

Immigrant College Students' Academic Obstacles

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Abstract

Immigrant college student populations continue to grow on college campuses across the nation; yet, little is known about the experiences of immigrant students. This paper examines differences in perceived academic obstacles between immigrant students and non-immigrant students at six large, public research universities (n = 56,000). The researchers found that immigrant students reported greater obstacles to their academic success, including weak math and English skills, inadequate study skills, poor study behaviors, poor study environments, and poor mental health. Using the framework of academic self-efficacy, the researchers offer guidelines to higher education practitioners, including faculty, advisors, learning assistance center staff, and other student affairs professionals, to decrease the effects of academic obstacles on immigrant students and enhance their academic self-efficacy.

Current events related to immigrants and immigration continue to dominate the daily news cycle. The United States and other nations devote significant attention to immigrant issues. Shifting demographics suggest that institutions of higher education will be impacted in the future as more prospective immigrant students pursue access to post-secondary opportunities. The United States receives the largest number of immigrants in the world, with over a million immigrants receiving legal permanent residence each year (Camarota, 2010). These immigrants and their children have a significant impact on the demographics of the United States population; for example, the latest census reported a 43% increase in the Hispanic population. Hispanics are currently the fastest growing segment of the United States population, accounting for over half of the total population growth (Humes, Jones & Roberto, 2011). According to the Center for Immigration Studies, 24.3 million immigrants were reported in 1995; that number grew to 31.8 million in 2001 and is currently at 37.6 million for 2010 (Camarota, 2010).

Based on these immigration trends, immigrant students will continue to pursue post-secondary education opportunities at many institutions. Figures from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) indicate that over 12% of the total undergraduate population is comprised of immigrant students (Kim, 2009); yet, there is a dearth of research on this area and scholarly literature related to some of the academic obstacles surrounding the educational experiences of immigrant students is still emerging for both documented and undocumented students (Gildersleeve & Ranero, 2010; Oritz & Hinojosa, 2010). Consequently, one of the goals of this study is to contribute to the emerging body of work regarding the experiences of immigrant college students who were born outside of the United States or whose parents were born outside of the United States. Little is known about some of the obstacles encountered by immigrant college students and this study was designed to elicit more information about immigrant students' perceived academic obstacles.

Research suggests that immigrants' college experiences are distinct from other student populations and deserve further scholarly inquiry (Erisman & Looney, 2007; Szelényi & Chang, 2002). As a result, this study examined a large-scale, multi-institutional survey to investigate the extent to which differences exist between immigrant and non-immigrant students with respect to their self-identified obstacles to academic success. With the assumption that students' confidence in their ability to be successful in academic tasks can help them to overcome these obstacles, this study uses the concept of academic self-efficacy to frame this research study and to understand how practitioners can help immigrant students to overcome obstacles to their academic achievement.

Academic Self-Efficacy

Academic self-efficacy refers to students' confidence in their ability to undertake academic tasks, including writing papers, studying for exams, and completing academic projects. In this study, researchers use the academic self-efficacy framework to understand some of the perceived academic obstacles facing undergraduate students, although students' academic self-efficacy is not directly measured or used in analysis. Academic self-efficacy is well-documented in scholarly research as being positively associated with students' performance (grades) in college (Brown, Lent, & Larkin, 1989; Elias & Loomis, 2000; Hackett, Betz, Casas, & Rocha-Singh, 1992; Multon, Brown, & Lent, 1991). Multon, Brown, and Lent (1991) conducted a meta-analysis of the associations between students' academic self-efficacy and their performance and persistence and found that between 11% and 14% of the variance in academic performance and persistence could be accounted for by an individual's academic self-efficacy beliefs. Torres and Solberg (2001) found a positive association between academic self-efficacy and the number of hours students spent studying. In fact, efficacy beliefs are thought to be so important to academics that Bandura (1997) stated, "Perceived self-efficacy is a better predictor of intellectual performance than skills alone" (p. 216).

