

## MITIGATING SUMMER LEARNING LOSS IN PHILADELPHIA DURING COVID-19: HUMBLE ATTEMPTS FROM THE FIELD

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In these times of crisis and uncertainty, educators feel powerfully compelled to respond to this moment in ways that support and uplift our students – to nurture, protect, and help them maintain hope in what is likely to be the biggest disruption in education for an entire generation of students. We endeavor to do this as we try to care for ourselves and our own loved ones and survive through the sheer uncertainty of this time in the world.

Right now, school districts, colleges, and universities are faced with no-win decisions about reopening this fall and keeping students and staff safe. To inform educational leaders and practitioners about what can be achieved and what obstacles to expect in preparing for the upcoming school year, this article describes our approach to creating a virtual learning experience for the University of Pennsylvania's largest summer program serving Philadelphia students amidst the global pandemic, the Penn Rising Senior Summer Academy (PennRSSA). Despite our combined 30 years of experience teaching and developing programs for youth, the challenges we faced to bring high-quality, responsive programming into existence expediently during a pandemic were complex and continue to evolve as we reflect over time and look forward.

Our creation of the Penn Rising Senior Summer Academy was an exercise in many ways of putting ideology into practice, however imperfectly, in a manner resonant with what Ravitch (2020a, 2020c) has termed flux pedagogy and its correlate, flux leadership. As a framework to guide educational practitioners during this particular time of crisis, Ravitch (2020b) describes a flux pedagogical stance as a call to incorporate "relational and critical pedagogy frameworks into a transformative teaching approach in times of radical flux," (para. 4) considering the "complex adaptive pedagogical approach that identifies and addresses lived problems as a form of radical action" (para. 6). Six key dimensions constitute a flux pedagogy approach: 1) adopting an inquiry stance, 2) embracing emergent, student-centered, and active teaching, 3) adopting trauma-informed practices, 4) employing critical pedagogical positions to raise critical consciousness, 5) centering intersectional racial literacy, and 6) cultivating brave spaces that invite deeper engagement and criticality (Ravitch, 2020a, 2020b). Drawing on elements of this framework, we elaborate on lessons we learned from designing and implementing the Penn Rising Senior Summer Academy in the hopes that this may be of use for other educators as they construct youth programming within and for these uncertain times.

### Design with purpose, humility, curiosity, and flexibility

In accordance with Ravitch's (2020a, 2020b) push to embrace emergent, student-centered practices and an inquiry stance as well as her recommendation that programs be reoriented for the complexity of this current moment, we recommend that partners in this work mold new initiatives and improve upon existing programs with an urgency and accountability that does not strive for perfection, but rather embraces constant evolution and renewal.

As the main architect of the Program, guided by pedagogical instincts developed from over ten years of creating curriculum for young adults in Philadelphia while keeping an eye on feasibility, Elaine designed programming with three critical questions in mind:

- How do you create a robust summer program virtually that can meet the needs of students across the spectrum of learning, preparation, and diverse identity backgrounds?
- How do you develop content that will allow students both the flexibility to be completely self-guided but also nurture interaction, dialogue, and community?
- How do you administer and provide high-quality programming that recognizes the undue stress and concern students and staff are feeling on a daily basis in a pandemic?

The stakes felt extraordinarily high – not only to create something within days that would leverage the many resources available at the University of Pennsylvania (Penn), but to do so with the kind of care necessary to ensure we could do right by students caught in truly unimaginable circumstances. After all, online course-taking is not associated with positive learning outcomes,

especially for students who are less academically prepared and already at higher risk of disengaging in school (Heinrich et al., 2019). Reports about school attendance and engagement as students and staff in Philadelphia switched rapidly to online teaching and learning also painted a grim picture (Graham et al., 2020). Additionally, we were intimately aware of the equity implications of this work for a district primarily serving low-income Black and brown communities attending a wide range of selective and open admission high schools with varying levels of communication, access to networks, and other resources for students.

What came to be was a two-pronged initiative focused on the needs of Philadelphia's over 14,000 rising seniors, representing a pragmatic vision of what we could offer with content already created or that could be easily adapted in two months' time. First, to facilitate a sense of structure and support deeper academic engagement with students, we created an intensive "Academy" that included daily synchronous and asynchronous instruction across four academic courses available on Canvas: *Applied Economics and Finance*, *Applying to College*, *Career Pathways*, and *Storytelling: Writing for Different Audiences*, the latter two courses having been newly designed exclusively for the Program. Second, to allow maximum flexibility for students navigating various responsibilities and/or hardships, we also developed "OpenRSSA," which offered students one course, *How to Apply to College*, designed by Steppingstone Scholars and Penn Admissions, and also offered to Academy students. OpenRSSA students completed the material entirely asynchronously on Coursera and were invited to participate in whole-program live *Career Pathways* events, featuring leaders from various professional spheres.

