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Hostos Online Learning Assessment: A Survey of Student Perceptions

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Abstract

The Office of Education Technology (EdTech) at Hostos Community College and faculty members from various departments created the Hostos Online Learning Assessment (HOLA) Task Force to design a survey for gathering and assessing data about students' perceptions of their online learning experiences. The task force wanted to utilize the survey results to identify strengths and weaknesses in online instruction and student preparedness for the online learning environment. Student perceptions of online learning are integral to building upon current best practices and also gauging the preparedness of the students for the online learning environment, particularly in an urban, Hispanic-serving community college. The survey and results will be discussed within the broader context of best practices and online learning assessments as well as the way the HOLA Task Force is utilizing the data to make meaningful changes in the survey instrument, in addition planning for continuous improvement in online learning.

Keywords: online learning, asynchronous, hybrid, blended, student, community college, urban, Hispanic, African American

Hostos Online Learning Assessment (HOLA): A Survey of Student Perceptions

Hostos Community College (HCC), part of the City University of New York (CUNY), is located in the South Bronx, the poorest congressional district in the country. HCC enrolls approximately 7,000 students, and more than half (5,000) are enrolled full time. Sixty-five percent of students reside in the Bronx and come from families who reside below the poverty line. Sixty percent of students identify as female, and the vast majority of students (85 percent) are 29 years old or younger, with nearly 45 percent under the age of 21. Students at Hostos are ethnically diverse. Nearly 60 percent identify as Hispanic, 22 percent as Black, and 13 percent as Other/Unknown. Three percent identify as Asian and two percent as White. The majority of first-year students are enrolled in developmental or remedial courses (“Student Profiles,” 2014). Hostos is categorized under the Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSI) program authorized by Title V of the Higher Education Act of 1965, and has received grants as a Hispanic-serving institution under the Department’s Office of Postsecondary Education (“Minority Institutions”, n. d.).

This uniquely diverse population in an urban, commuter, community college is served primarily by traditional, in-person courses; however, an increasing number of courses are being offered online. The college currently offers two types of online courses: hybrid and asynchronous. At least 30 percent of a course’s content must be offered online to be considered a hybrid course. At least 80 percent needs to be offered online to be considered an asynchronous course (“Online Learning”, 2016). Blackboard 9.1 is currently the Learning Management System (LMS) that CUNY hosts centrally and is used by Hostos faculty members teaching online content.

Faculty members who want to develop and teach online courses are encouraged to participate in the college's Online-Teaching Initiative and are considered certified to teach online upon completion of the initiative. Each faculty member who develops an online component for a course submits the online component to the EdTech Leadership Council (ETLC) for review in the form of a Blackboard course shell. The course needs to meet ETLC's requirements for hybrid ("Hybrid Guidelines", 2016) or asynchronous courses ("Asynchronous Guidelines", 2016) before it is offered.

Out of 1,270 total sections offered in Fall 2015, approximately 4 percent of courses (59 course sections) were offered in the hybrid modality and 2 percent (29 courses sections) were offered in the asynchronous modality. These numbers have been on the rise since the college began offering partially and fully online courses well over a decade ago. In the last five years, the number of courses offered with an online component has at least tripled. There has been no formal assessment of student perceptions of online learning at Hostos as of yet, but individual faculty are given the results of the standard course assessment by the Office of Academic Affairs.

As education continues to evolve along with technology, there has also been a growth in online delivery of courses in recent years. With online education increasingly becoming readily available in higher education, examining issues like student readiness and online pedagogies has become commonplace in educational institutions. Collins and Halverson (2009) acknowledge that, with educational content steadily transitioning to an online medium, "people will need to develop skills to find the information they are looking for, to evaluate its usefulness and quality, and to synthesize the information they glean from the different sources they locate;" these skills qualify as *critical thinking* skills. According to the U.S. Department of Education's (2016) *National*

Educational Technology Plan, the combination of these skills, along with complex problem-solving, collaboration, and multimedia communication, in addition to traditional content knowledge, is the key to creating engaging and relevant online courses.

