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Navigating online horizons: Fully online experiences of adult returning students at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa

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This pilot study examined online undergraduate students' experiences in a fully online completion degree while fostering belonging. Using a qualitative approach, the study introduced the "Belonging-Centered Model for Distance Education". Drawing on the TIPEC framework and Sense of Belonging theory, the model explored three spheres: Academic Belonging, Dialogic Belonging and Place Belonging. The findings reveal that student success relies on administrative clarity, flexibility and culturally responsive learning, with belonging rooted in programs that honour Hawaiian and Pacific identities.

Keywords: online higher education; undergraduate students' experiences; nontraditional students; adult students; returning students; Hawai'i; Pacific regions

INTRODUCTION

This study amplified the voices of three Pacific Islander women who resumed their undergraduate studies through a fully online program. They are among the 36.8 million "Some College, No Credential" (SCNC) students in the US—individuals who disengaged from college, that is, stopped out, before earning a credential (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center [NSCRC], 2024a; Ruffalo Noel Levitz & Lumina, 2019). Stopped-out students are those who do not enrol in postsecondary education for at least three consecutive terms, while returning students re-enrol part- or full-time after that period (NSCRC, 2024a). Many SCNC students are non-traditional, balancing full-time jobs, family responsibilities and financial constraints and need flexible, supportive pathways for re-entry (Ruffalo Noel Levitz & Lumina, 2019). In Hawai'i, where 94,187 SCNC students under 65 outnumber traditional undergraduates nearly two-to-one (NSCRC, 2024b), distance education emerges as a vital alternative.

As online learning has gained popularity, research on various online topics has flourished. Foundational studies examined the needs of non-traditional students (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Rovai, 2003; Tinto, 1987) and the challenges they experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic (Bay View Analytics, 2021). In Hawai'i and the Pacific, authors, such as Iding and Crosby (2013), Menchaca and Hoffman (2009) and Raturi (2022) have explored online learning, while Moleni (2020), Wolfgramm (2021) and Sayula (2024) have examined how Pacific students navigate higher education using cultural wealth and wayfinding.

While significant research exists on online education and, separately, Pacific students' values and needs, the studies remain fragmented, revealing a notable gap in integrated, comprehensive approaches. This qualitative study examined the experiences of fully online students from an undergraduate program at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa (UHM), exploring the strategies and challenges of female, adult, non-traditional, online and returning Pacific students as they navigate distance education while fostering a sense of belonging. The study is supported by the "Belonging-Centered Model for Distance Education", developed to contextualise the particular circumstances of distance education in the Pacific, where multicultural identities, connection to land and long-standing traditions, both ancestral and contemporary, shape the educational landscape. This framework integrates the multi-dimensional TIPEC model (Ali et al., 2018) with the theory of Sense of Belonging articulated through three spheres: 1) Academic Belonging, grounded in Garrison, Anderson and Archer's (1999) Community of Inquiry; 2) Dialogic Belonging, based on Bakhtin's Multivoiceness (Bakhtin & Holquist, 1981); and 3) Place Belonging, informed by Tuck and McKenzie's (2015) Critical Place Inquiry.

The literature review outlines the proposed theoretical model and its foundations. It is followed by an exploration of online learning in higher education, with an emphasis on Hawai'i and the Pacific. Contextual information on the fully online undergraduate degree serves as the study's axis. Methodology, Findings and Discussion highlight students' voices.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The review comprises two sections: the guiding frameworks and the proposed integrated model. The latter explores how different factors affect Pacific Islanders' online experiences while observing similarities and differences with other regions.

Theoretical guiding frameworks

This study is grounded in Sense of Belonging, a psychological concept that emphasises the human need to feel safe, respected and "comfortably fit in as our authentic selves" (Vaccaro & Newman, 2022, p. 4). Belonging is a "universal motivation" (Vaccaro & Newman, 2022, p. 3), emerging from the dynamic interaction between individuals and their environments—a perspective with critical implications for online education.

Research on belonging in higher education highlights its complexity. Tinto (1987) emphasised academic and social integration as key to persistence, while Bean and Metzner (1985) argued that social integration is less central for non-traditional students. Rovai (2003) adapted these ideas to online learning, stressing the need for school connection and community building. Yet, these models neither define belonging clearly nor contextualise it within distance education for students in remote regions with unique cultural values and histories. Ellison and Braxton (2022) critique higher education's tendency to prioritise graduation over belonging, overlooking its long-term impacts, even in virtual spaces.

Belonging is perspectival, shaped by identities, oppression, and resistance (Ellison & Braxton, 2022). Intersectionality is central, linking belonging to gender, race, age and socioeconomic status (Williams & Udoh, 2022). Ultimately, belonging depends not only on students' identities but on institutions adopting holistic and intentional commitments to students' welfare (Ellison & Braxton, 2022).

