Chapter 15

Online Instructional Practices for Racially Diverse Student Populations in United States Higher Education Institutions: Challenges and Best Practices

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ABSTRACT

Both individual online courses and fully online programs in the United States have gained widespread acceptance. They are also more diverse than ever due to students’ demographic changes. There are multiple challenges to student learning and to instructor teaching, and in this chapter, the authors present literature on online learning challenges and possible best practices for faculty training, instructional design, course content, intercultural miscommunication, accessibility for students with disabilities, and social isolation. Use of inclusive teaching methods are recommended. These are methods that promote effective cross-cultural pedagogies including methods that create learning tasks that foster reciprocal learning about cultures, expose learners to multiple perspectives, and facilitate development of skills in global thinking and intercultural competence. Use of universal instructional techniques to address multiple learning styles and integrating multicultural perspectives in course content have resulted in student success, satisfaction, as well as reduced stress and social isolation in online classes.

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INTRODUCTION

The United States has been grappling with demographic changes in the general population that in turn extend to K–12 schools and higher education institutions. According to US census bureau projections, the population will increasingly become a racially and ethnically pluralistic society: in the coming decades, one in four is expected to be a race other than non-Hispanic white, and by 2060 that number is expected to be one in three (Vespa, Armstrong, & Medina, 2018).

The Hispanic population contributes to half of the nation’s population growth, and the number of Hispanic students at all levels of education has doubled in the past 20 years. By 2060, at least two races, Asians and Hispanics, are expected to double in population size. By 2028, Black or African American races will comprise 15.5% of the population, and the foreign-born population is expected to make up about 14.9% of the population (America Counts, 2017; U.S. Census Bureau, 2013).

Institutions of higher education in the United States have therefore seen drastic changes in their students’ demographics in both face-to-face and online enrollments. Universities and colleges are a great reflection of a state’s demographics as they admit a greater percentage of students from within state than from out of state. For example, the University of Florida (UF), the state’s flagship institution, has seen the undergraduate student population change from over 80% white in 1990 to about 57% in the Fall of 2017 (UF Facts, 2017). The state is characterized by a higher Hispanic or Latino population (24.9% compared to 17.8% nationwide) and an African American population (16.8% in Florida versus 13.3% nationwide) (America Counts, 2017). The trends at UF are similar to the national trends—the percentage of Hispanic/Latino students has increased dramatically since 1990 from about 6% to 20% across UF. Furthermore, the majority of the university’s admits are the top-half of the high school graduating class as freshman students (99.9%), and 94% of all freshman admits have a high school GPA of 3.75 or higher (University of Florida Common Data Set). This does not align with the notion that diverse students entering the institution affect the quality or that diverse students lack intellectual abilities. This population paradigm shift also coincides with a time when online learning has gained popularity (Seaman & Allen, 2013). Hence, this cultural shift calls for a collective responsibility for institutions to use instructional strategies appropriate across racial/cultural groups in both online and face-to-face classes.

With advancements in computer technology and internet penetration, online course offerings and enrollments have increased. Online courses have also been filling a major educational gap for the working population due to flexible class schedules (Cobb, 2011; Mancini, Ashwill & Cipher, 2015). In a study by Mancini et al. (2015), a bachelor of science in nursing program (RN-BSN) had ten times as many online students (3470) compared to on campus students (332) signaling a high preference for online courses for nurses in the working population. Online, nursing students were significantly older than on-campus students by about 5 years (39.48 vs. 34.97). Both online and on-campus nursing programs had similar educational outcomes with a similar percentage of students who failed or dropped out from the programs (Mancini et al., 2015). However, most studies (reviewed in Bawa, 2016) report higher dropout rates for online programs compared to on-campus programs, with Smith (2010) reporting dropout rates of between 40%–80% for online courses. Faruk and Giffin (2014) reported lower persistence (38%), lower average GPA (2.65), and 70% course completion for credit in online courses compared to 62% persistence, 2.8 average GPA, and 82% receiving course credit in face-to-face courses taught by the same instructor.

Student acceptance of fully online programs and individual online courses has increased from the last decade. According to the Sloan Consortium for Online Learning Report (2011), about 32% of college students took at least one online course, a total of 6.7 million students (Seaman & Allen, 2013).