Allen and Seaman have maintained that online education is an important long-term strategy for the majority of postsecondary institutions (2012) and have self-acknowledged that, based on annual reports conducted over a 12-year period, they are the sole source of comprehensive studies of online education (2015). They reported that “the number of students taking at least one online course increased by over 411,000 to a new total of 7.1 million” and that one third of all students attending higher-education institutions will take at least one online class (2013). Their 2016 report indicated that the proportion of academic leaders who aver that online learning is an integral component of their institution’s long-term strategic plan is now at an all-time high of 70.8 percent.

As Hostos Community College works toward academic excellence in conjunction with current higher educational trends, attention to content, delivery, and student perceptions needs to be carefully examined, with comparisons to the standards in online learning.

Pros and Cons of an Online Class

Advantages to online courses include “lower total cost, more comfortable learning environment, convenience and flexibility, greater interaction and greater ability to concentrate, career advancement, continue in your profession, avoid commuting, improve your technical skills and transfer of credits” (“10 Advantages”, 2012). Advocates of online learning also argue that

technology-enhanced education can lead to superior learning outcomes, in addition to greater access for distance learners (Jaggars & Bailey, 2010).

While HCC has taken many steps to ensure that the quality of classes is leveraged by the aforementioned advantages, it should be noted that (like face-to-face courses) there are some real-world disadvantages to online education. These disadvantages include “lack of accreditation and low quality, little or no face-to-face interaction, more work, intense requirement for self-discipline and even more intense requirement for self-direction” (Hickey, 2014).

Those who oppose online learning often raise concerns about the quality of online coursework. Jaggars & Bailey (2010) stated that some instructors tended to simply dump their content into an online space rather than take advantage of the online format to develop new curricula around new learning technologies. By understanding and identifying these disadvantages when developing and designing online learning-modalities, HCC has made efforts to avoid these pitfalls and create a program that minimizes these disadvantages, while amplifying the potential advantages that online education offers.

Reasons for Online Learning

Jaggars (2014) investigated the reasons students were interested in taking online classes. Some reasons that were highlighted included increased flexibility and convenience for their work and travel schedules, a more efficient use of time, the opportunity to learn at their own pace, students’ belief that they could teach themselves certain subjects, and the inability to find available face-to-face sections of particular courses. Jaggars (2014) also examined the type of learning and interactions students preferred. She found that students preferred “to-the-point

content” (in comparison to an extended lecture) and fewer distractions from disruptive in-class students.

According to Jaggars (2014), “in order to scale online learning offerings appropriately, community college administrators need a stronger understanding of the reasons students take some courses online, and others face to face.” As HCC continues to advance in terms of its offerings and standards for online courses, there is much to be learned from the best practices described in past research from other institutions and the study that the Hostos Online Learning Assessment (HOLA) Task Force is currently conducting. Utilizing these lessons will allow HCC to develop future online courses that work as effectively, if not more so, than the equivalent face-to-face programs, in order to best serve the student population at HCC.

Research Design

The Office of Education Technology (EdTech) solicited faculty members who were leaders on campus with regard to online teaching to be part of a task force to design a survey for gathering data about students’ perceptions of their online learning-experiences. The authors of this article comprise that task force, and, as a group, represent the Office of Educational Technology, the Department of Behavioral & Social Sciences, the Business Department, the Education Department, and the Library. In the spring of 2015, a pilot 23-question survey was distributed, and 161 students responded. The authors met during the summer of 2015 to analyze the data and to discuss whether revisions needed to be made to the survey; as a group, they decided that more specificity was needed to create a more streamlined survey experience for students. The HOLA Task Force came up with the following four revised hypotheses: (1) students

would indicate that their experiences in online courses is comparable to their experiences in face-to-face courses (in terms of workload, level of course difficulty, and engagement with both the instructor and other students in the course); (2) there would be a relationship between the perception of workload intensity and course difficulty and students' experience with prior online courses; (3) students would access the course from multiple devices and multiple locations, and (4) students would indicate ease in navigating their hybrid and asynchronous courses. In order to collect data formally, the authors obtained human-subject research approval from the college's Human Research Protection Program (HRPP, formerly known as Internal Review Board [IRB]) in September of 2015. Since the data was collected as an aggregate, correlations between students' experience with online courses and their perceptions of workload intensity were not analyzed.

