

8. Student Peer Support

Several CLP programs have organized creative systems of peer support to help their students build relationships and learn together, including doing joint projects, socializing and sharing personal issues with each other. These formal and informal peer support systems are especially important for community college and other commuter students: they don't have the advantages of living together in dorms or having meals together, and their time with other students is reduced because they have part- or full-time jobs and often must take off a full term to make ends meet.

The goals of these peer support strategies are to –

- Increase student retention and graduation rates which are quite low at most American community colleges and other commuter colleges.
- Reinforce the students' learning by helping them support and learn from each other.
- Strengthen the identity and visibility of Community Change Studies in order to encourage more students to enroll in a full Certificate or Degree program rather than take only scattered courses, and
- Build ties among students which encourage them to stay together for the entire Certificate or Degree program

Strategies for Increasing Peer Support:

CLP sites have developed several creative ways of facilitating interaction among students, creating ways of helping them get to know each other, build relationships, and eventually reinforce each other.

First, CCS instructors and guest speakers use interactive teaching techniques to reinforce relationships among students -- stimulating **peer-to-peer discussion and learning**, using Socratic methods to question students and foster dialogue, and creating small pop-up discussion and learning groups during class.

Second, faculty develop projects for **joint work** by small groups, including experiential learning opportunities on and off campus. Courses in Community Organizing and Participatory Action Research are geared to teach active listening, sharing personal stories, building relationships, and working with others to

develop a shared analysis of an issue and the best strategies for addressing it. What's more, CCS courses and modules focusing on issues of identity, race, power and privilege are particularly effective in deepening the dialogue and sharing among students, and often have a transformative effect in enabling students to cross cultural and other boundaries. Furthermore, Capstone activities and projects often are developed by teams of students.

Third, some CLP sites have developed *familias* modelled on a remarkable approach pioneered by a DeAnza English professor. This chapter concludes with a lengthy section on the DeAnza program which, in short, creates families of 4 or 5 students as a course begins. They then work and learn together throughout that course and subsequent ones.

Fourth, Salt Lake City Community College and DeAnza have developed **Student Centers on civic engagement and organizing**. These provide places for students with common interests in community and social change to hang out, get helpful advice from other students, study, go on-line, learn about upcoming events and campaigns, get assistance on financial aid, housing, food pantry, internships, etc. These centers help create a sense of identity which can be fortified with CCS tee shirts, hats and other swag. They greatly benefit from being staffed, and are ideal spots for Work Study students to work and help their peers.

Fifth, faculty at several colleges, including Minneapolis College, have developed **student CCS clubs** which not only attract new students to Community Change Studies but also build relationships between them, current CCS students, and alumni who share their common interest in community development, organizing, and social justice. These sometimes focus on such shared issues as climate change, DACA and immigrant rights, Student Government elections or the need for student housing.

CCS programs have had difficulty creating **cohorts** of students who enroll in the full Degree or Certificate program at the same time and then are able to stay together through the full sequence of courses. This would maximize peer support and learning, while also enabling the faculty to schedule courses in the most logical sequence for preparing for developing the students' knowledge, skills and vision.

There are two reasons this is seldom practical for our programs. Most importantly, low-income and working-class students find it extremely difficult to stay in school consistently because they have to work full- or part-time, and often must take off an entire term to handle their financial needs. Secondly, it is difficult to convince a student to enroll in a multi-course Certificate or Degree program until they have tested one or more courses in that discipline.

In Paying the Price, Professor Sara Goldrick-Rab points out **“Full-time enrollment promotes degree completion not only because of the pace of progress it allows but also because of the academic focus it facilitates.”**

“Familias” for peer learning and support:

Several years ago, Marc Coronado, an instructor in English, Women’s Studies and Chicana/o Studies at DeAnza College, created an imaginative strategy of leadership and group development as an integral part of learning and student support. At the beginning of each quarter, faculty create “familias” or small, consistent groups of 4 or 5 students who learn from and support each other as they learn from the class as a whole.

