



## **Exploring the Pandemic’s Impacts on Latinx Students’ Learning**

Michael Hendricks, Jordan A. Arellanes, and Chang Su-Russell  
*Illinois State University, USA*  
Nur E Jannat Moon  
*University of Connecticut, USA*  
Shania Vasquez  
*Illinois State University, USA*

### **ABSTRACT**

*Through inductive thematic analysis of focus group data conducted during the Spring 2020, Fall 2020, and Spring 2021 semesters within courses focused on the Latinx community, this study illustrates the challenging impacts of COVID-19 and online learning on Latinx students at a predominately White institution during the pandemic. It underscores their concerns regarding access to essential educational resources, especially online learning tools, mental health support, and building connections with peers and the campus community. These findings highlight the importance of understanding the Latinx student experience to inform educational policies and pedagogical practices, particularly in the context of post-pandemic online and remote learning, aiming to address their unique challenges effectively.*

**Keywords:** Latinx college students, COVID-19, online and remote learning, mental health

## INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on Latinx students' experiences at a predominately white institution (PWI) during the online and remote learning semesters of the COVID-19 pandemic. To be inclusive and remain gender-neutral, we utilize Latinx because our students and research participants identified as Latina, Latino, and Latinx. Individuals who identify as Latinx are the second largest ethnic-racial group in the U.S. and comprise about 18% of the population (Rodriguez, 2021b), with predictions suggesting that this number will grow to 29% by 2060 (Colby & Ortman, 2015). Additionally, Loveland (2018) indicates that Latinx students will comprise one-fifth of all college students in the U.S. by 2025.

However, studies also show that Latinx students often face social and educational barriers at college that lead to lower student engagement (Green & Wright, 2017). This makes them less likely to receive their bachelor's degree than their peers in other ethnic-racial groups (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006). For instance, 35% of Latinx students withdraw from college six years after starting their university studies without earning a degree, compared to 27% of White students (Loveland, 2018). As such, degree attainment is more complex, especially when institutional agents make it harder for Latinx students to succeed (Bensimon et al., 2019).

With the changing demographics in the U.S., higher education institutions must have recruitment, enrollment, retention, and graduation strategies that address this population shift and the challenges Latinx students face. In this paper, we are interested in giving Latinx students a voice to express the additional barriers they faced during the pandemic semesters of online and remote learning. This qualitative project includes forty-seven participants in eight focus groups conducted in five of our online courses during the Spring 2020, Fall 2020, and Spring 2021 semesters. Based on an inductive thematic analysis, our focus group data confirm the preliminary research on the effects the pandemic and online and remote learning had on Latinx students' educational and learning outcomes. Latinx students faced increased challenges contributing to and exacerbating their existing obstacles in their academic pursuits. Specifically, Latinx students expressed serious concerns over available educational resources, mental health challenges, and increased disadvantages during the pandemic semesters, negatively affecting their learning and academic success.

Universities cannot expect students to become experts in what resources are available at the college to help them succeed. According to Romo and colleagues (2020), student support services increase optimism for degree attainment and impact a student's sense of belonging, leading to higher

GPA, finding additional support, and increasing persistence (Tovar, 2015). However, we also cannot expect higher education institutions to fully comprehend the barriers students face without asking students themselves. As such, evidence from this study can be utilized to inform educational policy and pedagogical considerations within higher education as we move out of the pandemic. Understanding the Latinx student experience during the remote learning period of the pandemic can help identify their unique challenges and assist faculty, staff, and administrators at colleges and universities to offer the support these students need to achieve.

## **BACKGROUND**

In March 2020, the U.S. experienced the onset of lockdown measures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. As cases surged across the country, federal, state, and local governments implemented various restrictions and guidelines to curb the transmission of the virus and protect public health. These measures included stay-at-home orders, closure of non-essential businesses, limitations on gatherings, and the promotion of social distancing and mask-wearing (Mervosh et al., 2020; Bosman et al., 2020). The initial lockdowns were influenced by recommendations from health experts and organizations like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (Moreland et al., 2020; CDC, 2023) and the World Health Organization (WHO) (WHO, 2023), aiming to slow the spread of the virus and alleviate the strain on healthcare systems. The restrictions had far-reaching effects on the economy, education, travel, and daily life, leading to significant disruptions and adjustments for millions of Americans (Pew Research Center, 2021).

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Spring 2020, higher education institutions in the U.S. implemented various measures to ensure the safety of students, faculty, and staff while maintaining educational continuity (Green, 2020). As the virus spread rapidly, many universities and colleges transitioned from in-person instruction to remote learning (Hess, 2020; Hubler & Hartocollis, 2020; Levenson et al., 2020). This involved developing and deploying online learning platforms and tools and adapting curriculum and assessments for virtual delivery (Gallagher & Palmer, 2020; Gillis & Krull, 2020; Lemay et al., 2021). The earliest phase of this shift shows that most faculty relied on email, synchronous video technologies, and institutional Learning Management Systems to engage students online (Johnson et al., 2021, p: 31). For example, 80% of faculty members from 672 U.S. institutions reported using synchronous teaching methods with various videoconferencing tools, whereas 65% reported using asynchronous mediums (Johnson et al., 2020). As a result, 84% of students reported having some or

all classes moved to an online format (Cameron et al., 2021). The cumulative number of undergraduate students enrolled in at least one distanced education course increased drastically from 6 million in the pre-pandemic Fall of 2019 to 11.8 million in 2020 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022).