The Office of Educational Technology was crucial in identifying the participants. The Blackboard administrator identified all of the faculty members listed in the university-wide course management system (CUNYFirst) who were teaching either hybrid or asynchronous courses during the fall 2015 semester and sent that list to the EdTech Director, one of the Principal Investigators (PI) for this study, who emailed the faculty and asked them to share a link that included the informed consent and 23-question HOLA survey with their students on Blackboard 9.1. Students were not incentivized to take the survey (no payment or extra credit were offered). Since some of the PIs were also faculty providing the link to the survey to their hybrid and asynchronous students, the HOLA Task Force made sure that the surveys would be anonymous so the PIs had no way of knowing which students completed the survey. Students who chose to click the HOLA survey link were asked to read an informed consent form and check

a box to proceed with the survey. Data was only collected electronically, further reducing the risk of students being identified, as no handwriting was required at any time during the study. Students were also given the option to exit the survey at any point without penalty from their instructor and without the PIs' knowledge.

Students submitted survey data through a web-based form. Only the PIs had access to the raw data that was being generated. While data was shared through protected email accounts and via Google Drive during the student survey period, once the research period ended, all research data was moved from any online space to a secure server that is stored at Hostos Community College. Hostos already provided security protocols to store confidential information for the college. The authors protected participants' confidentiality and anonymity by coding the data as an aggregate, which meant that each course was viewed as a group. In the event that data did reveal any identifying factors of participants, the data was coded to remove these revealing factors. With these measures in place, the authors were confident that they were doing all that was necessary to protect the integrity of the data collected and the anonymity of the students who participated.

The Office of Educational Technology (EdTech) wanted to use the data collected from the survey to identify areas to provide professional development for faculty developing hybrid and asynchronous courses in order to deliver online content more effectively for students. This study could identify areas where faculty might improve their knowledge of teaching pedagogy. In addition, EdTech wanted to use the data collected to make recommendations to college administrators on needed resources. The authors have identified similar efforts to survey students in online courses but none that identified similar populations.

The authors felt that the revised instrument will provide more pertinent information for the task force, especially the EdTech office, since they oversee the development of hybrid and asynchronous courses at Hostos Community College. If better practices for the delivery of hybrid and asynchronous course can be identified by students enrolled in online courses, they can be addressed during the developmental stages of future course design with faculty members.

Results

The 198 students who participated in this survey comprised slightly less than 10 percent of the 2,003 individuals registered in online courses. They were enrolled in ten different courses across the content areas: Computer Literacy (MAT 130), Field Experience in Early-Childhood Education (EDU 113), Office Systems and Procedures (OT 104), United States History through the Civil War (HIS 210); Anthropology (ANT 101), Business (BUS 100), Business Communications (BUS 203), Psychology (PSY 101), and Sociology (SOC 101). Nearly 23 percent had no idea they had enrolled in an online course and 4.7 percent enrolled for the online course as an added section so as to be considered full-time students. Three students had a mental or physical disability that would prevent them from being on campus for class. In terms of previous experience with online learning, 42 percent reported that they had taken a hybrid course at Hostos prior to the current semester, and 3.5 percent completed one at another college. Eighteen percent of participants responded that they had taken an asynchronous course at Hostos, and four percent completed one at another college. Forty-seven percent of participants acknowledged that this was their first online class. Our total is 114.5 percent because students were allowed to check all responses that applied and may have taken a combination of online courses at Hostos and/or at Hostos and another college.

Quantitative Data

Hypothesis 1: The online learning experience is comparable to the face-to-face learning experience. The majority survey respondents indicated that online courses were the same level of difficulty (57 percent) as face-to-face courses. Nearly 20 percent found the coursework to be less difficult, and nearly 24 percent found the coursework to be more difficult. Sixty percent of respondents also stated that they spent the same amount of time in an online course as in a face-to-face course, 32 percent reported spending more time working in an online course, and nearly 8 percent reported spending less time.