With this structure in place, we acknowledged the many questions that remained. For instance, we needed to design a recruitment, hiring, and training process for up to 100 graduate and professional students from across Penn's 12 Schools and recruit students across the city by providing incentives for their work. We also needed to develop online course content effectively and create awareness and buy-in across the University for the many faculty and staff, each with competing priorities, from whom we requested course content. Additionally, we needed to customize university platforms and technology that had never been used at this scale or for this purpose. Our small team of six, with the three authors working most exclusively on this project, found the endeavor quite taxing as we worked assiduously to implement this work in a fraught context of the pandemic and resurgent calls for national racial justice.

Keeping core questions central to our decision-making and being flexible to new opportunities helped us respond to emerging challenges and developments over the two months we spent designing the Penn Rising Senior Summer Academy. With a goal of enrolling as many rising seniors as we could in this free program (available first for School District of Philadelphia district and charter high schools and, later, Philadelphia parochial schools), we launched a widespread recruitment and communications campaign, spearheaded by Kimberly in partnership with the School District of Philadelphia. This phase included eight informational webinars, language translations of program flyers by staff in the Penn Language Center, and e-mails, robocalls, and social media messaging coordinated with School District of Philadelphia partners. We received 1,735 initial applications for the program, from which 807 students officially enrolled in the Academy (with 658 completing the entire program), and another 332 ultimately choosing to enroll in OpenRSSA.

We also orchestrated a robust hiring process that evolved in parallel to our growing student enrollment through which we selected 34 graduate and professional students within a month, and on a rolling basis thereafter to lead "pods" of 25 to 30 students throughout the Program. We engaged over 40 staff across Penn's sprawling divisions and departments to develop and supply content and assist in creating an online experience appropriate for the Program's scale. Through an amalgamation of efforts requiring swift tandem work from University, City, and non-profit partners, we were able to guarantee an elective credit for any participants enrolled in School District of Philadelphia high schools as well as offer 600 spots for students to earn a stipend through Philadelphia Youth Network's WorkReady program.

In short, we were able to bring this program to life through the selfless dedication of staff and educators within and external to the University and by identifying the kinds of expertise we needed, including best practices for online teaching and learning, technology platform usage and data management, and developing relevant and appropriate curricula.

### **Embrace the short and long-term aspects of equity work and its crooked progress**

The heightened racial and civil unrest emerging after the deaths of George Floyd, Atatiana Jefferson, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, and far too many others, created another pressing reminder of the need for our program to be responsive to current events--and youth experiences of and feelings about these events--and reflect our goal of building a more equitable, racially just world. We made imperfect progress towards a flux pedagogical stance that emphasizes critical, racially literate, and trauma-informed approaches to teaching practices and processes (Ravitch, 2020b). Focusing on what we could address within both short- and long-term timelines helped us organize our work. We relied heavily on our team's shared expertise in critical pedagogical approaches, antiracist practices and motivations, and equity-mindedness, particularly as a diverse team of women holding multiple racial identities.

A central aspect of our approach is that it is inquiry-based. As part of our reflective practice, we continually asked ourselves critical questions including:

- Where and how does course content explicitly acknowledge racialized systems of oppression?
- How do we invite students to reflect and make sense of this current national context?
- How do we provide spaces for reflection and self-care, both for students and for staff?

Immediately prior to the Program's launch, Augusta infused the writing course content with topics corresponding to activism and local political and racial conversations. For example, to refine students' research writing and critical thinking skills, students engaged with the history of the 1985 MOVE bombing in West Philadelphia and were asked to reflect on the connection of this incident to the spring and summer 2020 swell of protests. The entire *Storytelling* course was designed to guide students in developing their voice as they composed college personal statements and engaged in reflective writing in the form of blog posts describing their experiences living and learning through the COVID-19 pandemic. A selection of these reflective pieces are included in this special issue.

