

**Family Science as a Pathway to Higher Education
Attainment for Rural, Latina/o Students:
Lessons from a Pilot Distance Degree Program**

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ABSTRACT. Latina/o students in rural communities face unique challenges in their efforts to access higher education opportunities that lead to a four-year college degree. We describe a pilot distance degree program in which a four-year research university in southern Arizona partnered with a rural community college to offer a Bachelor of Science degree in family studies and human development (FSHD) to place-bound students. This program enables students located near the community college to attend courses both on that campus and virtually at the partnering university. We address specific experiences and lessons learned in terms of the partnership required to maintain high academic standards, while being culturally responsive, and meeting the unique needs of these distance degree students.

Family Science as a Pathway to Higher Education Attainment for Rural, Latina/o Students: Lessons from a Pilot Distance Degree Program

Latina/o students in rural communities face a number of challenges accessing higher education opportunities that can lead to successful completion of a four-year college degree. These students may have opportunities to attain an associate's degree, but avenues for obtaining a bachelor's degree from a distance are typically limited. In this paper, we 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. We then describe a small pilot distance B.S. degree program in family studies and human development (FSHD) 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 four-year research university in southern Arizona and a rural community college located in an agricultural community near the border of Mexico.

Latina/o Higher Education Attainment: Issues & Challenges

According to recent statistics, the state of Arizona has the sixth largest Latina/o population in the United States (Excelencia in Education, 2012). Our use of the term Latina/o for purposes of this paper is based on the U.S. Census Bureau (2014a) definition which specifies that "Hispanics or Latina/os are those people who classified themselves in one of the specific Spanish, Hispanic, or Latina/o categories listed on the Census 2010 questionnaire – 'Mexican,' 'Puerto Rican,' or 'Cuban.' In Arizona, Latina/os comprise approximately 30% of the total population and 43% of the K-12 population; individuals of Mexican origin account for almost 26% of the state population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). An important challenge for higher education in the state of Arizona (and nationally) is to improve college completion for Latina/o college students.

The Higher Education Attainment Gap

Although Latina/o educational attainment has increased over the last ten years, the rate of college enrollment and completion among Latina/os continues to lag behind that of other groups.

According to 2013 statistics, only 22% of Latina/o adults earned an associate's degree or higher compared to 60% of Asians, 42% of Whites, and 31% of African Americans (Excelencia in Education, 2015). In Arizona, only 16% of Latina/o adults earned an associate's degree or higher, compared to 34% of all adults (Excelencia in Education, 2012). Latina/o students lag even further behind in attainment of a bachelor's or higher degree accounting for only 14% of those aged 25-29 who have earned a bachelor's degree or higher compared to 19% of African Americans, 39% of Whites and 53% of Asian-Americans (Maxwell, 2012). Among Latina/o groups, individuals of Mexican origin ages 25 and older account for only 9% of those who have completed a bachelor's degree or higher as compared to 13% of all Latina/os in that age group (Motel & Patten, 2012).

When Latina/o students do decide to pursue post-secondary education, community college is the most common pathway to higher education access (Kurlaender, 2006). More than 50% of Latina/o college students nationwide are enrolled at two-year institutions, and almost 70% of Latina/o students in Arizona attend community colleges (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2011). This trend is problematic because degree completion rates for students who start at community colleges lag behind those of students who first enter four-year institutions (Radford, Berkner, Wheelless, & Shepherd, 2010).

Many students attending community colleges do so with the intent to transfer to a four-year institution to pursue a bachelor's degree. However, Latina/o community college transfer rates remain very low, even after six years of community college enrollment (Perez & Ceja, 2010; Radford, Berkner, Wheelless, Shepherd, & Hunt-White, 2010). For example, a study of community college students in California indicated that only 17% of Latina/o students (compared to 39% of Whites and Asians) transferred to a four-year institution within six years (California Postsecondary Education Commission, 2007). In Arizona, only 28% of community college students who indicated an intent to transfer to an in-state public university did so within six years (Arizona State System on Student Transfer, 2012). Latina/o students are under-represented within the transfer population (23%) relative to their enrollment in Arizona community colleges (25%), whereas White students are over-represented (62% of transfer population versus 51% of enrollment) (Arizona State System on Student Transfer, 2012).

