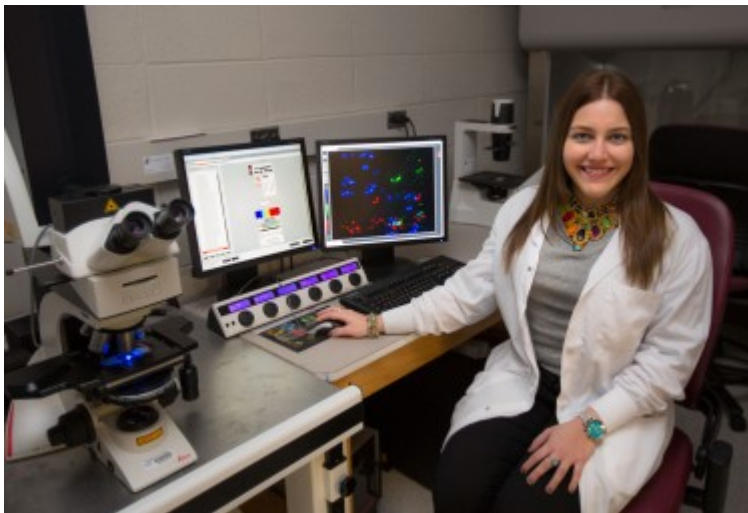


Challenges of Being a Latina Scientist: Embracing your Culture ^[1]

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When I was 5 years old, I identified that I had a special interest in science, which intensified upon entering college to complete my bachelor's degree in Cellular and Molecular Biology, and during several summer internships in Europe, South America and the United States. My passion continued to grow as I continued to get experiences: my master's degree in Spain and my experience as a science teacher in China were key elements for this to happen. These experiences motivated me to do a PhD in Immunology at Mayo Clinic in Rochester, MN, where I am currently studying. All the experiences that I had the joy of living before and also the challenges I faced, were unknowingly preparing me for what I am living now. I never imagined that the road to this new goal was going to be filled with so many obstacles, most of them not related to science, but with how I project my culture, my sense of belonging in this place, and how I interpret other people's messages towards me. This last factor includes, but is not limited to how I can understand and internalize the material of a class in comparison to my colleagues, how I perceive the intentions of those around me and how I face conflicts, both professional and personal, unlike my colleagues.

Hispanics represent 23% of students who enroll in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) programs, but only 16% finish their bachelor's degree in STEM, compared to 30% of white students. In addition, only 3% of Latina women are represented in any branch of STEM, while women in total represent 24% of the workforce (Fact Sheet: The State of Latinas in the United States [3]). There is a great need for Latinos, especially Latina women, in the sciences and, in my opinion, this is related in part to the challenges mentioned above. As a woman and as a Latina, feeling respected, understood and accepted in a foreign environment is fundamental for success, professional development and emotional well-being during graduate studies and throughout life.

What is my sense of belonging to the place where I am?

An important element for me, as a Latina, is to feel that I am part of the academic and social life. Feeling that you belong to a place is essential to be able to advance in your career and in your life. I often feel that, after having lived and visited so many places, I cannot find my true identity. Sometimes I do not know where I come from or where I belong. Sometimes I think I have nothing in common with my classmates. One strategy that often works to counteract this feeling is to meditate on my core values, what has led me to be the person I am and to achieve what I previously visualized only as a dream. I also visualize where I want to go and I remember that what I am going through is part of the process, the path to reach the final destination. In most cases, the answer or solution to my concerns is inside me, you just have to breathe, pause and rediscover yourself.

How do I interpret the messages? Your cultural and personal background dictates your mode of learning, the way in which you internalize new knowledge, how you project yourself, and how you deal with conflict.

"Acculturation" refers to the degree to which an individual adheres to or accustoms to a new culture, often at the expense of their own culture and involuntarily. On the other hand, "enculturation" refers to the degree to which an individual adheres to their inheritance culture. In an ideal case, enculturation and acculturation would go hand in hand, giving you the opportunity

to adapt and progress in a new environment without forgetting your essence and where you come from. The interpretation and internalization of any new concept will vary depending on the experiences and knowledge previously acquired, since we all go through different processes. You cannot expect everyone to understand and visualize a concept in the same way and at the same time.

Regarding conflict mediation, the way you approach solving issues speaks more about you than you imagine. In many occasions, it is difficult to define a line between having the right and not having it. We are different, unrepeatable and we come from different backgrounds, therefore we mediate situations in different ways based on our previous experiences and sometimes even in our culture. In an environment that promotes and supports diversity, this should not necessarily be a problem, but an opportunity to grow and learn from one another. Unfortunately, not all the places you are in will have this kind of harmony and it is fine not to agree, as long as respect is encouraged even if there are discrepancies.

I want to clarify that what I write here is merely my opinion and perception about the difficulties we may face as foreign students. Maybe other people identify with me, maybe not ... Anyway, I invite you to reflect on what worries you and prevents you from adapting to a new environment. I promise that facing your fears and situations is the beginning to being a little happier.

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