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**Hispanic Students and Online Learning: Factors of Success**

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**Abstract**

This study focused on understanding Hispanic post traditional college students’ perceptions of the factors of success in an online learning environment at a Hispanic Serving Institution in the United States. Survey, interview, and focus group data indicate that Hispanic post traditional students assert that hybrid learning, social interactions, faculty communication, and independent learning behaviors contribute to successful outcomes in online learning. Furthermore, Hispanic students learn best when engaged with peers and faculty, have access to a brick and mortar institution with support services, and consider face to face interaction important to their learning experiences.

**Introduction**

In the United States, Hispanic undergraduate enrollment is expected to increase 27% by 2022 (Hussar & Bailey, 2013), making it a growing population in colleges and universities when compared to a projected 7% increase among Caucasian enrollment during this same period (Hussar & Bailey, 2013). Hispanic college enrollment is expected to continue to increase, as Hispanics are the fastest growing population and possess the largest and youngest racial ethnic group in the United States, indicating that this group is a strong driver for the labor and economic markets (Patten, 2016; U.S. Census Bureau, 2017; U.S. Department of Labor, 2012). Despite Hispanic college enrollment rates, Hispanic college completion rates remain low at 16%, compared to the 40% completion rates of their Caucasian peers (McFarland et al., 2018). With the increase of Hispanic college enrollment and their high attrition rates, it is important to understand characteristics and experiences that lead to success among Hispanic college students, especially at Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs), those colleges and universities in the United States that possess over 25% of Hispanic student full-time enrollment (Johnson & Galy, 2013; Santiago, 2013). In the United States, HSIs serve almost 60% of the Hispanic college student population (Santiago, 2013); many are considered post-traditional students, those classified as being 18 years and older, commuter students, wage earners, and in many cases, first generation college students (Soares, 2013). Post-traditional students tend to choose a college that is accessible, close to home, and affordable; they seek alternative options for learning and integrate online or hybrid courses into their degree seeking plans as a flexible strategy to complete college goals. Moreover, a large percentage of Hispanic post-traditional students attend HSIs (Santiago, 2013).

Concurrent with the increase of Hispanic college student enrollment is the proliferation of e-learning integration among the nation’s colleges and universities in fully online, hybrid, and web-assisted courses. In fact, online education has become an integrated long-term strategy at many higher education institutions in fulfilling their enrollment and degree completion mandates, and upwards of 28% of college students enroll in at least one online course (Allen & Seaman, 2015). With the integration of online learning, many students choose to enroll in hybrid or fully online courses, which form a part of their campus-based degree programs. They do this for flexibility in scheduling and to advance degree completion (Johnson & Galy, 2013). Among higher education institutions, public colleges and universities enroll the most distance education students, but nonprofit private colleges have experienced a 33% growth in offering distance education courses in the last few years; this includes HSIs (Allen & Seaman, 2015). Yet, despite the increase in Hispanic student college enrollment and the development of diverse types of online learning options, there is little research on Hispanic students and online learning (Johnson & Galy, 2013; Lu & Cavazos Vela, 2015). Research also suggests that minority students, such as Hispanics, may lack the engagement skills in an online environment and experience some anxiety using technology in learning (Enoch & Soker, 2006; Johnson & Galy, 2013). This study provides insight on Hispanic student online learning trends and perceptions at one HSI.

**Theoretical Framework**

The purpose of this study was to explore post-traditional Hispanic college student perceptions of success factors in an online learning environment at one Hispanic Serving Institution, to understand the attitudes, ideas, and experiences this group of students has had with online learning in their campus-based degree programs. Using Tinto’s (1987) theory of social interaction, which asserts that exchanges that occur between students and their peers, students with faculty, and that the overall social experiences in a college learning context influence the student’s ability to persist academically, survey and interview questions were developed to explore student perceptions and experiences with online learning. Data collection was designed to inquire about student interactions with peers and faculty, student self-efficacy, and perceptions on successful outcomes in the context of an online course. In an online environment, interaction may be determined by many factors in course design, applications used to engage students, a student’s online learning readiness, past experiences in online learning, experience with technology, and a student’s ability to navigate the learning environment (Johnson & Galy, 2013; Kim, 2009; Lu & Cavazos Vela, 2014). Online learning requires students to be independent, self-regulated learners, and to possess a level of self-confidence in using technology in the learning process (Mannan, 2007). Student interaction with faculty and peers in an online environment may increase their self-efficacy and self-regulation, possibly increasing their ability to succeed online by helping them become independent learners, an important component to increasing success in an online environment (Johnson & Galy, 2013; Mannan, 2007). Online learning environments should nurture the independent learner, provide social interaction, and help students develop self-efficacy (Schunk & Zimmerman, 2003). This study investigated the factors Hispanic college students attribute to their persistence and success in an online environment. Nora and Grisp (2012) asserted that research on Hispanic student achievement would benefit from a broadening concept of success to include the social experiences and interactions with faculty, staff, and peers.

