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# **To Engage or Not Engage? Looking at the Barriers Behind Low Retention Rates of Racial/Ethnic Online Adult Learners**

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**Keywords:** adult education online; attrition rates and online racial/ethnic adult learners; adult learners and culturally relevant online education; distance education leadership and culturally relevant online learning environment

**Abstract:** Distance education leadership must be central to influencing organizational change due to the societal needs for educated adults that can contribute and thrive in a complex, technologically driven, pluralistic, team oriented global workforce society. This roundtable will examine the relationship between distance learning leadership and culturally relevant educational experiences in order to understand how leadership effectiveness and organizational change can be innovative in improving persistence of racial/ethnic adult online learners.

## **Distance Education Leadership and Culturally Relevant Online Education**

Even though higher education has invested substantial resources in online learning, major problems are associated with cultural and organizational changes while implementing teaching and learning for adult distance learners (Barak, 2012). Distance education leadership must be central to influencing organizational change due to the societal needs for educated adults that can contribute and thrive in a complex, technologically driven, pluralistic, team oriented workforce global society (Dowd, 2011). The research in this area, taken as a whole, reveals that issues of attrition rates of adult learners in online learning needs to be identified to determine what services and delivery methods higher education needs to provide for adult learners (Angelino, 2007). In *Changing Course: Ten Years of Tracking Online Education in the United States*, the results of the 2013 report reveals that approximately three quarters of academic leaders rate lower retention rates for online courses as an important or very important barrier to adult online learners (Allen, 2013). Dr. Vincent Tinto and Dr. Sylvia Hurtado tell us “that new conceptualizations should aim to gauge a student’s “sense of belonging” (Dowd, 2011, p. 18).

## **Online Learning Environment and Racial/Ethnic Adult Learners**

As reflected in the research on the importance of values and traditions outside of the dominant Eurocentric norm, values and traditions of racial/ethnic learners and educators are important in creating a learning environment that is shaped by the values and traditions of their cultural influences (Colin, 1998). This Afrocentric cultural value of collective formulation of work and responsibility will engage students as they develop and learn as online adults. A case in point is how these African centered values infused in the adult education process can allow adult learners to engage in the socio-cultural, cognitive and self-directed learning needed to persist in

their education. If we consider the points raised about cultural relevance with regard to adult learners (Colin, 1998; Guy, 1998, Hunn, 2004; Ross-Gordon, 1990), and we focus on the context of online learning experiences, then interest and identity are important factors for adult educator to consider.

Given the evidence that factors of engagement and cultural relevancy are not addressed in most research and studies of retention, it is important to discuss and delve into the questions of:

- How can distance education leadership promote a culturally relevant online learning environment for racial/ethnic adult learners?
- What are creative ideas for developing an online learning environment for engaging racial/ethnic adult learners?
- What adaptations can be made to structure an improved online learning environment for adults?

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