Explaining the Attainment Gap

Prior research suggests that a combination of institutional, academic, environmental, and socio-cultural factors contribute to Latina/os' differential rates of four-year college enrollment and bachelor's degree attainment. At the institutional level, the high cost of tuition at a four-year institution, as well as ineffective transfer policies and practices have been identified as important barriers to attainment of a bachelor's degree, particularly for ethnic minority and low-income students (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2011). In addition, because many Latina/o students are first-generation college-going students, they may lack access to or be unaware of critical information about financial aid and transfer policies (Nunez & Crisp, 2012). This lack of college information also contributes to inadequate academic preparation for college-

level work. Latina/o students are less likely to take more advanced college preparatory coursework or advanced placement courses (Nunez & Crisp, 2012).

The geographic location of higher education institutions also plays a role in Latina/o student college choices and higher education attainment. Latina/o students, especially those of Mexican origin, often prefer to live at home or remain close to home for college (Butler, 2010). Mexican American students tend to be concentrated in southwestern states where higher education institutions are more geographically dispersed; these students may need to travel greater distances to attend a four-year institution as compared to Latina/o groups living in more heavily populated urban areas (Nunez & Crisp, 2012). Furthermore, there is evidence that living in a rural community has a more negative effect on the educational attainment of Latina/o as compared to White students. O'Connor, Hammac, and Scott (2010) found that Latina/o students who resided in a rural school district were far less likely than their White counterparts to attend a four-year institution.

Remaining close to home for college is one way to reduce the cost of higher education. Family and cultural factors add to the desire for Latina/o students to remain near home. This is consistent with the Latina/o cultural value of familism or familismo which involves strong family interdependence, loyalty, and obligation (Sabogal, Marin, Otero-Sabogal, Marin, & Perez-Stable, 1987). Familismo is associated with a collectivist cultural orientation which prioritizes group needs and goals over those of the individual (Triandis, 1995).

According to Desmond and Turley (2009), adherence to the familismo cultural value can create a conflict between the Latina/o student's personal goals for higher education attainment and the need to remain at home to help out and support the family. Such conflicts tend to be most acutely felt by Latina students who may be expected to fulfill traditional female family roles at the expense of educational and career goals (Nunez & Elizondo, 2013; Risco & Duffy, 2010; Sy & Romero, 2008).

While family-oriented cultural values can create educational challenges for some Latina/o students, they can be a source of strength and motivation for others in their efforts to navigate college. For example, a sense of family obligation has been found to contribute to higher academic motivation and college persistence for some ethnic minority students (Fulgini & Pedersen, 2002; Tseng, 2004). There is also evidence that familismo values can coexist with individual achievement goals among Latina/o college students. In a study of low-income Latina/o college freshmen, Phinney, Dennis, and Gutierrez (2005) identified subgroups of students based on their endorsement of family-based values and individually-based values. More than one-third of the students fell into a combined "family and personally oriented" group that was characterized by high family interdependence combined with high personal and career motivation. Consistent with the Phinney et al, (2005) findings, Risco and Duffy (2011) found that Latina students were motivated by both cultural values and personal interest in making career decisions. These dual values may account for Latina students' tendency to favor careers that are closely connected to family and community and where they feel they can "make a difference" (e.g., Miller & Brown, 2005).

The literature on the sociocultural context of Latina/o college students suggests that well-designed and accessible degree programs in family science can provide a culturally-compatible pathway to higher education for Latina/o students. To be most effective, 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 four-year degree (Nuñez & Elizondo, 2013; Ornelas & Solorzano, 2004; Perez & Ceja, 2010). At the institutional level, one recommended practice for strengthening community college students' pathways to the baccalaureate degree is partnerships between community colleges and four-year institutions (Nuñez & Elizondo, 2013). Collaborations that provide "co-located bachelor's degree programs on community college campuses" are particularly important for meeting the needs of rural and place-bound learners (Arizona Community Colleges Strategic Plan, 2011). The FSHD distance degree program described here incorporates these practices to improve rural community college students' access to family science coursework leading to a bachelor's degree.

