


Drives and Motives During Online Degree Completion: Commonalities Among and Differences Between Hispanic and Non-Hispanic Adult Students

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the motives and drives of adult students during online degree completion, including the commonalities among and differences between Hispanic and non-Hispanic adult students. Participants included 364 adult students at a Hispanic-serving institution (HSI) who completed a series of reflective writing assignments, generating over 15,000 pages of data. After linguistic and statistical data analysis, results identified the drives and motives common to all adult students and significant differences between Hispanic and non-Hispanic adult students. Some merit little or no action, while three offer opportunities—achievement and affiliation as drives, the states of acquire and lack, and allure as motive. These results offer implications for Hispanic and non-Hispanic adult students and those in higher education who serve or teach such students—academic advisors, instructional designers, instructors, and program administrators—and inform how technology can support such efforts.

KEYWORDS

Higher Education, Hispanic College Students, Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC), Nontraditional Students, Online Learning

Persisting to a college degree represents significant accomplishment and offers numerous benefits. With access to higher-level jobs and careers, college graduates enjoy higher earnings and job satisfaction, lower unemployment, and valuable employee benefits, including healthcare coverage and retirement plans (Cherrstrom & Boden, 2018; Loveless, 2019; Ma et al., 2016; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018; U.S. Department of Labor, 2017). Beyond the workplace, persistence in higher education results in healthier, longer, higher quality, higher status, and more leisure-filled lives (Andrade et al. 2022). However, many Americans do not have access to such benefits. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2023), only 37.6% of adults, age 25 and older, who have completed any school, have earned a bachelor's degree, and for those who are Hispanic, only 20.9% have earned a bachelor's degree. Furthermore, 33 million adults (14.5% of adults who have completed any school) have attended college but did not graduate, including 4.8 million (13%) Hispanic adults. Adult students

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are more likely to leave without a degree than their traditional counterparts (Choy, 2002), and the lack of knowledge of adult students has contributed to high attrition rates (MacDonald, 2018). Adult and Hispanic students represent significant numbers and percentages of undergraduate students pursuing a college degree and merit research related to persistence.

The purpose of the study was to examine the motives and drives of Hispanic and non-Hispanic adult students *during* online degree completion. Four research questions guided the study:

- RQ1. What drives adult students during online degree completion?
- RQ2. How do such drives differ between Hispanic and non-Hispanic adult students?
- RQ3. What motivates adult students during online degree completion?
- RQ4. How do such motives differ between Hispanic and non-Hispanic adult students?

The results offer implications to better serve and retain these expanding populations of students during online degree completion. In addition, the results inform the use of technology to support such efforts, as adult education and technology are “inextricably intertwined and play a contemporary role in effective adult education” (Parker, 2021, p. 41). This article continues with a review of the literature, followed by the research design, results, and discussion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As context for the study, this section discusses the literature relevant to adult or nontraditional students, Hispanic students and Hispanic-Serving Institutions; linguistic inquiry of text, such as student assignments; as well drives, states, and motives.

Adult or Nontraditional Students

Nontraditional students, hereafter referred to as adult students, represent a sizable number and percentage of today’s undergraduate students but have historically been omitted from student success metrics. Varied definitions create challenges in estimating the number of such students. Using the leading characteristic—*age 25 years and older*, adults represent 25.4% of undergraduate students enrolled in degree-granting postsecondary institutions (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2021a). Solely using age, however, excludes other characteristics of nontraditional students, such as those who work full-time or attend school part-time, have dependents or are a single caregiver, or did not earn a traditional high school diploma or delayed higher education enrollment (NCES, 2014, 2015). Including these characteristics increases adult students to 74.2% of undergraduate students (NCES, 2015). Directly or indirectly, most of these characteristics negatively associate with persistence or attainment (Choy, 2002). Yet, higher education institutions primarily focus on traditional students (Rabourn et al., 2018) and often neglect adult students (Chen, 2017) creating a gap in the knowledge of persistence.