Hypothesis 2: Students will access online courses from multiple devices and multiple locations. Participants overwhelmingly (87.9 percent) believe they have adequate access to technology to meet the needs of the course. A personal laptop was the most frequently selected choice (132 students), followed by cell phones (80), devices at Hostos (80), a personal desktop (70), and tablets (47). Only 23 students indicated that they used someone else's device. Students accessed their courses from home (184), work (64), the Hostos library (63), the Hostos computer lab (60), another site at school (25), or alternate site off campus (24).

Hypothesis 3: Students will indicate ease in navigating online courses. Findings indicate that students are able to locate what they need for class, such as assignments (181 students), the syllabus (169), their grades (167), the exams (156), online discussions (144), and contact information for the instructor (130). More than 100 participants also responded that it was easy to find policies, and 89 reported that it was easy to locate additional tools for the course. When

asked whether they were able to find feedback about their progress in the course, 80 students answered that they strongly agreed, and 94 students agreed with the statement.

Enrollment, Motivation, and Student Engagement

In addition to the formal hypotheses, the HOLA Task Force also wanted to examine whether students realized they were enrolling in an online course, why they enrolled in an asynchronous or hybrid course (if they knew), and how timely students perceived communication to be between themselves and faculty and themselves and their classmates. The majority of students (71 percent) realized that they were registering for an asynchronous or hybrid course and 29 percent were unaware that the course required full- or part-time online attendance.

Students indicated that they had enrolled in an online or hybrid course for the following reasons: not applicable (“I didn’t realize I was signing up for a partially online or fully online course”) (23 percent); work or family obligations that prevented them from being present on campus (22 percent); they could not find anything else that would fit their schedule (16 percent); the sections were full (2 percent); or the course was only offered online (6 percent). Seventeen percent of students indicated “Other.” There is a discrepancy between the responses to the very first question on the survey which asked whether they realized that they were registering for an asynchronous or hybrid course, with 29 percent indicating they did not, and the fourth survey question which had had as a choice not applicable (“I didn’t realize I was signing up for a partially online or fully online course”), where 23 percent of respondents chose this option.

When asked whether they interacted with their instructors in a timely fashion, 26 percent said they were “excellent,” 18 percent were “above average,” 37 percent said “average,” and 11

percent claimed to be “below average.” When asked how well they responded to peers in a timely manner on BlackBoard, 14 percent selected “excellent,” 13 percent said they were “above average,” 40 percent self-identified as “average,” and 21 percent selected “below average.” Compared with an in-person course, 32 percent of respondents strongly agreed and 47 percent agreed that they were as actively engaged in the course and with the professor. Emails were used by 91 percent of the students to communicate with the professor, followed by in-person office hours (41 percent). Video chat software (2 percent), text messages (9 percent), and phone calls (7 percent) were also ways respondents indicated they communicated with their instructor.

Qualitative Data

Of the 180 asynchronous and hybrid students who wrote in a response to the question *“What are the most useful features of the online component of this course?”*, only 63 (35 percent) students responded with one or more Blackboard features (MyGrades, Discussion Forums, Blogs, Wikis, Recorded Lectures, Exams, Assignments, Calendar, Syllabus, Collaborate, and Course Content). Of the 63 students who responded with a Blackboard feature, 21 (12 percent) students listed MyGrades as the most useful online feature. Another 20 (11 percent) students responded “every part is useful or good” or a general “Blackboard/Blackboard tools.”

Responses that did not include a Blackboard feature were coded as: (a) flexibility/ accessibility (time, place, and/or device); (b) self-directed learning; (c) interaction with instructor and/or peers; (d) course design; (e) a combination of the coded categories; and (f) computer skills. Thirty-eight respondents (21 percent) wrote comments that could be categorized as flexibility and/or accessibility that related to either their own time, where they could access

course material, and/or how they could access course material. Many of these responses were similar and included “you can do it in any place and time,” “accessibility,” “flexibility,” “meet only once a week and get to do the homework online,” and “the time it allows me to take other classes.” Twenty-seven respondents (15 percent) wrote responses related to self-directed learning, such as “It allows me to work at my own pace,” “Being able to take quizzes, tests, and discussions as my time permits,” and “I am able to get the assignments done early enough so that I can finish it before the due date.” Thirteen students (7 percent) commented specifically on course design. The lengthiest comments were related to course design--students decidedly wanted to talk about the positive aspects of course design of their current course, and a few even stated how prior online courses were not designed in a user-friendly manner.

