

**Instructional support for first-generation
Hispanic students during the COVID-19 pandemic**

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Abstract

Students of Hispanic descent make up the single largest subset of first-generation students enrolled in colleges and universities in the United States. These students have been the most affected by the economic and health consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. They also have less support for their educational pursuits and more outside responsibilities than their continuing-generation counterparts. Best practices for creating an effective online learning environment are explored. Suggestions for helping students create social connections with instructors and fellow students are examined.

Keywords: first-generation students; COVID-19; online learning

First-Generation Hispanic College Students

Although there are differing definitions of “first-generation college student,” using the federal definition of a student whose biological parents did not complete a four-year degree, 56% of enrolled college students in the U.S. fall into this category (Center for First-Generation

Student Success [CFGSS], 2020a). These students come from households with a median income less than half that of continuing-generation students: \$41,000 compared to \$90,000. They are also more likely to attend school part-time, have children of their own, and be from an ethnic group other than white (CFGSS, 2020a). While 61% of continuing-generation students are white, only 46% of first-generation students self-identify as white; the largest ethnic group comprising first-generation students is Hispanic, making up 25% (compared to 14% of continuing-generation students).

Only 20% of first-generation students complete a bachelor's degree within six years of beginning their college experience, compared to 49% of continuing-generation students. First-generation college students are also five times more likely to abandon their college ambitions after the first year (CFGSS, 2020b). Financial aid is needed by 65% percent of first-generation students, with only 49% of continuing-generation students accessing such support (CFGSS, 2020c).

Less Family Support to Stay in School

Many first-generation college students, particularly those from collectivist cultures, desire to stay connected to their families (Benigno, 2012; Covarrubias et al., 2019; Jackson et al., 2016; Jehangir, 2010; Jehangir et al., 2015; Sy & Romero, 2008; Telzer & Fulgini, 2009). The aforementioned familial responsibilities are a way for many students from these cultures to engage with their families and remain close to them (Rogoff, 2014). Nonetheless, many first-generation Hispanic college students feel an ambivalence when starting college because their families do not have a full grasp of their educational journey and fail to provide the support that continuing-generation students receive (Azmitia et al., 2018).

Family Obligations

Many first-generation college students have significant familial obligations while attending school (Covarrubias et al., 2019; Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Jehangir, 2010; Stephens et al., 2012). Teens and young adult children from families of Hispanic ethnicity are often expected to provide care for younger siblings or older adults living in the home (Morgan Consoli & Llamas, 2013; Rogoff, 2014; Valdés, 1996). These obligations have remained consistent for first-generation Hispanic students over several decades of research (London, 1989; Rendón, 1994). In fact, family commitments are one of the main reasons that students are unsuccessful in online courses (Bawa, 2016). This is particularly challenging for educators in that universities in the U.S. mostly reflect norms and values of young adults transitioning away from their nuclear families with diminishing responsibilities and increasing independence (Covarrubias et al., 2019; Fryberg & Markus, 2007; Stephens et al., 2012).

Research has established that first-generation students can feel guilty and out-of-place in their home environments, as their education potentially weakens their family connections, and they pursue their individual goals. Students without family members who have successfully completed college are more likely to drop out because of unfulfilled family obligations (Azmitia et al., 2018; Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Hurtado et al., 2015). In the era of COVID, some first-generation students felt a marked increase in their obligations in the home because of school closures and younger siblings no longer having a place to go during the day.

The increased demand on household responsibilities for first-generation students was particularly common in Hispanic households and even more for female students (Covarrubias et

al., 2019; Quandt et al., 2020). Hispanic households are more likely for the parents to be working in farming, considered an essential industry and exempt from the stay-at-home mandates (Quandt et al., 2020; Mares, 2020; The Plight, 2020). Although it may seem to be a positive reality that Hispanic students had parents who were still working despite the pandemic, in many ways it was not: farmworkers were at increased risk of contracting COVID due to working conditions; lived in conditions making it difficult to socially distance; and experienced increased stress and mental health concerns regarding it (Quandt et al., 2020; Mares, 2020). Caring for ill family members, becoming ill themselves, and dealing with increased stress only exacerbated the complexities of navigating the college experience for them.