Adult students differ from their traditional counterparts, and better understanding those differences will provide further insight into the persistence of adult students to degree. They juggle multiple roles and competing responsibilities in the family, workplace, and community (Ross-Gordon, 2011) and bring abundant life and work experiences to their student role and responsibilities (Knowles, 1973). The literature identifies varied reasons for adults to *attend* or *return* to college—advancing in current job or career, changing to a new job or career, seeking more money, reskilling or upskilling, and personal enrichment or interest in the subject (Choy, 2002; Horn, 2021). Less is known about the reasons adult students persist *during* college.

Adult students face many challenges and resulting emotions during online degree completion. Due to busy lives and competing priorities, they frequently seek flexible programs and online learning, relying on technology for learning and synchronous or asynchronous interactions with instructors and

peers (Ross-Gordon, 2011; NCES, 2023). Although many discuss adult education and technology as separate topics, it is impossible to discuss the former without the latter (Parker, 2021). Facing new technology strikes fear and anxiety in many adult students, along with learning new study skills, having younger students in the classroom, and needing to navigate bureaucratic processes and systems (Erismán & Steele, 2012). If also first generation, adult students face additional anxiety about balancing family, work, and school and often feel misunderstood (Perna, 2016). They live with one foot in each of two different worlds, feeling like they do not belong in either one (Suwinyattichaiporn & Johnson, 2022). Adult students lead complex, multi-dimensional lives.

Hispanic Students and Hispanic-Serving Institutions

Hispanic students also represent a sizable number and percentage of undergraduate students but lag in earning a college degree. According to the NCES (2014, 2021b, 2021c), Hispanic students represent 21.1% of undergraduate students enrolled in U.S. degree-granting postsecondary institutions but have higher attrition rates and longer time to degree and currently represent only 14.9% of those earning a bachelor's degree. They often feel challenged when transitioning from home or the workplace to campus presents and overwhelmed by emotional and financial difficulties, expectations, and social integration (Arbelo Marrero & Milacci, 2018). In a study of Hispanic adult women, cultural values, multiple social roles, expectations, and attitudes created challenges in persisting to degree (Zollner, 2022). As examples, women were expected to marry, bear children, and care for the family; in addition to wife, mother, and caregiver, their roles included partner, employee, and student. Many were financially responsible for their families, needing to work, which limited access to education, and some faced the attitude that a woman's education has no value. Hispanic adult students face the challenges of being Hispanic and adult.

Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) play a vital role in educating Hispanic *and* non-Hispanic students. Title V of the Higher Education Act defined an HSI as an accredited, public or private, not-for-profit higher education institution with undergraduate full-time equivalent enrollment comprising at least 25% Hispanic enrollment (Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities [HACU], 2023a). Today, 527 HSIs enroll 65.6% of Hispanic undergraduate students and 30.5% of all undergraduate students in nonprofit postsecondary institutions (HACU, 2023a, 2023b). Many students served by HSIs work part- or full-time (thus, adult students), seek flexible course offerings (preferred by adult students), commute to campus, are first generation, and academically struggle (Arbelo-Marrero & Milacci, 2016). HSIs play a vital role in educating adult students.

Students at HSIs do not experience the same accessibility, reliability, and adequacy in connectivity and devices. Bell et al. (2022) examined the technology challenges faced by undergraduate students at a large, public HSI. They found unstable internet connectivity contributed to numerous technology challenges and caused psychological distress. Although 89% of students had access to a laptop, devices did not always have the current hardware, software, and features (e.g., a camera) needed for success. Overall, 83% of participants reported technology challenges affecting coursework, such as accessing live lectures, communicating with instructors or peers, viewing videos, completing assignments, using the learning management system, and completing required readings. Technology challenges interfere with the participation and learning of online students.

For Hispanic students, HSIs offer an on-campus social environment to create cultural connections through shared common foods, ideas, language, and values (Arbelo Marrero & Milacci, 2018). However, adult students with competing responsibilities and obligations spend little time on campus (Wyatt, 2011) and, therefore, may not experience and benefit from such cultural connections. In a study situated at an HSI, relationships with family, workplace peers, and other students, solidified the resolve to persist to graduation by affirming Hispanic cultural context and developing beliefs, concepts, and objectives (Arbelo Marrero & Milacci, 2018). The study further found prior life experiences prepared Hispanic adult students to persist to degree. Additional knowledge of Hispanic

and non-Hispanic adult students during online degree completion could enhance student persistence and close the gap to college graduation.