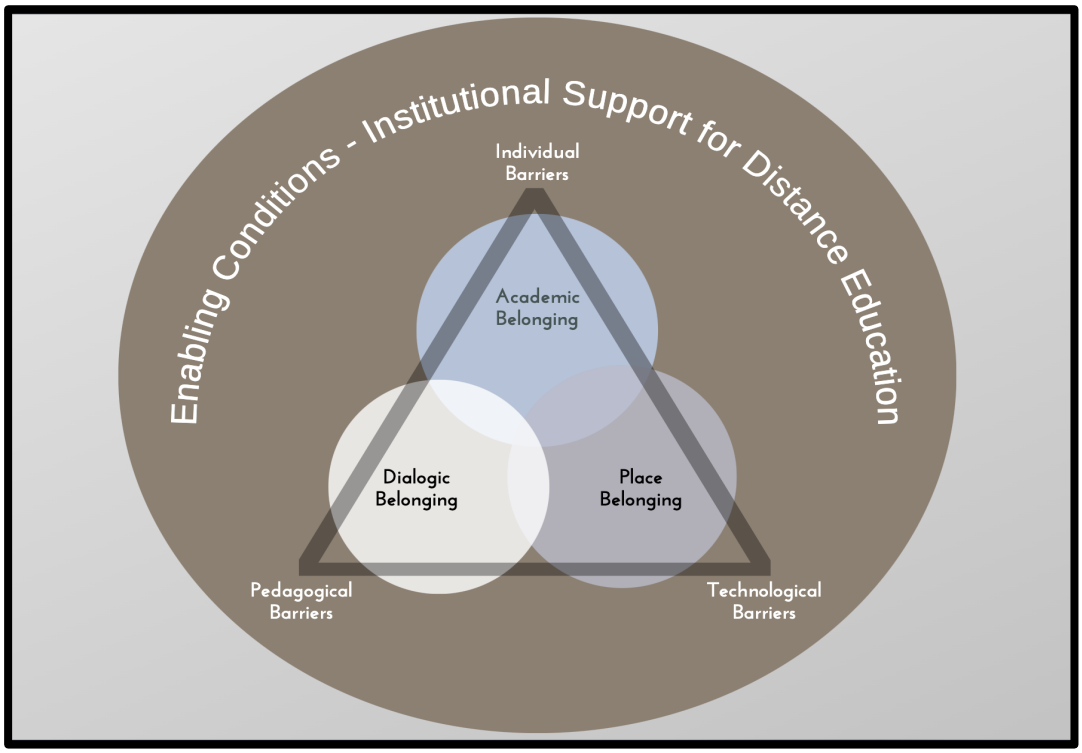
The COVID-19 emergency transition heightened the urgency of fostering a sense of belonging in distance education. Students, especially adults, lost traditional relational spaces, highlighting the need for intentional strategies (Van Heerden & Bharuthram, 2023). During the pandemic, in Tuvalu, a small atoll nation, solidarity grounded in cultural values supported students through isolation and technical barriers (Lagi, 2020).

Complementing this discussion, the TIPEC framework (Ali et al., 2018) identifies 68 barriers to e-learning, categorising them into four areas: technological—issues like infrastructure, technical support, bandwidth and connectivity; individual—factors specific to students; pedagogical—teaching methodologies and faculty/staff challenges; and enabling barriers—factors impacting the other three, such as administrative support, funding and regulations. While comprehensive, TIPEC overlooks belonging. This study addresses that gap, proposing a model that places belonging at the centre of students' experiences within multi-layered barriers.

The Belonging-Centered Model for Distance Education

Multi-level and intersecting factors shape distance education programs, yet research often remains fragmented. This study proposes a holistic model that is centred on belonging to address the complex realities of Pacific online learners. As shown in Figure 1, the "Belonging-Centered Model for Distance Education" places belonging at its heart, articulated through three dimensions: 1) Academic Belonging, 2) Dialogic Belonging, and 3) Place Belonging. These spheres are framed by a pyramid of barriers adapted from the TIPEC framework (Ali et al., 2018) to reflect the unique context of Pacific distance education. Surrounding this structure, enabling conditions reflect an institutional commitment to online student welfare and quality education. This framework highlights the intersections between these elements, acknowledging the complexity of students' realities that cannot be contained in rigid spaces. In the following sections, each component will be explained in detail.

Figure 1. A Belonging-Centered Model for Distance Education



Adapted from Ali, Uppal, and Gulliver's (2018) TIPEC framework; Garrison, Anderson and Archer's (1999) CoI model; Tuck and McKenzie's (2015) Critical Place Inquiry, Bakhtin's Multivoiceness (Bakhtin & Holquist, 1981).

Academic belonging

The Academic Belonging sphere addresses Pacific online learners' connections to the virtual classroom, their academic journey and their evolving roles as knowledge co-creators. Garrison, Anderson and Archer's (1999) Community of Inquiry (CoI) model frames this sphere through three presences: cognitive, social and teaching. Cognitive presence fosters knowledge construction and critical thinking; social presence reduces isolation by building trust and group cohesion; and teaching presence supports students through course design, facilitation and feedback.

For Pacific students, the Academic Belonging sphere explains belonging to the class, a sense of pertinence toward the chosen path of studies, a sense of belonging to the new role as students and co-creators of knowledge, a sense of pride in their newly-found voice, a sense of success in their capabilities to navigate the system, and a sense of hope about their future possibilities. Therefore, belonging transcends the virtual classroom, making distance education less distant.