The Fall 2020 semester in higher education was characterized by a mix of in-person, hybrid, and remote learning formats as institutions grappled with the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic (The Economist, 2020). Many colleges and universities implemented numerous safety measures, such as reduced class sizes, physical distancing protocols, mandatory mask-wearing, and enhanced cleaning procedures for on-campus instruction (Leidner et al., 2021; Fox et al., 2021). These adjustments aimed to balance providing a safe learning environment and ensuring educational stability (Hartocollis, 2020). However, many courses were delivered remotely or through hybrid models that combined online and in-person components. Given the variety of teaching modalities, many faculty reported using completely new teaching methods and changing student assessments, such as modifying exam formats or reducing the number of assignments. One study reported that 17% of faculty changed readings, 48% reduced the amount of work, and 32% lowered expectations about the quality of student work (Johnson et al., 2021). This indicates a general disruption to the learning environment, in addition to the challenges students had already faced, like access to technology, staying engaged, and social connections in the absence of traditional campus experiences.

The COVID-19 pandemic continued to impact higher education during the Spring 2021 semester, as the emergence of highly transmissible new variants compelled many institutions to maintain a mix of in-person, hybrid, and remote learning modalities (Lee, 2021). While some colleges and universities gradually increased the number of in-person classes and reopened certain facilities, others opted to continue with predominantly online instruction due to public health concerns (Korn & Abbot, 2020). Safety measures such as physical distancing, mask-wearing, and enhanced sanitation practices remained in place for on-campus activities. Many institutions also focused on expanding their technological infrastructure, providing support services for remote learning, and addressing the digital divide among students (U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Researchers have documented several critical factors that have affected Latinx student success while at college. For example, Latinx students often face barriers, such as unawareness of the college process, feeling

unprepared academically, experiencing displacement because of their ethnic-racial identity, and lacking access to social networks and educational resources (Rodriguez et al., 2021b; Dueñas & Gloria, 2020; Clayton et al., 2019; Sánchez-Connally, 2018; Rios-Ellis et al., 2015). Moreover, these students are more likely to come from low-income backgrounds, to be first-generation students, have lower high school GPAs, and have less access to rigorous coursework, making it more difficult to develop strong study skills and tools for balancing academic, family, and work obligations (Lincoln, 2023; Vega, 2016). Even with all the challenges Latinx students faced on campus before COVID, research also demonstrates that these students still performed better in a face-to-face classroom environment compared to an online course (Figlio et al., 2013), boding poorly for them during the online and remote learning period of the pandemic.

The challenges Latinx college students faced before the pandemic were further exacerbated during the global health crisis. COVID and the shift to online courses and remote learning options introduced new obstacles and increased disparities. A digital divide existed before the pandemic, particularly among students of color and lower socioeconomic status (Gonzales et al., 2020; Reisdorf et al., 2020). However, as online learning became the default during the pandemic, the abrupt adoption of various digital tools in higher educational institutions further highlighted socioeconomic and educational inequalities in the U.S. (Fortuna et al., 2020).

Synchronous instruction with videoconferencing tools became difficult as students had unequal access to the internet, technological devices, and dedicated and separate workspaces (Flaherty, 2020). For instance, 54% of Latinx college students expressed concerns about paying for internet services. In contrast, 36% of Black and 21% of White users had similar worries (Vogels et al., 2020). They also faced more difficulties “attending online classes mostly due to childcare responsibilities, lack of internet, being sick, or stressed” (Rodríguez-Planas, 2020, p. 17). Moreover, Gallaga (2020) notes that 65% of Latinx students during the pandemic had trouble meeting their basic food and housing needs, as they faced significantly higher financial uncertainties (Rodriguez et al., 2021a; Molock & Parchem, 2020; Trammell et al., 2021; Reyes-Portillo, 2022), likely leading to increased stress and anxiety making it difficult to focus on school (Rodríguez-Planas, 2021).