Linguistic Inquiry of Text

According to Harvard University, Department of Linguistics (2022), *linguistics* is the “scientific study of language” (para. 1), and *psycholinguistics* studies the relationships between language and cognition or behavior. Linguistic inquiry offers the opportunity to know and understand people through language—in this study, to know and understand Hispanic and non-Hispanic adult students through reflective writing assignments. Linguistic inquiry and word count (LIWC) software analyzes language to understand the writer’s thoughts and concerns, feelings and emotions, and personality and psychological state (Chung & Pennebaker, 2012; LIWC, n.d.). LIWC-22 software analyzes over 100 dimensions of text, each with a corresponding dictionary of words to capture a person’s psychological and social states (LIWC, n.d.). After opening a text file or series of text files, the software’s processing program compares each word in the text, one-by-one, with the words in each dictionary (Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010), thus efficiently analyzing substantial amounts of textual data.

Linguistic inquiry and word count as an analysis method in research and the use of LIWC-22 software and earlier versions have joined the published body of knowledge. The LIWC website links to over 20,000 academic articles referring to LIWC as a data analysis method in research; scholarly journals publishing such journals represent a wide variety of disciplines and fields (Chung & Pennebaker, 2012). Journal editors use disciplinary experts and the peer review process to assess the quality and originality of submitted manuscripts for publication as articles and new knowledge joining the existing body of knowledge (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009). A search for *LIWC* or *linguistic inquiry and word count* in the Academic Search Complete database yielded 12,436 results in All Text and 403 in Abstract. Researchers have used LIWC to analyze textual data and published results in a variety of academic journals.

Language Dimensions of Drives, States, and Motives

People interchangeably use the terms *drive* and *motives*, or at times, use one term to define the other. Building on Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, McClelland (1985, 1987) developed the human theory of motivation which identified three driving motivators—the need for affiliation, the need for achievement, and the need for power. He believed individuals learn the three needs or motives in early childhood, possess a measure of each, and depending on life experiences and culture, develop a dominant motivator. As used in this study, differentiation between the terms requires closer examination of three language dimensions in the LIWC-22 software—*drives*, *states*, which refers to drives, and *motives*.

Drives: Overarching Drives, Affiliation, Achievement, and Power

In LIWC-22, the overarching language dimension of *drives* captures the underlying dimensions of affiliation, achievement, and power (Boyd et al., 2022). In McClelland’s (1985, 1987) motivation theory, *affiliation* encompasses the human need to make friends, and people with high affiliation motive seek to do so by meeting the demands of others. In LIWC-22, affiliation includes relationships, belonging to a group, and reference to others (Boyd et al.). In McClelland’s motivation theory, *achievement* encompasses the human need to strive for excellence, and people with high achievement need tend to be competitive and seek to do better than they did before or better than others. In LIWC-22, achievement includes success, failure, and striving for achievement (Boyd et al.). In McClelland’s motivation theory, *power* encompasses the human need to impact other people, and those with high power need tend to respect institutional authority and have concern for self-respect and discipline. In LIWC-22, power includes status, dominance, and social hierarchies (Boyd et al.). Identifying common or differing drives can provide insight into Hispanic and non-Hispanic adult students during online degree completion. An additional language dimension, *states*, refers to drives.

States: Need, Want, Acquire, Lack, Fulfilled, and Fatigue

In LIWC-22, the language dimension of *states* refers to “many short-term or transient internal states that can drive or inhibit behaviors” (Boyd et al., 2022, p. 20) and includes six underlying dimensions—need, want, acquire, lack, fulfilled, and fatigue. *Need* denotes actions or behaviors for survival or wellbeing, while *want* goes beyond basic needs to a desire or preference (Boyd et al., 2022). In Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs—physiological, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization—lower needs must be satisfied prior to attending to higher needs. To support needs or wants, *acquire* encompasses the search for, finding of, and obtaining of goals, objects, or states (Boyd et al.). In contrast, *lack* describes a discrepancy between a current and desired state and expresses the missing of that state or an object associated with goals, needs, or wants (Boyd et al.). *Fulfill* refers to a state of completion, a satisfied goal, or satiation, and *fatigue* reflects boredom, spent effort, or exhaustion (Boyd et al.). Although short-term, these states relate to drives and, in turn, drive or inhibit behavior.

