

CSWS

*Research Matters**Latina Girls' Perceived Barriers,
Supports, and Future Expectations*

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In Oregon and nationally, Latina girls are more likely to drop out of high school than girls of any other ethnic group. At the same time, Latina girls express high aspirations for postsecondary education and their future careers.

For the past sixteen years I have studied perceptions of barriers among Latina and Latino youths and other adolescents from the perspective of social cognitive career theory. According to this theory, perceptions of barriers influence the translation of career interests to career goals, and career goals to outcomes. Young people who encounter or anticipate encountering more barriers to an interest area will be less likely to set goals in that area, and less likely to take steps to pursue that area. My research consistently found that Latina girls anticipate encountering significantly more barriers to their educational pursuits than their white peers. In addition, the results of a number of studies suggest that perceived barriers are only moderately correlated with Latina girls' expressed aspirations and plans. National educational and occupational attainment data suggest that these barriers do influence the realization of—

or the failure to realize—these aspirations. The authors of social cognitive career theory propose that the deleterious effects of perceived barriers can be mediated by support—both experienced and anticipated. Latina girls who face many barriers may be more likely to maintain and achieve their high aspirations if they experience contextual supports for their educational and vocational activities.

With funding from CSWS, I conducted a research study using focus group methodology to better understand Latina girls' postsecondary plans, the barriers and supports they experience and anticipate in school and at home, and their recommendations for how others might better support their educational and career goals. I conducted six focus

“We’re at the table and [our teacher] just came out of nowhere, like, ‘Stop speaking Spanish,’ in a bad way, you know, and, ever since she said that, the whole class would be like, ‘Go back to Mexico,’ ‘Why are you in America if you can’t even talk in English,’ and just saying, all these things and, the teacher didn’t say nothing to them, she said that . . . she didn’t hear them or whatever . . . she didn’t do nothing about it.” –Focus group participant

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 Permit No. 63

Research Matters

Research Matters is published by the Center for the Study of Women in Society. For more information, call (541) 346-5015, or visit our website, csws.uoregon.edu.

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groups with a total of forty-one Latina girls in the Eugene, Springfield, and Bethel school districts together with counseling psychology doctoral student collaborators Marina Valdez, Alisia Caban, and Christina Aranda. We consulted with community members and educators interested in Latina students to share our goals, refine our focus group questions, and obtain their support in recruiting participants. Focus groups were audiotaped, transcribed, and coded for thematic content. Groups were cofacilitated and were conducted in English or Spanish, depending upon the participants' preferences.

We found participants to have a

strong dedication to helping them succeed, while others identified a teacher, administrator, or peers who encouraged them. Participants in all groups expressed strong emotions and many cried while sharing experiences of isolation, lack of support, or discrimination. Our findings also indicate the critical importance of family in understanding postsecondary plans and subsequent choices made by Latinas; the chilling isolation of Spanish-dominant participants from teachers and from their Latino and non-Latino classmates; the importance and high impact of teacher warmth, interest, active investment in them as people; their strong desire to help their families; their awareness of their

barriers; and the underused potential for these young Latinas to contribute to their school communities.

Perhaps one of the strongest themes to emerge from the groups was that of negotiating challenges outside the awareness of teachers, peers, or families. For example, in discussing economic hardships within their families, their home and family responsibilities, or racism, they often made statements such as this one: ". . . the teachers don't really understand us because they don't know what we've been through. They don't know how our life is. They don't know how hard it is for us just to come to school . . ." In discussing the challenges posed by homework, obtaining college information, and school problems, they often described their parents as unfamiliar with the demands and workings of the school setting, unable to provide homework

"I think that a lot of people in these meetings [focus groups] are probably going to go away with at least, um, a couple of new perspectives and ideas and even more motivated than they were before and to be able to visualize your barriers and your supports is really useful, like, more useful than you would think it was, because you understand what the problems are, you understand what you need to overcome. You can't fight blind, you know, you can't overcome something unless you know what it is." –Focus group participant

range of postsecondary plans, with 68 percent hoping to go to college. They identified numerous barriers to achieving their plans in their school and home environments including economic hardships, lack of information about career and college options, and negative perceptions of Latinos. Many described parents'

parents' sacrifice and a pervasive sense of responsibility to achieve more because of those sacrifices; overt and covert discrimination experienced from white and Latina and Latino peers, from teachers and administrators, and in some cases within their own families; their high aspirations in the face of numerous

assistance, or unavailable to them because of evening work schedules. In spite of the many challenges they identified, the Latina participants in our focus groups stressed repeatedly that they were committed to obtaining a good education, working (in jobs or careers), and providing a better life for themselves and their families.