-.19	—			
3. Career Barriers	23.31	10.15	-.02	.16	—		
4. Education Barriers	45.88	16.44	-.06	.14	.40	—	
5. Anglo Orientation	3.79	.58	.004	.13	-.04	-.22	—
6. Mexican Orientation	3.72	.88	.04	-.16	.03	-.19	.19

A multiple regression analysis was conducted on college performance based on perceptions of career barriers, perceptions of education barriers, acculturation, enculturation, academic goals, and age. College performance scores were normally distributed. Scatterplots were analyzed and no curvilinear relationships between the criterion variable and predictor variables were evident. There was a statistically significant relationship between the predictor variables and the criterion variable,  $F(6,$

103) = 3.32,  $p < .05$ . A medium effect size was noted with approximately 16% of the variance accounted for in the model,  $R^2 = .16$ . Academic goals were a statistically significant predictor of college performance (see Table 2), uniquely accounting for approximately 6% of the variance. Perceptions of career barriers were a statistically significant predictor of college performance as this factor accounted for approximately 4% of the variance. Acculturation was also a statistically significant predictor of college performance accounting for approximately 4% of the variance. Age, perceptions of education barriers, and enculturation to the Mexican culture were not statistically significant predictors of college performance.

Table 2  
*Multiple Regression Results for Academic Performance.*

Variable	B	SEB	B	t	p	sr2
Academic Goals	.30	.11	.25	2.70	.008*	.06
Career Barriers	.01	.005	.22	2.23	.03*	.04
Education Barriers	-.004	.003	-.14	-1.34	.18	.01
Anglo Orientation	.16	.08	.20	2.07	.04*	.04
Mexican Orientation	-.02	.05	-.04	-.46	.64	.002
Age	-.008	.007	-.107	-1.11	.27	.01

\* $p < .05$

## **Discussion**

The purpose of the current study was to examine the influence of acculturation, enculturation, perceptions of barriers, and academic goals on Latina/o students' college performance. First, acculturation to the Anglo culture and not enculturation to the Mexican culture predicted Latina/o students' college performance. There are mixed findings in the literature regarding the importance of acculturation and enculturation. Although acculturation is related to academic achievement (Lopez et al., 2002), decisions to stay in high school (Martinez, Degarmo, & Eddy, 2004), decisions to apply to college (Castillo et al., 2010), and enculturation to the Mexican culture predicted enrollment in AP coursework (Cavazos, 2012) and college self-efficacy (Aguayo et al., 2011) among Latina/o students. Findings from the current study augment current literature by illustrating how orientation to the Anglo culture in a predominantly Latina/o environment influenced college performance. Second, there was a strong positive relationship between academic goals and college performance. This demonstrates the powerful influence of academic goals on college performance above and beyond other factors. Finally, an interesting finding involved a statistically significant (small unique variance) positive relationship between perceptions of career barriers and college performance.

Acculturation to the Anglo culture positively influenced Latina/o students' academic performance. Previous researchers found a positive relationship between acculturation and decisions to apply to college (Castillo et al., 2010), social belonging, academic achievement (Lopez et al., 2002), and educational aspirations (Castillo et al., 2010). Other researchers also highlighted the importance of orientation to the Mexican

culture, including increased enrollment in AP coursework (Cavazos, 2012). For students who attend a predominantly Latina/o university, other factors and cultural values may also play important roles in academic performance. Castillo, Conoley, and Brossart (2004) recommended that researchers examine Latina/o students' cultural values in order to understand their university experiences. An investigation of cultural values instead of cultural actions might improve insight regarding Latina/o students' negotiation of acculturation, enculturation, and ethnic identity (Gloria, Castellanos, Segura-Herrera, & Mayorga, 2010). However, it is also possible that a qualitative examination would lend further insight into the importance of acculturation in predominantly Latina/o areas.

Latina/o college students' academic goals were a positive predictor of college performance as measured by GPA. This finding demonstrates the importance of positive self-set goals on academic performance. There are several explanations for this finding. First, Carroll and Garavalia (2004) noted that self-set goals have potential to influence motivation and behaviors. This interpretation makes sense given that academic goals are almost meaningless without motivation, effort, and work ethic. However, results from the current study underscore the importance of academic goals on Latina/o college students' college performance. Second, given that academic goals had a significant and positive relationship with academic performance, we must question why some students continue to fall behind in goal setting. There are a number of programs and policies to help Latina/o students identify academic and career goals. Although there is much documentation regarding the importance of academic goals, less attention has been given to those factors that influence goal setting among Latina/o students.

