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### ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Effects of goal clarification on impulsivity and academic procrastination of college students<sup>☆</sup>

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#### KEYWORDS

Procrastination;  
Impulsivity;  
College students;  
Smart goal  
clarification;  
Online intervention

**Abstract** Nearly 50% of the college population struggles with academic procrastination, which is an impulsivity problem that often leads to emotional difficulties and college dropout. This study aimed to assess whether an online intervention on clarification of academic goals could reduce impulsivity and academic procrastination in college students. Forty-eight participants were assigned to three different types of interventions: (a) SMART-type goal clarification treatment (setting specific, measurable, agreed upon, realistic and time-based goals); (b) instructional intervention for the abandonment of procrastination (conventional self-help type intervention); and (c) a waiting list. Only SMART intervention produced a statistically significant decrease in impulsivity (measured in terms of a hyperbolic discounting test; Whelan & McHugh, 2009), and academic procrastination (measured with the Procrastination Assessment Scale-Student – PASS), in both cases with small-to-moderate treatment effects. In conclusion, the study showed that online SMART-type goal clarification led to positive changes in impulsiveness and academic procrastination of college students, whereas a self-help protocol failed to produce similar effects. Potential reasons for reduced treatment effects of the SMART intervention are examined (e.g., experimental control). Also, prospective lines of research are discussed in view of the scarcity of experimental studies in this area.

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## PALABRAS CLAVE

Procrastinación;  
Impulsividad;  
Estudiantes  
universitarios;  
Clarificación de  
metas smart;  
Intervención en línea

## Efectos de la clarificación de metas sobre la impulsividad y la procrastinación académica de los estudiantes universitarios

**Resumen** Cerca del 50% de la población universitaria experimenta procrastinación académica, un problema asociado con impulsividad, dificultades emocionales y deserción. El estudio evaluó si una intervención en línea en clarificación de metas académicas reduce la impulsividad y la procrastinación académica de estudiantes universitarios. Cuarenta y ocho estudiantes fueron distribuidos en tres tipos de intervención: (a) clarificación de metas tipo SMART (establecer metas específicas, acordadas en colaboración, medibles, realistas, y basadas en criterios temporales); (b) seguimiento de instrucciones para abandonar la procrastinación (protocolo convencional de tipo autoayuda), y (c) lista de espera. La intervención SMART fue la única que produjo una disminución estadísticamente significativa en impulsividad —medida en términos de descuento hiperbólico (Whelan & McHugh, 2009)— y procrastinación académica —medida a través del *Procrastination Assessment Scale-Student* (PASS)—, en ambos casos con efectos de tratamiento de pequeños a moderados. En conclusión, el estudio demostró la efectividad de un protocolo en línea de clarificación de metas tipo SMART para reducir la impulsividad y la procrastinación académica de estudiantes universitarios, efectos que no fueron encontrados con la implementación de un protocolo de tipo autoayuda. Se discuten posibles razones por las cuales los efectos del tratamiento SMART no fueron mayores (e.g., control experimental), y líneas potenciales de investigación a futuro, esto especialmente considerando los escasos estudios experimentales en esta área.

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Procrastination has been defined as postponing something unpleasant or difficult to do, and to end up doing it in a way that involves greater effort (Ainslie, 2008). As Ainslie (2008) states:

It generally means to put off something burdensome or unpleasant, and to do so in a way that leaves you worse off. By procrastinating you choose a course that you would avoid if you choose from a different vantage point, either from some time in advance or in retrospect. Thus, the urge to procrastinate meets the basic definition of an impulse—temporary preference for a smaller, sooner (SS) reward over a larger, later (LL) reward. (p. 2).

Thus, procrastination is regarded as the tendency to make impulsive decisions to defer the personal costs when an activity is postponed, in order to give temporary preference to an immediate consequence at the expense of a delayed reward (Ainslie, 1975, 2010).

### Problems associated with procrastination

Procrastination is a psychological phenomenon that extends broadly in society. Ferrari, O'Callahan, and Newbegin (2005) reported that 61% of the population display some form of procrastination, of which 20% do so in a chronic manner (e.g., routinely late for deadlines and postponing important tasks daily or weekly). However, procrastination has a particularly negative effect in academic contexts, where it occurs with high prevalence and chronicity. For instance, Steel (2007) reported that 80% of North American college students procrastinate – of which 50% do so in a chronic manner – and similar rates have been observed in Latin

American populations (e.g., Peru – Carranza & Ramírez, 2013; Argentina – Furlan, Ferrero, & Gallart, 2014). Procrastinating behaviors are related to important problems of academic performance and the use of psychoactive substances. Students who procrastinate on their academic tasks often exhibit more problems related to physical symptoms of disease and stress, and this generates the need to visit health units more often (Glick, Millstein, & Orsillo, 2014; Tice & Bauneister, 1997).

Finally, there is a noteworthy number of studies that have reported associations between impulsive behavior of the type involved in chronic procrastination and poor school performance, drug use, and emotional problems (Abraham, Bond, & Richardson, 2012; Ainslie, 2010; Ahn et al., 2011; Cerda & Saiz, 2015; Clariana, 2013; Gaeta, Cavazos, Sánchez, Rosario, & Hogemann, 2015; Glick et al., 2014; Goetz, 2014; González-Brignardello & Sánchez-Elvira-Paniagua, 2013; Furlan et al., 2014; Hayes, Levin, Pistorello, & Seeley, 2013; McKerchar et al., 2009; Perrin et al., 2011; Riveros, Rubio, Candelario, & Mangin, 2013; Yesilkalay, 2014; Zuluaga, 2010).

### Procrastination, goals, and instructions

Research on academic procrastination has established relations between following instructions and motivation for learning (Schunk, 2005). In particular, it has been found that students who demonstrate more skill in following their own instructions tend to be more academically motivated (Pintrich & Shunck, 1993). Monitoring self-instructions has been shown to be guided by the establishment of goals (Karas, Marcantonio, & Spada, 2009), and the instructional

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