Opportunities to Serve Latinx Students in Online Programs at Hispanic Serving Institutions in Higher Education

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Abstract

The United States workforce must evolve to become more educated and technologically advanced. Given that the Latinx population is the most rapidly growing minority group in the United States, it is important they are prepared to fulfill this need. Yet the enrollment and graduation rates of Latinx students in higher education is less than 40% of the overall population. It is imperative that Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs), which were developed specifically to enhance graduation rates among this population, create avenues to encourage Latinx students to enroll, retain and graduate. One avenue HSIs can utilize is online learning formats. This format increases accessibility to education and may be an opportunity to increase enrollment, retention and graduation rates of Latinx students. Through the theoretical lens of intersectionality, this article examines the multiple systems of inequity and discrimination that Latinx students experience in higher education. The online education platform demonstrates promise to strengthen the online community to encourage retention and engagement among Latinx students and HSI faculty. The online education platform also provides accessibility, flexibility, student-centered learning opportunities and opportunities to build community and cultural relevant pedagogy for Latinx students attending HSI institutions.

Keywords: *online education, culturally relevant pedagogy, Latinx student, Higher education.*

Introduction

Although the Latinx population constitutes twenty-three percent (23%) of the United States (U.S) population [1] (Passel et al., 2022) it is the most rapidly growing minority group in the United States. However, for many Latinx students obtaining a college degree can be challenging due to English language proficiency, difficulty paying for college, high poverty rates, and family obligations [2] (Acevedo-Polakovic et al., 2014). One avenue to augment Latinx enrollment into college is the effective utilization of Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) which are higher education institutions that serve twenty-five percent (25%) or more Latinx college students [3] (Garcia, 2018). Conceptualized in 1965 by the U.S. federal government, the mission of HSIs is to offer a variety of academic, student support programs, and holistic approaches specifically designed to recruit and elevate Latinx students' graduation rates in higher education [4] (Laird et. al., 2007). With the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, most institutions began delivering courses online [5] (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020), which could increase access to education for Latinx students. Yet, little is known about online education's effectiveness to improve degree attainment, and mentorship as well as its ability to align with the cultural and social context of Latinx students. This article examines current literature regarding online education and its capacity to build community engagement, cultural congruity, and culturally relevant pedagogy for Latinx students to successfully complete higher education degrees. Most HSIs lack curricular and co-curricular options centered on the racial and cultural inclusion of the Latinx population, decolonized pedagogical approaches, and anti-oppressive policies and practices for education delivery [6] (Conrona et al. 2017; Garcia et al., 2018; Garcia, 2018). Latinx students particularly first-generation college students' needs do not only encompass academic outcomes but nonacademic effects, like elevating the Latinx students' racial identity [7] (Garcia et al., 2018), critical consciousness [8] (Garcia, 2018) and self-actualization [9] (Conrona et al., 2017) that have a positive impact on the students' academic performance.

Intersectionality and the Online Environment

Multiple systems of inequity and discrimination exist among the Latinx population in higher education, including racism, colorism, xenophobia, class and gender bias and sexism [10] (Nichols &