While our courses were developed with first-generation and/or low-income students of color in mind, we also reviewed other course content to add readings, activities, and language sensitive to the moment. We worked closely with partners to consider different ways to make content more directly relevant to the current times. We also deliberately planned live panel sessions with community members--centering locally-based artists, politicians, media experts, and small business entrepreneurs--to mirror students' racial and ethnic backgrounds as well as their different community interests and experiences. Lastly, our cohort of graduate assistants demonstrated a collective flux pedagogical mindset by continuously advocating for their students' needs, prioritizing flexibility with student work, and suggesting improvements to our course content and activities in real-time in ways that supported the students' growth and learning.

While the Penn Rising Senior Summer Academy was in session, we also quickly learned how to leverage resources and expertise at Penn to support our students' emerging emotional, learning, and mental health needs. We relied on already-existing structures at Penn to help navigate and address students' multifaceted needs and facilitate their access to a range of other practitioners and academics. We benefited especially from our content partner and graduate student in the School of Social Policy and Practice (SP2), Loran Grishow-Schade, for providing both a unique course centered on race and social justice as well as individualized, high-attended "self-care" office hours for the students.

Even with a sense of success, over the long term, our programming must tackle deeper inequities in student access and be more explicit about our stances on the racial, ethical, and political dimensions of this work. For example:

- We need to increase student voice as an integrated part of program planning and preparation. In the midst of constructing the program, there was not enough time to recruit potential students who could provide feedback or help create portions of content that could have been especially meaningful to their peers.
- We especially need to address where and how we recruit participants. Despite the open access message, most of our students came from magnet schools. The paucity of students from open admission, neighborhood high schools in Philadelphia, and especially the relative underrepresentation of students residing in West Philadelphia, remained a concern through program enrollment and implementation that must be addressed.
- We need to ensure students with many different learning needs (e.g., writing and language support, emotional support, dis/ability support) and learning goals are given appropriate guidance and support. The self-paced nature of our programming particularly positioned English Language Learners at a disadvantage. While we tried to orchestrate language support groups during the program timeframe, we could have more intentionally identified and built in support at program inception.

Overall, while trying to fill a pressing need for rising seniors looking towards their post-graduation prospects amidst this chaotic time, our programming likely served more students already intending to go to college than those who may not have already considered a postsecondary degree. Our ability to improve engagement with hardest-to-reach students, and students with diverse needs, at underrepresented schools across the city will be one of the most telling aspects of whether we can more justly serve students at this critical juncture in their lives. These reflections are generative as we move forward.

### **Maintain hope and determine your focus, especially where you complement others' work**

As we look towards implementing these lessons into fall programming, our team is also battling fatigue and burnout while trying to maintain a sense of hope and optimism. We are likely not alone in these sentiments; many other educators have been unable to recover from the spring and summer as they enter an uncertain fall semester. Several questions remain: *How do we create the structures and systems necessary for students to thrive? To learn and to grow? To reflect on where and how they can contribute to the common good during such a global crisis?*

To answer these questions, we must clarify our focus to the students of Philadelphia and determine what we can accomplish along with other education partners who are also retooling programming and creating new, virtual experiences for students. Many of our Program participants were eager to have programming continue during the school year, so we are encouraged in maintaining that commitment to support rising seniors as they navigate future post-secondary processes. Our ability to figure out the best ways to meet their impending and unfolding needs and develop programming for younger high school students and current undergraduates will rest on how well we can leverage internal and external partnerships as well as adapt the programming and content we have already created. We feel a moral obligation to surpass previous expectations for Penn's commitment to Philadelphia students and their futures.

We also know that we must learn directly from our students' simultaneous demonstrations of resilience and expressions of pain. Hundreds of our students conveyed how this summer program helped give them a sense of hope, purpose, and clarity for their futures. Still, hundreds of others signed up and never enrolled in the program, or struggled with the quantity of work amidst other obligations. As we prepare for the unprecedented school year ahead, we now know what can be constructed in a short timeframe and we also know the costs in time, energy, and other resources necessary to reimagine virtual learning in these ways. For other practitioners and community members seeking ways to support Philadelphia's youth and families during this time, we welcome your partnership as we further capitalize on Penn's resources to deepen support for and with the Philadelphia community. We know we do not have all the answers, and we are determined to stand with families, educators, mentors, and other community stakeholders in devising the best path forward--playing our part in turning crisis, loss, injustice, and despair into opportunities filled with love, compassion, hope, and action to see ourselves and our students through.

*For more information about the Penn Rising Senior Summer Academy, please visit <https://provost.upenn.edu/pennrssa>*

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