

**What are the best practices for online student engagement among  
Hispanic-Serving Institutions? A narrative review**

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**Abstract**

The recent coronavirus disease-19 (COVID-19) pandemic has led many post-secondary education institutions to transition their in-person courses to a completely virtual format. Concerns have been raised about these institutions' readiness to create a student-centered online learning environment. Historically, rates of student attrition and lack of student engagement within the online environment are higher among courses delivered virtually when compared with those delivered in-person. This adds to the concern that graduation rates among first-time, full-time Hispanic undergraduate students are lower than their White and Asian counterparts. Faculty and students often differ in their views regarding which pedagogical strategies improve student success in online environments. Theories addressing student engagement exist, but do not adequately address students of color or faculty teaching at Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs). The purpose of this review is to explore how post-secondary education instructors within HSIs, specifically, can increase learner engagement and improve course retention rates particularly at a time when many courses within post-secondary institutions are being delivered online. Recommendations based on available data will also be provided.

In fall 2018, it was estimated there were over 6 million students enrolled in any distance education courses at degree-granting postsecondary institutions (NCES, 2019a). Approximately 35.3% of these students were taking at least one distance education course, whereas 16.6% were enrolled solely in distance education courses. However, given the current coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic and concerns regarding exposure to the virus, many U.S. colleges and universities have transitioned the majority of their in-person courses to a completely virtual format (Bastrikin, 2020). As of April 2020, approximately 98% of postsecondary institutions had made this transition (Bastrikin, 2020). However, prior to the pandemic, only 48% of 4-year colleges and universities and only 41% of 2-year institutions increased their online learning budgets (Bastrikin, 2020). Therefore, concerns have been raised about these institutions' readiness to create a student-centered online learning environment. Senior leadership within many postsecondary institutions are concerned about increased rates of student attrition and lack of student engagement within the online environment during COVID-19. Results from prior studies have indicated that online courses may have poorer retention rates when compared with in-person classes, where estimated dropout rates have ranged from 40 to 80% among all virtual students (Smith, 2010).

Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) are a type of Minority-Serving Institution (MSI) and are defined as a college or university where at least 25% of full-time undergraduate enrollment identifies as Hispanic and at least 50% are low-income (Department of Education, 2016). Undergraduate enrollment among Hispanics increased from 4% in 1976 to 13% in 2008 (NCES, 2010), making this racial group one of the fastest growing among colleges and universities.

However, in 2010, the graduation rate among first-time, full-time Hispanic undergraduate students was only 54%, whereas rates for Asian and White students were 74% and 64%, respectively (NCES, 2019b). HSIs with fewer campus resources may also have lower graduation rates (Garcia, Núñez, & Sansone, 2019). This is particularly concerning given that many institutions' infrastructures may not be equipped to support virtual student learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The purpose of this review is to explore how post-secondary education instructors within HSIs, specifically, can increase learner engagement and improve course retention rates, particularly at a time when many courses within post-secondary institutions are being delivered online. Recommendations based on relevant data will also be provided.

### **Online Learning: Faculty and Student Perspectives**

Faculty and students differ in their perceptions of the usefulness of various approaches to increase student success in a virtual environment. Online students indicated more faculty instruction and engagement, as well as more comprehensive feedback, would be most valuable to their success (Gaytan, 2015; Heyman, 2010). In contrast, experienced online faculty believe that student self-discipline, quality of interactions between instructors and students, and prior student success in online courses are most important for student retention (Kauffman, 2015). Previously, Wladis et al. (2014) reported that students enrolling in lower-level elective courses were more likely to withdraw and concluded that students' reasons for enrolling in online courses may serve as a potential risk factor for attrition. Others have concluded that learner demographics,

including gender and prior success in online courses, may influence online learning satisfaction through increased feelings of self-efficacy (Shenet al., 2013).

Based on these studies, a consensus has not been reached. Faculty and students differ in their views regarding best approaches to promote student engagement and retention within online courses. This necessitates a discussion of respected theoretical models to provide further insight into this issue.