The familias approach emerged out of experience with LEAD (Latina/o Empowerment at De Anza), a program which was presented to President Brian Murphy and approved in 2005. The first summer, a group of 16 students and two instructors created the program. Half the initial students were Latino, half not, and Marc worked with them to “figure it out”. Some students had done some organizing or seen organizing in action, and all students found it meaningful to work with real issues as they learned. Their first course became very intensive, meeting 4 hours a day every day, including field trips and food events as a way of building a supportive community. The idea of creating familias emerged from the students’ desire to break the class into smaller groups to accomplish meaningful work. The smaller groups work together so intensively that they begin to know each other intimately, to share in lots of ways both personal and academic, and to refer to themselves as family. Knowing that many students had difficult experiences with their biological families and that the term "familia" therefore wasn’t necessarily a positive one, Marc took the students through a process of discussing that fact, saying to the students that as adults they have an opportunity

to choose their own family, to recreate what the word means. The discussion stressed the students' sense of responsibility for each other, person to person.

Dr. Coronado made it a rule to avoid interfering if difficulties emerge in one of the familias, because then it “would no longer be a family. It would be just a group.” Familias typically resolve their own difficulties with the help of their LEAD Mentors.

The route into a LEAD familia is through one of the LEAD classes, which include Economics, Ethnic Studies, Chicana/o Studies, Women’s Studies, Composition and Reading. Two classes are taught online incorporating the familia structure. In most classes, students are assigned to familias based on their choice of social justice projects and civic engagement opportunities.

Instructors are aided by LEAD mentors -- students who have taken other LEAD courses, who are committed to social justice, and do not need much handholding. The course includes an introduction to leadership skills, civic engagement “to get their hands dirty”, field trips to understand their history in depth, and regular mentoring by faculty.

The familia structure stresses responsibility to each other, and the familias help teach the course content (after demonstrations by the instructor and LEAD mentors). That lightens the load for the teacher, and helps familia members develop a sense of being able to rely on themselves and each other. For example, if a familia member doesn’t show up for class, another calls them, checks in on them and fills them in on what happened that day. When they prepare for tests or essays, they do research together. When they make class presentations, they divide the work up and rely on the talents of each familia member. This philosophy and practice helps students move beyond individualism to experiencing the value of collaboration.

Community college students sometimes must take off a quarter to earn money or help their families as primary caregivers. When this happens, they remain members of the larger LEAD familia, with someone checking in with them from time to time. They are also invited to two fixed annual events in which all LEAD students, alumni, and friends participate. These are the Annual Familia Reunion in January and an end of the year celebratory event in June. People bring food, there’s no agenda, they just hang out. These events **reach people who are not in**

school currently, people who may have been oddballs in their own familia and do not keep in regular contact, and people who may have graduated, moved, or transferred to a school out of the area. These measures help with student retention. People bring their children, parents and partners to the events to introduce them to other LEAD familia members. Many younger brothers and sisters have come through the LEAD program as a result of the familia structure.

For the familias to succeed, they must have something important to do together – a specific project. They also spend time on the collective “work of the family”. They start with relatively easy, low risk activities that have high reward – applause, a quick positive grade and written feedback, etc. They wind up leading at least three 1-hour discussions in class during each quarter. Marc stresses how this makes life easier and her teaching more gratifying as “they do the teaching”. They do short reflections and follow a simple reporting style – what I thought before I started the project, how the project went, what I learned by doing the project (both in terms of course content and human interaction), and what I want to improve the next time I do this.

The winter quarter culminates in a major joint event with lots of preparation -- the day-long LEAD Global Issues Conference. One year focused on immigration and began in booths in a large conference area with several booths featuring interactive student presentations focusing on myths surrounding immigration. A major guest speaker is the keynoter. For this event it was a labor organizer and photojournalist who works on issues of labor and immigration. The students who had been in familias for longer periods of time designed and conducted afternoon workshops on issues like the E-Visa, health and migration, and the environmental impacts of NAFTA. A Fair Trade Marketplace was incorporated as part of the day-long conference. The newer LEAD students and members of the campus community attended these and learned from their example. A recent conference hosted 30 workshops, all conducted by students, and welcomed more than 500 students from across campus.