Eleven students (6 percent) wrote specifically about interactions with peers and instructors, in addition to those who cited interactive spaces such as Discussion Forums, Blogs, Wikis, and Collaborate; these course-design elements included another 20 students, for a total of 31 or 17 percent. Many students commented on how much they valued being able to get timely feedback from their instructors on assignments and other grade-related items. Two students combined flexibility and course design, one student combined flexibility and self-directed learning, and one student stated course design and self-directed learning were the most important Blackboard features. Two students specifically stated “it helps you obtain better computer skills,” and two comments were off topic.

Of the 95 participants who answered the question “*Do you have any suggestions for improving the online component of this course?*,” 40 respondents (42 percent) responded “N/A,” “no suggestions,” “good as is,” or specific positive comments about their professors.

Twenty-five participants (26 percent) wrote the following suggestions related to course design: content, assignments, and online tools should be broken down and/or better explained (6 participants); more time on assignments and discussions (4 students); students should be able to see their letter grade not just points earned (4 students); more videos, both professor lecturing and web-based (3 students); more time on tests (2 students); students should be able to see their test answers after the test (2 students); less work (2 students); and style and organization of the course (2 students).

Fifteen students (16 percent) suggested improving communication in the online environment, and participants made the following suggestions: live chats (5 students); more feedback and communication (4 students); more reminders (4 students); in-person recitation (1 student); and fewer Blackboard Announcements that are placed at the top instead of the bottom of the home page (1 student).

Five students suggested improvements to Blackboard. Of these, two students delineated technical difficulties with Blackboard, including system errors, two students did not like the Blackboard app, and one student did not like the scrolling required in the Discussion Forum.

Six students had miscellaneous suggestions that included online instructors coordinating due dates, improving Safe Assign, making it easier to tell that a course is hybrid on CUNYFirst (our college's registration system), making it easier to correct typos, and offering a chance to work on one's grade when it drops. There was one student who had suggestions but could not think of any at the time.

Three students recommended additional online courses, and two participants' feedback fit into more than one of the coded categories. One student wrote, "Due dates should have two sessions instead of one due to many unexpected things that can happen throughout the course. Also many assignments can't be sent until its due date. Blackboard sometimes isn't working and materials disappear." This participant indicated both technical problems with Blackboard as well as suggestions for course design. Another student wrote, "I would suggest making the 'Contact the Professor' more accessible than making the inbox hard to find. Though I'd rarely needed it for this course, I find it hard to message on Blackboard due to the way the messaging is set up." This comment makes suggestions about Blackboard, course design, and communication with the professor.

Discussion

The primary objective of the study was to ascertain student perceptions of their online learning experiences at Hostos Community College. The HOLA Task Force designed a survey aimed at measuring students' perceptions of their online learning experience. Two additional objectives were part of the study as well: to use the data collected from the survey tool to identify areas to provide professional development for faculty developing hybrid and asynchronous courses and to use the data collected to make recommendations to college administrators about needed resources.

H1: The majority of students (60 percent) perceive online courses to be similar to face-to-face courses in terms of difficulty level contradicting other literature that demonstrates that students perceive online courses to be easier (Jaggars, 2014). This could be explained by our student population, which is disproportionately remedial in comparison to other community colleges.

Additionally, the high number of English Language Learners and students who speak a language other than English at home may result in fewer students perceiving any course as “less difficult” than others.

H2: Our data shows that students access their online course from multiple devices and in multiple locations. Given the tremendous capabilities of Smartphones and laptops, it makes sense that the vast majority (90 percent) of respondents believed they had adequate access to technology; however, our survey did not specifically address issues of Internet connectivity nor did it address which devices students have access to during quizzes and exams. More specific questions such as “Did you ever lose your Internet connection during a quiz or exam?” would be helpful. Also, several students in the qualitative section made comments to the effect that the Blackboard App was not particularly useful (thus making it difficult to complete work on their phones) and/or that Blackboard posed technical problems as a course management system. Members of the HOLA Task Force have indicated that students report losing their Internet signal during a quiz or exam and many others use their cell phone for lengthy written responses on Journals, Blogs, Wikis, and Discussion Forums and also on quizzes and exams. Thus, students may have access to multiple devices but lack the appropriate device and/or stable Internet connection to succeed on a particular task.