Scholars have also approached the effects of the online and remote learning period forced upon students from a mental health perspective. For instance, the rapid shift to online learning platforms increased students’ mental health distress (Hu et al., 2022), decreased their coping abilities (Clabaugh et al., 2021), and reduced their overall learning quality (Hu et al.,

2022). These findings are consistent with other research reporting a decline in the emotional well-being of college students (Reyes-Portillo et al., 2022; Son et al., 2020). Lee and colleagues (2021) note that many students reported having amplified levels of anxiety and depression. In particular, female, nonwhite, and first-generation college students experienced a lack of motivation due to increased pressures and distractions from the transition (Gillis & Krull, 2020). As a result, these adverse outcomes led students to delay graduation and enrollment (Aucejo et al., 2020; Hamann et al., 2021). In fact, Hispanic-serving institutions experienced a significant decline in student enrollment (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). For example, Bulman and Fairlie (2022) reported that the enrollment rate of Latinx students in the California community college system declined by 18%, which is significant given that 72% of Latinx high school students enroll in California's community colleges (Colmenares, 2022).

Furthermore, Hill and Artiga (2022) discuss that people of color, including Latinx individuals, faced higher rates of COVID-19 infection and death compared to White individuals when age differences across racial and ethnic groups are considered. While these disparities fluctuated during the pandemic, people of color were disproportionately affected by surges caused by new variants. The elevated infection rates among people of color likely resulted from increased exposure risks related to their employment (such as having jobs that cannot be done remotely), living situations, transportation, residing in larger households, and relying on public transportation. These groups have consistently experienced higher age-adjusted death rates during resurgence periods, reflecting disparities across all age groups and an older White population. The differences in COVID-19 infection and death rates among racial and ethnic minority groups can amplify college students' challenges, affecting their (mental) health, academic progress, and overall well-being.

In summary, before the pandemic, Latinx students had already grappled with systemic barriers and educational disparities, such as limited financial and educational resources and underrepresentation in higher education. However, the additional challenges associated with the pandemic and the shift to online and remote education (e.g., isolation, mental and physical health problems, unreliable internet connectivity, lack of suitable study environments, and limited technological proficiency) likely intensified these issues, potentially hindering Latinx students' abilities to achieve their educational goals. As we navigate the complexities as we move out of the pandemic, educational institutions must acknowledge and address these inequalities and compounded challenges, ensuring that Latinx students have

equitable opportunities and receive the necessary support while pursuing their degrees.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

The University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB 2019-554) approved this study. The data from this study were obtained from a larger ongoing mixed-methods project that assesses students’ experiences related to IDEA principles at the start and conclusion of the semester within the authors’ courses (Arellanes & Hendricks, 2022; Arellanes, Hendricks, Su-Russell, 2024). We base these principles on our university’s IDEA values that affirm and encourage “community and a respect for differences . . . [that foster] an inclusive environment characterized by cultural understanding and engagement, ethical behavior, and a commitment to social justice” (Illinois State University, 2024b, “Diversity and Inclusion” section). For this study, we rely on eight focus groups conducted in five of our courses from Spring 2020 to Spring 2021 at a large state university in a peri-urban, corporate-focused county in the U.S. Midwest.

### **Background of the University and Courses**

As of the Fall 2023 semester, the predominately White public four-year university had 20,989 students enrolled, including 2,539 graduate students. About 28.6% of the entire student body comes from a traditionally underrepresented group. This rate has been on the rise across the U.S. in recent years. For example, data from Common App shows a 32% surge in applicants from underrepresented minority backgrounds from 2019 to 2020 (Doherty & Pandey, 2022). Underrepresented students at our university identified with the following ethnic-racial groups: Hispanic (12.1%), Black or African American (10.1%), two or more selections excluding Hispanic (3.8%), Asian (2.6%), and American Indian/Alaskan Native (0.1%) (Illinois State University, 2024a).

Two of the study’s authors are actively involved in teaching courses that aim to support the Latinx community in a broad sense. The authors integrated the university’s IDEA principles into these classes, emphasizing the importance of fostering a sense of community and respecting differences. These values promote an inclusive atmosphere characterized by cultural understanding, ethical conduct, and a commitment to social justice (Illinois State University, 2024b, “Diversity and Inclusion” section). We incorporated these principles into our course materials, activities, assignments, and mentoring to provide students with increased opportunities and connections, thereby enhancing their sense of belonging and representation. The study utilized the following courses: Latino Psychology, Psychology Senior

Seminar, Latin American Politics, and Central American Politics. Participants in this study took these courses.

Latino Psychology is a 3-credit hour course for third and fourth-year students, and Psychology Senior Seminar is a 3-credit hour capstone course for fourth-year students. The primary goals of these two courses are to introduce students to research focusing on culture, ethnicity, gender, etc. Specifically, students examine current research on the psychological functioning of Latinx individuals in the U.S. In doing so, they become familiar with how psychologists (and other social scientists) have investigated the behavior of the Latinx population (e.g., cultural identities, belief systems, language, mental health, etc.) and the contexts of their behavior (e.g., gender, families, communities, religion, school, media, etc.).

Latin American Politics is a 3-credit hour class for second to fourth-year students that familiarizes them with Latin America's politics, economics, cultures, and societies. The course focuses on political and economic development, emphasizing the recent democratization wave and the implementation of market policies across the region. Students explore themes (e.g., democratization, political-economic models, political movements, immigration, repressive regimes, etc.) relevant to the region by focusing on case studies of one or two countries. They explore academic literature, current events, and documentaries to facilitate meaningful discussions. Students relate the theories they learn to real-life examples throughout Latin America.