Given the small unique contribution to the overall variance, researchers are urged to use caution when interpreting the statistically significant relationship between perceptions of career barriers and academic performance. There are several possibilities for this unexpected finding. Some students might thrive in the face of real or perceived education or career barriers. Several researchers (Castro, Garcia, Cavazos, & Castro, 2011; Cavazos, Johnson, & Sparrow, 2010) speculated that Latina/o students use barriers as motivation to persevere in the face of adversity. Therefore, it is possible that students achieve college performance to overcome perceived or real barriers. To this end, Latina/o students who are aware of specific career barriers might work and try harder than other students. We contend that awareness of such barriers may influence motivation, academic goals, and work ethic, thereby influencing academic performance.

### **Implications for Practice**

Professional counselors can create interventions to help Latina/o students learn about the culture in higher education (Aguayo et al., 2011). Exposure to the roles, expectations, and customs of faculty and staff in higher education will help Latina/o students learn about college culture. In addition, counselors can help low acculturated Latina/o parents learn about college culture, including admission policies, course expectations, and college knowledge. Once parents understand and develop college knowledge, they may be more likely to relate to students' experiences and concerns. Additionally, although enculturation to the Mexican culture was not related to college performance, counselors can facilitate discussions regarding the importance of biculturalism, bilingualism, and ethnic identity. Counselors must provide safe environments for Latina/o high school and college students to explore conversations

about acculturation and enculturation. It is highly possible that teachers and college professors do not view biculturalism as strengths, thereby influencing Latina/o students' attitudes toward acculturation to the dominant Anglo culture. In sharing their stories, students can gain self-awareness and a sense of empowerment in knowing their cultural background may facilitate academic success. We contend that counselors can help Latina/o students find value in their cultural experiences and how making-meaning in these experiences can facilitate academic performance.

Professional counselors also are encouraged to examine career-related and educational barriers to Latina/o students' academic and professional success. Career counselors can discuss specific career-related barriers related to Latina females or Latino males, such as family problems, ethnic background, and balancing employment and academics (McWhirter, 1997). Instead of looking at career or education barriers via quantitative methods, professional counselors can have qualitative discussions about the effects of specific barriers on college performance. For example, counselors can use facilitative questions, such as "How do you balance school, work, and family?" and "To what extent is your family supportive of your career goals?" Such questions will help counselors not only understand Latina/o students' perceptions of career barriers but also identify how students cope with barriers. Finally, it is disconcerting that Latina/o college students continue to perceive career barriers. While some Latina/o students might use barriers as motivation to persevere (Castro et al., 2011; Cavazos et al., 2010), other Latina/o students might give up in the face of real or perceived barriers. We agree that perceptions of barriers might influence motivation in some Latina/o students (Castro et al., 2011); however, we also understand that other students might not have this innate or learned ability to overcome academic adversity. Counselors can integrate interventions to help Latina/o students develop resiliency to overcome barriers (Luzzo & McWhirter, 2001).

High school or college counselors can create psycho-educational workshops to illustrate the importance of academic goals. Results from this study provide a sense of optimism for students when they learn how efforts to identify and work toward goals can influence college success. Additionally, it is important that college counselors and advisors discuss consequences of GPA with Latina/o students (e.g., motivational interviewing). These conversations can target those factors that lead to improvements in GPA with the ultimate goal of increasing academic performance and educational aspirations. College counselors also can create service learning projects for Latina/o students to improve academic performance and educational aspirations. Service learning projects have potential to help students identify connections between their current performance (GPA) and future occupational success, as well as find meaning in service-learning.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Future research should continue to investigate specific interventions that increase Latina/o students' academic goals and college performance. Possible new interventions include mindfulness, positive psychology, service learning, and narrative therapy. Additionally, future research can examine types of higher education resources that influence Latina/o students' aspirations to pursue four year and advanced degrees. Given the importance of undergraduate and graduate degrees, researchers must continue to

explore this domain of interest. Finally, only a few qualitative studies highlighted how Latina/o undergraduate and doctoral students used perceived barriers as motivation to persevere and achieve academic success. We must continue to explore why some students thrive in the face of challenges while other students do not.

### **Limitations**

There are several limitations that must be taken into consideration. First, results may not be generalizable to Latina/o students who attend universities in which they are not the majority. Second, no cause and effect relationships can be inferred from the current study. Multiple regression examines relationships and not cause-and-effect (Dimitrov, 2013). Finally, this study relied on self-reported academic performance as measured by GPA.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, we addressed the need to examine the relationship among acculturation, enculturation, perceptions of barriers, and academic goals on Latina/o students' college performance. The findings presented herein point to the importance of exploring factors associated with Latina/o college students' academic performance. Professional counselors can help Latina/o students learn about the culture of higher education, as well as identify coping responses to overcome career barriers. Finally, professional counselors can help Latina/o students identify and work toward academic goals in order to have a positive influence on academic performance.

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