


# 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

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