Central American Politics is a 3-credit hour class for third to fourth-year students that focuses on the five countries of Central America—Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica, as well as examines Panama and Belize. Students examine the broader historical trends and questions surrounding U.S. involvement and intervention in the region and how this has, directly and indirectly, affected Central American countries and their peoples. In particular, students explore Central America's profound economic, political, and social changes through themes such as revolutions, civil wars, peacebuilding and transitional justice, political inclusion and participation, crime, violence, and migration.

### **Focus Group Procedures and Participants**

Within each class, students could join two types of focus groups—one involved students who self-identified as Latinx, and the other engaged students who did not. In total, we conducted eight focus groups in five of our courses. We distinguished separate groups because all classes, whether political science or psychology-related, focused on supporting the Latinx community. Latinx students may have unique experiences within these classes, especially during the pandemic's remote and online learning aspects,



than those who do not identify as Latinx. We were interested in learning about these different experiences for this paper. As such, by providing Latinx students with separate focus groups, we gathered evidence highlighting their specific and unique challenges.

Trained graduate student research facilitators conducted the focus groups. Because of the challenges of COVID-19, focus groups occurred via Zoom. We ensured that the facilitators ethnically matched the participants to aid in the comfort and openness of all focus groups. Ethnic matching means students and facilitators self-identify similarly as Latinx or non-Latinx in that focus group (Easton-Brooks, 2019). The facilitators informed student participants that the study aimed to learn about the best teaching practices within the course and their experiences concerning available resources that aid their success and sense of belonging within the campus community. Before moving forward with obtaining students' informed consent, the facilitators also ensured students that 1) participation was voluntary, 2) the study would not affect their course grade, 3) their instructor would not attend the focus group sessions, 4) all data would be deidentified, and 5) any data analysis would occur after the semester ended and grades were finalized. Following each focus group, facilitators and the research staff debriefed and shared interview reflections. We used keynotes from these debriefings to inform our data analysis.

Upon completing the focus group, participants completed a short demographic survey using an anonymous Qualtrics link. We analyzed these data in SPSS. Twenty-four Latinx and twenty-three non-Latinx students completed the study for a total of forty-seven undergraduate participants. Additional participant details can be found in Table 1 below.

### **Data Analysis**

Using thematic analysis, we analyzed the focus group transcriptions in MAXQDA20 after each semester ended. Thematic analysis is a widely used and robust systematic qualitative data analysis method focused on identifying patterns across data (Nowell et al., 2017). Following Boyatzis's (1998) inductive qualitative analysis procedure, we analyzed each focus group independently. Researchers then met to further the coding system and develop preliminary themes. After discussing these themes, the researchers recorded the data to focus on the initial findings. We repeated this process until we had a consensus that alleviated all discrepancies within the data and coding scheme. Braun and Clarke's (2006) model informed the construction and application of thematic analysis.

As the two authors instructed the courses, bias, and validity were potentially problematic to our positionality (Holmes, 2020). Positionality

suggests that our social, historical, and political setting affects our orientations and that we are not isolated from the social processes we research (Malterud, 2001). As Foote and Gau Bartell (2011, p. 46) note, “[t]he positionality that researchers bring to their work, and the personal experiences through which positionality is shaped, may influence what researchers may bring to research encounters, their choice of processes, and their interpretation of outcomes.” Each author in this study acknowledges their privilege, strives to be aware of their biases, and recognizes that their experiences and opinions may impact their coding and analysis of the data. As such, it is crucial to mention our positionality.

The political science instructor/co-author identifies as a White cisgender male. He is fluent in Spanish, has traveled extensively throughout Latin America for service and leisure, and has lived and worked as a Peace Corps Volunteer in the region. His primary political science research focuses on Latin America, principally related to resource-extractive community-led protests. The psychology instructor/co-author also identifies as a White cisgender male with some Hispanic background. One of his primary foci in research is on the educational attainment of Latino families. Both instructors have volunteered and conducted advocacy work within the Latinx community. The third co-author identifies as a Chinese cisgender female. Her research focuses on the influence of quality caregiving on young children’s socioemotional well-being and the impact of contextual factors (race, culture, socioeconomic status, etc.) on caregiving. The fourth co-author identifies as a Bangladeshi cisgender female. Her research interests include the role of institutions in democracy, the political economy of South Asian regions, and socio-political dynamics in hybrid regimes. The fifth author is a Hispanic

