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Discourse Community Project: College Track

Abstract

Discourse communities are groups of people who share a common goal(s) and work together to accomplish it through communication. College Track in Boyle Heights serves the community in effort to increase the graduation rate and increase the number of members with college degrees. Through communication through email, social media, and in-person discussions, as well as a 10+ year commitment to the members, the community uses informative and encouraging speech to give the power back to the students to fight against the unfair system. However, this goal is just the tip of the iceberg. With the empowerment of the students, the program additionally aids in the uplifting of communities out of poverty as the members come back to serve the community in which they originally came from.

Introduction

College Track is a non-profit organization that serves low-income communities with the goal of aiding first-generation students in their journey to higher education. The organization has a total of twelve sites, seven located in California and the rest spread throughout the US. This paper will focus on the Boyle Heights site found in the city of Los Angeles. The program lasts 8+ years but most students remain in contact even after receiving their degrees. Members of the community include high school students, college students (both undergraduate and graduate), advisors, and a

site leader. Advisors serve and guide students throughout high school and college. Typically, on site and interacting with students in person, are the high school advisors. They conduct interactive workshops, panels, groupwork activities, games, one-on-one meetings and hold tutoring sessions for students. College advisors are more virtual as their students are spread out through various universities in California and some even out of state. Both teams collab at times for events where students share and learn from each other's experiences. The main mechanisms of communication used amongst the members include social media, in-person conversations, and emails. Students and advisors share a semi-formal attitude towards one another and communicate using personal development and inspirational genres. But like with other non-profit organizations, measuring the success of these advisors' efforts is a challenging task.

For the past decade, non-profit organizations have begun to switch over to "traditional business models to improve their effectiveness and efficiency." However, there is one element that these organizations have not been able to incorporate during their transition: quantitative data/results of their performance. The Nature Conservancy, a non-profit that focuses on the conservation of biodiversity through protection of land and water sources for rare species, developed a model to measure success in three broad categories: "impact, activity, and capacity" (Sawhill & Williamson, 2001). This approach allows organizations like College Track, who have more qualitative data than quantitative, to show their true impact on each community. These results can then be presented to potential donors, sponsors, or the public in efforts to publicize the importance of their organization. As a member myself, I am a bit biased, but I truly believe that College Track as a whole should be studied due to the unique extensive relationship the members maintain with one another.

Methods

To investigate the community from my current location, I chose to observe communication through the mechanisms of social media and email. In-person discussions also take place at a dedicated meeting site, but on top of not being able to travel back and forth from Davis to Los Angeles, I felt that my observations would not have been accurate due to my presence. Although I am a member of the community, those who are typically at the site are the high school students. As an upperclassman, I would stick out for being unfamiliar to the younger students and influence their behavior and conversations to change since they know they are being watched by an “outsider”. With the social media posts, I can see the way the staff members communicate with the wide range of age groups and some of the students’ comments as a response to what the post says. The Boyle Heights site has 2 major Instagram accounts that almost all current members and even some former members follow to remain informed and aware of the community’s affairs. From the posts, I made a note of the language, tone, and possible reason behind certain posts made. Emails were observed in a similar manner. Since most of these are written by the “elders” of the community, this is where most conversation sparks from.