More Likely Impacted by COVID Economic Consequences

First-generation college students, to include Hispanic students, are more likely to come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and, generally, come from households with considerably lower incomes than continuing-generation students (Allan et al., 2016; CFGSS, 2020a). Throughout the course of the pandemic, it was more vulnerable populations most affected economically by the social distancing and other public health orders requiring businesses to close and employees to work remotely (Fairlie, 2020; Kantamneni, 2020). First-generation Hispanic students are more likely to come from families which had a disproportionately higher representation in industries affected by COVID-19 (i.e., restaurants, transportation, and manufacturing) and less likely to have family who worked in an area deemed essential, thus their income was reduced significantly (Allan et al., 2016; Kantamneni, 2020). Additionally, parents of first-generation Hispanic students are more likely to be undocumented and not eligible for

some of the aid and legal protections that were available during the pandemic (Arcury & Mora, 2020).

Online Instructional Strategies

Instructor presence varies significantly in an online class versus a traditional classroom lecture setting. A traditional lecture environment affords the instructor the ability to make eye contact with students, change the pace of their delivery based on body language responses of the students, and to better command students' attention. Online classes, however, do not allow for any of this; to compensate, instructors should use a range of different strategies when creating recorded lectures (Bao, 2020). Strategies such as changing the slide layout throughout a presentation or posing questions and suggesting students pause the recording to contemplate it can help keep them engaged (Smith & Diaz, 2004). Additionally, instructors can compensate for the lack of in-person presence by engaging with students in online discussions; higher rates of student-instructor interaction in such activities translate to better student performance (Townsend et al., 2002).

Assessments & Learning Material

When teaching in an online environment, assessments need to be properly scaffolded to build student confidence and ability while confirming their mastery of the content. Properly scaffolded assignments provide students with the opportunity to solidify foundational skills before moving to higher level thinking. Assessments should be relevant and challenging while maintaining a level of flexibility for the learner to proceed in a manner consistent to their own learning preferences (Tai, et al., 2018). Students can be offered, for example, an assignment

with an option for a research paper or a virtual presentation, both exploring the same course components. Further, to keep the content relevant and engaging, online instructors can use case students and share personal and professional experiences to frame their assessment activities (Smith & Diaz, 2004). For Hispanic students, specifically, basing assessments on literature of Hispanic authors or work of Hispanic professionals can be especially profound (Galina, 2016).

Learning material needs to be relatable to students. For Hispanic students, content that is culturally relevant to their background and futures careers should be considered. In many ways, this is easier to do in an online setting than a traditional classroom (Persky & Pollack, 2010). The online setting allows for instructors to use innovative techniques and technology to bring cultural experiences virtually to students from around the globe that otherwise may not be possible. Students and instructors alike may also feel less inhibited and safer to explore topics in a virtual setting that would be intimidating in a face-to-face environment.

Encouraging Students

Gardner and Holley (2011) stress the importance of spotlighting professionals in the field of study from diverse backgrounds. This encourages Hispanic students and other students of color to pursue careers they may have otherwise not thought possible. Instructors also need to be supportive in the online setting so that students learn from their mistakes rather than feeling shamed and discouraged.

Recorded Lectures

Recorded lectures should be brief to help keep students' attention. Given the ease of being distracted in a non-classroom environment, the content of a long-recorded lecture is less likely to be retained by a student. Breaking these longer lessons into micro-lessons, of no more than 20-30 minutes, will help students remain focused and attentive (Bao, 2020). This strategy also provides students with a forced mental break when a micro-lesson concludes, further helping their retention. Bao (2020) showed that voice control is also important in recorded lectures. Instructors need to speak with a gentle tone to not intimidate students; this is especially important with Hispanic students and other students who are likely to be first-generation students (Covarrubias et al., 2019; Quandt et al., 2020). To help with keeping students focused on the content, instructors should use appropriate voice inflections, repeat important elements, and pause after reviewing a complex concept.