Motives: Reward, Risk, Curiosity, and Allure

In LIWC-22, the language dimension of *motives* is an underlying state that guides, pulls, or drives human behavior, and includes four underlying dimensions—reward, risk, curiosity, and allure (Boyd et al., 2022). *Reward* refers to “rewards, incentives, positive goals, and approach” (p. 22), *risk* to “dangers, concerns, [and] things to avoid” (p. 22), and *curiosity* to an interest in new knowledge and openness to new experiences (Boyd et al.). *Allure* refers to persuasive or compelling language used in advertising and communications (Boyd et al., 2022). Understanding the drives and motives of Hispanic and non-Hispanic adult students during online degree completion can inform action to enhance persistence. In addition to the literature, the research design guided the study.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This section discusses the study’s context and reflective writing assignments, the participants, as well as the methods used in data collection and data analysis.

Context and Reflective Writing Assignments

The study situated at a large, public, HSI in the South. The university’s Institutional Review Board approved a study of adult students in an interdisciplinary, online, degree completion program using an opt-out email for the consent process. Students joined the program midway through their college degree journey, could complete all required courses online, and depending on electives, could complete the degree online. The professional growth plan (PGP)—a series of reflective writing assignments—spanned two required, sequential, 8-week introductory courses and generated over 15,000 pages of data. Students reflected on course content, past experiences, and the future and wrote six thematic chapters—autobiography of life events; learning style and disciplinary perspectives; autobiography as a worker; autobiography as a learner; abilities, interests, knowledge, and skills; and growth plan and future goals.

Participants

Using purposeful and convenience sampling, participants included 364 Hispanic and non-Hispanic adult students, age 25 years or older at commencement of the first course, who submitted a complete PGP. Demographically, women (57.4%) outnumbered men (42.6%), and the adult students were 51.1% White, 33.8% Hispanic, 11.8% African American, 1.4% Asian, and less than 1% each Multi-racial, Unknown, International, and American Indian/Alaskan.

Data Collection

Data collection comprised the PGP for each participant and ethnicity data. For the first dataset, each participant's PGP was downloaded from the learning management system as a Word or PDF file and individually saved using a naming convention including the participant number. For the second dataset, corresponding demographic data, including ethnicity, were downloaded from university systems and saved as an Excel spreadsheet.

Linguistic and Statistical Data Analysis

For linguistic analysis, the dataset of PGP files were uploaded into the LIWC-22 software, and the processing module compared the language in each PGP against the LIWC-22 dictionaries and sub-dictionaries for the 14 language dimensions relevant to the research questions—drives (i.e., overarching drives, affiliation, achievement, and power), states (i.e., need, want, acquire, lack, fulfilled, and fatigue), and motives (i.e., reward, risk, curiosity, and allure)—and calculated the percentage of total PGP words for each sub-dictionary. The results were downloaded from the software as an Excel spreadsheet and paired with corresponding ethnicity data. For statistical analysis, independent-samples t-tests were conducted on the 14 LIWC language dimensions to compare the results for Hispanic and non-Hispanic adult students.

RESULTS

This section presents the results for adult students, Hispanic adult students, and non-Hispanic adult students, organized by research question.

Research Questions #1 and #2: Drives and Related States

The first research question asked, “What drives adult students during online degree completion?” Results (see Table 1) indicated *achievement* was the highest drive for adult students, followed in descending order by *affiliation* and *power*. Results (see Table 2) further indicated *acquire* was the highest state (related to drives) for adult students, followed by *need*, *want*, *fulfilled*, *lack*, and *fatigue*.

The second research question asked, “How do such drives differ between Hispanic and non-Hispanic adult students?” Results indicated no significant difference in overall drives, achievement, and power between Hispanic and non-Hispanic adult students (see Table 1) or in the states of need, want, fulfilled, and fatigue (see Table 2). However, results did indicate a significant difference in affiliation, the second highest drive; acquire, the highest state; and lack, fifth out of six states; with Hispanic adult students scoring higher than their non-Hispanic counterparts.