Academic self-efficacy has its roots in Bandura's social learning theory (Bandura, 1977). Central to social learning theory is the hypothesis that self-efficacy beliefs help to determine the activities individuals will pursue, the effort they expend in pursuing those activities, how they will persevere in the face of challenges and obstacles, and their ability to cope with the demands associated with a chosen course. Some of the most influential sources of these beliefs include mastery (i.e., successful) experiences, which provide one with real-life evidence that he or she has what it takes to be successful (Bandura, 1997). A college student's prior performance can offer a reliable guide for assessing self-efficacy beliefs; for example, when a student has been successful, his or her self-efficacy beliefs are raised (Schunk & Ertmer, 2000; Zimmerman & Ringle, 1981). Bouffard-Bouchard (1990) and Cervone and Peake (1986) found that students in high self-efficacy conditions—those who received more positive feedback on their performance—set higher aspirations, showed greater strategic flexibility in the search for solutions, achieved higher performance, and were more accurate in evaluating the level of their performance than were students of equal ability who received less positive feedback.

Students who perceive more obstacles to their academic success may struggle in their academic performance; however, under the framework of academic self-efficacy, practitioners can strive to increase students' confidence in overcoming those obstacles. As the researchers are interested in determining whether immigrant students perceive different levels of academic obstacles, the research question is as follows: Are there significant differences between immigrant and non-immigrant students' perceptions of obstacles to their academic success?

Method Instrument

The Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) survey project is based at the Center for Studies of Higher Education (CSHE) and is administered by the Office of Student Research and Campus Surveys at the University of California-Berkeley. The Student Experience in the Research University (SERU)/Association of American Universities (AAU) Consortium is a collaborative project of faculty and institutional researchers with the intent of creating data sources geared toward policy-relevant analyses of the undergraduate experience within major research universities and promoting a culture of institutional self-improvement. Each SERU Consortium member administers a version of the SERU survey as an environmental census scan of their students.

The SERU survey sampling plan is a census scan of the undergraduate experience. All undergraduates enrolled during spring 2009 who were also enrolled at the end of the prior term are included in this web-based questionnaire, with the majority of communication with undergraduates occurring by electronic mail. The SERU survey contains nearly 600 individual items. Each student answers approximately 200 core questions and is randomly assigned one of four modules containing approximately

125 items focused specifically on a research theme. The core questions, which focus on time use, evaluation of a student's major, campus climate and satisfaction, serve to highlight four thematic research areas: academic engagement, community and civic engagement, global knowledge and skills, and student life and development. The questions used in this analysis are derived from the student life and development module, which included questions relating to students' perceived academic obstacles. This module was randomly assigned to 20% of students.

Participants

The survey was administered in the spring of 2009 to 145,150 students across six large, public universities classified by the Carnegie Foundation as having very high research activity. The institutional level response rates varied from 26% to 69%, for an overall response rate of 39.97% ($n = 58,017$). Immigrant students, defined as students who were born outside of the United States or had parents born outside of the United States, comprised approximately 33.9% ($n = 18,315$) of our sample. In the survey, students were asked to identify whether their mothers or fathers were born in the United States or outside of the United States; further, students were also asked to identify when they came to the United States to live. Students who indicated that either they or their parents were born in the United States were classified as non-immigrants while all other students were classified as immigrants. Table 1 represents the demographic information associated with the immigrant and non-immigrant students in our reduced randomly-assigned sample. Within our sample, we observe that gender representation was nearly equal across both immigrant and non-immigrant groups; however, immigrant students had higher proportions of African American, Chicano-Latino, and Asian students as compared to the non-immigrant students. Immigrant students also had higher numbers of working-class, low-income, and first-generation students as compared to non-immigrant students.

Analysis

We began by analyzing whether there are statistically significant differences between immigrant students and non-immigrant students with regard to their perceived obstacles to academic success. For this analysis, we used an independent samples t -test with immigrant status as a between-subjects factor. We also calculated the t -statistic, which measures the mean differences relative to the variability in each sample and the likelihood that the differences are due to chance alone, and Cohen's d effect sizes, which conveys the estimated magnitude of the differences.