The FSHD Distance Degree Program: Background

Capacity-Building and Program Planning

Capacity-building for the distance degree program was facilitated by a statewide initiative intended to promote workforce development through increased access to higher education for time- and place-bound students. Under this initiative, grants were made available to the state's community colleges and universities to fund the development of high quality online and distance learning projects. Between the fall 2007 and the fall 2010, the FSHD program in the School of Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) at the university secured funding to develop online versions of all lower and upper division FSHD foundation courses. This helped create capacity to offer an online distance degree that could serve non-resident, place-bound students in other parts of the state.

Working with the FSHD Undergraduate Curriculum Committee at an Arizona university, the FSHD Program Chair and the FCS Assistant Director for Student Services developed a preliminary proposal for a distance degree in FSHD. The proposed distance degree was structured as a "2+2" program in which students would complete their first two years of coursework with an associate's degree at a community college and then transfer to the university to complete a bachelor's degree via online/distance education. Once completed, the proposal was presented to the FSHD faculty for review and for making a decision to move forward with curriculum development and program implementation.

Although most FSHD faculty were supportive of the distance degree plan, a number of concerns had to be addressed before final approval was obtained. These concerns centered on the quality of the online courses, continuity of the academic program with the existing FSHD major, and the long-term program viability and sustainability. Several mechanisms were put in place to address these concerns. First, quality of online courses was ensured by submitting all

core FSHD online courses to the University's "Quality Matters" assessment process. This peer review process involves evaluation of all aspects of an online course, including instructional materials, technology support tools, and budget details. Second, the decision was made to offer the new degree as a second (but parallel) distance option within the existing FSHD major. This meant that distance degree students would be held to the same requirements as campus-based students with respect to completion of pre-major and major requirements for the degree. Finally, it was agreed that the program would be offered initially on a two-year pilot basis to establish program viability and sustainability.

Program Need and Opportunity in Border County

At the time of initial planning for the FSHD distance degree program, the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences (in which the School of Family and Consumer Sciences is located) was offering a handful of distance Bachelor of Science degrees in agricultural fields as part of an existing university satellite program at a community college in Border County. A Coordinator for Academic Outreach Programs, along with a small staff, provides program oversight and student services to the community college students seeking to complete a bachelor's degree while remaining in Border County. The university's Border County satellite program provided the necessary infrastructure to support the delivery of a "co-located" distance degree in collaboration with the community college.

The Community College. The community college is a two-year public community college serving approximately 13,000 students (average age of 30 years); more than 60% of the students are Latina/o, and 57% are female. The community college is classified as a Hispanic-Serving Institution. Title V of the Higher Education Act defines Hispanic-Serving Institutions as non-profit institutions of higher education "with a full-time equivalent (FTE) undergraduate student enrollment that is at least 25 percent Hispanic" (Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, 2015). The community college is one of the few community colleges in the state to offer an academic program in family and consumer sciences. Yet, before our project, place-bound community college students had no viable pathway to a four-year degree in the family science field. A distance degree program in FSHD would help to fill that need.

The Border County community. The community college is located in, an agricultural community in the desert southwest near the border of Mexico. According to 2009-2013 five-year estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau (2014b), the population of Border County is 61% Latina/o and 51.2% non-English-speaking. Educational attainment among adults 25 and older lags behind the rest of Arizona; only 14.3% of adults in Border County have earned a bachelor's degree as compared to almost 27% of adults statewide. In addition, slightly more than 20% of the people in Border County live in poverty as compared to about 18% of individuals in other parts of Arizona. In addition to providing access to a four-year degree for the community college students, the FSHD distance degree program could help to fill the need for well-qualified family professionals to work with individuals and families in the Border County community.