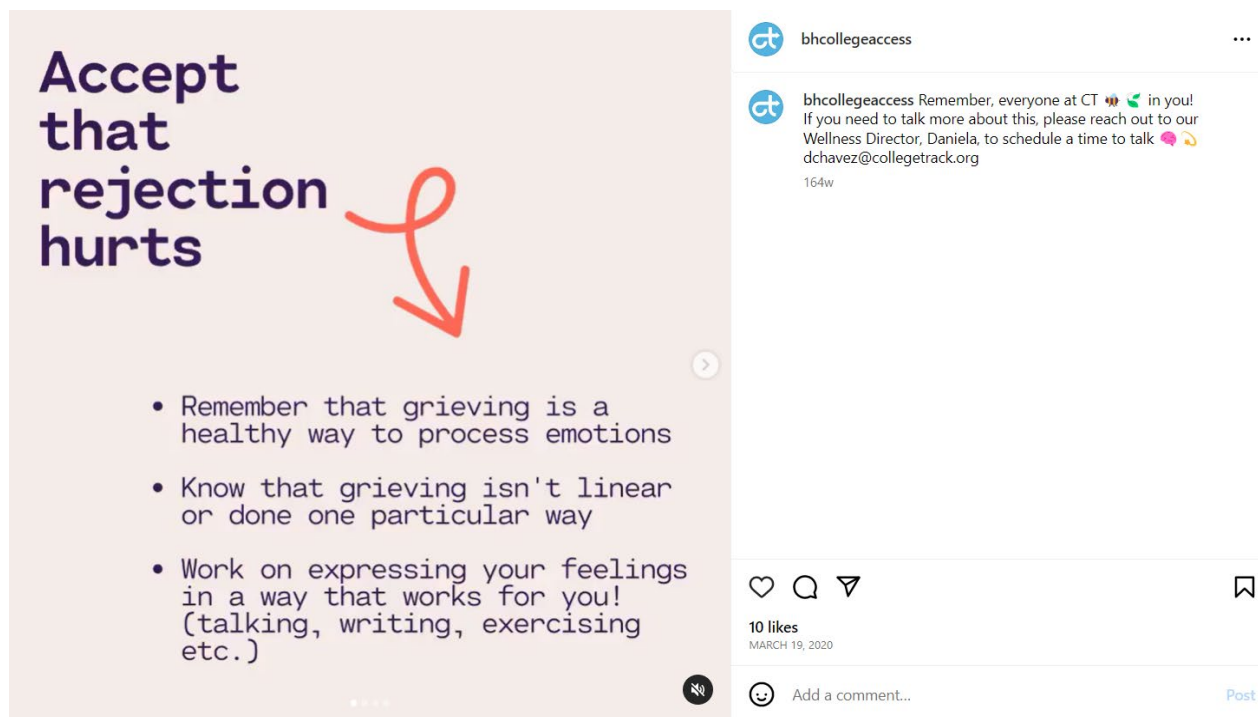
Additionally, to hear more directly from the community but also do a comparison, I conducted interviews with 3 students who attended the same high school and shared similar backgrounds. Due to the difference in schedules, the participants were all close friends who I knew did not have finals to worry about and were also willing/able to set time aside. The first two are college students of differing age and schools from the community and the other person was someone who matriculated from the same high school to university but was not part of the community. Although they were willing to share their real names, to maintain their privacy, I chose to use fake names. The beginning of the interview consisted of simple introductory questions of their

name, occupation and/or status as a student, and whether they were considered a first-generation student. Being that College Track's goal is aid students on their journey to college, I then transitioned into asking questions about what their initial thoughts about the process and idea of college was. The questions then differed for the 2 students in the community and the "outsider" student. I questioned the two about their experience at College Track and the types of conversation and language they experienced while in contact with others at the site. I also asked how they remained in contact and updated about any news to do with the community. For the other student, I asked about their matriculation process and if they had any help along the way. All interviews ended with rating their academic confidence and reasonings behind their rating. Their responses to these questions were meant to prove if the informative and encouraging speech/text is the reason behind why so many of College Track students are capable of getting their degree.

Results and Discussion

For observations, I noticed that the two social media accounts were drastically different. In the first account, iamcollegetrack, it was mostly a collection of memories and accomplishments of the community. The most current pictures included high school seniors' college decisions with their families and college student graduation ceremonies. The comments consisted of other students encouraging or congratulating those celebrated in the posts. Sprinkled here and there were reminders of important information sessions being held at the site or special opportunities that would aid in students' networking. The second account, bhcollegeaccess, was a little more specific on their posts as it was directed to the high school seniors of the current class. The posts on this page were colorful to catch the students' attention, but concise to get the message across quickly. Dates were bolded to guarantee that the students remembered the date. There were no

comments on any of these posts, but that was simply because the students were directed in the caption to contact the advisors with any questions through email. Amongst these informative posts, there was a post that stood out to me.



The post reminded students that the grief that comes with rejection is normal and that the community advisors were willing to listen to any concerns or simply work through the emotions that come with college admission decisions. The simple design with soft pastel colors differed from the usual bright colored, bold text posts. This approach was taken to soothe and comfort students as well as encourage sincere conversations with guaranteed privacy. The caption “Remember, everyone at CT “bee-leaves” in you!” was a nice touch to further reassure the students these decisions did not determine their overall value. At first glance, many people assume that the community is more of a business transaction and believe me, for some students, it may be. But this post served as a reminder that the advisors are more than just paid associates. The community cares about the students’ emotions since many of the advisors hired experienced

similar situations when applying to college. Additionally, students' success is more likely when they feel supported in more aspects than just academic.

Emails had a semi-formal structure that provided a sense of assurance in the professionalism and experience of the advisors, but also short and appealing to the eye to ensure students read everything. The language was gender inclusive with students being referred to as "scholars" and there wasn't any tone that indicated superiority over the students. Of course, the advisors weren't completely uncensored but there was more of a friendly tone that you share with a work-colleague, someone of equal rank. The actual contents of the email were filled with helpful links and/or documents the advisors made with step-by-step instructions specifically for the students to review to complete tasks. One of the most memorable documents is the FAFSA / Dream Act Information Checklist because comments were added to ensure smooth execution. Under the checking and savings account totals portion of this document was a little reminder that stated, "Small amounts here are better than reporting "\$0" to limit your chances of being flagged for verification." These little details informed students to prevent unnecessary obstacles in their application process. At the bottom of each email, after the advisors' signoff, were inspirational quotes chosen to share with the students. One being "What you pay attention to grows" by Adrienne Marie Brown.