Table 1

Frequency of Demographic Variables

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Non-Immigrant Students</i>		<i>Immigrant Students</i>	
	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Male	3198	41.9	1719	42.4
Female	4425	58.1	2333	57.6
American Indian/Alaskan Native	63	.8	5	.1
African American	398	5.2	280	6.9
Chicano-Latino	251	3.3	672	16.6
Asian	150	2	1983	48.9
White	6421	84.2	853	21
Other/Unknown	346	4.5	261	6.5
Wealthy	202	2.6	81	2
Upper-Middle or Professional-Middle Class	2786	36.6	970	24
Middle Class	3243	42.6	1646	40.7
Working Class	1123	14.7	974	24.1
Low Income	262	3.4	378	9.3
First-Generation	1817	24.6	1209	30
Non-First-Generation	5722	75.4	2819	70

Note. Total numbers in categories are not equal due to non-response on items.

Results

The findings suggest statistically significant ($p < .05$) differences between immigrant and non-immigrant students in several areas. In regards to competing responsibilities, immigrant students are more likely to report higher instances of family responsibilities as an obstacle to their academic success as compared to non-immigrant students. Additionally, immigrant students are significantly ($p < .05$) more likely than non-immigrant students to report that weak math and English skills are obstacles to their academic success. There were no differences between immigrant and non-immigrant students with respect to employment or “other” responsibilities (e.g. athletics, clubs, or internships) impeding their academic success (Table 2).

The data also suggest that immigrant students are significantly more likely than non-immigrant students to report areas including lack of study skills, poor study behaviors, and poor study environments as impediments to their academic success. For example, immigrant students reported having more inadequate study skills (e.g. knowing how to start, knowing how to get help, or organizing material), poor study behaviors (e.g. waiting until the last minute, being easily distracted, spending too much time in social areas, or surfing too much on the web), and bad study environments (e.g. having a noisy roommate, poor internet access, or inadequate computers or software) as compared to non-immigrant students.

Finally, the data suggest that immigrant students were more likely to indicate that feeling stressed, depressed, or upset served as obstacles to their academic success than non-immigrant students. There were no observed differences with respect to students’ physical illnesses or conditions that impeded their academic successes. The size of the effects in most cases was relatively small, although competing family responsibilities ($d = 0.239$), weak English skills ($d = 0.341$), and inadequate study skills ($d = 0.213$) had more modest effect sizes, suggesting that these differences were among the larger differences observed in the two groups.

Discussion and Implications for Practice

The data suggest that immigrant students are significantly more likely than non-immigrant students to believe that specific obstacles stand in the way of their academic achievements, including family responsibilities, weak English and math skills, study skills, study behaviors, and study environments. Furthermore, the data suggest that immigrant students are more likely than non-immigrant students to indicate mental health concerns as obstacles to their academic success. As discussed previously, academic self-efficacy can help students to persevere and overcome obstacles to their academic achievement; subsequently, there are several steps that practitioners—including learning assistance center professionals, developmental educators, and others—can take to help students to increase their academic self-efficacy (Jakubowski, 2004).

Table 2
Differences between Immigrant and Non-Immigrant Students' Obstacles to Academic Success

