

Running Head: Hispanic Retention and Distance Education

Can Distance Education Help Hispanic Student Retention?

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Abstract

As new statistics are released showing an increase of Hispanic students dropping out of higher education, distance education is being explored as an alternative to help Hispanics balance their family duties and gain an education at the same time. It's also seen as a way to help those who are living in rural areas to go to school when it was once thought not possible. Does distance education really meet those goals? Do Hispanic students in distance education programs drop out at the same rate as those in traditional programs? This paper will explore the statistics and provide future trends that may help this growing population of students.

## CAN DISTANCE EDUCATION HELP HISPANIC STUDENT RETENTION?

Hispanics have always fallen "second best" in numbers, grades, and talents when it comes to higher education. They are also always behind Caucasians in numbers attending higher education institutions. Their GPAs are always a bit further behind the Caucasian students and they never seem to get the same amount in scholarships. Why does this happen? What can we do to keep Hispanic students in college to complete not just baccalaureate degrees, but also masters and doctoral degrees?

## The Statistics

Hispanic students generally get lumped together in statistics even though many cultures and nationalities actually form the "Hispanic" name, just as many cultures and nationalities form the "Caucasian" label. There are several factors that must be taken into consideration when looking at the statistics most organizations produce regarding Hispanic enrollment numbers. First, one must consider if the student is a native-born Hispanic or an immigrant. Second, one must consider what nationality the student is. Hispanic students can be from many different countries including Mexico, Puerto Rico, Guatemala, Honduras, Cuba, and several others. Each of these countries has different cultures and place different demands on

the students. Also, students who are first-generation American do not typically have the support from their family to have a successful educational career.

According to Schmidt (2003), 44% of Hispanic immigrant students dropped out of high school before they completed their high school diploma, compared to only 15% of Hispanic native students. The U.S. born Hispanic students attend college at the same rate as Caucasians. The numbers become a concern, though, when considering how many of those Hispanics actually complete their baccalaureate degree. According to a report titled "Educating the Largest Minority Group" (2003), Hispanics receive only 6% of all baccalaureate degrees, 4% of all masters degrees, and 3% of all doctoral degrees. In addition, half of all Hispanic students enroll in community colleges, setting themselves up for problems transferring to a four-year institution after completing their two year degree because of non-transferable credits.

#### The Cause

Many studies have been performed trying to determine the cause of the failure of Hispanic students to complete their degrees. The following reasons have been a common thread in all the studies: poor academic preparation because of poor schools; family responsibilities; poverty; discrimination; immigrant

status; poor language skills; first generation to attend college; part-time college enrollment (this ties in with family responsibilities); time-out between high school and college, and 2-year college and 4-year college; work schedules; family culture; starting at a 2-year vs. a 4-year college; and not wanting to borrow money – even for an education.

So what can we as educators do to overcome these hurdles? Will distance education solve this problem? According to a recent survey of students at Bergen Community College (BCC) in Paramus, New Jersey, it will take more than just a good distance education program to help Hispanic students complete their baccalaureate degrees (Angiello, 2004). This study was from Fall 2001 until Spring 2002. In Fall 2001, approximately 22% of its student body were Hispanic students. The college offered 70 online courses and the study compared the students in online courses and face-to-face courses. Over the four semesters, 21.6% of the students enrolled in traditional classes were Hispanic students, compared with only 14.1% enrolled in online courses. In addition to the low enrollment in online courses, the Hispanic students were 24.8% less successful in online courses than they were in traditional courses, and their GPAs were .40 points lower than Caucasian students in online courses, while only .25 points lower in the face-to-face classes.

### Meeting The Statistics With Distance Education

Is our desire for meeting Hispanic students needs by using distance education classes hopeless? No. Distance education classes do overcome many of the barriers faced by Hispanic students. Distance Education allows students to work full-time and go to school so they can meet family monetary obligations. If the community college articulates an agreement with a four-year institution, Hispanic students can then use the online degree they earned at a community college to then attend an online four-year institution.

Distance Education classes can also give the student the one-on-one support and encouragement they need from an instructor. If a student is having problems, it's much easier for an instructor in an online course to notice the student isn't there. In addition to the instructor, American InterContinental assigns each student an academic advisor. If the student is having problems, he can call his academic advisor and work out options to complete their course. Many times the advisor simply has to encourage the student and the student can work out the solution himself (Martinez, 2003).

Distance Education classes can also provide self-confidence. Many times students are uncomfortable answering questions in a face-to-face setting for fear of either answering

incorrectly, or saying the wrong thing because they aren't comfortable with the English language. Dr. Ron Rojas states in "Distance Learning at American InterContinental":

I think for my Hispanic students, studying online is an incredible advantage on many fronts. In the traditional classroom, the hardest thing for many Hispanics – it was for me – is fear of active classroom participation. When you have to speak, you're cautious.

In the online courses, basically all we're seeing is keyword entries. Grammar is not so much an issue when you're online. Everybody makes mistakes with the keyboard. I've noticed that my Hispanic students are just as active as the rest of the student population.

Distance Education also allows the Hispanic students to process the information more slowly and carefully as they translate the language and terms. They can prepare for chats and discussions carefully and be assured they are assimilating the information better (Martinez, 2003).

While there is room for improvement, including better design of online courses to lessen discrimination towards

Hispanic students, Distance Education does provide a new way for Hispanics to receive their education despite their cultural and educational barriers.

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