Dialogic belonging

Bakhtin's concept of *heteroglossia*, or *Multivoiceness*, offers a framework for understanding belonging in diverse educational spaces. It emphasises that culture and individuals hold multiple voices, breaking static identity conceptions (Quantz & O'Connor, 1988). Dialogue is fluid, social, historical and shaped by the interaction of diverse voices over time and space. Heteroglossia illuminates the need for educational spaces to foster varied cultural expressions and narratives, particularly in distance learning. In higher education, this aligns with Manning's (2018) concept of *multivocality*—recognising universities as spaces of competing messages and perspectives—and Veles' (2023) call for hybridity and openness in post-pandemic institutions. Bakhtin's *chronotope* further invites reflection on the relationship between time and space in online education, where asynchronous learning enables students across geographies to engage in shared, meaningful dialogues (Bakhtin & Holquist, 1981).

In Pacific contexts, belonging is shaped by diverse identities, communal values and colonial histories. Cultural frameworks like *Tauhi vā* (Wolfgramm, 2021) and Moleni's (2020) wayfinding illustrate how Pacific students navigate academic spaces guided by relational care and ancestral knowledge. Ormond and Reynolds (2024) remind us that for Māori students, well-being is holistic, intertwining the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual dimensions. *Wairua* (spirit) reflects the duality of individuals, *whānau* refers to the extended family network, and *hinengaro* encompasses thoughts and feelings. This deep spirituality transcends individuals and connects Māori students to ancestral lands and traditions. Likewise, the Kanaka ʻŌiwi framework (Goodyear-Kaʻōpua et al., 2015) grounds belonging in Hawaiian values: *lāhui* (identity), *ea* (sovereignty), *kuleana* (obligations) and *pono* (justice). Yet Hawaiʻi's colonial tensions complicate belonging. Losch (2023) found that Native Hawaiians often felt less valued at UHM, while Kosaki (2016) warned against homogenising identities by referring to all residents of Hawaiʻi as "Hawaiians". In this landscape, dialogic belonging means creating learning environments that not only allow but also intentionally celebrate multiple voices—ensuring Pacific online learners bring their cultural perspectives into classroom discussions, reflective assignments and collaborative projects, ultimately transforming distance education into a space of connection, agency and cultural affirmation.

Place belonging

The place belonging sphere in this model highlights the centrality of land, heritage and cultural identity in shaping Pacific students' educational experiences. Rooted in Tuck and McKenzie's (2015) Critical Place Inquiry framework, this perspective recognises place as dynamic, shaped by settler colonialism, regional histories and acts of resistance. In Hawai'i and the Pacific, education cannot be separated from land, where Indigenous values of sovereignty, survival and knowledge-making are deeply tied to place.

The *Kanaka 'Ōiwi* framework further links land, identity, education and governance, as Goodyear-Ka'ōpua et al. (2015) remind us: "The health/breath of the people is directly linked to the health/breath of the land" (p. 10). In distance education, this connection must not be erased but intentionally nurtured. Decolonising online learning requires centring students' profound relationships to place, honouring their land-rooted knowledge and empowering them as co-creators in their learning journeys. Pacific students are not passive recipients of content but hold place-based wisdom, understood by Tuck and McKenzie (2015) as "sites of presence, futurity, imagination, power, and knowing" (p. xiv).

Individual barriers

This section examines how students' individual characteristics shape their online learning experiences. The TIPEC framework (Ali et al., 2018) identifies individual barriers such as motivation, preparedness, perceived usefulness of studies, family and economic support, technological anxiety, and isolation. As suggested by Williams and Udoh (2022), these factors often intersect with gender, age and ethnicity, requiring a nuanced understanding of student experiences. In the Pacific, cultural identity deeply influences belonging and persistence. Sayula (2024) found that Pacific students' motivations were tied to family and community expectations, often positioning education as a pathway for collective advancement. Moleni (2020) similarly emphasised wayfinding as a collective process, where family networks provide essential resources and guidance for navigating higher education.

These issues extend beyond the Pacific. In Peru, Indigenous students face parallel challenges shaped by rural isolation, systemic inequalities and cultural expectations. Johnson and Levitan (2021) studied 28 *Quechua* and *Asháninka* students from Andean and Amazonian communities, highlighting their collective resilience rooted in parents, elders and teachers—their *ayllu* or community nucleus. Forero (2023) further documented rural Peruvian women's struggles in preserving language and cultural traditions while pursuing education within a system marked by economic hardship and limited infrastructure. Comparing Pacific and Peruvian contexts underscores shared barriers in remote regions, where education requires navigating tensions between tradition, structural inequality and cultural resilience.

Pedagogical barriers

This section draws on the TIPEC framework (Ali et al., 2018), which encompasses teaching methodologies and faculty-related barriers. For adult, returning and non-traditional Pacific students, pedagogy shapes how they navigate online learning and foster their sense of belonging when positioned as central actors in their education.

Kaiwipunikauikawēkiu Lipe, a Native Hawaiian student at the University of Hawai'i, shared her struggles with cultural dissonance in what she considered a predominantly non-Hawaiian institution. Educational methods often failed to reflect her ways of being and learning. Lipe, Oliveira and Wright (2015) emphasised *mo'olelo*—genealogical oral communication—through practices like *mele* (chants), *'ōlelo no'eau* (proverbs), and storytelling. These could inform

distance education practices in Hawai‘i and other regions with Indigenous or marginalised populations. Sayula (2024) similarly revealed that Pacific students valued curricula that reflected their cultural identities—featuring Pacific literature, maps, and storytelling—and deeply appreciated faculty and staff acting as "institutional agents" (p. 38), demonstrating genuine care for student success. Wolfgramm (2021) found that Pacific students in STEM leaned on social capital and trusted networks to navigate their academic journeys, reflecting communal cultural practices.