	Immigrant Students		Non-Immigrant Students		<i>t</i>	<i>d</i>
	<i>n</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>		
Competing job responsibilities (i.e. paid employment)	405	2.22 (1.29)	796	2.18 (1.26)	1.66	0.031
Competing family responsibilities	404	2.51 (1.19)	795	2.24 (1.07)	12.63*	0.239
Other competing responsibilities (e.g. athletics, clubs, internships)	405	2.58 (1.18)	795	2.55 (1.11)	1.49	0.026
Weak English skills	404	1.42 (0.86)	796	1.17 (0.58)	18.66*	0.341
Weak math skills	402	1.73 (1.01)	793	1.60 (0.91)	7.49**	0.135
Inadequate study skills (e.g. knowing how to start, knowing how to get help, organizing material)	404	2.41 (1.12)	794	2.18 (1.04)	11.19*	0.213
Poor study behaviors (e.g. wait until the last minute, easily distracted, too much social time, too much web surfing)	404	3.03 (1.16)	794	2.87 (1.12)	7.14**	0.140
Bad study environment (e.g. noisy roommate, poor internet access, inadequate computer or software)	403	2.64 (1.08)	794	2.54 (1.03)	4.90**	0.095
Feeling depressed, stressed, or upset	404	2.80 (1.12)	796	2.71 (1.09)	4.10**	0.081
Physical illness or condition	405	2.03 (0.92)	797	2.00 (0.91)	1.63	0.033

Note. *** $p < .001$

Scale: 1-5, ("not at all" to "all the time")

First, practitioners are encouraged to initiate honest conversations with immigrant college students about their study environments. Are they working in a physical space that is conducive to productive study efforts? Many immigrant students live with their families and commute to campus. In these cases, some immigrant students may find it difficult to successfully complete academic work at home due to family distractions or family responsibilities. Many immigrants are first-generation students (Vuong, Brown-Welty, & Tracz, 2010) and, if they are the first in their families to pursue higher education, well-intentioned parents may not understand the demands of college-level work (i.e., they may question why students need to complete school work in the evenings and weekends) (Jehangir, 2009). Staff in learning assistance centers and developmental educators can encourage immigrant students to seek out study spaces on campus or in the university/college community. Students may not be aware of the resources, including extended weekend and evening study hours, which are available to them.

Second, immigrant students often have multiple family responsibilities especially if they live at home. These familial tasks may often interfere with academic work as well as academic self-efficacy and career decision-making (Ma & Yeh, 2010; Stebleton, 2007). Pending cultural traditions and expectations, these family expectations often fall on the shoulders of female immigrant students or older siblings. Educators may opt to initiate conversations with immigrant students about home and school balance issues. Issues and skill development related to time management, goal setting, and negotiation may be valuable discussion topics.

Third, based on the results, immigrant college students may perceive obstacles such as poor study behaviors and skills. Learning assistance center staff, academic advisors, and other educators are in an ideal position to address these concerns. For example, most colleges and universities offer study skills courses and/or life-planning skills development options. Furthermore, practitioners in learning assistance centers or tutorial services can provide ongoing workshops to address concerns related to study habits (Cole & Denzine, 2004; Reinheimer & McKenzie, 2011). Immigrant college students can be advised of these opportunities and encouraged to attend. Ideally, students will feel more confident with their abilities as they develop these important college survival skills.

Fourth, issues related to mental health and counseling needs can be sensitive topics, perhaps even more so with immigrant college students. Often immigrants will not seek out traditional mental health services or professional counseling help (Ogbu & Simons, 1998; Omizo, Kim, & Abel, 2008). Again, depending on cultural norms and expectations, many immigrants will opt to seek out support from family and community resources, or rely on their religious beliefs and practices (Constantine, Myers, Kindaichi, & Moore, 2004; Winograd & Tryon, 2009). Often, students may not even be aware of mental health resources on their campus (Stebleton, Soria, & Huesman, in press). Instructors,

advisors, and tutors again are in an ideal position to help immigrant students (and all students for that matter) to be more informed about the resources available both on and off campus. For instance, some students may opt to utilize counseling services in the community rather than the student health center or counseling office. Other barriers to the use of services include concerns about confidentiality, access to location and hours, questions about insurance, and myths about the purpose and stereotypes of using counseling services (Loya, Reddy, & Hinshaw, 2010). Practitioners, including advisors, faculty, and student affairs staff, can help educate students about misperceptions and serve as brokers of services, referring students in need to the array of services that might be available on respective campuses.