Table 1. Drives of Hispanic and non-Hispanic adult students during degree completion

Language dimensions	Adult Students						Mean Difference	95% CI	df	t	p
	Hispanic			Non-Hispanic							
	n	M	SD	n	M	SD					
Drives	123	6.53	1.08	241	6.35	.93	.19	-.03, .39	362.00	1.66	.098
Affiliation	123	1.64	.49	241	1.50	.50	.13	.03, .24	362.00	2.44	.015*
Achieve-ment	123	3.53	.71	241	3.53	.69	.00	-.16, .15	362.00	-.04	.969
Power	123	1.47	.64	241	1.43	.44	.04	-.09, .17	182.97	.656	.513

* $p < .05$.

Table 2. States of Hispanic and non-Hispanic adult students during degree completion

Language dimensions	Adult Students						Mean Difference	95% CI	df	t	p
	Hispanic			Non-Hispanic							
	n	M	SD	n	M	SD					
Need	123	.67	.26	241	.63	.24	.04	-.01, .05	362.00	1.56	.121
Want	123	.31	.16	241	.28	.14	.03	.00, .06	362.00	1.80	.072
Acquire	123	.93	.20	241	.86	.23	.07	.02, .00	362.00	2.90	.004*
Lack	123	.14	.09	241	.12	.08	.02	.01, .00	362.00	2.60	.010*
Fulfilled	123	.21	.10	241	.21	.09	-.01	-.03, .01	362.00	-.80	.427
Fatigue	123	.01	.08	241	.01	.02	.00	.00, .00	362.00	.22	.828

* $p < .05$.

Research Questions #3 and #4: Motives

The third research question asked, “What motivates adult students during online degree completion?” Results (see Table 3) indicated *allure* was the highest motive for adult students, followed in descending order by *reward*, *curiosity*, and *risk*.

The fourth research question asked, “How do such motives differ between Hispanic and non-Hispanic adult students?” Results (see Table 3) indicated no significant difference in reward, risk, and curiosity between Hispanic and non-Hispanic adult students. However, results did indicate a significant difference in allure with Hispanic adult students scoring higher than their non-Hispanic counterparts.

Figure 1 summarizes these results and visually depicts the drives, states, and motives of adult students in descending order, along with statistically different results between Hispanic and non-Hispanic adult students. The next section discusses the major results and implications.

DISCUSSION

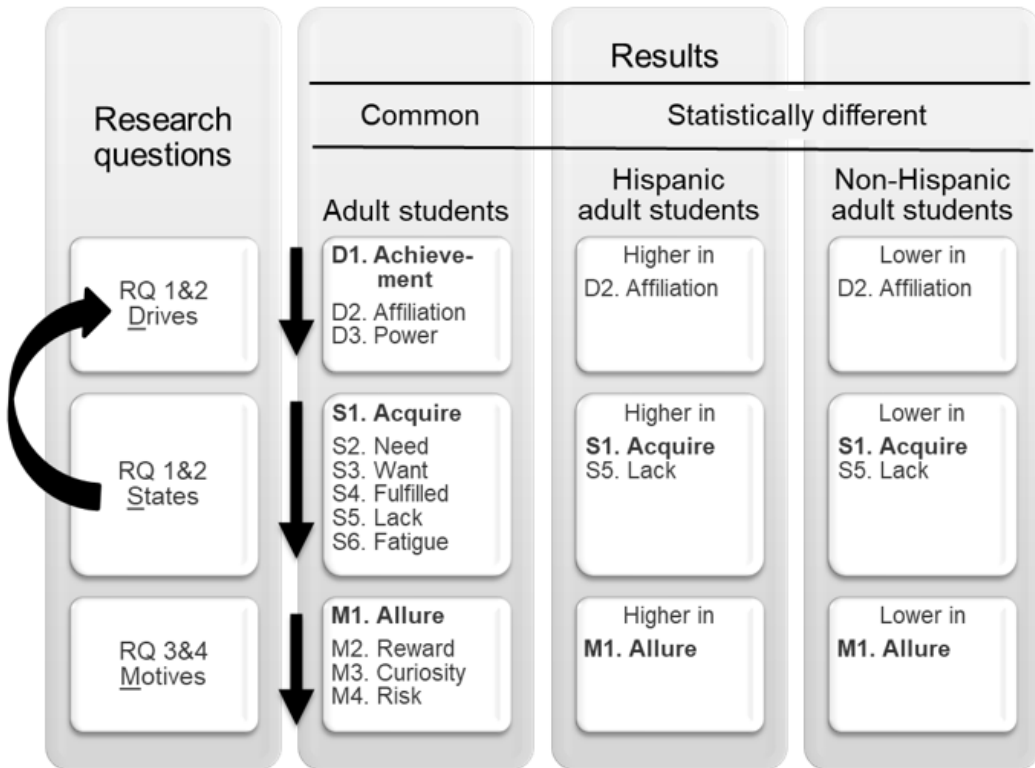
The current study adds similarities and differences among and between Hispanic and non-Hispanic adult students in drives, states, and motives during online degree completion to the literature. These results will help busy academic advisors, instructional designers, instructors, and program administrators prioritize actions and maximize effectiveness to benefit Hispanic and non-Hispanic adult students. For example, several motives, states, and drives merit little or no action—overall drives, power, need, want, fulfilled, fatigue, reward, risk, and curiosity. This section discusses those