Establishing the Community College-University Partnership

As a long-standing member of the Border County agricultural community, The Academic Outreach Coordinator played a pivotal role in connecting faculty and administrators in the School of Family and Consumer Sciences at the university with their counterparts in the community college family and consumer sciences program and Border County community leaders. In early spring 2011, representatives from the university, including the FCS School Director, the FSHD Program Chair, and the FCS Assistant Director for Student Services, traveled to Border County to formally initiate the partnership to provide a distance degree in FSHD at the community college. During the visit, representatives consulted with family and consumer sciences faculty at the community college to share a transfer curriculum plan. In addition, the community college president confirmed his institution's commitment to the four year degree program.

In meetings with members of the Border County business and non-profit social service community, the representatives from the university were able to gain an understanding of the educational needs and challenges of the Border County population, employment opportunities for emerging family professionals, and how the distance degree students could contribute to the Border community before and after their graduation. It became evident in these meetings that a high level of community support existed for the distance degree program; and it was viewed as important not only for the students' higher education, but also for the socioeconomic future of Border County.

These collaborative activities culminated in the development and approval of an Arizona Transfer Admissions Pathway Agreement between the community college and the university's Family and Consumer Sciences program. When the FSHD pilot distance degree program was launched in fall 2011, it was one of only four degree programs offered by the university in which the community college students could remain in Border County while earning a Bachelor of Science degree.

The FSHD Distance Degree Curriculum

The curriculum for the FSHD distance B.S. degree consists of 120 total units of coursework, closely paralleling the curriculum of the university's FSHD major. Under the Transfer Admissions Pathway Agreement, prospective students would enroll in the Associate of Arts in Family Studies program at the community college where they would complete 36 units of general education coursework and 25 units of coursework required for the FSHD pre-major. The pre-major curriculum includes coursework in biology and human behavior, introductory psychology and sociology, beginning statistics and research methods; and nine units of lower division FSHD coursework covering lifespan human development, close relationships, and dynamics of family relations. Students would need to complete this coursework with a minimum 2.0 GPA in all transferable courses and a 2.6 minimum GPA in the FSHD pre-major courses.

Upon completion of requirements for the associate's degree in Family Studies, the community college students can apply for admission to the university's B.S. FSHD major. The major includes 36 units of foundation coursework, with courses in child and adolescent development, aging, advanced family relations, and problems in development and relationships. The major curriculum also includes two professional development courses. During the first semester in the major, students complete a one-unit seminar designed to orient them to the major and foster skills for personal, academic and professional development. A second-semester course addresses personal and professional qualities essential for successful internship and career planning, including roles, responsibilities, and ethical standards for professionals.

Another 21 units of thematic minor coursework are included in the major curriculum. Students can pursue one of two structured thematic minors in the areas of Children and Youth in Military Families and Families, Health, and Nutrition. The thematic minor curriculum also includes three units of required field experience in a community setting; most of these experiences are in the non-profit social services and healthcare sectors. For example, distance degree students have provided nutritional counseling support at the Border County Regional Hospital, shadowed domestic violence support groups, provided referral assistance for families seeking community service options, and assisted in determining client eligibility for the Border County Food Bank. Currently, there are over 50 potential sites in Border County where FSHD distance degree students can pursue experiential learning opportunities.

Program Delivery Model and Staffing

The FSHD distance degree is a "co-located" program which is staffed and delivered at both the community college and the university. Personnel located at the community college include a full-time Academic Outreach Coordinator and a part-time Classroom Instructor, both of whom reside in Border County. The Academic Outreach Coordinator oversees all the university's distance programs in Border County. She also assists with recruitment, community outreach, transfer advising, and financial aid. The part-time Classroom Instructor, who is also on the faculty of the community college, teaches the face-to-face FSHD courses, supervises internships, and assists with recruitment and academic advising for FSHD distance degree students. At the university, administrative oversight is provided by the Director of the School of Family and Consumer Sciences and the FSHD Program Chair. The lead FSHD academic advisor at the university monitors and guides the distance students' academic and degree progression, and FSHD lecturers provide online course instruction.

