

Using Combinations of Love, Tech, and Empathy to Improve the Economic Opportunity of PCC Students

Problem

We know that PCC students, particularly Students of Color, are not completing their academic goals (i.e., finishing a certificate, degree, or transfer). Over the past two years, we have analyzed institutional data and interviewed close to 200 students in PCC. Overwhelmingly, we know that Students of Color face unique challenges in college to gain access to the necessary support systems in and outside of their institution, locate empathetic and not those who pity them (including from faculty, staff, and administrators), and face unnecessary policies and institutions bureaucracies that eat their time instead of creating smoother pathways to academic and occupational resources and successes.

What is our idea?

Our idea is to radically change the way we engage with students at PCC to be able to nurture students (and their families) and to support them to thrive in college and in the labor market. Based on Hilary Cottam's book *radical help*, **we aim at helping PCC to think of capabilities and agency rather than on serving and managing the needs of students**. Based on Cottam's experiments, **our idea is to help PCC develop a new prototype of working for students based on their current skills at work, assets, desires, and dreams**.

We have already spent a considerable amount of time understanding the context in which students at PCC operate. In doing so, we have identified campus leaders who are willing to take risks, and, with their help and support, we will put together a core team that will help carry out our shared plan. We plan to spend time getting to know students to understand from their views, lived experiences, aspirations, and the root causes of their problems that contributed to current economic conditions. The result of this process that Cottam calls the 'archaeological dig' will be the creation of profiles and mini videos that showcase students, and how they spend, manage and try to squeeze "extra time" from their daily duties. This process of immersion into students' lives will generate ideas, which will be tested with quick and dirty prototypes (i.e., study groups with free/subsidized childcare). These prototypes will use basic technological platforms (e.g., text messaging software, Facebook groups, Instagram, etc.) to facilitate making new and solidifying connections, but also enhanced understanding of students, particularly those that are most vulnerable. The goal is to help connect people with other people. That is, we use technology as means to the desired goals of fostering new relationships for PCC, but also allow "outsiders" a window into student-parents' lives, not simply to mean outsiders will solve all problems, but contribute to helping cohesively solve the problems together. We will then tweak these prototypes to scale them up and to raise the necessary funds to support them. This approach blends some principles in adaptive management with participatory methods. Most importantly, at the heart of this approach is a focus on the emotional world (e.g., loneliness, stress, anxiety, dependency, transitioning away from abusive relationships, chronic unemployment, etc.) of students, which now is a severe gap in current thinking, practices, and policies. Outsiders may not be aware or sympathetic to the daily challenges and stress that students must confront, especially when they do not have internet or working computers at home, unstable childcare, or having to use public transportation with young children to get to school and work.

As it becomes increasingly clear that the community college sector alone will not be able to alleviate poverty for student and their families, Cottam's approach of innovating local solutions with a relational focus may provide a way forward for scholars, leaders, and practitioners who genuinely desire to help the poor, but recognize the devastating social impact of impersonal bureaucratic strategies to help students persist and succeed in college and in the labor market.

How will we test the idea?

Identification of various sub-groups of vulnerable students is key to the success of our project. We must make every effort we can to better understand students' experiences holistically and to improve their educational

and economic success. For this project, we plan to use institutional data (course-level data, financial aid data, etc.), surveys (to know more about students' work histories), and qualitative data (including observations and interviews) to map their academic and occupational trajectories. In addition, we will rely on mixed-methods social network analytic (SNA) techniques to examine the extensity of students' networks as well as the content and meaning of the ties that they are forming over time. In sum, we will create an institutional dataset that allows researchers, leaders, and practitioners to holistically understand students' experiences at PCC.

In addition, we will create a set of tools to visualize students' networks to see how they evolve over time as a result of establishing networks of support inside and outside college. We have tested this approach throughout our academic careers with great success (see Fagioli et al., 2019; Rios-Aguilar & Deil-Amen, 2019). The technological platforms we propose are simple, free, and easy to navigate. The technology will allow us to create meet ups for students around various themes and we will be collecting data on how cost-effective the emerging prototypes are for PCC. For this specific project, we will make sure that at least one prototype can be tested in a period of 16 months. We plan to recruit 100 students for a research study.

We have generated tremendous interest and energy in this project because of the amount of time we have spent surveying and listening to students and faculty. Anecdotally, we know that our project has resulted in more extensive networks for students. It is now time to gather systematic evidence that an approach on assets and capabilities can actually result in improved college persistence and completion, as well as on economic opportunity among community college students. We plan to follow-up with participants for at least 3 years.

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