**Table 1:**  
*Focus Group Demographics*

	Latinx Focus Group				Non-Latinx Focus Group			
	N	%	Range	Mean	N	%	Range	Mean
Ethnicity								
Latino or Latina	22	91.7			0			
Latinx	2	8.3			0			
Non-Hispanic White	0				18	78.3		
African American	0				1	4.3		
Asian American	0				1	4.3		
Multi-racial	0				3	13.1		
Age			19-27	22			18-26	22
Gender								
Male	8	33.3			10	45.5		
Female	16	66.7			12	54.5		
Total Family Income <sup>a</sup>			20K-100K+	40K-50K			30K-100K+	90K-100K
U.S. Generation								
1 <sup>st</sup> Generation	0				2	8.7		
2 <sup>nd</sup> Generation	19	79.2			2	8.7		
3 <sup>rd</sup> Generation	2	8.7			3	13.0		
3+ Generation	1	4.3			16	69.6		
First-generation college student <sup>b</sup>	13	54.59			6	26.1		
College Cumulative GPA			2.2-3.8	2.9			2.5-4.0	3.3

Note. <sup>a</sup>collected in \$10k increments ranging from \$0 to 100K+. <sup>b</sup> Reference group = Yes.

cisgender female who researches expressive arts therapy, severe mental illness, and intersectionality. The third and fourth authors have limited experience working with the Latinx community. These authors provided an outside perspective that increased the validity of our findings, as they did not lead any of the classes and reviewed and coded the data separately.

To further increase the trustworthiness and validity of our study, eight undergraduate and graduate student researchers independently audited the data and the identified themes. These students had training in the basic principles of qualitative data analysis and completed a semester-long project where they coded data independently and collaborated on potential themes. They were not present for this project's data collection or the initial data analysis. We used their work to validate the themes present in the current study. First, we compared our results to theirs. Then, we shared this manuscript with them to ensure they could identify their results within it. Their analysis closely aligned with our results, adding to this study's validity. Finally, adding to this validity, resources from this study, including course syllabi, products from the semester-long project, focus group questions, and other resources, are publicly available through OSF Materials (Arellanes & Hendricks, 2021).

## **RESULTS**

Based on our data-driven inductive thematic analysis, we present three themes. Within the first theme, "Lack of Adequate (Online) Learning Resources," we demonstrate how the remote learning period during the pandemic made Latinx students more aware of their preexisting learning disadvantages. This theme also highlights that they had less access to adequate online learning resources, limiting their ability in their courses. In the second theme, "The Inability to Make Meaningful Connections," we document that remote learning further isolated Latinx students, magnifying their already limited sense of belonging to the campus community. This inhibited their capacity to learn and find educational resources and organizations that could help them succeed academically. In the third theme, "Approaching Mental Health Issues," we reveal that the transition to online learning during the pandemic adversely affected students' mental health, affecting their academic focus and engagement. Students emphasized the need for accessible and culturally sensitive mental health resources remotely and on campuses, with a desire for designated spaces for quick support and emergency therapy sessions. Students acknowledged our efforts to accommodate their mental health challenges during the pandemic, particularly appreciating engaging and respectful teaching approaches.

Below, we describe the results of these themes from Latinx and non-Latinx student participants enrolled in our Latinx-community-focused courses. Although our results include non-Latinx student participant data, the scope of this paper focuses on Latinx student experiences during the pandemic semesters. As such, we frame our findings in this perspective.

### **Lack of Adequate (Online) Learning Resources**

Insights derived from Latinx students shed light on the socio-economic disparities and the resulting educational disadvantages they have faced. Participants highlighted the inequitable distribution of advantages in life, exemplified by the contrast between individuals growing up in the Southside of Chicago or different environments compared to those with access to more resources. The ramifications of such disparities become evident when considering these students' academic journey. The lack of equivalent educational opportunities disadvantages them, hindering their ability to keep pace with their peers in the (virtual) classroom. Participants expressed frustration at the seemingly unsympathetic stance of some professors, who fail to acknowledge the additional support and resources required by students facing such challenges. The need for more assistance and resources to level the playing field is underscored, as participants contend that expecting these students to catch up without considering their unique circumstances is unrealistic and perpetuates educational inequalities. Addressing these concerns is imperative for fostering an inclusive learning environment that provides every student with equal opportunities for academic success. To illustrate, one Latinx student stated:

*You cannot expect someone who, I don't know, grew up in the Southside of Chicago or in a different environment to have the same level of education as someone with advantages in life. And it kind of sucks because it puts that person at a disadvantage. Like how do you expect them to be in the classroom and just be leveled up with everyone else? They're not because they need more help. They need more resources. And I think oftentimes professors don't consider that. They just expect us to catch up.*

Furthermore, Latinx students provided unique perspectives on navigating their academic landscape during the pandemic. The lack of equitable access to essential resources emerged as a prevalent concern, with students expressing difficulty accommodating their circumstances due to

resource limitations. The issue of unreliable internet connectivity is particularly highlighted, with interruptions during crucial academic engagements, such as presentations, resulting in a sense of helplessness and the need to adapt to unforeseen disruptions. For instance, one Latinx student said:

*I feel like not all of us are at a place where we might have the resources because we're still accommodating because of the pandemic. Sometimes our Internet does not turn on. I had an issue where I was presenting a project, and then halfway through, my Internet went off, and I couldn't get back on. So I just had to accommodate to that.*