Courses are delivered in a "hybrid" approach involving a combination of online and "live" classroom-based formats. Hybrid programs offer students the best of both face-to-face learning and online learning environments providing added convenience without the complete absence of face-to-face contact (Rovai, 2003). For non-traditional students, such as those over the age of 24, those attending school part time or while working full time, alternatives to the "traditional" face to face classroom are often valuable tools which aid in the persistence toward

and completion of college degrees (Rovai, 2003). At the same time, the opportunity for ongoing face-to-face interactions with program personnel can contribute to the development and maintenance of mentoring relationships that support Latina/o students' retention and degree completion (Nuñez & Elizondo, 2013).

FSHD distance degree students enter the program and progress through the major curriculum according to a cohort system in which they take a common set of major coursework each semester with the same group of students. Students typically take 15 units of coursework per semester during the academic year; about two-thirds of this coursework is provided through online courses taught by university instructors. The remaining coursework is offered in face-to-face classes on the community college campus, and are scheduled one day per week in the evening to accommodate student's work schedules. In addition to their live and online classes, the FSHD distance degree students visit the university campus once a semester to meet with online instructors and campus academic advisors, sit-in on classes, and participate in available campus events (e.g., attend a football game, go to Spring Fling). These activities help to connect the students to the university campus experience and create a sense of belonging to the broader the university community.

Pilot Program Implementation and Student Outcomes

During the fall and spring semesters preceding the 2011 fall semester program launch, the community college students were informed about the new pilot FSHD distance degree program through flyers and brochures, information sessions conducted by the lead instructor for the community college family and consumer sciences program, and classroom recruitment visits.

FSHD Pilot Distance Degree Students: The First Cohort

To be considered for entry into the FSHD distance bachelor's degree program, interested students met with the Academic Outreach Coordinator who evaluated each student's transfer status and eligibility for enrollment at the university for the following academic year. Although early estimates were that approximately 12 community college students would be ready to enter the pilot program, only half ultimately qualified based on completion of general education and FSHD pre-major requirements.

Table 1 (pp. 19-20) shows demographic characteristics and background information on the six students comprising the first cohort for the FSHD distance degree program. During the first year, non-empirical methods, including informal interviews and conversations with students and program personnel were used to gather information on the students' backgrounds and academic motivations at the time of entry to the program. Although case study methodology was not used in an empirical sense (Yin, 1984), the methodology was used as a model for creating the student profiles as this enabled the authors to "explore individuals or organizations, simple through complex interventions, relationships, communities, or programs" (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p.544).

As can be seen in the background profiles, all six students were, in one way or another, trying to balance work and family obligations with their goals of earning a four-year degree and pursuing a professional career. The profiles also reveal a combination of family orientation and college commitment that is similar to the “family and personally oriented” college motivational profile described by Phinney et al (2005). For example, family figures prominently in the academic motivations of Students 1, 2, and 3. All three point to their parents as a source of motivation and support for their college aspirations; Student 1 also wishes to follow in the footsteps of her older brother who was recently accepted to the School of Medicine at the university. All six students see earning a bachelor’s degree in FSHD as a stepping stone toward their longer-term goal of pursuing graduate training and/or eventual careers in health-related (e.g., medicine, nursing) and helping professions (e.g., counseling, college teaching).

Student Perceptions of their Program Experience

At the end of their first semester, students completed an informal online survey to rate their degree of satisfaction with their program (from very satisfied to very dissatisfied) in response to three questions: 1) “How satisfied were you with the course content/material offered during your first semester in the [FSHD] distance degree program?” 2) “How satisfied were you with the course delivery methods (online, live classes) used in the [FSHD] Distance Degree Program?” and 3) “How satisfied were you with the academic advising and support services you received in the [FSHD] distance degree Program?”. Students also provided written comments on the perceived strengths and weaknesses of each of the three program areas. Below we summarize the quantitative results and provide illustrative quotes from the students’ written comments.

