



Post-Webinar Plática* Q&A with Cynthia Olivo of Pasadena City College

* Plática = talk, or chat

CLP hosted a series of webinars to support student services faculty, staff, and administrators at community colleges across California as they re-orient to providing services completely online during the Covid-19 pandemic. Find information about the series (and additional materials) at <https://www.careerladdersproject.org/problem-solving-moving-student-supports-online-a-clp-webinar-series/>. Dr. Cynthia Olivo, vice president of student services at Pasadena City College (PCC), was one of the presenters.

[Cynthia's presentation](#) focused on how her college is responding to the social work needs of her students during the Covid-19 pandemic. We asked her to expand on some of the subjects she touched on in hopes that we can continue to share and build out our [California Counseling Network \(CaCN\) community of practice](#).

CLP: Was it difficult to coordinate the tangible social work resources for your students?

Olivo: It wasn't too difficult because on March 11 or maybe a few days before, I pulled my student services managers together because my brother in law is an ER doctor, and he told me that this virus was going to be disruptive. So I had already given my team notice of what was coming. I had known about Covid-19 since late January because we had international students impacted by the virus. I already talked about this issue with our international student department and our student health center.

Our international department worked to quickly resolve the needs of students who were overseas. They had Zoom meetings early in the morning, around 5 a.m. Pacific. I was proud of this department's flexibility in meeting the needs of students.

In terms of meeting social work needs, I had reached out to our teams in social work services, health therapy, disabled student services, counseling, financial aid, and admissions for ideas about how we would proceed online. I pushed them to come up with a plan and to put it in place. Our food pantry said that it could do food distribution. I told my team to think of the ways that we are there for our loved ones and that's where the ideas emerged about how to respond to our students. Fortunately, for the past few years, we have done a lot of fundraising to support our [Lancer Pantry](#).

We had about \$50,000 in our foundation account, which comes from our flea market. This supports emergency aid, and \$100,000 from flea market funds goes to student scholarships. We are always figuring out how to collaborate and be creative and utilize existing resources.

CLP: Did you have any prior data on food insecurity and housing needs for your students?

Olivo: I would say that we do have data on food insecurity because we have been using the [Lancer Pantry](#) for four years. We were able to distribute 100 electronic gift cards for grocery shopping per day, this is our second full year with a social worker on staff. This has helped because anyone who has housing insecurity can speak with a dedicated staff person who can help navigate the paperwork and build active relationships with community-based housing organizations. I make sure the social worker pays attention to local government to be equipped with recent information.

Last year, I formed a housing resource committee with community organizations to be responsive to homeless students. Every housing resource community attracts 10-12 agencies to provide input. Hathaway Sycamore is one of those local organizations. They have a housing navigator, who helped place a student in need. My team knows that all of us have to be social workers at this point, so we have an app, where we are all linked to share social work resources.

CLP: You also indicated that PCC is doing personal outreach to students who have not logged into the learning management system. Is your team having success with personal outreach?

Olivo: Our first outreach was through the executive committee because we realized that each VP has staff who could do the outreach, but we all did outreach; even our president was making calls. I divided a list of 1,200 students from the VPs. Our calls revealed that students' top needs were access to tech and food. By the second week, we were down to 700 students who needed to be called, and we worked from there. Some students needed to withdraw from classes, and some needed other resources. The behavior we are seeking is logging into the LMS (learning management system) because it's an indicator of who has access versus who does not.

CLP: You discussed using social media tools as a way to reach students and relay information. Is FERPA or student privacy an issue, given the ever-evolving privacy policies of various social media platforms?

Olivo: I would say that FERPA (the federal Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act) is always something we should care about and follow. We never want to reveal a student's personal information or ID on social media, but the kind that we have engaged in thus far is providing information to students.

At our college, we have a large number of traditional-age students, many are bummed out about this situation and upset about missing commencement. My student life department was encouraged by student leaders to do Tik Tok videos. And our Cross-Cultural Center interviewed staff on Facebook Live. Social media is a good way to figure out how students are communicating during this time.

CLP: How is PCC addressing mental health support for its students?

Olivo: We have updated our intake form to consider therapy over the phone, and we are providing telephone access to mental health therapists. If a student needs a therapy session, we have guidelines so they can be honest with the therapist and make the most of the session. I feel bad for colleges that don't have mental health therapists on staff. I have referred so many students for the past three to four weeks. Some students are worried about leaving their homes, some are having issues with caring for their own children or family members, and some LGBTQ students might experience stress being at home with family members who don't know they are LGBTQ. I also have had Asian and Pacific Islander students share that they have been victims of racism because of the virus.

Finally, we have an hourly therapist from Pacific Oaks University whose specialties are African American and Latinx family counseling. She has a background in students of color and formerly incarcerated individuals and is available to meet via Zoom. I'm proud that we have a dedicated therapist for formerly incarcerated students.

The webinar series was produced by the Career Ladders Project with funding from the California Community College Chancellor's Office.