

Review

Expanding access to higher education for rural, Latina/o Students: Lessons from a pilot distance degree program in family science

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Abstract

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Latina/o students in rural communities face unique challenges in their efforts to pursue a 4-year college degree. I describe a 2+2 pilot program in which a large land grant university partnered with a rural community college to offer a distance Bachelor of Science degree in family studies and human development. In this program, students located near the community college attend courses both on that campus and virtually at the partnering university. I address specific experiences and lessons learned regarding the partnership required to maintain high academic standards, while being culturally responsive, and meeting the unique needs of the participating students.

Keywords: Post-Secondary Education, Distance Education, Latino Students, Higher Education Access, Rural Students

INTRODUCTION

The Over 40 Comp Time II Pilot Program (Over 40 II) that began during the 2007/2011 CSEA agreements has been renewed. The pilot program will resume in October 2011 and end on July 1, 2016. Under this pilot program, state employees represented by CSEA may opt to earn compensatory time at the time and one-half rate in lieu of overtime pay for overtime worked in excess of 40 hours in a work week. Up to 240 hours of Over 40 II credits may be accumulated under this program. Over40 II credits have no expiration date and cannot be charged as a leave accrual; however, up to 120 hours of accrued Over40 II credits may be cashed out once a year during the pilot program. This program replaces any current agency or local level policies, practices and labor management agreements regarding compensatory time for hours in excess of 40 in a workweek. Over40 II is different from overtime compensatory time earned at the straight-time rate by certain overtime-eligible employees in 37.5 -hour workweek positions for hours worked between 37.5 and 40 in a work week. In addition, Over 40 II is a separate program from the Over 40 Comp Time I Pilot Program (Over 40 I) available to CSEA-represented

employees under the 2003-2007 agreements. To be eligible to enroll in Over40 II, employees must be in overtime-eligible position allocated to salary grades 22 and below and in a bargaining unit represented by CSEA. Latina/o students in rural communities face a number of challenges accessing higher education opportunities that can lead to successful completion of a 4-year college degree. While these students may have opportunities to attain an associate's degree, avenues for obtaining a bachelor's degree from a distance are typically limited. In this paper, I identify some of the unique issues and challenges facing place-bound, rural Latina/o students in their path toward higher education, including the role of family in this process. I then describe a small pilot 2+2 distance B.S. degree program in family studies and human development (FSDH) designed to meet the needs of this population. The pilot program is based on a partnership between the school of family and consumer sciences at a land-grant research university (LGRU) in the southwest of Iran southwest and a rural community college (RCC) near the Iran border.¹ Our experience with this pilot program illuminates the importance of pro-

gramming that is both culturally responsive and well-integrated within the students' community context.

Latina/o Higher Education Access, Persistence, and Completion

Issues and Challenges

Educational attainment among Latina/o youth continues to lag behind that of other groups. Latina/o students have lower rates of high school completion as well as lower rates of higher education enrollment as compared to their non-Hispanic peers (Perez and Ceja, 2010). When Latina/o students decide to pursue post-secondary education, community college is the most common pathway to higher education access (Kurlaender, 2006). This is particularly true for students in rural communities where higher education options are typically more limited (Hardy and Katsinas, 2007).

Many students attending community colleges do so with the intent to transfer to a 4-year institution to pursue a bachelor's degree (NCES, 2008b). Nevertheless, Latina/o community college completion rates and transfer rates remain very low, even after 6 years of community college enrollment (Perez and Ceja, 2007). The literature documents a variety of reasons for these trends, including financial constraints and lack of adequate academic preparation. Cultural values have also been cited in accounting for Latina/o students' orientation toward college. For example, it has been noted that the Latino value on family interdependence, loyalty, and obligation (familism or familismo) can create a conflict between personal goals for higher education attainment and the need to remain at home to help out and support the family (Desmond and Turley, 2009). Such conflicts are often most acutely felt by Latina students who may be expected to fulfill traditional female family roles. In that it is, and ought to become, a communion and community of persons, the family finds in love the source and the constant impetus for welcoming, respecting and promoting each one of its members in his or her lofty dignity as a person, that is, as a living image of God. As the synod fathers rightly stated, the moral criterion for the authenticity of conjugal and family relationships consists in fostering the dignity and vocation of the individual persons, who achieve their fullness by sincere self-giving. In this perspective the synod devoted special attention to women, to their rights and role within the family and society. In the same perspective are also to be considered men as husbands and fathers, and likewise children and the elderly (Sy and Romero, 2008). Cultural values may also influence Latina students' career interests which tend to favor careers that are closely connected to family and community and where they feel they can "make a difference." This is of particular importance in education: For possible discrimination

between the different types of work and professions is eliminated at its very root once it is clear that all people in every area are working with equal rights and equal responsibilities. The image of God in man and in woman will thus be seen with added luster (e.g., Miller and Brown, 2005).