**Literature Review**

Data indicates that Hispanics are enrolling at a lower rate than their counterparts in online courses (Koenhke, Kyger, Berg, & Stroud, 2013) and suggests that there are social integration, online readiness, and course design issues, among other factors, that may hinder their success in an online learning environment (Ali & Leeds, 2009; Johnson & Galy, 2013; Markle, 2015; Wozniak, Pizzica, & Mahony, 2012). Low levels of persistence in online courses include a student’s external and internal factors, as well as the context of the learning environment. While internal factors revolve around a student’s ability to motivate themselves to stay on task to complete coursework, there are also external factors such as the time constraints, family burdens, and even financial situations associated with an individual’s ability to persist in an online learning environment (Croxton, 2014; Hart, 2012). Online student success is continuously measured by similar variables across studies; these include retention rate, course grade, and student level of satisfaction with the course (Croxton, 2014; Hart, 2012). Another indicator of success in online learning has been the student grade point average (GPA); research shows that a student with a high GPA who enrolls in an online course has been almost always found to do well in an online course (Hart, 2012; Markle, 2015). Yet, some researchers argue that the reasoning behind the success may not be the individual’s GPA, but rather the factors related to motivation, time-management and good study habits (Johnson & Galy, 2013; Markle, 2015; Wladis, Conway, & Hachey, 2015; Xu & Jaggars, 2014). Self-motivation has been linked to online learning persistence and a major aspect of self-motivation is linked to self-efficacy, or, a student’s confidence to complete the course; this has been found to correlate with students’ persistence, and, in turn, their success (Hart, 2012). Ethnicity and age are other factors that may be linked to online student success, as are a student’s background, technology access, or levels of stress experienced during the college going years (Xu & Jaggars, 2014).

Other factors have been more controversial in their correlation to student success. Females are believed to perform better in online courses when compared to their male counterparts. Studies support this statement across all majors (Wladis et al., 2015; Xu & Jaggars, 2014), except for one study where data demonstrated that females are more vulnerable to failure in Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) online courses as compared to males (Wladis et al., 2015). Similarly, age is another disputed factor. Some research indicates that younger students are more adept at using technology and this puts them at an advantage, therefore allowing them to outperform older students in online coursework (Henson, 2014; Wladis et al., 2015). However, another study reported that older students had a better adaptability to online courses than younger students (Xu & Jaggars, 2014). While online learning has its benefits, there are several factors to consider when trying to understand success factors and address attrition in online courses.

Hispanic Students and Online Learning

By and large, higher education institutions may take for granted that Hispanic students would academically thrive in an online environment. With a few training modules on how to navigate the learning management system, most institutions have launched Hispanic college students into the world of e-learning and expect success. This population, however, has characteristics that may affect the effectiveness of online learning. Many are immigrants or first generation children of immigrants who have only experienced technology in a recreational context (i.e., cell phones, video games, web browsing). Skills developed and utilized during the use of recreational online media may not transfer effectively into the online learning environment. Learning for this population has been in the traditional classroom setting, which they prefer, where they can share their life experiences through lively discussions that connect course content to employment, participate in group projects, and complete assignments with peers (Van Doorn & Van Doorn, 2014). Findings from one study found that time management, self-confidence in technology skills, and independent learning were significantly linked to variables in Hispanic student online course success (Johnson & Galy, 2013). From a cultural perspective, Hispanic students seek out mentoring experiences with faculty; they develop relationships with people on campus that aid them in accessing resources and cultivate their funds of knowledge (Arbelo-Marrero & Milacci, 2016; Castellanos, Gloria, Besson, & Harvey, 2016; Schwartz, Kanchewa, Rhodes, Cutler, & Cunningham, 2016). Relationships are not easily transferable to an online environment; some students may experience isolation and discouragement (Mahoney, 2009). For first generation or immigrant college students, language barriers, lack of English writing proficiency, and knowledge about the United States educational cultural norms may be a deterrent to their success in an online environment. Further, individuals in this population may struggle with managing family households and financial commitments. Learning how to navigate an online educational environment without face-to-face interaction or live mentoring opportunities may make seeking a degree in higher education their last priority (Beyrer, 2010).