Meaningful interaction and active faculty presence are vital for student success. This need aligns with US federal requirements for Regular and Substantive Interaction (RSI), which mandates instructor-initiated academic engagement in distance education (US Department of Education, n.d.). Culturally responsive teaching and intentional design enrich online education, fostering a sense of belonging while meeting institutional quality standards.

Technological barriers

This section, drawing on the TIPEC framework (Ali et al., 2018), examines institutional technological readiness, including infrastructure, network capacity, e-learning platforms and technical support. It raises critical questions about how institutions facilitate distance education for Pacific students in remote areas and about how technological support affects their navigation of the system and sense of belonging.

UNESCO's (2024) "Pacific Technology and Education Report" emphasises that "technology is a tool, not a panacea" (p. vii). While digital tools expand educational access, limited and costly infrastructure undermines equity. Effective implementation requires context-driven solutions that are not necessarily advanced but impactful on student outcomes. Iding and Crosby (2013) describe significant disparities across Hawai‘i and the Pacific Islands—especially in outer islands—where outdated computers, weak bandwidth and frequent outages deepen the digital divide. Similarly, Forero (2023), studying rural Peru, advocated for an expanded definition of infrastructure that incorporates digital and communication technologies as critical enablers of educational spaces. Whelan's (2008) analysis of the Pacific eLearning Observatory at the University of the South Pacific (USP) shows persistent ICT (Information and Communication Technologies) barriers across 12 member nations. Despite 70% access to tertiary education (which is relevant given that half of the 22,000 USP students are distance-based), underfunding, limited staffing, and weak infrastructure particularly affect rural distance learners. These findings call for coordinated national, local and institutional support.

Aligning technology with students' realities and integrating it with culturally responsive, student-centred pedagogy is essential. When used thoughtfully, technology can support inclusion and foster belonging rather than reinforce exclusion.

Enabling conditions: Institutional support for distance education

This section draws on the TIPEC framework from Ali et al. (2018), which highlights institutional conditions, including funding, administrative support, policies and ethical considerations, that shape all spheres of belonging. In this model, the institution's role in ensuring program quality and student success is central, making organisational culture a critical factor. Manning (2018) reminds us that universities are sites of contestation—shaped by multiple goals, competing definitions and diverse pressures. Yet, it is this very complexity that sustains them. Veles (2022) calls attention to the "Third Space" emerging in higher education's post-pandemic, highly technological reality. In this space, professional identities shift, power

tensions emerge, and diversity must be repositioned as essential for partnership-building and new knowledge creation. Grounding this concept in the Pacific, Moore (2023) invokes the Oceanic metaphor of *vā/vā/wā*, the relational "space between" that holds all entities in unity (p. 52). Through the Hawaiian practice of *pā'ina*—a shared meal where everyone contributes and listens to each other's stories—Moore illustrates a dialogic, ethical space that erases insider–outsider binaries and affirms each participant's value.

Institutions must, therefore, be defined by their intentional pursuit of quality and culturally responsive education, anchoring a true commitment to student welfare as the foundation for belonging (Ellison & Braxton, 2022). Baice (2023) cautions against reducing equity to vague ideals like "equity for all" (p. 11), which positions all students as having equal opportunities while masking systemic inequalities and framing Pacific learners through deficit lenses. Instead, she advocates for the "unequal treatment of unequals" (p. 12), recognising that meaningful support must be responsive to the distinct needs and lived experiences of Pacific students. Quality assessment should likewise move beyond rigid accountability measures and be embraced as a process of continuous improvement, ensuring programs align with students' cultural contexts and realities (Menchaca & Hoffman, 2009). Online students, particularly in the Pacific region, deserve programs that not only meet federal standards but also honour the diverse knowledge systems and identities they bring to higher education.

Moleni (2020) recommended that institutions actively engage Pacific communities in dialogue to facilitate students' wayfinding trajectories in higher education. Iding and Crosby (2013) proposed building leadership structures between universities and Indigenous communities to collaboratively support students, celebrating Pacific experiences rather than viewing students through deficit lenses. Sayula (2024) warned that institutional practices often led Pacific students to feel invisible or objectified, treated as enrolment numbers rather than individuals. To counteract this, Sayula called for faculty and staff development in cultural competency, along with fair compensation for efforts supporting minority students. Ultimately, institutions must ask themselves: How are we facilitating Pacific students' journeys toward success in distance education? What institutional structures are shaping or hindering their sense of belonging? And what future for distance education are we choosing to build?

CONTEXTUAL INFORMATION

Between 2022 and 2023, UHM enrolled 14,198 undergraduate students, with nearly half (46.1%) exclusively enrolled in online courses. The majority of these online students (87.4%) were residents of Hawai'i, with smaller percentages from other US states (12.1%) and international locations (0.6%) (College Tuition Compare, 2023). This pilot study focuses on a fully online, asynchronous degree-completion program offered by the College of Social Sciences at UHM. Designed for students who have already completed their first two years of general coursework, this program provides a flexible pathway for returning, non-traditional and adult learners. Its five-week accelerated format allows students to concentrate on one course at a time, while its interdisciplinary curriculum explores issues related to Pacific lands, waters, cultures and communities, reflecting the university's mission to become a Native Hawaiian Place of Learning and leveraging its location in the Pacific region.