Course Content. All six students indicated that they were “very satisfied” with the course content covered in their first-semester courses. Students found the subject matter interesting and applicable to their future careers.

The professors were available, thorough, and helpful. The material was interesting and things that can be applied to real life situations (Student 2).

The class that I had in person was excellent...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 (Student 4).

Course delivery methods. Students also expressed a high degree of satisfaction with the “hybrid” instructional approach, with all six indicating that they were “very satisfied” with this course delivery method. Student comments reflected recognition of the convenience and flexibility offered by online courses as well as appreciation for the opportunities for interaction afforded by the face-to-face instructional format. A theme in a number of the comments was the importance of good student-teacher communication and opportunities for interaction with the instructor and peers.

Online classes make the...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 (Student 6).

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 [the community college] we were unable to go up to their offices and ask for them to explain material (Student 1).

[In the live class]...I was able to interact with my classmates and learned the content through all of the senses. The online classes had a very organized layout. D2L [the online learning platform] is very user friendly (Student 4).

Some students specifically commented on the cohort system as a program strength that afforded them peer support in navigating their academic work.

Our cohort is very small. We are like a little family and are able to rely on each other to ask questions and get help if we need (Student 4).

Students also mentioned a number of areas where they thought the course delivery could be improved. Most of these comments focused on the need for more face-to-face and “real-time” interaction with instructors. Three of the six students expressed a desire for more “live” class offerings at the community college. Two others felt that more face-to-face contact could be provided through the use of video chats or more frequent visits to the university campus. Another student suggested incorporating a once-a-week student-instructor synchronous chat into the online course format so that students can ask questions in “real time” (i.e., through same-time, serial communication with the instructor).

Academic advising and support services. On the online survey, students rated their advising/support services highly, with all six students indicating that they were either satisfied or very satisfied with these services. Written comments reflected the high level of appreciation students felt for the support they received from the instructional and advising staff.

Our advising and support services are amazing. Being able to count on our [Academic Outreach Coordinator] and our [Classroom Instructor] is something that not everyone will experience. They help us with any questions we have, even when it has to do with our professional work (Student 1).

The advising and support services were very helpful. I was concerned about studying in a distance program but the support we had in [Border County] through [the Academic Outreach Coordinator] and [the Classroom Instructor] made the process simple (Student 2).

At the same time, students expressed a desire for additional support services (e.g., a “designated financial aid and administration person” located on the community college campus) and more advising opportunities in both group (e.g., monthly advising sessions) and individualized formats.

Student Academic Progress in Pilot Year 1

At the end of the fall and spring semesters of the first pilot year, course instructors and program coordinators/advisors were asked to report on student grades and provide open-ended written commentaries about program outcomes and student performance. Instructors reported that all six students in the first FSHD distance degree cohort successfully completed their first-year coursework. Importantly, their first-year academic performance was excellent. The average GPA in the fall and spring courses was 3.41 (on a 4 point scale) with GPAs ranging from 2.64 to 3.84. Instructors and support staff consistently noted the students’ strong work ethic, persistence, and commitment as central factors in their academic success. Students also noted anecdotally that they were more motivated to do well knowing that the future of the FSHD distance degree program depends on their success.

Student Retention and Program Completion: Pilot Year 2 and Beyond

Information on student retention and program completion was obtained from archival records and reports from the FSHD academic advisor at the university. All six of the first-year pilot cohort students re-enrolled for Year 2 of the pilot program. By the end of Year 2, three of the six first-year distance degree students had graduated, and two others graduated in fall 2013. Only one of the original six distance degree students failed to complete the program; she chose to withdraw after her third semester.