**Problem Statement**

While online learning has emerged as an important aspect of higher education and enrollment in online education has increased by almost 30% over the past five years, attrition rates for online courses is on average about 35% in the United States (Allen & Seaman, 2015; Hachey, Wladis, & Conway, 2013; Xu & Jaggars, 2011). It is obvious that online learning will impact degree completion as colleges and universities add online learning to their curricular models. With Hispanic students lagging in degree completion, it is imperative to understand factors of success for online learning in order to adopt practices and models that work well for these students. The purpose of this study was to understand post-traditional Hispanic student perceptions about online learning and to what they attribute their success in an online learning context. Using survey and interviews, data was collected from a larger sample population *n* = 104 (survey), and *n* = 10 (interview and focus groups) to understand factors of success for post traditional Hispanic students in hybrid and online courses. With the dearth of literature on Hispanic students and online learning, this research study adds to the literature on this topic.

**Methodology**

**Research Questions:**

To understand the experiences of Hispanic students in online learning and further explore their perceptions and attitudes toward online learning, the following research questions were developed:

How do Hispanic post-traditional students describe their experiences in an online learning environment?

What factors do Hispanic post-traditional students attribute to successful online learning experiences?

**Sampling and Data Collection**

A web-based Likert scale survey was administered using Questionmark Perception, sent from the student support services department of a small private not for profit HSI with over 75% Hispanic student population. The survey targeted student programs of the institution with fully online and hybrid course components; these included the undergraduate psychology, education, and criminal justice programs and graduate programs in education and industrial and organizational psychology. Students received a survey link by email with an explanation of the study and a consent form to review; no identifiable information was collected. Responses were sought from Hispanic students that had previously participated in either a hybrid or fully online course at the institution, and who were over the age of 18. Of the 167 students who were sent the survey, 104 completed the survey (see Table 1). Researchers piloted the survey with a small student group of post-traditional students to determine item clarity and revised survey and interview questions based upon student feedback. The survey instrument collected demographic profiles, online learning experiences, accessibility to technology, technology readiness, and student preferences and attitudes towards online learning (see Table 2). Creswell and Poth (2018) asserted that quantitative data that is collected as scores on a survey instrument has the potential to establish trends on a large number of people which can prove very helpful when studying a phenomenon such as online learning. Once the survey closed, data was exported from Questionmark Perception to an Excel file and then to Statistical Package for the Social Sciences v.25. Tables 1 and 2 present the descriptive data; no hypotheses were developed because this was not a validated instrument. This instrument was developed to collect descriptive data on the attitudes of students toward online learning among this student population.

Table 1 - *Survey Population Descriptive Statistics*

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|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Category | Frequency | Percentage |
| Gender |   |   |
|  Female | 83 | 81 |
|  Male | 20 | 19 |
| Age |   |   |
|  18–24 age | 27 | 26 |
|  25–29 age | 41 | 39 |
|  ≥ 30 age | 36 | 35 |
| Other Characteristics |   |   |
|  Undergraduate  | 57 | 54 |
|  Graduate | 47 | 46 |
|  First Generation | 52 | 50 |
|  English Language Learner | 68 | 64 |