Communication

Given that many Hispanic students are often also first-generation college students, supportive communication can aid in their success (Covarrubias et al., 2019; Quandt et al., 2020). Supportive communication includes emails and course announcements with important details on upcoming assignment due dates and links to specific reading material and other resources. These tools help students who are less experienced with navigating the university system.

There are differences in communication approaches for individuals from individualistic and collectivist cultures (Lang, 2014). Hispanic students come from a collectivist cultural

background, valuing relationships with others and indirect communication (Frambach et al., 2014). Most U.S. college instructors, though, come from individualistic cultures, emphasizing individuality and direct communication (Frambach et al., 2014; Helmer et al., 2015). Faculty need to be aware of these differences and how their communication style may impact their students; this can reduce miscommunication and help students feel more comfortable (Frambach et al., 2014).

Flexibility

Hispanic students are more likely to have work obligations, family obligations, and unreliable internet access (Covarrubias et al., 2019; O'Regan, 2020; Quandt et al., 2020). These realities suggest instructors should be more flexible with due dates to accommodate these factors outside of students' control. Of course, for fairness, flexibility needs to be provided to all students; one option is for instructors to have a due date with a "grace period" ranging from two days to a week later to allow for these other factors.

Social Connections in the Online Environment

Relationship Building

Relationships are important in Hispanic culture, in part because of the collectivist nature (Frambach et al., 2014). From a student performance perspective, students who form relationships with other students and/or their instructors, engage in their courses more, perform better, have a higher self-esteem, and are more likely to finish their degrees (Kuh, 2008; Trowler, 2010). While there may be inherent challenges to creating social opportunities for these relationships to be established in online courses, proper use of technology provides the needed

tools. Instructors can create virtual “hang outs” with discussion boards for students to post non-course related content (Boyd, 2014). Instructors are also encouraged to use voice and screen sharing technology in social ways for students to introduce themselves to one another (Pacansky-Brock et al., 2020).

When Hispanic students in an online course room are provided with the means to build these relationships that consider their cultural background, it also provides the opportunity for peer-to-peer learning (Boud, 2001; Frambach et al., 2014). Options for creating peer learning can include group projects, providing peer feedback and assignments, and cohort groups on social media (Keengwe & Kidd, 2010). The benefits of peer-to-peer learning include learning how to achieve a common goal and benchmarking their understanding of the course content as they hear others’ understanding of the material (Boud, 2001). Though it may seem that only low-performing students benefit from this learning process, high-performing students also benefit from the experience of teaching what they have learned to others.

Instructors should create opportunities for relationships to be built between them and their students as well (Rourke, et al., 2001). One way to do this is to provide details on one’s non-academic life with the students. Instructors can post welcome videos at the beginning of the course, shot while on a hike, at the beach, or visiting a museum; they should share with students their interests and ask students to share theirs. These and other course videos can also be imperfect, with minor errors, to build confidence in students seeing that their instructor is not perfect and also has challenges to overcome (Allan et al., 2016; Gehlbach et al., 2016; Pacansky-Brock et al., 2020).

Summary

First-generation Hispanic students are more likely to experience barriers to learning. The most common of these are family obligations, poor access to internet, and concern over finances. First-generation Hispanic students must balance more responsibilities outside of their academic life while navigating their college experience. They also begin their academic journey with less resources, financial and non-financial, than other student groups.

Given the economic realities of the COVID-19 pandemic, these students felt the consequences more drastically. First-generation Hispanic students were more likely to be exposed to the virus and experienced significant economic fallout. Many of these challenges are continuing with the ongoing conditions of COVID-19 variant. Thus, instructors need to consider ways to lessen the impact of these consequences on these students' academic careers. Being more flexible with assignments and due dates, effectively using technology, clear communication, and creating student and instructor relationships will help these students succeed during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond, given the barriers to learning they frequently encounter.

There is much to learn from the transition to virtual learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The observations and reflections of college faculty have provided an opportunity to analyze students' perceptions of their courses. Colleges and universities need to create specific strategies to help serve first-generation Hispanic students in the best ways possible. Potential strategies to consider include professional development for faculty regarding communication and

collectivist cultures, cultural competence, and implicit bias; working with students to identify needed resources; and providing tools and resources to build and foster relationships.

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