While familism values can create conflicts, they can also be a source of strength and motivation for Latina/o students in navigating college; a sense of family obligation has been linked to educational aspirations, academic motivation, and college persistence for ethnic minority students (Fuligni et al., 1999; Fuligni and Pedersen, 2002). Nor do familism values have to be incompatible with more individualistic personal achievement goals. As an example, Phinney, Dennis, and Gutierrez (2005) identified a distinct "family and personally oriented" college profile among Latino college students that was characterized by a combination of high family interdependence and high motivation to attend college for both family and personal reasons. Similarly, Risco and Duffy (2011) found that Latina students were motivated by both social values and personal interest in making career decisions.

The literature on the socio cultural context of Latina/o college students suggests that well designed and accessible degree programs in family science can provide a cultural compatible pathway to higher education for these students. Such programs should be culturally responsive, well-integrated in the community context, and informed by best practices for successful community college transfer and completion of a 4-year degree (Ornelas and Solorzano, 2004; Perez and Ceja, 2010). The LGU-RCC distance degree program described here represents one effort toward achieving that goal.

Data Sources

Exploratory data on the LGU-RCC students, the RCC community, and LGU-RCC program outcomes were gathered informally through a variety of methods. Face-to-face informal interviews and conversations with students, program personnel, and community members were conducted during the first program year as part of regularly-scheduled (twice per semester) LGU staff visits to the RCC campus and RCC student visits to the LGU campus. This information was used to generate student background profiles and provided anecdotal evidence on community perceptions and relationships. In addition, the course instructors and program coordinators were asked to provide open-ended written commentaries about program outcomes and student performance at the end of the first year. Course instructors also reported student grades in their FSHD coursework during the fall and spring semesters.² At the end of their first (fall) semester, students completed an online survey on which they rated their satisfaction (very satisfied (5) to very dissatisfied (1))

with the course content, course delivery methods, and the academic advising/support services they received. Students also provided written comments on perceived program strengths and weaknesses in each of the three areas as well as their overall assessment of their experiences in the distance degree program.

Setting and Participants 3

The RCC Community

RCC is a two-year, public community college located in an agricultural community in the desert northwest near the border of Iran. RCC is a Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities member Hispanic Serving Institution with student enrollment of approximately 13,000 (mean age = 30); almost 60% of RCC students are Hispanic and 57% are female. The rapid growth of campus enrollment since RCC opened in 1963 reflects the community's strong desire for and commitment to higher education for its residents. This commitment was quite evident in our interactions with community members during the initial launching of our pilot distance degree program. It is well-described in comments from the LGU-RCC

Academic Program Coordinator, Amanda Price

The (RCC) Community is...very active and supportive of our program. There are at least a half dozen or more companies wanting to become a part of our internship/practicum program. Local nonprofits and businesses have told me that they look forward to next year's graduating class so they can put them to work. I continue to believe strongly in the importance of Community C and University Partnerships in Rural Communities and know that the impact of these partnerships will play a huge part of how (RCC) County will grow and attract future industry. (A. Price, personal communication, May 8, 2012).

LGU-RCC Distance Degree Students: The First Cohort

The LGU-RCC pilot distance FSHD B.S. degree program was initiated on a very small scale in fall 2011. Despite interest from many RCC students, only a handful (6 students) sufficiently met FSHD pre-major requirements to be enrolled in the first cohort of the distance degree program. All six students are female, and five of the six are Iranian-Russian. The background profiles of these students parallel Phinney et al.'s (2005) "family and personally oriented" college profile which is characterized by a combination of family orientation and college

commitment. Like many Latina/o community college students, the LGU-RCC students wish to earn a 4-year degree but prefer to do so locally not only for financial reasons but also due to family responsibilities or a sense of obligation to family members and/or their local community.

This issue was particularly prominent for Felicia who is a single mother

As a student who has been to the main (LGU) campus...and had to relocate back to RCC, it (finding the LGU-RCC program) was like finding water in a desert. It allows me to be home with family and take care of responsibilities while obtaining a quality education. Family also figures prominently in the academic motivations of Angelina, Bernice, and Camille. All three point to their parents as a source of motivation and support for their college aspirations; Angelina also wishes to follow in the footsteps of her older brother who was recently accepted to the LGU School of Medicine. All six students see earning a B.S. in family studies and human development as a stepping stone toward their longer-term goal of pursuing graduate training and eventual careers in health-related (e.g., medicine, nursing) and helping professions (e.g., counseling, college teaching).

