Highline officials may possibly implement a program to boost access and support for students of various ethnic communities with a particular emphasis on outreach to Latinos, college administrators say.

Puente means bridge in Spanish and Highline officials are seeking to partner with California educators and their Puente Project, which aims to span the various gaps that can inhibit access and success in higher education for minority populations.

Of particular interest is serving the burgeoning Latino communities within the Highline service area.

“With 19 percent of our students being Latino/a, along with our surrounding school districts seeing increasing numbers of our Latino/a student population (Federal Way School District at 27.8 percent, Highline School District is at 37 percent, and Tukwila School District at 27 percent), this is a timely meeting,” said Rolita Ezeonu, dean of Instruction, Transfer and Pre-College Education.

The Puente Project is a 30-year-old program that supports students of all ethnicities and backgrounds as they seek to successfully graduate, and transfer to a four-year school, earn a bachelor’s degree, and return to their communities as a leader and/or mentor.

College officials hosted an informational meeting last week to explain the Puente Project and solicit input.

“There’s a sense of urgency now for us to kind of move this along, and I feel that this meeting is the time for all of us as an entire campus and community to come together,” she said

The Puente Project is co-sponsored by the University of California and the California Community College Chancellor’s Office. The goal of the Puente Project is to enable students to not only develop skills, knowledge, but also to become critical thinkers and problem solvers.

“The Puente Program covers more than literature, more than the California standards. It covers life in the sense that students learn how to find their voice and project that voice, how to find their need in the community so they can get back. They become empowered and is not an individual process, they do it together as a family. The students do it as a community,” said Julia Vergara, interim co-director for the Puente Leadership Team.

The project has components such as English, counseling, mentoring and instruction as well as personal, academic and career counseling to prepare students for advancement to a four-year school. It also seeks to build the educational support network necessary for each students’ success.

Arline Garcia, department coordinator for World Languages, said Highline is investigating, and evaluating if it’s worth implementing the Puente Project here.

“I think that between the additional programs and more opportunities for students that this is the best for them,” Garcia said.

According to the Puente Project website, the program currently benefits approximately 14,000 students across the state of California.

“The important thing is that this program has to be inclusive, creating an environment of you’re welcome here whether you’re in the program or not,” said Garcia.

Even if the Puente Project is not implemented here, Highline instructors are adjusting current programs to reach out to various ethnic communities. Even with the changes, though, particular needs of some students, such as Central Americans, South Americans and Afro-Latinos, still need to be addressed.

“We have to give students our 120 percent best,” said English professor Stephanie Ojeda Espinoza. “Also we have to think how we are going to treat our students, how we are going to make students feel that this is the right place for them.”

One of the drawbacks to implementing the program is in determining the cost. Also to be determined is how to synchronize with the California program since the schools there operate on the semester system as opposed to Highline’s quarter system.

That leaves the Highline Puente Project still in the “fact-finding stage,” and raises questions as to when it might become operational.

“We are saying that maybe next year is too soon to start a Puente program, but I can say that there is a lot of interest and it is likely that the program will exist soon at Highline. It would be good if it works as well as Umoja (Black Scholars Program),” Garcia said.

“We should have started this a lot of time ago. This is the beginning of understanding this model and how to apply it in Highline,” said Dean Ezeonu. “We have to be thoughtful and deliberate to move forward with this project.”