Table 3. Motives of Hispanic and non-Hispanic adult students during degree completion

Language dimensions	Adult Students						Mean Difference	95% CI	df	t	p
	Hispanic			Non-Hispanic							
	n	M	SD	n	M	SD					
Reward	123	.73	.26	241	.77	.31	-.03	-.10, .03	362.00	-1.14	.255
Risk	123	.16	.08	241	.16	.09	.00	-.01, .02	362.00	.48	.630
Curiosity	123	.58	.19	241	.58	.20	.00	-.04, .05	362.00	.10	.918
Allure	123	6.08	1.15	241	5.81	1.03	.27	.03, .51	222.58	2.20	.029*

* $p < .05$.

Figure 1. Drives and motives of Hispanic and non-Hispanic adult students during degree completion



results offering opportunities and meriting action—achievement and affiliation as drives, the states of acquire and lack, and allure as motive—as well as implications and future research.

Achievement and Affiliation as Drives

Drives motivate us to act and take a course of action (American Psychological Association, 2020a). McClelland (1985, 1987) identified three drives, motives, or needs—achievement, affiliation, and power—learned in childhood and possessed in varying degrees throughout life with one most dominant. Based on the current study, adult students are most driven by achievement during online degree completion. They seek excellence and compete with themselves and others for high performance (McClelland). In contrast, adult students are least driven by power; they do not seek or seek little to impact others (McClelland) and do not focus or focus little on status, dominance, and social hierarchies (Boyd et al., 2022). Between most and least, Hispanic adult students are statistically more driven by affiliation than their non-Hispanic counterparts; Hispanic adult students seek affiliation by making friends and do so by meeting the demands of others (McClelland). Higher education institutions often highlight functional reasons for going back to school—enhancing or adding skills, advancing existing or finding new jobs or careers, and earning more money—but seldom social and emotional reasons (Horn, 2021). The decision to return to college or transfer to a four-year college and persist to a college degree is complex and challenging. Identifying the common and differing drives among and between Hispanic and non-Hispanic adult students can enhance persistence.

States of Acquire and Lack

A state can drive or suppress behaviors (Boyd et al., 2022) and denotes one's dynamic or stable status or condition at a particular point in time (American Psychological Association, 2020c). The current study identified acquire as the top state experience of adult students during online degree completion, followed in descending order by need, want, fulfilled, lack, and fatigue. Surprisingly, acquire outranks need, which denotes behaviors for survival or wellbeing, as the highest adult student state (Boyd et al.). In other words, adult students search for, find, and obtain goals (Boyd et al.), and the goals aspect of acquire may complement the drive for achievement found in adult students. Although ranked fifth out of six in the current study, lack merits mention, especially for Hispanic students who statistically experience a greater discrepancy between their current and desired state and express the missing of that state associated with goals, needs, or wants more than their non-Hispanic counterparts (Boyd et al.). Whether dynamic or stable, the states of Hispanic and non-Hispanic adult students drive or suppress behavior during online degree completion and identifying common and differing states can enhance persistence.