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Table 2 -*Frequencies for each Statement Measured* |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Category | Item | N | Mean | Standard Deviation | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree |
| Access | I have access to a computer at home. | 104 | 4.82 | 0.51 | 1% | 0% | 3% | 10% | 86% |
| Access | I have access to the internet from my home. | 104 | 4.76 | 0.67 | 0% | 4% | 3% | 8% | 85% |
| Social Technology | I use email to communicate regularly with friends and family.  | 104 | 3.8 | 1.35 | 7% | 18% | 13% | 15% | 47% |
| Social Technology | I feel confident in using technology for social purposes (i.e. email or texting friends, using Facebook/Instagram/Twitter).  | 104 | 4.62 | 0.8 | 1% | 4% | 3% | 17% | 75% |
| Academic Technology Use |  I often use internet search engines, such as Google Scholar, to complete class assignments. | 104 | 4.61 | 0.74 | 0% | 4% | 4% | 20% | 72% |
| Academic Technology Use | I use the university virtual library databases to help me complete my assignments. | 104 | 4.21 | 1.17 | 5% | 6% | 13% | 15% | 60% |
| Online Learning Confidence | I feel confident enough to complete a fully online course  | 104 | 4.25 | 1.03 | 1% | 10% | 9% | 25% | 55% |
| Online Learning Confidence | I feel confident enough to complete a hybrid online course  | 104 | 4.36 | 0.97 | 1% | 5% | 9% | 27% | 58% |
| Online Learning Confidence | I feel confident participating in discussions in an online class (i.e. discussion boards, chat rooms, etc.) | 104 | 4.2 | 1.1 | 5% | 5% | 10% | 27% | 53% |
| Online Teaching and Learning | I find the discussion boards in an online course helpful to the learning process.  | 104 | 3.97 | 1.21 | 5% | 7% | 18% | 25% | 45% |
| Face-to-Face Meetings | As long as I learn the class material, I do not need to meet with my professor face to face. | 104 | 3.00 | 1.33 | 14% | 28% | 24% | 14% | 20% |
| Face-to-Face Meetings | I feel knowledgeable enough in the English language to complete an online class without face-to-face assistance. | 104 | 4.29 | 0.91 | 2% | 3% | 11% | 34% | 50% |
| Degree Completion | Fully online courses allow me to complete a degree and not stop working | 104 | 3.94 | 1.13 | 4% | 7% | 19% | 31% | 39% |
| Face-to-Face Meetings | I learn less in an online class than in a face-to-face class, because the professor is not present at all times. | 104 | 3.09 | 1.27 | 15% | 19% | 18% | 36% | 12% |
| Face-to-Face Meetings | Face to face meetings with professors are important in my learning experiences | 104 | 4.47 | 0.85 | 1% | 4% | 7% | 24% | 64% |
| Online and On Campus  | Learning online is the same as learning in an on campus course.  | 104 | 2.55 | 1.49 | 31% | 30% | 13% | 8% | 18% |

Survey items were grouped using construct clusters of access, technology use, online learning confidence, online teaching and learning, and face-to-face interaction. Data was self-reported; which limits validity (Creswell & Poth, 2018); all quantitative data is descriptive to allow us to gain a sense of the student population’s experiences and attitudes about online learning. Table 2 displays the item mean, standard deviation, and Likert scale distribution. Data was collapsed by rank and averaged by the following categories: Access, Social Technology Use, Online Learning Confidence, and Online Teaching and Learning. Face-to-Face Meetings and Academic Technology Use were not collapsed due to the nature of the questions; we thought that it was worth reporting them individually to present truer data on these categories. For example, for the Access category, the statements “I have access to a computer at home” and “I have access to the internet at home,” the *strongly agree* and *agree* survey items were collapsed to represent one percentage (94%). Ninety four percent of respondents reported they had access to computer and internet off campus, 77% reported they use social media and email to communicate with friends and family, and 92% of respondents reported that they use internet search engines to complete class assignments. Seventy-five percent of respondents reported using the university’s virtual library, 81% of respondents reported having online learning confidence, and 70% reported discussion board activities helpful to the learning process. Only 34% of respondents expressed that face-to-face interaction was not important to learning and 71% agreed that online learning would help them complete their degree while working. Across respondents, only 26% reported that online and on campus learning is about the same.

**Phenomenology**

The second part of this study sought to understand Hispanic college student experiences with online learning to obtain a sense of “what works” for this group. Mainly interested in understanding Hispanic post-traditional student experiences online and understanding their preferences, the following research question guided the qualitative portion of this study:

RQ: What type of experiences do Hispanic post-traditional students understand as having contributed to their success in an online environment?

A qualitative phenomenological design was used to explore this phenomenon by reviewing descriptions of participant experiences and using the human experience as the main source of data (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Van Manen (1990) asserted that the lived experiences of individuals with a specific phenomenon can lead to a discovery of collective ideas that elucidate a phenomenon. Moustakas (1994) believed that there was a connection between the descriptions of experiences and underlying meaning of that experience. Using an in-depth interview process and focus group protocol, this research examined the ideas and experiences of Hispanic students with online learning. Using purposeful sampling techniques, we recruited 10 Hispanic students over the age of 18 who satisfied criteria as post-traditional Hispanic college students enrolled in a degree program at an HSI who had participated in a fully online or hybrid course (Patton, 2015). Post traditional students as mentioned above are those who are 18 years and older, commuter students, wage earners, and in many cases, first generation college students (Soares, 2013). To recruit students, flyers were posted on various bulletin boards on campus, in the student services office, and an invitation was sent to all undergraduate and graduate master level students through the Office of the Dean of Student Affairs. Participants were recruited from the same HSI; 3 were males, 7 were females, and ages ranged from 23 to 49. All were Hispanic, two were born in the United States, and the others were born in Cuba, Peru, Spain, and the Dominican Republic (see Table 3). Purposeful sampling allowed us to recruit the individuals with online learning experiences that could elucidate this phenomenon among this specific population (Patton, 2015).

