



Post Webinar Plática* Q&A with Julia Vergara, Co-Executive Director, The Puente Project

* 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>.

Julia Vergara, the Co-executive Director of The Puente Project, addressed how she and her team have continued to focus on equity and sustaining professional development during the Covid-19 crisis in her [presentation](#). She also discussed how The Puente Project is monitoring the psychological and emotional well-being of its students while continuing to focus on academic excellence. We followed up with her to ask a few additional questions about how The Puente Project has adapted to the pandemic.

CLP: How is Puente working between all their programs—elementary, high school, California Community Colleges, Texas Community Colleges and the state of Washington Community and Technical Colleges—in regards to how they are responding and working under the pandemic challenges and pressures?

Vergara: Decisions in education can at times be slow, usually because there are so many people examining things from different angles. Finding common ground in education is important but can, at times, contribute to a slow response.

However, these are unprecedented times for education—faculty, staff and administrators have rightly and successfully spent the first few weeks of the closure focused on responding to immediate needs, such as technology and equipment access issues and food insecurities.

We have memorandums of understanding (MOUs) with high schools, middle schools, and community colleges in Texas and California. In Texas, things are a little bit different at the community college level because there are some structural differences in terms of how the colleges are organized and in the way they operate. California and Washington community colleges are more similar. In California, the

MOUs state that we provide teacher and counselor support through professional development. There are a lot of different methods to provide support services. Puente is committed to hosting a leadership conference and to providing professional development so that leaders can go back to their campuses and lead. Often, participants come from the associated student bodies. We also have a writers conference. About 5,000 of our students are directly impacted by having to change these activities to be online. And our indirect impact is close to 40,000 students.

Our response has to be more immediate during this time. Puente is continuing to honor its responsibilities as an equity-centered partner with faculty and students and is focused on these areas:

- Check-in with Puente students and Puente teams about ensuring program's stability in the coming academic year; and
- Provide strategies for distance learning
- Share with our partners and teams our vision for expanding professional development for all community college faculty and a staff

For example, we hosted the Puente hour, a recurring online event where we have had various topics and workshops that provide professional development and support. We continue to do weekly check-ins online with our community college staff.

CLP: In terms of professional development of staff and faculty at the community colleges, how have you had to adjust the training to meet the needs of the faculty and staff participants during the COVID-19 crisis?

Vergara: Initially, we did a lot of listening. We know that faculty were experiencing a lot of anxiety about revamping their classes for online delivery, and they had a lot of emotions to deal with in not seeing their students. The idea of not seeing students was something that people needed to talk about, so we also looked at the emotional and psychological side of COVID. We also started to build online resources to build capacity, and discuss how to revamp and retool and then help faculty re-envision their classrooms online.

Puente has provided resources and training and is always sharing online resources. My own staff is constantly going to webinars to learn about how to support students. We have moved all professional development to online for summer for Texas, Washington, and California. We are providing the same things as we would in person, but we have had to make modifications. As an example, a session might have been eight hours with breaks in person; now that kind of session would be online for three hours. Now with online delivery, we are using pre-work that is happening regionally and then with our teams, which is what's happening with the Pre-Puente Summer Institute. We are still learning what content translates well online. There's a big learning curve for all of us taking place right now.

Page 2

CLP: What resources have you found to be helpful in keeping Puente students engaged and on the path of persistence and success during this challenging time?

Vergara: We have been encouraging Zoom meetings because being able to see each other is important for our students, and we have encouraged all faculty to keep office hours and to extend them to give students more opportunities to connect. We have had to think about technology and are purchasing hotspots and computers for some of the students who are at home and are sharing computers with siblings. Sometimes they don't get to use a computer until after a sibling can use it. This is a bigger problem for our middle and high school students. Our community college students tend to be more technologically equipped.

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

Page 3