Allure as Motive

Motives explain or cause the behavior of an individual (American Psychological Association, 2022b). The current study found adult students are most motivated by allure during online degree completion, followed in descending order by reward, curiosity, and risk. Furthermore, allure is statistically higher for Hispanic adult students than their non-Hispanic counterparts. The field of advertising promotes allure using attention-grabbing words and language to stimulate needs and desires and to attract or persuade (Boyd et al., 2022). A search for allure within the context of higher education yielded some examples. In the mid-90s, the Los Angeles Times published an article, "They Hope the Allure of College Grows on the Class of 2011," opening with a kindergartener's quote: "If you go to college, you get to be anything you want to be" (Ko, 1995, para. 2). Current examples of personal statements for teachers in training reference the allure of an education degree (studental, n.d.). Likely referring to traditional students, BestCollegeReviews.org (2022) referenced the allure of leaving home, moving to the big city, living on or near campus, and attending a large university. For adult students, the allure of a college degree and resulting upward economic mobility might be a motivation for adult students to enroll (Cherrstrom et al., 2023) and may drive and motivate their persistence during online degree completion.

Implications

These results offer implications for Hispanic and non-Hispanic adult students and those in higher education who serve or teach such students—academic advisors, instructional designers, instructors, and program administrators. Technology can support the execution of actions related to these implications.

Adult Students and Hispanic Adult Students

Adult students will know they are not alone in the challenges experienced during degree completion and find ways to boost their drives and motives and persist to graduation. While motivated by opportunities for promotion, new employment, and greater compensation (Davies & William, 2001), adult students can pursue interim achievements to stay extrinsically or intrinsically motivated during degree completion. Examples of extrinsic motivation include grades, awards, certificates, scholarships, a growing transcript of completed courses, a stronger resume or CV, and membership in an academic honor society. Examples of intrinsic motivations include mastery of course learning objectives, new concepts, and greater knowledge. Based on the current study, identifying what holds allure or value to acquire also motivates adult students and, for Hispanic adult students, to fill or acquire what they lack.

Furthermore, adult students will understand their need for and benefits from affiliation, especially valued by Hispanic adult students, and can seek opportunities to affiliate with others. On campus, students organically interact with each other, building a sense of belonging and community (Nwabuoku, 2020). Lacking such on-campus interactions due to busy personal and professional lives and competing responsibilities, adult students must purposely participate in community building opportunities, to find and affiliate with students who share common interests, challenges, and solutions and to boost motivation. Such opportunities in online courses include discussion forums and group learning activities and assignments; non-course opportunities include online orientations, information sessions, and workshops. In addition, the content of many online opportunities provides relevant and helpful information, resources, and networking for further affiliation and achievement.

Academic and Career Advisors

Academic advisors can influence an adult student's persistence during degree completion by fostering achievement and affiliation. Academic advisors can emphasize academic performance and workplace achievement on websites and during advising sessions. More specifically, they can tie course selection and degree planning to graduation and career achievement and highlight opportunities to earn awards, certificates, and scholarships. Although scholarships have budgeting limitations, awards, as one example, offer high value for students, and build their resumes or CVs. To quickly re-enter the workforce, earn a promotion, or enjoy increased compensation, extrinsically motivated adult students pursue degrees requiring less time (Gardner et al., 2022), thus more quickly achieving, acquiring what holds allures, and for Hispanic adult learners, providing what they lack. For adult students, credit for prior learning "can make the difference between earning or not earning a college degree" (Boden et al., 2019, p. 2). Therefore, academic advisors can recommend credit for prior learning, so students can earn credit hours for learning gained outside the classroom and, thus, speed time to degree.

Academic advisors can harness the power of technology to offer traditionally in-person services online—orientations, information sessions, advising, and academic support groups. Furthermore, they can emphasize affiliation in communications and virtually offer relevant services in group formats, to foster relationships and connections among adult students and especially valued by Hispanic adult students. Best practices in advising adult students include building advisor/advisee relationships based on communication, preparedness, and trust and the academic advisor as partner, using their relationships and network across the physical and virtual campus to advocate on behalf of adult advisees (Sapp & Williams, 2015). Such efforts and actions boost the motivation, affiliation, and success of adult students.