### **Distance Learning: Theoretical Models**

Theoretical models have been proposed to explain student satisfaction within distance learning environments. Tinto's Model (1975) is considered a seminal work regarding student retention and as such is often referenced in the literature (Lorenzo, 2012). This model emphasized the importance of a sense of belonging via their peer interactions as a means for increasing student retention. Tinto (1975) theorized that students of color may have a decreased sense of belonging given that their social and cultural background may not align with the college or university culture. This lack of alignment may lead to a higher likelihood of attrition among these students. Rendón (1994) theorized that validating students' experiences may serve as an acknowledgement of their existence and thus increase their involvement and reduce attrition. This could be accomplished by incorporating culturally relevant curricula.

Both Tinto's (1975) and Rendón's (1994) perspectives have been applied to distance learning outcomes. In fact, Sweet (1983) applied Tinto's Model to a distance education program

and found it useful when examining student persistence and attrition. Similarly, Rovai (2006) applied to Tinto's Model to create a revised framework for student persistence rates among distance learners. However, this model has not been validated. More recently, Meyer et al. (2006) concluded that among distance education courses relatedness, the combination of student-faculty relationships, the quality of the educational experience, and learners' personal motivations decrease attrition rates.

It is important to note that many of these studies did not include minority-serving institutions in their inquiries. As a result, a significant gap in the literature exists. If students of color comprised much of the study sample, would the same conclusions have been reached?

### **Increasing Academic Engagement Among Students of Color in an Online Environment**

Núñez et al. (2010) concluded that many post-secondary institutions need to be more inclusive of students of color and recommend actively engaging students in the learning process as opposed to viewing them as vessels that need to be filled with knowledge. Similarly, Garcia (2016) reported that when faculty view students as cocreators of knowledge, students reported increased satisfaction and improved quality of faculty-student interactions. Others have recommended that HSIs must provide learning environments that are culturally sensitive by including curricula that are culturally relevant and promote equity among all students (Garcia & Okhidoi, 2015; Malcom-Piqueux & Bensimon, 2015). Redesigning courses to include culturally relevant topics has been shown to be successful in increasing student retention rates among HSIs (Sanchez et al., 2013). If these topics include perspectives of those that are underrepresented, it

would serve to validate their life experiences and may increase their engagement and retention (Garcia & Okihidoi, 2015; Rendon, 1994).

Students have reported that the presence of faculty with an understanding of the importance of racial identity contributed to a positive experience within their respective institutions (Garcia, Núñez et al., 2019). Universities have incorporated service-learning opportunities and have found success with engaging students of color.

Even with these data, examination of successful pedagogy within MSIs and HSIs are sparse, particularly those addressing online engagement. Given that, at this moment, many post-secondary courses are taught remotely, creating a sense of belonging and relatedness can present a unique challenge. Students may feel even more isolated and less engaged with their institution and classmates. These factors may contribute to less interaction, engagement, and a lower sense of belonging among students. In contrast, students that identify as Latinx have reported the presence and visibility of others from a similar cultural background increased their feelings of belongingness and relatedness (Garcia, Núñez et al., 2019). However, remote instruction may reduce these feelings due to the potential lack of visibility among students attending these classes.

Additionally, internet connectivity issues and a lack of access to appropriate technology resources (e.g., laptops, tablets) may prevent students from performing optimally in their courses. It has been reported that students of color, those from lower socio-economic and rural backgrounds, and students with disabilities are more likely to report barriers accessing their courses remotely (Kimble-Hill, Rivera-Figueroa et al., 2020). Additionally, minority students are more likely to experience issues regarding finances, childcare, and transportation (de los Santos & Cuamea, 2010) all of which may negatively affect their success in school. Data from the

United Kingdom (U.K.) revealed that post-secondary students are experiencing connectivity issues while completing their coursework at home (Montacute & Holt-White, 2020). As a result, students have resorted to completing their courses using their cellular phones.