The program maintains a small enrolment, supporting close-knit learning environments and individualised pathways to completion. During Spring 2024, it served 21 active students, had six graduates and recorded 12 non-persisters (Table 1).

Table 1: Program's profile report 1

General enrolment information			
Criteria (students)	**%**	**Participants**	**Additional notes**
21 Active	53.8	2	● 39 students enrolled between 2020-2024-01. ● 3 participants in this pilot study.
12 Non-persisters	30.7	1	
6 Graduated	15.3		
Gender Enrolment			
Female	60		● The 3 participants of this pilot study were females.
Male	40	0	
Age Distribution			
20-25	14.3		● 46-50 age group with more active students ● 43.5 average age of active students ● 69 maximum age of active students ● 22 minimum age of active students ● 61.9% of active students older than 40 years ● 38.09% of active students younger than 40 years old
26-30	4.8		
31-35	9.5		
36-40	9.5		
41-45	14.3	1	
46-50	19	1	
51-55	4.8		
56-60	14.3	1	
61-65	0		
66-70	9.5		

Table 2: Program's profile report 2

Geographic location enrolment			
Criteria	**%**	**Participants**	**Additional notes**
Hawai'i	80	2	● *CFA status: (Compact of Free Association/Palau): U.S. special relationship with the Republic of the Marshall Islands, the Federal States of Micronesia, Palau, Pacific Island district, commonwealth territory, or insular jurisdiction, state or nation.
US Mainland	13.3		
US National/CFAS*	5	1	
International	1.7		
Race & ethnicity enrolment			
White	38.9	0	● *Native Hawaiian or Part Hawaiian. ● **Asian, including Filipino, Vietnamese and Thai.
Native Hawaiian*/ Pacific Islander	35.2	1	
Multiracial	20.4	2	
Asian**	5.6	0	
Credit hours enrolment			
Part-time	76.7	1	● Full-time students are students enrolled in at least 12 credit hours or more. ● Part-time students are defined as students enrolled in less than 12 credit hours. ● 2 participants of the pilot study were full-time students during 2023, and 1 was a part-time student.
Full-time	23.3	2	

Tables 1 & 2: Information gathered in March 2024 via advising tools supporting online learners in the College of Social Sciences.

One of the three participants in this study stopped out during the research period and was later included in the non-persisters group. The program's 60% female enrolment was reflected in this study's all-female participant sample, aged between 40 and 57 years (Table 1). The majority (80%) reside in Hawai'i, represented by two participants (Table 2). Racial and ethnic composition includes 38.9% white, 35.2% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (1 participant), 20.4% multiracial (2 participants), and 5.6% Asian (Table 2). Although 76.7% of students are enrolled part-time, two of the three participants were full-time, revealing different enrolment choices within the cohort (Table 2).

METHODS

This IRB-approved pilot study was conducted as part of a qualitative research course in Fall 2023 to inform a larger doctoral project. Its purpose was to test feasibility, refine the research design and anticipate potential challenges. The unit of analysis was a fully online, asynchronous undergraduate degree-completion program offered by the College of Social Sciences at the UHM, selected for its distinctive characteristics serving non-traditional adult learners across the Pacific region. Purposeful sampling was used to recruit three online students from the program, all of whom had recently participated in an outreach activity. The final selection was based on availability. Although additional participants could have been invited, the depth of these three women's experiences provided rich insights.

Participants signed informed consent forms, and I assigned them pseudonyms—Grace, Lagi, and Faith—to protect their privacy and honour their fortitude. Semi-structured Zoom interviews were the primary data collection method, guided by 30 open-ended questions exploring motivations, challenges and online learning experiences. Examples included: What aspects of the program do you like most? What motivates you to persist? What challenges have you faced? Interviews lasted about one hour, were audio-recorded using Otter.ai and transcribed. Participants reviewed transcripts for accuracy. Additional data included enrolment, attrition and graduation records, as well as institutional reports. A demographic survey offered context to their experiences (Table 3). This study addressed two questions: Q1. What factors influence Pacific Islander online students' participation in the degree program? Q2. How do online students' integration experiences shape their sense of belonging?

I analysed the data using an abductive approach (Bloomberg, 2022), balancing inductive exploration with deductive guidance from the proposed model. As Stake (1995) noted, this involves observing and interpreting meaning as it evolves. The TIPEC framework supported the categorisation of barriers, while the academic, dialogic and place-belonging spheres informed the interpretation of emotional and personal connections. Manual coding in Word and Excel followed three levels: (1) in vivo coding using highlights to identify shared participant language; (2) dramaturgical coding (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018), capturing objectives, conflicts, tactics, attitudes, emotions and subtext; and (3) a priori coding, mapping student experiences onto theoretical concepts.

To ensure trustworthiness, defined as the "truthfulness of your findings and conclusions based on maximum opportunity to hear participants' voices in a particular context" (Hays & Singh, 2012, p. 192), I used multiple strategies. These included a reflexive journal, member checking, triangulation of data sources and theory, peer debriefing, simultaneous data collection and analysis, thick description and an audit trail.