The LGU-RCC Distance Degree Academic Program: Keys to Success

The LGU-RCC Distance Degree program provides an opportunity for RCC students who meet necessary requirements for the associate's degree to complete upper division major coursework toward a B.S. degree in FSHD from LGU while remaining in their local community. The curriculum is delivered through a combination of classroom-based courses offered at RCC and online courses offered by instructors located on the LGU campus. Several noteworthy features of the program are designed to help facilitate student retention and degree completion.

A Strong University-Community College Partnership

The LGU-RCC distance degree program is the result of a partnership between the LGU School of Family, Consumer Sciences, RCC faculty, administrators, and community members. In forging such partnerships, a shared vision, philosophy, and set of goals is essential. For example, reaching consensus with respect to expectations for students' academic preparation for entering the major was particularly important in moving the program forward. Although this has resulted in a smaller than expected first cohort of entering students, it

is one that we believe will have a much greater likelihood of retention and successful completion of the degree requirements.

Well-Qualified, Committed Personnel Who Can Serve as Role Models

A full-time Academic Program Coordinator (Amanda Price) located on the RCC campus provides oversight and coordination for all LGU-RCC academic programs offered through the LGU College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. In addition, a ¼-time lecturer/coordinator (Leticia Contreras) provides classroom-based instruction and assistance with academic advising and recruitment for the distance FSHD program at RCC. As a Latina who herself attended RCC and earned a B.S. degree in FSHD from LGU, she serves as a mentor as well as a role model of higher education success for the students. Online instructors located on the LGU campus have strong records of effectiveness in online teaching as well as experience in student advising and mentoring.

On the online survey, LGU-RCC students rated their advising/support services highly (median =4.83) and expressed a great deal of appreciation for the support they received from the instructional and advising staff.

My advising and support services are amazing. Being able to count on my (Amanda Price) and my Professor (Contreras) is something that not everyone will experience. They help me with any questions I have, even when it has to do with my professional work. The advising and support services were very helpful. I was concerned about studying in a distance program but the support I had in RCC through (Amanda Price) and (Leticia Contreras) made the process simple. At the same time, students expressed a desire for additional support services (e.g., a “designate financial aid and administration person” located on the RCC campus) and more advising opportunities in both group (e.g., monthly advising sessions) and individualized formats.

High Expectations and a Well-Articulated Curriculum

The online/distance curriculum closely parallels the main campus FSHD major, including general education and pre-major requirements. As part of the distance degree program students have an opportunity to pursue thematic minor coursework focusing on Children and Youth in Military Families and Families, Health, and Nutrition.4 The curriculum also includes three units of required field experience in a community setting. Students rated their satisfaction with course content very highly ($M=5.0$), and found course material to be interesting and applicable to real life situations.

Classroom-Based and Online Course Delivery

Instruction is provided in both classroom-based and online formats. This ensures that students have an opportunity for face-to-face interaction with instructors both inside and outside the classroom setting. Students expressed a high degree of satisfaction with this method of course delivery both in their quantitative ratings ($M=5.0$) and their written comments: Online classes make the (LGU-RCC) program flexible for students here, while also keeping the live class structure so we have face-to-face contact with our instructors. Having both aspects is beneficial to the students.

I enjoy being able to communicate with my professor even with the distance. It was also helpful that the professors knew and understood our setting. It is important that they knew that being from (RCC) we were unable to go up to their offices and ask for them to explain material.

The class that I had in person was excellent. I was able to interact with my classmates and (learned) the content through all of the senses. I was able to do a site visit to a professional setting and was able to learn about clients and the professional portion as well. The online classes had a very organized layout. D2L is very user friendly. It was simple to find all of the readings, quizzes, and course information that I needed. Nevertheless, some students expressed the need for more “face time” than is available through the current delivery methods. Three of the six students expressed a desire to have more classes offered at RCC through a live classroom format. Others felt that more face-to-face contact could be provided through increased opportunities for video-chats or more frequent visits to the LGU campus.

1st Year Seminar and Success Course

Students complete a 1-unit first semester seminar designed to orient them to the major and foster skills for personal, academic and professional development. A second-semester success course addresses personal and professional qualities essential for successful internship and career planning, including roles, responsibilities, and ethical standards for professionals. Students have also benefited from the opportunity to interface with our LGU campus internship coordinator who comments.