Instructional Designers and Instructors

Adult students bring a variety of experiences to learning (Knowles, 1973). Instructional designers and instructors can recognize and validate such prior experiences through discussions, learning activities, and assignments. Many adult students are extrinsically motivated by performance, intrinsically motivated by mastery, or both (Schunk et al., 2014). For extrinsic motivation based on performance, instructors can leverage technology—such as the data and analytics in learning management systems (LMSs)—to recognize students (e.g., time spent in course site, grades, strength in a specific assignment type, timeliness) and provide a boost. In addition to administratively led recognition, such as high GPA, inclusion on the honor roll, and membership in academic honor societies, instructors can nominate adult students for awards, certificates, and scholarships. For intrinsic motivation based on mastery, instructional designers and instructors can scaffold the learning process and use low- and high-stakes assignments to build confidence and support mastery of learning objectives, new concepts, and increased knowledge. In addition, a variety of assessment methods helps ensure opportunities for students with different learning styles to learn and achieve. Through effective course design and facilitation, adult students develop knowledge, skills, and abilities in the classroom and apply them

in the workplace, providing further motivation through achievement, acquiring what has allure or, for Hispanic adult students, what they lack.

Although online learning presents limitation in fostering interaction (Yoon & Leem, 2021), effective course design promotes learner interaction in six ways. Students, or learners, interact with course content, the instructor, other students, the technology, themselves through self-reflection, and vicarious learning (Cherrstrom et al., 2019). Several interactions boost affiliation, important to adult students and especially valued by Hispanic adult students. Building a creative and collaborative online learning community presents challenges (Rudestam & Schoenholtz-Reid, 2021), but most LMSs support student-instructor interaction through videos (e.g., meet your instructor, course overview, course content, weekly highlights, feedback), emailing, discussions, and feedback as well as student-student interactions through discussions and, as relevant, peer review of a learning activity or assignment. Collaborative or team assignments also offer affiliation while building important skills for school and the workplace. Guest speakers, successful in their areas of expertise and work, can share their journeys—the highs and lows—to achievement by joining synchronous online classes or creating a video.

Program Administrators

Program administrators can highlight achievement and affiliation in mission statements, in communications, and on websites. The latter might feature student testimonials and successful alumni stories as well as link to local, state, or national information about top jobs, responsibilities, requirements, and compensation. Most importantly, program administrators can align program outcomes with employer and workforce needs to help adult students achieve and acquire what has allure and, for Hispanic adult students, what is lacking. Programs can recognize adult students (e.g., awards, certificates, scholarships) and exclude common criteria focused on traditional students (e.g., time spent on campus, club memberships, sports, student government, day-time activities). Since adult students spend little time on campus, celebrating such achievements with virtual events could boost participation and foster affiliation.

Limitations and Future Research

This study examined the drives and motive of Hispanic and non-Hispanic adult students during online degree completion. Limitations included adult students in one degree completion program at one HSI and solely using linguistic inquiry and word count and the variable of Hispanic ethnicity. Future research can address the limitations of this study and narrow or broaden the scope. Using quantitative methods, this study could be replicated to include adult students with different demographics or characteristics or in different contexts, such as non-HSIs and/or other HSIs, private and/or other public institutions, other geographies, varied sizes of institutions, urban or rural settings, etc. Future research using qualitative methods is needed to examine the essence of acquire and allure for adult students and, for Hispanic adult students, the essence of lack. In addition, qualitative methods could more deeply examine what achievement looks like and what affiliation really means for Hispanic and non-Hispanic adult students during online degree completion. Findings could lead to interventions for application and testing using quantitative methods.

In closing, adult and Hispanic students represent sizable numbers and percentages of undergraduate students pursuing a college degree, and they merit the workplace and personal benefits afforded by earning a college degree. However, research is needed to enhance persistence and close the gap to graduation. This study examined the drives and motives of Hispanic and non-Hispanic adult students during online degree completion. Results identified three areas of opportunity—achievement and affiliation as drives, the states of acquire and lack, and allure as motive—offering implications for Hispanic and non-Hispanic adult students and their academic advisors, instructional designers and instructors, and program administrators. In addition to adding a study focused on adult student persistence *during* a degree completion program to theory, the implications provide ideas for practice and action to enhance the persistence and close the gap, leading to more Hispanic and non-Hispanic college graduates.

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