



## Post Webinar Plática\* Q&A with Nzingha Dugas, Executive Director, Umoja Community Education Foundation

\* 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>. Nzingha Dugas, the Executive Director of the Umoja Community Education Foundation, shared her expertise about how the Umoja community is transitioning their strategies in serving at-risk, educationally, economically under-resourced African American and other students in an online environment.

[Nzingha Dugas's presentation addressed](#) how Umoja promotes student success and how their work connects students to their cultural identity. As she pointed out, Umoja is an academic and cultural program that is aligned with the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office Vision for Success.

**CLP: What is the key support that has helped students in your program navigate from the face-to-face to online transition? And why?**

**Dugas:** I think there is one very critical factor -- students feel included. Umoja operates like a family, a site-based family with coordinators, faculty and staff who have a comprehensive approach to support student success. Our practices engage our students, and we foster an inclusiveness based on relationship building and trust between academic support folks and the students. Our students feel like they have a community behind them. They feel grounded. Because of COVID-19, their coordinators and counselors now check on their progress and needs online. This inclusive, collective value system has a huge impact on student success.

The second factor is the regional coordinators who support campus-based coordinators doing the direct work with our students. We have seven regional coordinators throughout the state who support the development and implementation of Umoja programs at the colleges for our

students. They also support faculty and coordinators at the individual colleges. We have routine check-ins, all-group meetings, and we have coordinator and counselor meetings that are continuing to take place online.

**CLP: Umoja practices are rooted in community building and sharing cultural practices. How have you been able to build that community with students in an online environment and how are students building community and relationships with each other?**

**Dugas:** One thing that we try to underscore is that Umoja looks at the whole student -- we don't separate cultural activities from academics. We want students to have the ability to stand on their culture and to use their sense of identity as a foundation. We engage in community building to help them understand the larger impact of their intellectual identity.

We draw on the knowledge from ancient Africa, promoting success through excellence. This touches all aspects of what we do in the program.

I should add that students reach out to me and continue to do so during this time. They want to check in and see that they are on the right track with their studies. They have a love and appreciation for the entire Umoja family.

We have continued to share practices that are culturally rooted even during this COVID-19 crisis, and our program participants share the practices among themselves. I have talked to some students who have expressed that not being around other students who are like them has impacted how they feel about getting through this crisis, so we have really tried to be intentional about making sure that the Umoja family continues to be a resource for them. One of the ways we hope to gain more student voice and feedback is through our May 15 town hall webinar designed to allow students to share the impact of COVID and identify solutions that will help them navigate this challenging moment.

**CLP: You mentioned professional development in your presentation and how that enriches the Umoja experience. How could faculty and staff who aren't participating in Umoja benefit from some of these professional development resources, especially now that the colleges have transitioned to online service and instruction?**

**Dugas:** This is a great question. I would love to see Umoja and Puente be the lead trainers at the community colleges. We have been expanding the way the colleges can use Umoja. We have a faculty institute and before the COVID-19 crisis, this would occur in person. We are working on translating all of this into webinars for online delivery. Social distancing is hard on

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our community because our work is relational in that we take a holistic view of the mind, body, and spirit. This is harder to reflect in a webinar, but we're going to try to make it work. Ultimately, we want faculty and staff to walk away feeling enlightened and having takeaways that they can use immediately with their students.

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

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