Active faculty involvement in online courses is necessary among all institutions, whether they are an MSI, HSI or not (Morris & Finnegan, 2008). However, based on the studies presented, this need may be particularly necessary within HSIs. Based on their research, Morris and Finnegan (2008), recommend the administration of pre-assessments in order to identify students at high-risk for attrition. Additionally, they cite the importance of clarity and repetition, particularly among courses that are delivered asynchronously. Tracking students' online behavior when they are logged into the respective institution's Learning Management System (LMS) may also help identify those that have become disengaged. However, these recommendations do not specifically address students of color. Students of color may have different needs and perspectives when compared to their white counterparts. Future research needs to address whether these differences exist and how to best serve these students.

While not specific to students of color, the E-Learning Education Design (ELED) Framework (Czerkawski & Lyman 2016) may serve as a starting point for faculty when redesigning their courses to incorporate the principles above. This framework includes the following phases: i) instructional needs, ii) instructional objectives, iii) learning environments, and iv) summative assessment. The Instructional Needs phase assesses learners, addresses diversity, and identifies students' needs. It is during this phase the usefulness of course redesign to better serve the learners may become evident. During the Instructional Objectives phase, based on feedback from the previous phase, course objectives and learner outcomes are drafted. The Learning Environments phase encourages faculty to think of their role as mentor as opposed

to content expert. Instructors facilitate higher-order learning and deeper knowledge attainment among their students by designing courses that encourage active learner engagement while meeting the course objectives identified in Phase 2. This coincides with Núñez, Ramalho, et al. (2010) and Garcia (2016), who encourage actively engaging students in the learning process as cocreators of knowledge, as opposed to viewing them as vessels that need to be filled with knowledge. The Summative Assessment phase provides feedback regarding the effectiveness of the students' learning experiences.

Future studies need to explore whether the ELED Framework could be applied to students attending HSIs. Doing so will help faculty determine best practices for creating a supportive distance learning environment for all students.

### **Recommendations**

The aim of these recommendations is to provide information that might aid instructors and institutions conducting virtual courses, particularly MSIs and HSIs, to improve their student retention rates. Further well-designed studies examining how best to support and engage students attending MSIs and HSIs are needed. However, given the results of the studies cited, some preliminary recommendations can be made.

The following may improve retention rates among students of color in an online environment:



1. Know your students: conduct a pre-assessment of students inquiring about potential barriers to success in an online learning environment, address students' backgrounds and diversity among learners, and indicate how the instructor may support their success (Morris & Finnegan, 2008; Czerkowski & Lyman, 2016).
2. After this initial assessment, incorporate culturally relevant curricula as part of the course objectives: didactic coursework should incorporate material to which students of color can relate (Malcom-Piqueux & Bensimon, 2015; Garcia & Okhidoi, 2015; Sanchez, Ramirez et al., 2013). Encourage students to provide examples as to how the course material may relate to those that come from similar cultural backgrounds (Núñez, Ramalho et al., 2010; Garcia, 2016). This may increase a student's sense of belonging which, in turn, may decrease the likelihood of academic withdrawal (Tinto, 1975).
3. Incorporate planned and unplanned interactions with students: schedule regular check-ins with students via email or synchronous modes of communication. Given that students of color may be unequally affected by barriers to technology (Kimble-Hill, Rivera-Figueroa et al., 2020), it may be worthwhile to connect with students that have not recently logged on to the course LMS or appear to be struggling with the course material. (Malcom-Piqueux & Bensimon, 2015; Garcia & Okhidoi, 2015, Sanchez, Ramirez et al., 2013; Morris & Finnegan, 2008)
4. Engage in online pedagogy training: these trainings should incorporate ways to involve students in the learning process while providing an environment that allows for an equal

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chance of academic success regardless of the learner's cultural background. (Núñez,  
Ramalho et al.,2010; Garcia, 2016)

### Recommendations for Future Research

Continued examination of successful pedagogical approaches in remote learning environments are needed, particularly among MSIs and HSIs. Determining the effectiveness of the recommendations provided requires further exploration through well-designed research studies. Additionally, determining the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on student engagement, belongingness, relatedness, and attrition rates needs to be further explored.

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