



Why Nevada Needs the Nepantla Program and Others Like It

Leila Pazargadi, Nevada State College

Christopher S. Harris, Nevada State College

Nevada ranks 51st in the United States in terms of education quality. For many in the Las Vegas Valley, schooling – and higher education in particular – is valued solely as a pathway to employment. With these troubling facts in mind, it is no surprise that many young people in the Valley do not pursue education beyond their high school diploma. Those who do choose to attend college are often first-generation students who receive little support from their communities, and come in programmed to view college in the transactional terms described above.

These circumstances intensify the risk Nevada residents face from national trends that devalue and threaten to defund education across the board. The value of higher education is in question. To respond, colleges and universities, administration, faculty, students, and everyone who cares about the quality of education in Nevada must come together to reclaim and restate the public value and civic purpose of higher education.

Colleges and universities must create programs that address pressing problems in their communities. We – along with several other faculty members at Nevada State College – have forged a Social Justice Collective to do just that. Policymakers and other civic leaders should plug into these efforts and serve as their champions. This will ensure programs target communities' most important problems and help the programs grow to fill those needs.

Early Findings from the Nepantla Program

The Social Justice Collaborative formalizes the efforts of several faculty who have been working to provide educational experiences focused on civic responsibility and worldview formation. Social Justice Collective members are committed to bell hooks' concept of *teaching to transgress* – where students are encouraged to transgress against systems of oppression along racial, sexual, and class lines. The group meets regularly to share critical pedagogical techniques and to mentor students that are working on economic and social justice issues.

The Nepantla Program is one important outcome of the Social Justice Collective's work. The program is a competitive four-year degree program at Nevada State College dedicated to empowering first-generation college students through academic skill acquisition, access to resources, community building activities, and professional self-discovery. In Nahuatl – a language of Native American groups from the Southwest – Nepantla means “in-between-ness” or “in the middle.” The program's name has its roots in the experience of native peoples who used “nepantla” to describe the in-between culture they created as their indigenous culture was shifted and shaped by Spanish colonization during the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries.

In their first year at Nevada State College, Nepantla students are required to take two courses that focus on issues of social and economic justice. In the fall semester, students take an English composition course: *Race, Class, & Gender*. In the spring, they take a Communications course: *Power, Culture, & Society*. These courses introduce students to the concepts of participatory citizenship and media literacy. Through this thought-provoking, justice-driven coursework, first-year students strengthen ties with their peers and acquire essential academic skills.

Outside the classroom, Social Justice Collective faculty members host a monthly screening of films that focus on social justice issues such as food scarcity, water rights, police brutality, immigration policy, net neutrality, and other topics. After the screenings, faculty hosts solicit reactions from the audience and lead attendees in a critical discussion of the arguments and topics set forth in the film.

In July, faculty in the Collective take three to five Nepantla students to Salzburg, Austria to participate in the Salzburg Academy for Media & Global Change. On this three-week academic program, students explore the role media literacy plays in engaging citizens, journalists, governmental bodies, and civic organizations in cross-cultural dialogue about pressing issues. Students are encouraged to consider these groups' portrayal in contemporary digital culture. Recent themes have included forced migration, the rise of populism, and distrust in the media.

Although the Collective has only been in operation for a year, it has led to the implementation of several successful projects, the most robust of which is the Nepantla Summer Bridge. The bridge program helps first-generation college students prepare academically for college level coursework, but also creates peer networks and connections with staff to ease their transition from high school to college.

Observed Impact

The impact of these initiatives on our students and campus culture has already become observable. Social Justice Collective events have become some of the most anticipated and well-attended events on campus. The student government has begun to implement their own justice-focused events like the Tunnel of Awareness and The Human Library which fostered connection and learning on topics including disability awareness, misconceptions and stereotypes that contribute to inequality and discrimination, race and policing, inequality in social justice, veteran suicide awareness, intersectional identities, sexual assault, and other topics. Members of our strategic planning committee have successfully lobbied to amend Nevada State College's mission and vision statements to include an explicit commitment to social justice.

Furthermore, anecdotal evidence shows that students who engage with the Social Justice Collective are more apt to challenge and question social injustices and connect with material that speaks to their experiences. Fueled by the course content and extracurricular activities supported by Social Justice Collective faculty, students are empowered to develop a self-aware, civic-minded standpoint. Taken together, all these efforts create a supportive community that encourages increased faculty- and peer mentorship.

These endeavors should be evaluated more thoroughly, other institutions should build similar programs, and policymakers and other civic leaders should connect and support such efforts. Without these efforts, higher education in Nevada will likely continue to be undervalued and underfunded.