Moreover, Latinx students voiced their frustration at the lack of comprehensive guidance and support in utilizing online tools, exemplified by the challenges faced in effectively understanding and utilizing platforms like Zoom. This disparity between virtual and in-person learning experiences is further underscored as students lament the diminished personal connection in online settings. One Latinx student said,

*I had nobody ever explain any of these resources. No one ever explained Zoom to me. There is no personal connection online compared to when we're in class, and I often experienced internet issues. There was even one time that I didn't have my main laptop, and my backup computer didn't have a working charger.*

Based on these issues, participants preferred in-person classroom settings, attributing their success and enhanced understanding of course material to their physical presence in the classroom. The transition to online learning during the pandemic showed the inability to replicate the same energy and engagement experienced in face-to-face interactions. As one Latinx student mentioned,

*I think that I personally thrive the most in classroom environments, and I've really been able to understand that and like confidently state that being forced to take five courses online and recognize that my energy really does come from the classroom and I can't replicate it online.*

Students emphasized the significance of forming meaningful connections with peers in their in-person coursework. These connections served as vital support systems, fostering a sense of community and camaraderie. Students who found study partners or collaborators through such connections highlighted the lasting impact on their academic journey as these relationships endured beyond the confines of the classroom. Notably, the presence of one or two reliable individuals in each class, with whom students could exchange reminders or seek assistance, was particularly cherished by those who felt reserved or shy in physical and virtual classroom environments. Students believed such peer-to-peer support bolstered academic success and cultivated a stronger sense of belonging on campus for Latinx students.

### **The Inability to Make Meaningful Connections**

Latinx students also emphasized the profound impact of campus proximity on their social engagement and involvement in university activities. Participants longed for the potential connections they could have forged if they were physically on campus, fostering a greater sense of belonging and participation in various groups. For example, one Latinx student said, “*I know people involved in different groups on campus, and I think that brings a little bit more of a connection, especially since I’m at home now.*” To further illustrate, a different Latinx student stated:

*From making music with others to having study buddies from my classes, I will always have a better connection in-person. You start to notice the people you have classes with, see them around campus, and want to talk to them. Being involved with different groups on campus brings more of a connection.*

The distance from campus, in some cases, hindered active involvement, as students discovered intriguing groups they wished to join but could not feasibly participate in due to their remote location. For instance, another Latinx student mentioned,

*If I was on campus, I feel like I would have known more people, and I feel like I would be involved more on campus, like being at home, I’ve found out more about different groups that I want to be a part of, but I can’t really participate in them because I’m two hours away from the school.*

To combat being away from campus, courses like the ones in this study were seen as a way to make friends and learn about meaningful topics for the students. Having courses related to the Latinx community was seen as a resource and a potential location to make connections even if students were not physically in the same place. For example, a Latinx student shared,

*The classroom environment is very comfortable. It is our safe space to have discussions about tough topics. Honestly, this is the first class that I've felt the most comfortable sharing in that way; I really did appreciate that. That type of learning environment is super important... I feel lucky to be at a university that offers classes like this.*

Additionally, the significance of social circles in accessing information about available resources became apparent, with students acknowledging that awareness of such resources often came through word-of-mouth or during times of need. One Latinx student said, “Over time, I learned more about them because of other people, because of the groups that I’m involved in, or because I have friends that are involved in groups, and they tell me about them.” However, Latinx students highlighted the challenge of resource accessibility, where despite the university offering numerous resources, students remained largely unaware of their existence and potential benefits. For instance, a Latinx student suggested that:

*You have to find resources on your own because something happened that you have to look for them. It could be the most minor thing ever, like talking to someone about a resume, or it could be about something that happened to you with another person, things like that. There are different levels of situations. And I think most people don’t look for a resource until they need it.*

Participants emphasized the learn-as-you-go nature of discovering resources through personal experiences or when faced with specific situations, suggesting that proactive dissemination of information about available resources is crucial for effective utilization. To illustrate, a Latinx student acknowledged,

*The university offers many resources, but as I think [Maria] mentioned, they’re kept away from students. Many of us are unaware*

*that we're even paying for this. And not even aware that this is where your funds are going and that you can use these resources.*

This lack of awareness raises questions about transparency and how students can fully utilize the services they financially support. As one Latinx student suggested, *"I don't know how to find these things. I do not know what the university offers. How can I search for something if I don't know it exists?"* When specific resources were available that they knew, students detailed that they were still only available during times in which they had work or class. One Latinx student explained, *"Some students, like me, have other jobs and don't have much time to go to office hours, tutoring, or workshops because bills come first before my academics."* Other Latinx students emphasized that their lives outside their academic careers, especially during the pandemic, were more essential. For example, one non-Latinx student noted, *"What's written in the syllabus is not more important than what's going on in their life."*

### **Approaching Mental Health Issues**

As one can ascertain from the last statement, fears of the pandemic and the transition to online learning brought forth new and additional challenges, taking a toll on students' mental health. For example, one Latinx student said, *"I am currently doing therapy because of all the stress I face."* Grappling with the realities of these difficult situations associated with the transition to remote learning during the pandemic took an extreme toll on students' mental health, adversely affecting their academic focus and engagement.