In the Spring class (EWRT2) students read Paolo Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed and “teach the ideas to each other.” Here, familias work on social justice projects like working with farmworker families to create oral histories, presenting workshops on environmental injustices, raising funds for an award for undocumented students, creating films on the intersections of same sex marriage

rights and immigrant rights. All these were presented publicly to the campus community throughout that quarter.

The LEAD familias have also been an incubator for larger projects. For example, TOUCCh (Tutor Outreach Uniting Communities for Change) emerged from this process and became a nonprofit directed by a former De Anza student. For several years, through TOUCCh, students taught basic English skills to farmworkers in Watsonville about 45 minutes away. They used Freireian approaches, with a social justice emphasis, and ask their “students” what they need to learn. Topics that they worked on included: What to do in an ICE raid, how to ask questions in a parent/teacher meeting, whom to go to if you don’t receive fair pay from your employer, how to make a banking transaction, etc. Unfortunately, budget cuts made it impossible for the program to continue.

The familias also created a program of **scholarships for undocumented students**, with the scholarships awarded on the basis of community service. A support group for undocumented students and a campus-wide working group on undocumented student issues was established at De Anza as a result of LEAD familias.

The familias support these activities, helping to publicize the programs, recruiting students, inviting guest speakers, conducting workshops, and connecting with community partners. Over the program’s first nine years, more than 3000 students became part of the LEAD community. In any given year there are about 1000 students and 30 mentors (students who head familias in LEAD classes, some of them on a paid basis, and some as returning alumni volunteers).

Dr. Coronado handed over leadership several years ago, but other LEAD faculty teach a multiplicity of courses, all of which include an emphasis on issues in the Latina/o community. All LEAD courses integrate civic engagement and a meaningful field trip. For instance, many classes visit farmworker families in Watsonville nearby, or travel to Angel Island to understand historic immigration detention. Current issues have included contemporary slavery, queer migrations, farmworker youth, leadership development, environmental injustices, and creating a Women/Gender/Sexualities center on campus.

Because branding matters to this generation, the bright red T-shirts with the yellow LEAD logo have been important for recruiting new students and faculty,

and helping the campus community know who LEAD students are and what work they are doing. Members of the community celebrate each accomplishment to build morale, and maintain an active Facebook site to congratulate LEAD alumni who have moved on to graduate school or received major scholarships, and excellent jobs in the community.

There is no direct tie between the LEAD program and DeAnza's Certificate in Leadership and Social Justice, but some students participate in both programs as both focus on building their experience on social justice issues and collaborative work done through small groups. Both are programs of DeAnza's VIDA Institute for Civic and Community Engagement.

An Experiment – Developing a “Microcampus” to Maximize Peer Support and Learning:

For several years, Houghton College, a private liberal arts college in New York State, experimented with an entirely unique approach to education which – while it would be difficult to replicate – included several highly innovative approaches which may spark new strategies elsewhere.

The background: Houghton College leaders and faculty became increasingly concerned that they weren't able to recruit many students of color or Pell-eligible students because of their high tuition and distance from major cities.

Having always concentrated solely on its four-year Bachelor's program, Houghton examined ways it could extend its reach to low-income and minority students its BA program couldn't serve. In exploring alternatives, a faculty team discovered that the College had the untapped capacity to grant two-year Associate Degrees as well as BAs. They then examined cost, outreach, and academic questions as well as community needs, and were authorized to experiment with ways of offering AA Degrees to students who would benefit from that credential and a pathway to a Bachelor's program.

Houghton created three “microcampuses”, two in Buffalo, and one in Utica. They are in effect very small alternatives to community college, each of which is **designed to meet the needs of a particular population**. Houghton's first initiative in Buffalo was designed to serve new immigrants and refugees living on the city's