While the small, all-female sample limits transferability, the study prioritised depth to honour participants' voices and offers context-rich insights supported by multiple trustworthiness strategies.

Table 3. Participant characteristics

Characteristics	Grace	Lagi	Faith
Age group	56-60	46-50	41-45
Gender	Female	Female	Female
Race/ethnicity	Multiracial	Pacific Islander	Multiracial
Geographic location	Hawai'i	Compact of Free Association status (CFA)	Hawai'i
Marital status	Married	Married	Single
Dependent children	Non-dependent	Dependent	Dependent
University enrollment	PT	FT	FT
Previous academic background	Some college with credential: AA	Some college, no credential	Some college with credential: AA
Work status	FT	FT	PT
Economic status of household	Medium-income tier	Medium-income tier	Lower-income tier

Note: PT: Part-time. FT: Full-time.

FINDINGS

The findings are organised into two sections, corresponding to each research question and connected to an emerging theme.

Ability of online students to participate in the degree program

The three participants, Grace, Faith, and Lagi, brought unique life experiences shaped by personal, professional and cultural contexts. Grace, living in O'ahu, worked full-time for a nonprofit supporting Pacific communities, making in-person classes impossible. Secretly pursuing her degree, she planned to surprise her family with her accomplishment. Faith, a single mother in rural Kaua'i, balanced caregiving, part-time jobs and a desire for a stable future. Lagi, a Native Pacific Islander in Micronesia, followed in her educator parents' footsteps and worked in a non-governmental organisation focused on Indigenous learning recovery. Despite their varied backgrounds, all three exemplified resilience, integrating their studies into their demanding lives.

Returning to school after 17 to 25 years was transformative. Motherhood and early academic struggles had delayed their education, but the pandemic unexpectedly prepared them for online learning. They became comfortable with digital tools like Google Drive and video conferencing. As Grace noted, "The pandemic happened, and everybody was going online." The decision to return was also deeply personal. Grace and Lagi sought career advancement, while Faith hoped a degree would provide better job opportunities and allow her to give back to her Hawaiian community.

Family support varied. Lagi's family ensured quiet study hours and reminded her to stay on track. Faith, as a single mother and caregiver, had fewer resources and often struggled to balance responsibilities. She admitted, "I go all over the place sometimes . . . I have a lot going on."

Each participant encountered the online program differently. Grace initially aimed for an associate degree but was encouraged by an advisor to continue to a bachelor's degree. Lagi's colleagues, many of whom are UHM alums, supported her decision, noting her passion for

education. She recalled, “I felt out of place not having a degree”. Faith, recognising UHM’s strong reputation, valued how “if you tell them you graduated from UH, it’s automatic”, signalling employment opportunities. Distance education presented a rare opportunity, as all three women saw this as possibly their last chance to achieve their academic goals.

While technology was already part of their lives, navigating university systems proved challenging. Registering for courses and using unfamiliar platforms felt overwhelming. One participant described feeling like she was “just floating around for a second”. However, a responsive advisor and a supportive college unit helped ease the transition.

Adapting to online learning required both logistical and technical adjustments. Although they had basic resources, they needed additional tools such as printers, second monitors and microphones. Lagi and Faith frequently experienced power outages and unstable internet, forcing them to print materials in advance. Grace sought IT assistance to install applications like FlipGrid and Padlet. Faith struggled with being recorded—a requirement for many courses—but her ethnic studies classes introduced her to presentation theory, helping her overcome this fear.

Academic challenges also emerged, particularly in reading and writing. The complexity and volume of scholarly articles made them question their ability to persist. However, engaging discussions with peers facilitated their experience. Faith described how the content “keeps surprising me . . . I’ve been turned into an activist!” The program’s compressed five-week format sparked mixed opinions—Grace and Faith valued its focus, while Lagi preferred the 16-week structure, which allowed deeper reflection. Two participants had to enrol full-time to receive financial aid, intensifying their workload. Despite these challenges, the program’s interdisciplinary nature stood out, broadening their perspectives. Faith remarked, “That’s going to be the key to all of this, to a better world—everybody from all different angles”.

Time zone differences added another layer of difficulty. Lagi, balancing her studies from Micronesia, shared, “My Monday is your Sunday; I dedicate at least half of it to schoolwork”. Assignments due during the week sometimes conflicted with her schedule, but she remained focused on learning over grades.

Instructor support played a crucial role in their experiences. However, faculty responsiveness and course design varied. Some instructors maintained open communication, while others left students feeling directionless. Grace explained, “Some are just throwing the class onto the student: whatever you get out of it and however you want to define it”. Grace strongly claimed, "You still direct me!” This inconsistency underscored the need for clearer instructional expectations in online education.

Their cultural and professional identities were deeply connected to their academic pursuits, with the program’s emphasis on Pacific knowledge giving their studies a clear sense of purpose. Grace found the coursework “interesting and relevant to [her] work”. Lagi took pride in encouraging her daughter to study at UHM, where their Pacific heritage was valued: “This part of yourself that you’ve been distancing from . . . it’s all available at UH”. For Faith, education was both personal and place-based, shaped by two certainties: setting an example for her children and giving back to Kaua‘i. Aware of her island’s economic struggles, she aspired to teach Hawaiian *keiki* (children), combining her degree, a Hawaiian Studies Certificate, her fluency in Hawaiian and a parallel pursuit of a Hawaiian Music Certificate.