Finally, low self-efficacy beliefs around math and English abilities may serve as significant barriers to success (DelliCarpini, 2011). This can be especially challenging when new immigrant students are faced with completing multiple courses in developmental Math and English; often these courses do not bear any college-level credit that can be used toward graduation. Students who begin at the 2-year community college are frequently required to take several ESL or ELL classes in order to develop stronger English communication skills. Students need to be aware that there are resources on campus (e.g., individual tutoring, study groups, and office hours) that will help them succeed in these important courses. Professionals who are employed in student affairs offices or academic learning centers might explore the use of peer mentoring programs or other targeted initiatives that will help students to develop stronger academic self-efficacy and become more successful in academic coursework that eventually will lead to degree completion (Gloria, 2010).

There are other institutional efforts that colleges and universities can implement to help address the self-efficacy issues and other needs of immigrant college students. Learning assistance center staff and other student affairs practitioners may opt to take lead roles on some of these initiatives (Blake, 2007; Stuart Hunter & Murray, 2007). Examples include getting involved with first-year experiences such as freshmen seminars, collaborating with faculty and instructional staff in living-learning communities, teaching or co-teaching a college success course, and seeking out involvement opportunities in other high impact educational practices that often lead to student engagement and success (Kuh, 2008). Ramos-Sanchez and Nichols (2007) noted that the transitional needs of students are often not met by traditional support services offered by the university, so they suggested interventions that focus primarily on increasing self-efficacy to build student confidence related to perceptions of academic ability. Self-efficacy beliefs are malleable (Bouffard-Bouchard, 1990); therefore, helping students to increase their academic self-efficacy may increase their motivation to persist and become successful in their academic pursuits. College staff members—including learning center staff, peer advisors and mentors, student affairs staff, faculty advisors, and academic/staff advisors—can reach

out to provide the necessary support and encouragement to facilitate increased academic self-efficacy among immigrant students in college. Several examples of ways that staff and faculty can assist immigrant college students with building their academic self-efficacy follow.

Garing (1993) has recommended several key times during which it is critical for college advisors to reach out and contact students, starting within the first three weeks of the semester, when students are beginning to feel more comfortable about asking questions and have a clearer understanding of course requirements. Intrusive advising at this stage is important, so advisors can proactively address any perceived problem areas and provide relevant information regarding campus services; this is also a great time to provide positive feedback for immigrant students regarding their progress. Garing (1993) also suggested that advisors meet with students during their sixth week of courses, a time when students will have already undertaken the challenge of at least one major examination and can begin to project their academic progress—this is also a great time to reinforce academic accomplishments. Finally, Garing recommended that advisors reach out to students between semesters—a time when “students tend to disappear...due to family pressures, changes in work, or perceived changes in their career goals” (1993, p. 103). Developing frequent and regular advising conversations can support immigrant students at these crucial stages—especially during their first year, when advising staff can initiate regular communications with new students.

Feedback from faculty members can also reinforce immigrant students’ successes. Researchers have long recognized the importance of student-faculty contact in student retention. Chickering and Gamson (1987) noted that student-faculty interactions in and out of classes are the “most important factor in student motivation and involvement” (p. 3). Research has shown that faculty-student interactions, mentorship, and academic advising—all modes of academic and social integration—appear to be highly integral to college student development and achievement. As one means of facilitating student-faculty interactions, faculty advising has been shown to “positively influence students’ degree aspirations, self-efficacy and esteem, academic success, satisfaction, goal development, and adjustment to college” (Chang, 2005, p. 770). In a frequently cited study of student retention, Astin (1993) concluded that “next to peer group, the faculty represents the most significant aspect of the student’s undergraduate development” (p. 410). As faculty are directly involved in reviewing students’ work, they are key players in helping students to increase their academic self-efficacy.