Participants highlighted the pressing need for universities to offer accessible and culturally sensitive mental health resources for students. They expressed a desire for designated spaces where they could quickly seek support and talk to someone if needed, including emergency therapy sessions, which many students did not know existed. A non-Latinx student desired a place *"where you could just talk to somebody if needed. Or, I know you can have an emergency therapy session, but I don't think anybody knows that. I wish more people knew they had super easy access to mental health services."*

Students acknowledged the existing Counseling Center as a crucial resource; however, its capacity limitations, evidenced by waiting lists and overcrowding, posed challenges for students seeking timely assistance. Notably, students identified the value of mental health services run and operated by members of their respective ethnic communities, highlighting the potential benefits of culturally relevant care. To address this, students



emphasized the importance of hiring more professionals. A Latinx participant stated,

*Many people I know have tried to reach out to the Counseling Center, and there's either been a waiting list, or it's just too crowded, to where they cannot get to all the individuals. So, I think an emphasis on hiring more individuals is also needed, and students are reaching out for this as something that the institution should focus on.*

The focus groups made it clear that students' personal struggles and mental health issues during this period impacted their academic success, leading to calls for increased understanding and support, especially from their professors. Some participants felt that many professors did not understand what it meant to be a student living during the pandemic. Students shared that they recognized that faculty were going through tremendous change as well, but students often felt confused or lost during this period. This led to increased stress and thoughts of dropping out. To remedy this, students sought faculty who would break down the traditional roles of faculty and student and instead think of the student as a person first, then as a student. A non-Latinx student shared,

*The faculty has to find ways to bring everybody together. We don't always want to think about schoolwork. If you have us interact outside of class and get to know each other on a different personal level, that will help bring students together. If students feel like they have a family, a connection, that will keep them [in college]. We're lonely, and that leads to depression, but if we can make connections to people that we're comfortable with, that will help. It doesn't have to be people of your same culture; it can be anybody.*

There is a notable acknowledgment of our efforts in accommodating our students' challenges, even when faced with situations beyond our control. Our dedication to accommodating students' needs was also acknowledged, exemplified by our efforts to support individual learning goals. According to data gathered from the focus groups, participants lauded us for our engaging and respectful teaching approaches. Students felt we cultivated a comfortable and safe discussion environment, particularly when addressing challenging topics. This conducive atmosphere fostered a sense of openness. It encouraged students to share their thoughts and experiences freely, making it the first remote class in which they felt comfortable during the pandemic. As

one Latinx participant claimed: *“Incorporating group activities, particularly discussions, emerged as a significant benefit, enabling students to express their cultural perspectives and share their learnings in a non-judgmental space.”* The positive impact of this approach on student engagement was evident, as all group members actively participated, contributing to a rich and inclusive learning experience.

Overall, students suggested that our commitment to creating a safe and supportive learning environment, coupled with our effective teaching methods, such as group activities, exemplified our dedication to helping students succeed and fostering a sense of community within the virtual classroom. To illustrate, one Latinx student said:

*Group activities, like discussions, are a huge benefit because they allow people like myself to have the ability to speak about our cultural upbringing, perceptions, and what we’re learning in the class. Everyone in my group attended, participated, and responded. It was a safe environment for everyone to talk with no right or wrong answers.*

Participants appreciated our empathetic and understanding demeanor, even when we could not connect to every aspect of their cultural backgrounds. As one Latinx student noted, *“Just because he can’t fully relate, that doesn’t mean he’s not empathetic, understanding, or trying as hard as he can to make people feel safe about sharing their lives.”* Students shared that when we communicated our experiences, such as working in the Peace Corps, knowing how to speak Spanish, or discussing our community-based research within Latinx communities, it assisted students in overcoming their expectations that we should ethnically match with the course materials.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

The findings of our study, based on a data-driven inductive thematic analysis, illuminate critical issues Latinx students faced during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly during remote learning. Our research underscores the existing socioeconomic inequalities that Latinx students grapple with and how these disparities were exacerbated during the pandemic. The contrast between those growing up in disadvantaged areas and those with access to more resources was stark. Latinx students experienced challenges from the lack of equivalent educational opportunities, resulting in difficulties keeping pace with their peers in the virtual classroom. Notably, the frustration voiced by students was directed not only at the challenges themselves but also at the

perceived lack of understanding and support from some professors. This theme illustrates the urgent need for higher education institutions to address systemic inequalities in access to educational resources. To foster an inclusive and equitable learning environment, it is imperative to acknowledge students' diverse backgrounds and unique challenges. Faculty and administrators should consider providing additional support and resources to level the playing field. This could involve targeted assistance programs, improved access to technology and reliable internet, and faculty development initiatives to enhance online teaching methods.