At the end of the first pilot year, program administrators at the university made a commitment to continue the distance degree program on a modest scale, with a goal of maintaining about 20 active students per year. A small second cohort of eight students was admitted to the program in fall 2012. As of this writing, six of those eight students have graduated with their bachelor’s degree; one student chose to transfer to another four-year university, and the other is still actively enrolled in the distance program. For the 14 students comprising the first two cohorts of the pilot program, the retention rate after their first year of enrollment was 93%, and the three-year graduation rate was 79%.

Summary and Conclusions

Preliminary evidence on the FSHD pilot distance degree program suggests that our academic program model is a viable one for providing a high-quality, four-year distance degree to place-bound rural and Latina/o students who might not otherwise have this opportunity. Not only did the first-year cohort express a high degree of satisfaction with their academic experience, but they also demonstrated strong academic performance over their first year in the program. Even more important, the retention and graduation rates for students in the first two program cohorts have far exceeded those typical of Latina/o students who begin their careers at a two-year institution.

Keys to Success

Based on the results of our pilot program, we've identified several program elements that we consider to be "keys to success" in facilitating student retention and program completion.

A strong university-community college partnership. The partnership between the community college and the School of Family and Consumer Sciences at the university is based on a shared commitment, vision, and set of goals for enhancing the higher education attainment and career preparation of Border County community college students. 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 resulted in a smaller than expected first cohort of entering students, we believe that these students were better prepared to progress through the academic program and complete the bachelor's degree.

Well-qualified and committed program personnel. As long-time residents of Border County, the Academic Outreach Coordinator and FSHD Classroom Instructor have a special understanding of and commitment to the students of the community college. Online instructors located on the university campus have strong records of effectiveness in online teaching as well as experience in student advising and mentoring.

A co-located program model with "hybrid" course delivery. It was evident that students highly valued the opportunity for face-to-face instruction and advising support on the community college campus that was afforded by the "co-located" program model. At the same time, they benefited from the flexibility and convenience offered by their online courses under the hybrid course delivery approach.

A well-articulated transfer curriculum. Our ability to move forward with the "2+2" distance degree was facilitated by the fact that the community college had an existing program in family and consumer sciences with coursework that aligned well with the university FSHD pre-major curriculum. This helped to reduce barriers to the transfer process and created a manageable pathway from the community college to the university.

The cohort system. The cohort system, in which students enter and progress through the curriculum with the same group of classmates proved valuable for the first-year distance degree students. The first-year cohort formed a close bond as a group and came to rely on each other for academic and personal support.

Lessons Learned and Challenges Ahead

An overarching lesson learned from our pilot program is that program elements that constitute “keys to success” can also present challenges with regards to program sustainability.

“On-the-ground” support services and need for capacity-building. As revealed in our preliminary findings, the hybrid (face-to-face + online) course delivery format was well received by the students. Students appreciate the flexibility offered by online courses; however, they place even greater value on the opportunity for live, face-to-face contact and personal advising/mentoring from the distance degree program staff. Unfortunately, resource constraints have limited our ability to staff additional face-to-face courses or expand student support services on the community college campus.

In the absence of increased staffing, one strategy we have implemented for the subsequent distance degree cohorts is the use of peer teaching assistants (called preceptors) from earlier cohorts. These students receive academic credit to assist the Classroom Instructor with in-class activities and to provide peer mentoring/advising for students who have questions about coursework or program requirements. In this way we have been able to extend the academic support available for new distance degree students in addition to providing a leadership and professional development opportunity for the student preceptors. In an effort to increase opportunities for face-to-face instruction, we are exploring the feasibility of creating tech-linked classrooms that would allow the distance students to participate in face-to-face FSHD classes at the university via video.

The cohort system and curriculum flexibility. Although the cohort system facilitates group cohesion and peer academic support, it also limits the flexibility students have in progressing through the curriculum. For example, students who withdraw and then seek to return to the program may be in a situation where they have to wait a semester or two for the needed courses to be offered. Also, we are not able to accommodate mid-year (spring semester) admissions to the program. To expand the coursework available to students, we have recently added a human services thematic minor option to the curriculum through a collaboration with a satellite campus of the university. This has expanded the coursework available to students each semester as well as providing more flexibility in how students’ can progress through the curriculum.