These experiences reveal the complexity of distance education for multifaceted adult learners. Their success relied on administrative clarity, flexibility and culturally relevant learning

experiences that accommodated their digital literacy levels, time constraints, internet access and academic needs.

Integration experiences and sense of belonging

The results from this section intend to dig deeper into the three spheres of sense of belonging; therefore, the findings are organised accordingly.

Academic belonging

The academic belonging sphere captures students' connection to course content, classmates and instructors as they evolve into active knowledge creators. Though their academic community was primarily virtual, culturally relevant coursework strengthened engagement. Grace shared how her learning reshaped her work with Pacific youth: "I've seen a correlation . . . history I wasn't aware of, which makes me look at things from a different perspective". Similarly, Lagi found the program deeply affirming: "That's what keeps me going . . . that's what I've wanted to learn since I was a child . . . it connects". For both, academic belonging was not just about coursework; it reflected their identities, aspirations and sense of purpose.

In terms of peer interaction, participants identified discussion forums as the main space for academic inquiry. Tools like Flip and Padlet supported expression, yet students did not engage in group work or practices grounded in Hawaiian or Pacific traditions. Many approached their studies pragmatically, focusing on degree completion, though they also missed the warmth of a traditional classroom. As Lagi admitted, "My main focus was just taking courses and getting a degree . . . I wasn't really worried about having the connections". Still, when challenges arose, connection proved essential. Grace leaned on a trusted classmate, and Lagi appreciated the familiarity built through the program's cohort-style rotation. While they valued community, they didn't engage in optional peer spaces, suggesting a need to rethink interaction design to reflect Pacific non-traditional students' relational values.

Teaching presence—essential for student success—was experienced unevenly. Students valued instructors who offered flexibility, clarity and understanding of their unique lives. Lagi described an impactful teaching strategy involving a shared document in which she reflected on her Pacific Islander identity and the course material. Her instructor's personalised feedback made her feel seen: "Writing everything down . . . how it applies to me, where I'm from—felt meaningful. Having at least one person paying attention and looking at it made a big difference". These moments illustrate the power of culturally responsive teaching and highlight the need for consistent, relational instructional approaches in online learning.

Dialogic belonging

Dialogic belonging highlights the role of diverse voices and reciprocal exchanges in fostering meaningful relationships in online spaces. Despite limited opportunities for connection, participants engaged through discussion forums, written responses, videos, online meetings and the cohort course structure. Their maturity and life experiences enabled them to approach interactions with empathy and openness. Lagi reflected, "I'm beginning to understand: this person, this is their experience, and this is where they're talking from". Grace emphasised, "That hint of experience, being around, that awareness has helped me through these classes". Faith valued the exposure to diverse perspectives, explaining, "We think we know, but we really don't because there are so many other ways of thinking . . . there's so much happening out there that we don't understand".

Beyond appreciating multiple perspectives, the Dialogic Sphere of Multivoiceness captures participants' transformation as their voices grow more confident. Their Hawaiian and Pacific identities, age and gender were not barriers but sources of strength. Lagi proudly saw herself contributing to education in Micronesia: "My sons are lucky to be in this age. I can see things that my parents both helped shape in the education system . . . I am being part of that change! Yes, yes, yes, and yes!".

Faith echoed this sense of empowerment and possibility, stating, "I did the family planning first; I did things a little bit backward, but I think I'm getting there . . . I'm not done yet!" Their experiences illustrate how multivoiceness in distance education fosters understanding, strengthens identity and inspires change within their communities and beyond.

Place belonging

For Pacific Islander students, land, heritage and cultural identity shape their sense of belonging and academic engagement. Grace found that her studies deepened her understanding of the broader impact of her work: "I know what we do; I didn't know why we do it . . . The water projects down in the Marshall Islands; I didn't realize they have got those issues". Education illuminated the cultural and environmental dimensions of her projects, reinforcing their significance. Faith, deeply attuned to her island's challenges, aspired to give back to her community. Studying in a program focused on Pacific issues, Hawaiian studies, and Hawaiian music reflected her connection to Hawaiian heritage, and she saw UHM's prestige as a gateway to working in Hawai'i: "It will allow me to work at home, in Hawai'i".

Lagi's academic journey was intertwined with her Pacific identity, her work and her cultural responsibilities. Frustrated by a Westernised education disconnected from her surroundings, she recalled: "Why do I have to learn about the capital of so and so when I don't know where this is?" Today, her work in Indigenous learning recovery fosters the same place-based knowledge she once lacked. After online coursework and Zoom meetings, she travels by boat to outer islands, supporting Indigenous elders in teaching children traditional practices. Life, work and education are inseparable for Lagi: "It all gets woven into what I'm doing throughout the region".

Adult students returning to higher education bring life experience, resilience and commitments to family and community, helping them navigate an often impersonal online environment. These women embody personal growth and empowerment, demonstrating that their contributions to their communities matter just as much as earning a degree. Higher education institutions must listen to their voices and ensure that online learning reflects their realities and supports their success.

DISCUSSION

This study presents a comprehensive framework that builds upon existing models to elucidate the complex realities of Pacific Islander online learners. For participation (RQ1), adapting TIPEC (Ali et al., 2018) maps how technological, individual and pedagogical barriers intersect with age, gender, race and socioeconomic status. Yet TIPEC overlooks emotional and cultural dimensions. Embedding TIPEC within a belonging model underscores the importance of purpose, voice and relationships in sustaining engagement.