Our results also emphasize the profound impact of physical campus proximity on students' social engagement and involvement in university activities. Latinx students longed for the connections and sense of belonging that physical presence on campus facilitates. The distance from campus hindered their ability to actively engage in groups and organizations, limiting their opportunities for meaningful connections and involvement. As research documents, students not connected to the campus are more likely to have lower GPAs, student engagement levels, graduation rates, and academic success (Billingsley & Hurd, 2019; Burke, 2019; Green & Wright, 2017; Aguinaga & Gloria, 2015; Crisp et al., 2015). Our findings highlight the importance of campus life and co-curricular activities in the overall college experience. It demonstrates the need for institutions to develop creative solutions to engage remote students actively. Universities can explore virtual alternatives to on-campus activities, ensuring students can access resources, join clubs, and connect with peers regardless of physical location. Additionally, fostering a sense of community among remote students should be a priority, as it contributes to their overall well-being and academic success.

The challenges posed by the transition to online learning during the pandemic extended beyond academics to students' mental health. Latinx students reported increased stress and anxiety, with some seeking therapy to cope with the added pressures. They emphasized the necessity for accessible and culturally sensitive mental health resources on campuses, including designated spaces for quick support and emergency therapy sessions. This theme underlines the critical importance of mental health support in higher education, particularly during times of crisis. Universities must invest in expanding mental health services and resources, addressing capacity constraints, and ensuring that students are aware of available support. Culturally relevant and remote mental health care can play a pivotal role in addressing the unique needs of diverse student populations. Moreover, the role of instructors in creating a supportive learning environment cannot be

understated. Our study shows that engaging and respectful teaching approaches can positively impact students' mental well-being.

However, before we conclude, we must acknowledge several limitations in interpreting the findings of this study. Firstly, the study's participant pool consisted solely of students who volunteered at one Midwestern university, which may not be representative of Latinx college students at other institutions. Furthermore, the research was conducted within the context of courses specifically designed to support the Latinx community, implying that participants likely possessed distinct intrinsic motivations related to this community support. Consequently, the generalizability of our study's findings to different student populations and institutions may be limited. Secondly, while our emphasis allowed for a nuanced examination of the experiences of Latinx students, it also implies that the recommendations and insights generated from this research may not be directly applicable to other ethno-racial groups or students from various marginalized backgrounds who may face distinct challenges and require tailored support mechanisms. These limitations warrant careful consideration when extrapolating the implications of our findings to broader student demographics and educational contexts.

Even with these limitations, we offer valuable insights into the pandemic experiences of Latinx students that have broader implications for higher education institutions. This paper highlights the need for systemic changes in how universities approach online learning, resource allocation, and mental health support. By addressing the issues identified, institutions can strive to establish more equitable, inclusive, and supportive learning environments that benefit all students, regardless of their backgrounds or circumstances. These insights illuminate the critical importance of prioritizing mental health services, promoting faculty diversity, and implementing engaging teaching strategies, especially in online courses. To remain responsive to student needs and foster an inclusive and effective learning environment, U.S. higher education institutions must take proactive steps to address these insights, ultimately aligning institutional practices with student voices and providing the necessary support to navigate academic and personal challenges effectively.

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**MICHAEL HENDRICKS**, PhD, is an Assistant Professor of Political Science in the Department of Politics and Government at Illinois State University. His primary

research interests lie in the areas of inclusion, diversity, equity, and access for university students in marginalized groups. Email: [mshend1@ilstu.edu](mailto:mshend1@ilstu.edu)

**JORDAN A. ARELLANES** is an Assistant Professor of Developmental Psychology at Illinois State University. His research focuses on the inclusion of Latino students into the educational system and fatherhood. He is the Chair-Elect of Family Policy for the National Council on Family Relations. He can be reached at [jaarell@ilstu.edu](mailto:jaarell@ilstu.edu).

**CHANG SU-RUSSELL** (Ph.D. CFLE) is an Associate Professor and the Program Coordinator of Human Development and Family Science in the Department of Family and Consumer Sciences at Illinois State University. Currently, she is the Chair of Asian/Asian American Families focus group and the Communication Specialist at the Racial and Ethnic Diversity in Families section at her professional organization-National Council on Family Relations (NCFR). She can be reached at [csuruss@ilstu.edu](mailto:csuruss@ilstu.edu).

**NUR E JANNAT MOON** is a PhD candidate in the Department of Political Science at the University of Connecticut. Email: [nmoon@uconn.edu](mailto:nmoon@uconn.edu)

**SHANIA L. VASQUEZ** is a dedicated therapist at Creative Healing Art Therapy, PLLC, with a Master's degree in Clinical-Counseling Psychology from Illinois State University. Email: [shaniacreativehealing@gmail.com](mailto:shaniacreativehealing@gmail.com)

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