With respect to students accessing the course from multiple devices and multiple locations, the majority of students accessed their online classes via their personal laptop from home. Moving forward, the HOLA Task Force will seek more specific data in terms of which devices are being used for what tasks and in which places are they most likely to complete

coursework. This will illuminate some of the lingering questions related to Internet access and the limitations of cellular devices with specific Blackboard features such as quizzes and exams.

H3: The quantitative findings suggest that students perceive that they generally navigate the Blackboard course site fairly well and qualitative feedback about current instructors was very positive, however, many students wrote lengthy responses about course design when asked about Blackboard features. They also referenced poor course design in their previous online courses. Thus, targeted professional development for faculty who have been teaching online for several years is recommended to help them update their course design. This coincides with larger studies of online learning that show course design is one of the most important aspects of student performance in the online environment (Jaggars & Bailey, 2010).

Enrollment, Motivation, and Student Engagement

The issue of students being uninformed that they had enrolled in online courses (29%) is still a problem in spite of the efforts of the Office of Educational Technology to initiate various methods of student awareness during the advisement and registration periods. Much discussion with, and support from, the Registrar's Office is still needed to initiate more effective methods of course identification for the student.

The findings of this survey support Jaggars's (2014) qualitative findings, which indicate distance, scheduling, and ease, were primary reasons for taking an online class; the remainder of students either didn't realize they were enrolling in an online class, or they were taking the class for other reasons. The "Other" that 17 percent of students indicated is puzzling and requires further investigation. One solution would be to allow students to write in reasons that are not

included in the list. The HOLA Task Force could also interview students to gain a deeper knowledge about their motivation for taking online courses.

Our findings coincide with Jaggars's (2014) findings in terms of similar reasons why students choose to take an online course such as flexibility, convenience, and efficiency. HOLA's findings coincide with Jaggars' reasons for taking a course, with 45 percent of Hostos students citing distance, flexibility, or time as a reason for taking an online course. Jaggars' qualitative analysis suggests that students choose online courses based on the following three factors: "(1) whether the subject area was well suited to the online context, (2) whether the course was easy or difficult, and (3) whether the course was 'interesting' and/or 'important'" (p. 13). Regarding course difficulty, Jaggars identifies that "easy" seemed to symbolize humanities-type courses as opposed to math and lab courses. Nearly 63 percent of survey respondents were in "humanities-type courses," which might be indicative of Hostos' unique student demographics, their orientation to higher education, linguistic difficulties, and/or college readiness, but only 8 percent of students registered for the course because they thought it would be easy. In contrast to our survey results, Jaggars found that most students preferred to take online courses because they thought the course would be easy for them.

The majority of the students who responded to the survey either agreed or strongly agreed that they felt actively and enthusiastically engaged with the course and the professor, thereby implying that there was equal or even greater interaction between students and faculty in the online learning environment than in the face-to-face classroom. The survey does not distinguish one-way communication (such as Blackboard Announcements, which are relayed to students' linked email accounts, written feedback on assignments, discussions, quizzes, etc.)

from two-way communication (such as emails between instructors and students, office hours, online chats, Skype, Blackboard Collaborate, text messages, and/or phone calls).

Limitations

The 10 percent participant response rate is one limitation and that 10 percent disproportionately includes students from the classes being taught by HOLA Task Force members, because all of the PIs teaching online courses in the fall of 2015 made the link available to their students. This in turn may skew the results since faculty on the HOLA Task Force are some of the more experienced faculty teaching online and also serve as mentors in the Asynchronous and Hybrid Initiative. Although a link to the survey was sent to all faculty teaching online courses, the number of courses represented in the survey mirrors the courses taught by HOLA Task Force faculty. The HOLA Task Force will brainstorm ways to engage their colleagues to encourage other faculty to make the link available to students in their online classes.