Table 3

*Qualitative Participant Description*

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Category | Frequency |
| Gender |   |
|  Female | 7 |
|  Male | 3 |
| Age |   |
|  18 - 24 age | 2 |
|  25 - 29 age | 4 |
|  ≥ 30 age | 4 |
| Other Characteristics |   |
| Undergraduate  | 10 |
|  Born in the United States | 2 |
|  Born in Latin America | 8 |
|  English Language Learner | 8 |
|  Participated in Hybrid Course | 9 |
|  Participated in Online Course  | 10 |

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**Data Collection**

All participants completed a consent form and a demographic survey during the initial meeting with principal investigators. Time was spent building rapport with participants, explaining the interview protocol, and answering any questions that they had about the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Scott & Garner, 2013). The demographic survey recorded participant gender, age, program, level of study, country of birth, first language learned, and participation in online learning. In-depth interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed within 48 hours of the interview; these ranged in time from 40 minutes to 60 minutes. The transcriptions were de-identified as participants were each assigned a number, P1 (Participant 1), P2, P3, up to P10. The interview narratives were reviewed by participants for validity. Thematic units were presented to participants during a focus group for accuracy and confirmation. Creswell and Poth (2018) asserted that having a third type of data collection increases the reliability of the findings.

**Data Analysis**

Initial coding was the first layer of coding used to identify salient attributes of the interview transcriptions (Saldaña, 2016). Raw data was analyzed using open codes on a line-by-line approach; these were read and reread (van Manen, 1990). Some of the codes identified during this initial coding process were “independent learning,” “self-motivated,” “time-management,” “social interaction,” and “access to professor.” These initial codes were noted on the transcription narratives and on the page margins (Saldaña, 2016). The next layer of coding was descriptive coding (Saldaña, 2016); this was used to summarize the topics in the transcriptions and narratives, such as “access to professors,” “campus social networks in virtual setting,” “visual course content,” and “detailed feedback from professor.” This layer of coding revealed emerging ideas in the transcriptions while also providing an understanding of the meanings of transcription content (van Manen, 1990). The third layer of coding was pattern coding (Saldaña, 2016); that is, identifying repetitive ideas and descriptions in the data transcriptions with notes, and highlighted content from prior layers; these were assessed for thematic patterns. This exercise helped to formulate explanations, identify connections between phrases, and further cluster ideas generated throughout the coding process. Examples of clustering patterns in this study would be “independent learning” and “successful online experiences.” The cluster codes helped to form overarching codes such as “online learning experiences” and could then be reviewed again for further development (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Saldaña, 2016). This analytic process provides a means for an ongoing data-reduction process to accurately depict the phenomenon in themes (van Manen, 1990). After coding the data, it was organized into cluster patterns that were developed into thematic meaning units (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

**Qualitative Findings**

Data analysis revealed four themes that Hispanic students attribute to successful online learning experiences. These are independent learning, social interaction, faculty communication, and hybrid preference (Figure 1).

**Independent Learning**

Hispanic post-traditional students assert that to succeed in an online learning environment, a student must know how to study independently. Participants believe that students must be self-motivated and resourceful in navigating the learning process on their own. One female participant voiced this assertion, “in online learning you have to teach yourself, have a willingness to learn on your own.” Another stated that there was a lack of human contact, and concern that the professor did not “see” the effort that students make to complete their assignments and only note the finished product. A male participant stated, “You are the person that sees your own efforts in an online class, the professor does not see this.” Participants aver that students should be focused on their learning outcomes, self-disciplined enough to overcome the opportunity to procrastinate, and manage time efficiently. Participants described online learning as time consuming while doing the actual reading, watching videos, and assignments, but flexible because you are not required to be physically on campus. One participant stated, “I had to study a lot more than having my professor answer my questions right away.” Another stated, “You take days of the week to work on your online class and set your own goals to meet deadlines.” When asked what helped her complete an online course, one participant stated, “my own self-motivation to really want to complete it.” Participants described a learning curve in online learning related to complicated initiations into an online learning environment, and not understanding how to navigate learning management systems made it a challenge.

