Post Webinar Plática* Q&A
with Grace Beltran of Skyline 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. Grace Beltran, a program services coordinator at Skyline College, was one of the presenters.

Grace Beltran's presentation addressed how she and her colleagues have prepared to be student-ready while transitioning to providing online services. She also discussed ways to be innovative and creative in this virtual work environment. We followed up with her to ask a few additional questions about the transition to online services at Skyline College.

CLP: In your presentation, you mentioned that your college created a student survey to determine what their needs and concerns were. How was the response and did you have any challenges in getting students to answer the survey?

Beltran: We have approximately 9,000 students who are taking classes at Skyline, and we had about 600 or so responses. We have reached out to students based on responses. We did not have an incentive to participate, but we did have a lot of responses that came through text messages. When we set up the survey, it was initially sent out via email and then reminders were sent to the students via text for them to respond. One thing that was interesting is that a lot of students responded via text, but many indicated in the survey that they preferred receiving information via email. The purpose of the survey was mainly to gauge the need of our student population not only for academic counseling or equipment (laptops and/or hot spots) support, but other basic needs such as food, physical health, mental health, and housing to name a few.

CLP: What have been the biggest challenges that you and your colleagues have encountered in trying to prepare students to be successful this term from a distance?

Beltran: Within the first few weeks, our students were in a phase where there was little communication. We were trying to respond to their messages. We were in the process of transitioning students to being completely online, and they were looking for answers. We were still trying to figure things out in terms of processes and how to communicate with everyone and how to alleviate the load of things that we had to do.

In our counseling division on campus, we have five student ambassadors, and we are constantly answering our phones. We are always busy, and on our campus, it's known among students that the counseling office will answer the phone. We have a reputation for being really responsive for students who need to speak with a counselor or even ask questions about graduation requirements and deadlines. When we first went online, we were trying to communicate to the students as quickly as we normally do. We noticed that students are quick to send email about an issue that they might have, but they [students] are not always quick to respond. The communication piece has been challenging in working with our students. Emails can get buried in inboxes, especially now.

We do use Google voice to contact students so they don't have our personal phone numbers, but it's more about getting a hold of staff and faculty to see where they are at. Some other divisions have allowed people to be flexible with their schedule when working at home, and others haven't been as flexible. For our students or even staff or faculty who are used to a quick response, waiting is more difficult because now we have emails at all hours of the day, and sometimes the person sending those emails expects an immediate response even if it's sent at night.

CLP: How has working with feeder schools and your counseling peers at the high school level changed in this virtual environment?

Beltran: Normally, we would often work at the high schools at certain hours so they could do counseling appointments onsite for incoming students. This has typically mirrored the bell schedule at their high school. With Zoom meetings, now students were told that we would be going with their bell schedule for these appointments, which is difficult because the students aren't prompted by the bell at home. SARs [Scheduling And Reporting System] is the appointment system that we use for scheduling student appointments, so we are logging the appointments like we normally would if they were in-person meetings. We are finding that some high schools are adhering to bell schedules now and some aren't.

We have noticed that students either try to get into Zoom too early or the counselor will hop on a little earlier or later than the student, instead of waiting 5-10 minutes for the student to show up. And sometimes the student, the counselor, or both end up missing the appointment. In our effort to transition online, we came across the reality that not all HS students know how to use Zoom and not all college students know how to use Zoom. Some students are getting lost. Student outreach ambassadors call and then explain how to use Zoom so they don't miss their appointments. We have to hold the students' hands to get them on Zoom and even some of our HS counselors need this extra support. We are communicating about how to use Zoom via email and on the phone, and this takes time from other work.

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