Although survey questions were developed after a pilot survey was administered and data were analyzed, our participants' responses have shown us several questions that need to be more specific and additional questions that need to be added to help us better understand student perceptions of online learning, some of which have been discussed. Additional areas to explore include: (a) Did the professor provide any type of orientation to Blackboard?; (b) Had the student ever taken another course with the professor before the online class?; and (c) Were these students high-achievers who do not usually find academic work difficult? In order to understand the specific findings such as those related to course difficulty, Internet access and ease of use, reasons for enrolling in an online course, and engagement, additional questions

should be added to the survey. Demographic information that does not necessarily compromise anonymity should be obtained, specifically, age, employment status, and college major, because certain responses might indicate the learner has had more exposure to technology in general.

The learning styles of the students were not identified during the survey. If the online environment does not support how the student learns, it is expected that that student's responses would be negative; conversely, a course would be conducive to learning and more enjoyable for a person whose strengths are addressed within a specific academic environment. Elements such as motivation and task persistence can affect student engagement and comfort, including when learning online; sociological requirements can support positive attitudes toward a course if the individual learner's need is met; and locating online tools is easier if they are presented in a perceptual modality that is complementary to that of the user (Dunn, 2003).

Conclusion

Studies of online education are in their infancy and comprehensive national studies of online learning are merely a decade old. There is a definitive lack of research specifically geared toward Hispanic-serving institutions, particularly within the community college setting. Thus, this exploratory survey and analysis highlights particular ways that participants' perceptions in a Hispanic-serving institution do not mirror those of students taking online courses nationwide and provides important data and analyses regarding student perceptions of online learning.

Most importantly, our findings indicate that Hostos participants register for online courses for different reasons than participants indicate in national surveys. Few register for an online course because they think it will be easier than a face-to-face course. The particular

challenges that community college students face, especially at Hispanic-serving institutions, are likely part of the reason why students register for an online course. Further research is needed to illuminate the “Other” (17.2 percent), as well as more detailed data regarding the 22.4 percent of respondents who indicated that they registered for an online course because of family or work commitments. What types of commitments do students have and how does the online environment help students foster non-cognitive skills such as goal setting, task persistence, and time management as a result of the flexibility and accessibility online courses provide? Our qualitative open-ended response feedback also strongly shows that students value the flexibility/ accessibility and self-directed learning that takes place in the online environment. The HOLA Task Force needs to continue work to reduce the number of students who do not realize they are registering for an online class by utilizing the data from this survey to push for urgent changes in the online registration system and to inform success coaches and advisors. In addition, the HOLA Task Force will continue to work on including an online readiness module in every course shell, which would help all students prepare for the online environment, but particularly those who are new to online learning and/or those who did not know they registered for an online course.

Participants also indicated in the qualitative responses that course design heavily impacts their experience in the online environment, which supports national research. Hostos’ Online Teaching Initiative ensures that all new courses are created through a collaborative environment that includes mentoring and a final course review, however, additional professional development should be strongly encouraged and focus on new online tools and pedagogies and research-based best practices. Communication in the online environment should also be viewed as part of the course design. Many students wrote lengthy responses about the high quality communication

they had with the professor and/or other students. Further information about what types of online communication students prefer as well more specific questions about communication to distinguish one-way communication from two-way communication and individual and group communication would broaden our understanding of this crucial aspect of online learning. Areas of strength at Hostos, such as course navigation and communication with faculty and peers, should be capitalized through these professional development opportunities.

In conclusion, the HOLA Task Force will continue to work toward examining student perceptions of online learning through a modified survey instrument, as well as considering amending our research design to include focus groups in order to learn more about students' motivation for registering for an online course, course design and online communication. The Hostos Online Teaching Initiative will utilize survey results to shape professional development opportunities for faculty currently teaching online courses, as well as in developing training for faculty who are new to online course development. Also, we hope to work to make online registration more transparent so that all students make an informed choice regarding course selection and modality. By sharing our survey results with HETS and at conferences, we hope to collaborate with our colleagues at other colleges and universities and continue to expand the existing research about online education at Hispanic-serving institutions.

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