**Social Interactions**

All participants described in their interviews a need for a virtual social structure in the way of linkages and communities in online learning. They need to interact and engage with peers in a concrete manner beyond the discussion board. Synchronous chats, skype meetings with peers and faculty were activities they described that gave them a sense of a virtual community. One participant stated, “not hearing a professor’s voice can be challenging,” another stated, “peer interaction is sometimes missing.” The discussion board forum or group projects require some interaction but participants seek a deeper link to their peers and faculty in the online classroom. One participant stated, “this [online learning] is a very abstract way to learn,” “you don’t have the same interaction that you do on campus and that makes it challenging.” In online classroom activities learners obtain information, exchange documents, and collaborate to complete tasks, but much of their social capital is still campus based. “Being able to come to campus and meet with a professor that is teaching me online has helped clarify doubts about assignments and feel connected to something.” Another participant asserted, “seeing my faculty is important because I get to ask those questions and get clarification, a lot can be misinterpreted. But when you look at someone and they’re responsive it clears up any confusion…it opens doors for communication and knowledge.” For many, having campus friends in their courses has helped them succeed because there is a built-in social structure to support them, “having friends in the same class helps, we call each other, work together, talk out our doubts about assignments.” Social structure in online learning is supported through campus-based connections, cohort group learning both on campus and online, and access to faculty in a brick and mortar context.

**Faculty Communication**

Participants of this study made it very clear during the interviews that clear and consistent communication is imperative in an online learning environment. Many described situations where they were “stuck” with a problem or question and had difficulty moving on in an assignment if the question was not answered. Some described feelings of isolation, frustration by a lack of timely feedback from faculty, uncertainty in navigating the course shell, and in some instances, the desire to quit. “It was difficult to find like the places, the links, and the discussion boards; it was confusing.” One participant described dropping an online course because the isolation was too much. They wanted to see a physical person to answer their questions. Another described a positive communication experience as “…if I had a question, I would hear back from my professor within 24 hours; that was very helpful for me.” Phrases that participants used to describe the quality of the communication with faculty were “patient when I have questions,” “quick turnaround on emails,” “thorough feedback,” and “attentive professor.” There was a general perception of a lack of support in the online environment, at least as compared to their on campus environment. Participants stressed the role of faculty presence in communication. One participant stated, “there was no sense of ‘here I [professor] am’ to answer your questions.” Some participants mentioned the phone as an optional mediator that supported their connection to a professor; others mentioned text messaging. Being able to call a professor and hear their voice added a supportive aspect to the online learning environment. “…because verbally they understand better what you are trying to say and what you are asking.”

**Hybrid Preference**

Eight of 10 participants stated that they preferred hybrid course learning experiences over fully online learning experiences. Many described face-to-face meetings as imperative to their learning process. One participant stated, “[I prefer] hybrid because it is good to have an online class if the class can meet from time to time, to see each other face to face; this is the best because you socialize more, discuss course concepts, and learn from each other.” Another participant stated, “…if I don’t understand instructions, or a concept of the course, I know I will be able to see professor and talk to him. That makes me feel more confident about online learning.” Having access to a brick and mortar campus, to a professor that they can meet with, services and support staff, and peer support is important to Hispanic undergraduate students. Post traditional students describe their many obligations outside of school and the fact that situations often occur that may disjoint the learning process. Another participant stated, “Time is a big issue when you are working and studying…hybrid learning gives me the flexibility to complete courses while still having contact with my professor and peers on campus.” Having access to a classroom experience helps them stay focused, connect with peers, clarify doubts about course work, and promotes a sense of belonging. The flexibility of online learning allows students to have some contact with their professor but allows them the flexibility they need as commuter students who are employed and have families.