Stahl, 2019). The theoretical framework of intersectionality is concerned with identifying, discussing, and addressing the ways that systems of inequity intersect to produce complex relations of power and disadvantage [11] (Cho et al., 2013; Crenshaw, 1991; Nichols & Stahl, 2019). The edict of higher education is to serve as the formation of equitable societies and thus actively challenge inequities. Online learning is recognized as one of the great recent developments to democratize higher education [12] (Mast & Gambescia, 2015) but it must remove barriers to appropriately access higher education and take the multiple Latinx identities into account when creating appropriate curriculum. With the advent of the pandemic the enrollment rates of Latinx first year students in community colleges have declined by twenty percent (20%) and five-point three percent (5.3%) for on-going students in Spring 2021 [13] (Mangan 2021). Online education can impede this decline due to its accessibility and flexibility in meeting the needs of the Latinx student. Online learning platforms include synchronous (live-session) classrooms, asynchronous online learning (self-guided learning) [18] (Sosulski & Bongiovanni, 2013), and blended learning (a combination of synchronous and asynchronous learning formats). Additionally, most online education programs can be more cost effective than traditional on the ground programs because of their lower tuition rates [19] (Hanson, 2021). These factors make online education accessible and pursuing an online degree attainable for many Latinx students [20] (Allen & Seaman, 2017). Along with trying to afford the cost of higher education, many Latinx students also face a digital divide experiencing technological gaps of accessing digital resource tools, including high-quality electronic devices and high-speed internet. Studies [21] (Domina et al., 2021, Johnson & Galy, 2013) indicate that there have been inequities to access the internet and poor quality of technical connections among Latinx college students. To reduce inequities of access, HSIs providing online programs should commit to offering students the latest equipment (e.g., new laptops with a quality camera and microphone) and the most advanced mobile Wi-Fi options.

Teaching and Curriculum
Culturally relevant pedagogy

For Latinx students, knowledge of their racial and ethnic identity matters in the educational experience [22] (Abrica & Dorsten, 2020). Culturally relevant pedagogy supports the multiple identities of Latinx students as it calls for students to develop a strong identity and a critical perspective that challenge societal inequalities [23] (California Department of Education, 2020). Culturally relevant pedagogy in an online setting encourages the formation of a digital community that simultaneously fosters peers and student to faculty relationships. A decolonized curriculum and culturally relevant teaching, which is equitable, inclusive, and accessible for all students, will strengthen student's identity as active learners and contributors.

Hyflex Course Design

Curriculum that embraces culturally relevant curriculum transforms current knowledge into culturally responsive curriculum designs and instructional strategies [24] (Krsmanovic, 2021). The hybrid-flexible course design allows students to decide how they want their education to be delivered, and how they would like to engage their professors, peers, and content. Students can select between attending class sessions in a traditional classroom or in an online environment (synchronous or asynchronous). It provides learning activities in all participation modes that will lead to equivalent learning outcomes.

This type of culturally relevant pedagogy and student learning approach provides the Latinx student with the opportunity to customize and be an architect of their own education. The Hyflex model allows for a more equitable means of attaining and retaining the content introduced in the course, due to its consideration of the student's daily lived experiences and modern stresses. Allowing for a multimodal teaching demonstration to include cultural exposure, collaboration with the use of technology, empathy to the intersectionality of the student, honoring intergenerational experiences while often living in a mutigenerational household and building strong relationships virtually.

Student Engagement

One of the challenges around engaging and retaining Latinx students in a traditional institution is the lack of Latinx faculty [25] (Calderon, 2012). Latinx faculty are greatly underrepresented in nearly all departments and units. Regardless of the ethnicity or race, academic faculty employed at HSIs facilitating online education programs should be knowledgeable about the complexities and barriers Latinx students encounter while navigating higher education. A strength-based approach is imperative as Latinx students bring a wealth of assets and experiences that can contribute to their success in higher education [26]

(Carales & Lopez, 2020). Ensuring an understanding of Latinx students' experiences will ease building a rapport among instructor, institution, and student, which can then encourage retention and foster academic success. HSI faculty should also be equipped to create culturally relevant pedagogy, curricula, and programming in an online format. This will facilitate the connection between social justice issues and building critical consciousness to be embedded within the higher education experience.

Discussion

This article examines current knowledge and theoretical concepts that online education at HSIs can utilize to build community engagement, cultural congruity, and culturally relevant pedagogy for Latinx students to successfully complete higher education degrees. Online education has become a way in which Latinx students can obtain degrees, and professional and economic advancement in their respective fields. Online programs cater to the lives of Latinx students with affordability and flexibility, although there are still technological support barriers that HSIs should address, along with serving as a recruitment hub for faculty who are truly sensitized to the Latinx students' need for culturally competent mentorship.

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