Academic expectations and student recruitment. Our commitment to having the distance degree students meet the same pre-major requirements as our university campus students has been embraced by the distance degree students and staff because it assures that their degree will be fully comparable to a B.S. degree in FSHD from the university. Nevertheless, work remains to be done to ensure that all incoming community college students have the

necessary pre-requisite coursework. Partly as a result of this issue, our second cohort was smaller than expected. However, a 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 university campus program. In other words, preparation for entry to the FSHD distance program created a direct pathway to the four-year college campus experience for some community college students.

Program sustainability and growth. Budget constraints are an ongoing reality and will continue to challenge our efforts to sustain and grow the FSHD distance degree program. As of this writing, we have 23 active students in the distance degree program, and this is our maximum capacity given current resources. It is also unknown to what extent we can “scale-up” our current co-located model to accommodate larger numbers of students or whether we could achieve similar retention and completion rates with larger enrollments. Nevertheless, the results thus far from our modest pilot effort are very promising, and the commitment of the university administrators to continuing the distance program beyond the pilot phase is reassuring. Ultimately, we 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 Border County community and beyond.

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Table 1. FSHD Distance Degree Pilot Program Students: First Cohort

Demographic Characteristics*	Background Profile
Student 1: Mexican-American female, single, age 21, bilingual English-Spanish	Student 1 is a first-generation college student who was born in Border County and grew up speaking both English and Spanish in the home. Student 1 works for her parents' janitorial service and coordinates youth ministry at her church. She attended the university, majoring in public health, but returned to her hometown to assist with a family illness, the family's janitorial business, and church. Student 1 is eager to study medicine at the university main campus or in Mexico. She has siblings who have all been inspired by their parents. Her brother is a role model for her as he was recently accepted to medical school.
Student 2: A Mexican-American female, single, age 20, English as second language	Student 2 is a first-generation college student who was raised in a rural border community 20 miles south of the community college campus. Both parents were both born in Mexico, and her home language is Spanish. She notes that her parents influenced their children to "follow their dreams." Student 2 works as a substitute teacher which allows her flexibility for her studies. Her passion is to learn about the dynamics of families and how this impacts children in schools. She is interested in pursuing a graduate program at the university main campus or a local extended university.
Student 3: A Mexican-American female, married, age 20, English as a second language	Student 3 is a first-generation college student whose parents have worked in the agricultural fields to support her and her five siblings. Student 3 cares for her parents and assists with their medical problems. She disclosed that her upbringing was the motivation for helping young children. She wishes to obtain a graduate degree in the family studies field or in nursing. Her husband also intends on participating in the FSHD degree program this fall.
Student 4: An Italian-American female, single, age 36, English as primary language	Student 4 is a first-generation college student who moved to Border County from northern California for agricultural work. She is working with a local medical doctor offering nutrition courses to the community. She is interested in the area of nutrition and hopes to pursue graduate work so that she can begin a career

	teaching family studies in a post-secondary setting. She wishes to impact her community, more specifically the young adult to elderly populations.
Student 5: Mixed Native American and Mexican American, single, age 24, English as primary language	Student 5 is a native of Border County. Her father attended college and received an associate's degree in fire science. Student 5 lives at home with her parents and works for a local homeless shelter. She was a student athlete at the community college while working on a family and consumer sciences associate's degree. She began doing community agency work after she obtained her associate's degree. She hopes to return to agency work or work within an educational organization once she obtains her B.S. degree in family studies and human development.
Student 6: A Mexican-American female, divorced, age 26, English as primary language	Student 6 is a first-generation college student who was born in Border County. She is a single mother of one child, balancing motherhood, fulltime work, and her studies. She is trying to be an educational role model for her son. She looks forward to obtaining a graduate degree in the counseling field once she obtains her B.S. degree. She wants to assist individuals to better their marriages and family dynamics, communication skills and goals.

*Age and marital status are at the time the student enrolled in the FSHD Distance Degree Program.