For belonging (RQ2), the model diverges from linear integration frameworks, such as those of Tinto (1987) and Rovai (2003), which emphasise institutional assimilation or classroom interaction. Its three belonging spheres—academic, dialogic, and place-based—show how students create meaning through identity, community, and cultural continuity, often beyond

traditional structures. While Bean and Metzner (1985) downplay social integration for non-traditional learners, this study affirms that belonging remains central—redefined through Indigenous and Pacific lenses as land-rooted learning, culturally sustaining ties and dialogic empowerment in virtual spaces.

Building on CoI (Garrison et al., 1999), the academic belonging sphere offers a culturally grounded lens that redefines presence for Pacific non-traditional learners. Beyond CoI's triad—cognitive, social, teaching—this study reveals needs that are place-driven, historically rooted and culturally affirming. Cognitive presence deepened when Pacific identities were centred in coursework. Teaching presence proved critical when instructors offered relational, flexible and responsive feedback. Rather than general notions of community, belonging here reflects embodied histories, purposeful pragmatism and relational validation—expanding CoI through Pacific epistemologies.

Dialogic belonging emerged as participants' voices grew more confident and culturally grounded. While these shifts reflect Bakhtin's multivoiceness (Quantz & O'Connor, 1988), asynchronous formats often yield sequential monologues rather than true dialogue, thereby revealing tension with Bakhtin's chronotope, in which meaning arises through shared time and space. Still, dialogic learning is possible through intentional design that fosters responsiveness and narrative continuity, whether asynchronous or supported by complementary synchronous elements. Embedding Pacific epistemologies requires community-building and culturally grounded presence. Timely feedback and regular interaction remain essential to realising multivoiceness.

Place belonging emphasises how land, heritage and culture shape educational purpose and epistemologies (Tuck & McKenzie, 2015). For Faith, this was deeply affective, anchored in giving back and sustaining Hawai'i's culture. Her goals were entwined with land, family and future. For Lagi, place belonging was epistemological: her frustration with disconnected curricula fueled efforts to critique dominant paradigms and revive Indigenous knowledge across outer islands. These contrasts show that place belonging is neither uniform nor static. In both cases, distance education became a vehicle for rooted, community-responsive learning across time and space as students navigated their cultural responsibilities and educational goals not only within physical geographies but also across generational knowledge systems and digital platforms.

This pilot study has limitations, including a small, all-female sample, the absence of Native Hawaiian and male voices, and the lack of faculty or administrative perspectives. While not generalisable, the findings offer transferable insights into how institutional support, culture and relational well-being can shape online learning. Notably, even with only one Native Pacific Islander, Hawaiian and Pacific values emerged as central. The model reframes success as multidimensional and culturally anchored, but its broader applicability remains to be tested.

In Peru, belonging and multivoiceness face distinct constraints. Johnson and Levitan (2021) describe how rural students struggled when forced to use Spanish instead of *Quechua* or *Asháninka*, compounding linguistic, gendered and class-based exclusions. Forero (2023) highlights the fragility of bilingual education, as 45 Indigenous languages confront systemic inequities. These examples show that place and voice are not abstract ideals but lived experiences, shaped by marginalisation, historical violence and structural barriers that limit expression and connection.

Applying this model elsewhere requires interrogating local meanings of place: what histories, values and communication patterns shape distance learning in that setting? Multivoiceness must also be re-examined in contexts where colonial, gendered, or economic hierarchies silence non-dominant voices. Future research should explore these dynamics to refine the model and support more inclusive online education systems.

Actionable Recommendations:

1. *Bridge the Digital and Cultural Access Divide*: Prioritise accessible, culturally relevant tools and materials that reflect students' lived realities, not just advanced infrastructure.
2. *Design for Cultural and Place-Based Relevance*: Embed Pacific knowledge systems, traditions and land-rooted epistemologies into course content, design and learning outcomes.
3. *Identify and Support Students Proactively*: Use learner profiles and early alert systems to identify barriers, provide mentorship and nurture relational well-being throughout the program.
4. *Foster Belonging through Institutional Integration*: Strengthen students' institutional ties via online orientations, peer networks and rituals that reflect Pacific values of community and reciprocity.
5. *Create Meaningful Dialogic Engagement Channels*: Ensure reciprocal, ongoing communication among students, faculty, and administration through structured, culturally attuned mechanisms.
6. *Train Faculty in Culturally Responsive and Dialogic Pedagogies*: Equip faculty to facilitate multivoiced, inclusive learning through Pacific-centred epistemologies and relational teaching practices.
7. *Diversify Course Formats to Reflect Pacific Learning Styles*: Incorporate multimodal and synchronous components, project-based learning, and storytelling formats that honour cultural variation and learner voice.

CONCLUSIONS

This study positions belonging as central to Pacific adult online learners, offering a holistic model rooted in lived experience. It carries theoretical, institutional and pedagogical implications: distance education must support connection and growth; institutions must centre student welfare; and pedagogy must prioritise equity, clarity and cultural relevance. Ultimately, fostering belonging requires intentional strategies that empower learners and nurture meaningful, relational engagement in culturally grounded online spaces.

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