*Figure 1.* Emerging themes for Hispanic post-traditional college student online success factors.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

The primary objective of this research was to understand the perceptions of Hispanic post-traditional students about online learning and to understand the factors this group attributes to online learning success. Post-traditional students are often pressed for time and have obligations outside of their college course loads that require time and attention, which makes online learning a viable option to help them manage their time while fulfilling their degree aspirations. As institutions of higher education integrate online learning into their programmatic offerings to meet the needs of post-traditional students, it is imperative to understand their attitudes and perceptions of online learning to gain a better sense of how to best transition their students to this learning context. Just as institutions have developed targeted strategies for Hispanic college student success in a traditional campus environment, specific strategies should be developed to support Hispanic student success in an online environment. Understanding Hispanic student experiences and preferences in an online environment, how prepared or unprepared they are for the nuances and rigors of online learning, the types of interactions and instructional design methods that will best support online learning among this population, and how to keep students connected to the institution in a virtual environment assists in forming strategies to successfully serve this population.

This study’s findings indicate that Hispanic post traditional students tend to use internet search engines to complete course assignments ($x$ = 4.61) more than the university’s virtual library ($x$ = 4.21). Prior studies found that college students often use the internet search engines with more frequency than their college’s virtual library to identify sources and information to complete their coursework (Head & Eisenberg, 2010; Kolowich, 2011). Students may use internet search engines over the institutional virtual library because they are pressed for time, the ease of access of the internet, or because they are not knowledgeable about how to use library virtual databases. Yet this does not guarantee that they are using quality sources to complete their course assignments. Institutions may want to embed quick visual library tutorials and easy access resources within course shells to encourage students to use virtual libraries. Student respondents also report online learning confidence for fully online courses at $x=4.25 $and a slightly higher average confidence in hybrid courses at $x=4.36$. Prior research demonstrates that Hispanic students learn best when engaged and connected to peers and faculty; moreover, these connections motivate them to learn and complete courses (Barril, 2017). This type of engagement leans toward hybrid course design that provides both virtual and physical campus context for students, satisfying the preference to remain connected to peers and faculty. Yet, ethnic students will use online courses, whether hybrid or fully online, to attain their college degree goals, despite their personal learning preferences (Barril, 2017; Fontenot, Mathison, Carley, & Stuart, 2015; Watts, 2016). Interestingly, Hispanic post-traditional students reported neutrally ($x=3.00$), about learning class material diminishing the need to meet with professors. This indicates an uncertainty about this and a leaning toward wanting to meet with or have access to professors, which was also confirmed in the qualitative component of this study. The neutrality of this response predicated upon “if they are learning course content” in online courses, while reporting face-to-face meetings important to students’ learning experiences at $x=4.47. $This may indicate that if students believe they can learn the material without meeting with professor, they would do so, but need the meetings to clarify course content.

Findings also indicate that Hispanic post-traditional student online success is predicated upon independent learning, social interactions, and faculty communication (see Figure 1). Hispanic students understand that to succeed in online learning, a student must be self-motivated, an independent learner, and possess the ability to self-regulate; this finding is supported by past research (Kauffman, 2015). Social interactions and an online sense of community nurture student engagement and learning in a virtual environment; these findings are supported by past research (McInnerney & Roberts, 2004). Hispanic post-traditional students desire a common social space to exchange ideas, and explore and clarify course content; these interactions help to engage them in learning. Further, Hispanic students demonstrate a preference for hybrid course design because it allows them to remain linked to a physical campus, support services, develop relationships with peers and faculty; these are social interactions that support student academic success.

Hispanic serving institutions are the perfect laboratory to further research on Hispanic student online behaviors, preferences, and academic achievement. As noted in this article, as online learning becomes a permanent medium for education, studies on different ethnic groups, age groups, and educational programming deserve attention. Another recommendation for future studies is to focus on the faculty at HSIs and their perceptions of online success for this population of students. Based upon the findings of this study, HSIs should focus on the following areas as they continue to develop their distance learning course offerings:

* Develop virtual engagement models to embed into online learning framework that promote enhanced social interactions for students who are enrolled in online courses. This may help reduce feelings of isolation for students.
* Include students in the online course design process, use feedback from student online experience surveys that are relevant to the online learning process. Students offer insights that course designers, faculty, and staff may not possess.
* Coach faculty on developing an enhanced communication method for online students that is timely, versatile, and meets their needs.
* Train faculty in online best practices for effective assignment feedback, virtual meetings, and supporting student learning in an online environment. Harnessing tools that increase engagement and effective teaching methods impact distance learning.
* Link help desks, support services, and on campus services to the online classroom so that students have options when seeking assistance.

Overall, HSIs should consider the type of support measures and engagement students will need when offering online courses. This study was exploratory and sought insight from participants on success factors linked to online learning.

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