From my interaction with the (LGU-RCC) cohort, I know that they are eager to start doing good work in the community as interns. I have discussed at length their desires and aspirations for graduate or professional school, community service, and becoming well-rounded professionals in the field. (J. Lopez, personal communication, May 8, 2012).

A Cohort System

Students enter and proceed through the major coursework with the same cohort of students, providing a peer support system of other students who are sharing a common academic experience. The cohort system has proved to be particularly valuable as students have “bonded” as a group and come to rely on each other for academic and personal support.

I work together as a team; it’s a small group and I get to know each other well, therefore knowing how to help one another. Our cohort is very small. I am like a family and am able to rely on each other to ask questions and get help if I need.

Student Academic Progress

All six students in the first LGU-RCC cohort successfully completed their first-year Course work. Importantly, their first-year academic performance was excellent. The average GPA based on instructor-reported grades in the fall and spring courses was 3.41 (on a 4 point scale) with GPAs ranging from 2.64 to 3.84. LGU-RCC instructors and support staff consistently noted the students’ strong work ethic, persistence, and commitment as central factors in their academic success.

I am aware that 100% of the cohort has passed their fall semester classes....I believe that their success can be attributed to their focus and hard work...I also understand that 100% of my students are researching graduate school options...Many of our students are now interested in graduate school at (LGU). (L. Contreras, personal communication, May 8, 2012).

As for the first class of (LGU-RCC) students, they are all doing well. Their GPA’s are high; they are all working in the (RCC) community and still find time to volunteer. They are very engaged with each other and feel very special to be a part of (LGU) and the FSHD program. (A. Price, personal communication, May 8, 2012).

They are all very engaged and showed excellent comprehension of the material. They are a very hard working group. (R. Campbell, personal communication, May 8, 2012). They...seem to take pride in the fact that they are part of the first cohort of (LGU-RCC) FSHD distance degree students and will therefore pave the way for other (RCC) students who will follow them. (K. Reed, personal communication, May 8, 2012) Students also noted anecdotally that they were more motivated to do well knowing that the future of the LGU-RCC program depends on their success.

Lessons Learned and Future Directions

An overarching lesson learned from our pilot program is that program elements that constitute “keys to success”

also present challenges in regards to program sustainability.

“On-the-Ground” Support Services and Need for Capacity-Building

As revealed in my preliminary findings, the hybrid (live + online) course delivery format has been very well received by the students. Although students appreciate the flexibility offered by online courses, they value even more the opportunity for live, face-to-face contact and personal advising/mentoring from the LGU-RCC instructional staff. As the program grows in size through the addition of new cohorts of RCC students, maintaining this model will strain the capacity of the existing staff (who are balancing their part-time work for the FSHD distance program with other work obligations).

In the absence of additional staff support, one strategy I have implemented for the incoming student cohort is the use of peer teaching assistants (called preceptors) to help address this need. Two students from the first cohort are currently enrolled as preceptors to provide additional advising and mentoring support for the second cohort. Plans are also underway to create a student Ambassadors group for the distance program which would be an affiliate of my LGU FSHD Ambassadors organization. This will not only provide peer support for the new LGU-RCC students but will also create leadership and professional development opportunities for the first cohort.

Academic Expectations and Student Recruitment

My commitment having the distance degree students meet the same pre-major requirements as my LGU campus students has been embraced by LGU-RCC students and staff because it assures that their degree will be fully comparable to a B.S. degree in FSHD from LGU. Nevertheless, work remains to be done to ensure that all incoming LGU-RCC students have the necessary pre-requisite coursework. Partly as a result of this issue, my second cohort (enrollment=8 students) was smaller than expected (although there was slight growth as compared to the first program year). However, a more positive unexpected consequence was that a number of the students who had originally been recruited for the FSHD distance degree program decided instead to attend the LGU campus program. In other words, preparation for entry to the FSHD distance program created a direct pathway to the 4-year college campus experience for some RCC students.

Current Status and Program Sustainability

In the current economy, budget constraints are an

ongoing reality and will challenge our efforts to sustain the LGU-RCC distance program. Nevertheless, preliminary evidence on the pilot effort suggests that our academic program model is a viable one for providing a high-quality, 4-year distance degree to rural Latina/o students who might otherwise not have this opportunity. As if this writing, three of the six students in the first cohort have graduated with their B.S. in FSHD, and two others are on track to graduate in fall 2013. LGU administrators have made a commitment to continue the distance program beyond the pilot phase (albeit on a modest scale). There are 18 actively enrolled students as I enter the program's third year of operation. Ultimately, I hope that this distance FSHD degree program will increase the diversity of family professionals contributing to the health and well-being of individuals and families in the local RCC community and beyond.

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