Studies of first-year students have also confirmed that faculty-student contact is an influential factor in student achievement, persistence, academic skill development, and personal development (McArthur, 2005). According to King (1993), academic advisement and the role faculty play in its delivery is the most critical service available for college

students. Light (2001) concluded that “students who get the most out of college, grow the most academically, and [those] who are the happiest, organize their time to include activities with faculty members” (p. 10). The reasons for such potent influence are better understood when considering instructors’ multiple roles as educators, role models, employers, advisors, and sources of support and guidance (Chang, 2005); consequently, immigrant students have a lot to gain from faculty interactions.

Although many immigrant students may not participate in co-curricular school activities due to their family obligations, colleges can create positive experiences within the classroom that can encourage persistence. Students who are actively involved with peers, faculty, and staff—especially in learning activities—are more likely to learn, persist, and graduate. The focus on the classroom is important, as many retention theories are focused on the creation of learning communities or cohorts as a means to help students develop academic and social connections with peers and faculty (Ellertson & Thoennes, 2007; Lardner & Malnarich, 2008). Taylor, Moore, MacGregor, and Limblad (2003) have concluded that “a preponderance of studies indicate that learning communities strengthen student retention and academic achievement” (p. iii). Among the many well-documented benefits of learning communities are that they organize students and faculty into smaller groups, encourage integration of the curriculum, help students to be socialized to the expectations of college or specific disciplines, and offer a community-based delivery of academic support programs (Shapiro & Levine, 1999). These are all conditions that can foster positive academic self-efficacy among immigrant students. Immigrant students can be encouraged to actively participate in these types of high impact educational practices (e.g., learning communities, study abroad, service learning, directed research with faculty, and others) (Kuh, 2008).

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The generalizability of this study is limited because it explores immigrant students at a single institutional type—large, public research universities; as a result, further work on immigrant students to include multiple institutional types is recommended. Additionally, while the purpose of this study is to examine differences between immigrant and non-immigrant students only, future studies could control for possible confounding variables such as gender or socioeconomic status. Further, we grouped all immigrant students together when clearly students of different racial and ethnic backgrounds have different experiences on college campuses; consequently, future studies are encouraged to explore differences between different racial and ethnic immigrant groups.

Additionally, the SERU is a census survey that relies solely on self-reported student data. Porter (2009) outlined and critiqued the challenges of interpreting self-reported student data on surveys that purport to understand student behaviors and measures. Porter’s critique focused on

the NSSE instrument; however, the premise can be applied to all student surveys that rely on self-reported behaviors. In addition to positivistic approaches to understanding immigrant experiences, the researchers for this study advocate for rigorous interpretive studies through the use of narrative, photoethnography, the qualitative research practice of capturing visual images that depict the experiences of college students' lives, and other non-traditional approaches to better understand student development (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010).

While recognizing the complexity of immigrant students' identities and the unique experiences of each individual student; the intention of this paper is to shed light on only the differences in perceived academic obstacles between immigrant and non-immigrant students. Stebleton, Huesman, and Kuzhabekova (2010) have noted important differences between different generations of immigrant students based on when they arrived in the United States; to that end, we encourage future studies to take into account such factors in exploring the experiences of immigrant students. Finally, we advocate longitudinal research to examine the impacts of these self-perceived obstacles on immigrant students' academic successes and the extent to which academic self-efficacy can moderate those impacts. Learning which educational practices best influence academic self-efficacy can also help higher education administrators with deciding upon the most effective practices to engage immigrant students and help them to overcome obstacles to their success.

Conclusion

In conclusion, immigrant students are more likely to report that they have greater obstacles to their academic success than non-immigrant students. Specifically, immigrant students were more likely to cite competing family responsibilities, weak English skills, weak math skills, inadequate study skills, poor study behaviors, poor study environments, and feeling depressed, stressed, or upset as obstacles to their academic success. These findings have implications for higher educational professionals in learning centers, as immigrant college student populations will continue to grow. Further, the obstacles to their academic success that immigrant students encounter may have serious implications for their degree progression and attainment over time. In this article, several recommendations have been presented which student affairs practitioners and other educators, including learning assistance center staff, can take to enhance immigrant students' academic self-efficacy and help them to overcome academic obstacles.

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