Emails sent out are usually what spark up in-person conversations amongst the advisors and students. The interviews with the two members of the community revealed that they solely used these two mechanisms of communication to stay in contact. When given the opportunity, however, they would visit the site to catch up with the advisors and other members. Their accounts are based on their experience from the moment they were introduced to the program to their current state. Although only a year gap, AJ being a first year at community college and

Rose being a second year at UCSB, both shared a positive experience with the advisors and agreed that without College Track, they would have been discouraged from the complicated process. As first-generation students, they were aware of the idea of college but did not know how to get there. Rose in specific, revealed that as an undocumented student, her process was even more complicated than the rest of the students. She stated, “Initially I was very confident. I thought that as long as I had the highest grades, I would be a shoo in. I had no idea of the financial costs, the UC, Cal State and Privates application processes, exams such as the ACT and SAT, or even AP courses. There was also extracurriculars such as sports and school clubs that I didn’t even know were something that would help me boost myself as a student... And the last thing I learned was that as an undocumented student I could not do work study or apply to FAFSA, I had to apply to the Dream Act.” They both had very limited help from their families as well as income related concerns. With the help of College Track and relationships that were formed in the community, both agreed that their friendly, informative, and encouraging conversations contributed to their success in matriculation to their current college/university.

Cynthia, the “control” interviewee, explained that she joined another program similar to College Track called Upward Bound. This program is funded by the Department of Education and works with low-income first-generation students. The only issue reported by Cynthia was the community was not as close-knit as that of College Track. The students depended on one another more than they did the advisors of the program. She matriculated the same year as Rose but is no longer in attendance at her university CSULA. She expressed, “On a scale from 1 to 10, I rate my confidence in succeeding academically a 7 because of the fact that I technically am currently not enrolled in school and have no idea of when I will be. Furthermore, when I do decide to go back I am unsure of the following steps I would have to take to do so. But once I get all of that

dealt with I know for a fact that when I return it will be because I want to and not because of others opinions of what I should or should not be doing with my life.” She has the confidence to succeed academically but was simply lost in the process of how to get there as she was also a first-generation student with no relationships to those who could lead her down the “right” path, her path.

Without any guidance as low-income first-generation students with minimal understanding of the process of how to get to college and very low expectations for success in a world built on generational wealth, these students are being set up for failure. Programs like these have been discovered to “compensate for the lack of social capital of students and are indeed making a difference” (Yasuike, 2019). College Track’s goal of guiding students and providing them with equal opportunities to secure higher education created a safe community with informative and encouraging speech. When the odds are so blatantly not in your favor, it is easy to lose motivation or ambition to accomplish the goal in mind. Through empowerment with simple inspirational quotes in emails and celebratory posts of their accomplishments, students remain optimistic and willing to fight against the system that is built against them. The advisors’ impact is seen through the students’ power of knowledge; the power in which was rightfully there’s for success.

It is proven that programs like College Track are effective but there is a huge difference in College Track’s approach. Most programs only remain involved with the students during middle and high school. After graduation, most students are forced to continue their journey alone and re-establish new relationships with their professors or college counselors (Yasuike, 2019). But College Track bases their locations on a community as a whole, not just the students. The program commits to their members for 10+ years of their lives, past high school, college, grad

school, and even to employment. Due to this commitment, their capacity for students remains low due to lack of funds and space. But when community members return to give back to the community through donations or as advisors themselves.

What makes this community so special is that their goal of getting more first-generation students through higher education is the small picture. Because of the close-knit nature of the community, members end up coming back to uplift the neighborhood. According to self-reported statistics on their website, there are 767 graduates in the alumni network who continue to work together (College Track 2021). Boyle Heights is a tiny portion of Los Angeles County, but with the new profound social capital, the community has seen changes in graduation rates that have lifted many families out of poverty.

Conclusion

Unfortunately, to make an impact from a young age, College Track does not accept members past the 10th grade. It is mainly due to the time commitment as the more time they spend with the students, the more of a difference they can make in their chances of success. The community is built on mutual respect and trust. There is always a sense of professionalism to maintain structure to the program, but most conversations consist of informative and playful banter. The younger members of the community are aided in the understanding of difficult texts and conversations involved in the college process as well as being employed. With commitment of time to attending your sessions and maintaining grades, you are ensured full support from the whole community. As a member, the big picture goal should be to uplift yourself and family out of poverty and away from low-paying manual labor jobs.

Work Cited

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