

CSU Student Success Network Case Study

June 2021

Introduction

Looking at their work on behalf of transfer students over the past six years, SDSU colleagues Michelle Lopez and Dr. Martha Enciso have much to be proud of. Michelle, Senior Assistant Dean for Student Success, and Martha, Associate Director of The Weber Honors College, have developed a network of support and programming for transfer students that has not just improved graduation rates but also fostered a new spirit of camaraderie and a stronger feeling of acceptance within the SDSU community.

Michelle notes that when they first started working together in the 2014–15 school year, “There was no transfer-specific work being led centrally in Academic Affairs,” and there was only one transfer student in The Weber Honors College at the time. Martha and Michelle recognized the need to mitigate the isolation that prevailed for so many transfer students.



Senior Assistant Dean for Student Success Michelle Lopez and Associate Director of The Weber Honors College Dr. Martha Enciso. Photo courtesy of Michelle Lopez.

They found and made connections with campus allies who were also trying to improve the experience of these students, such as staff in Enrollment Services and the admissions counselors who were sympathetic to the specific challenges transfer students face. They connected with Career Services because transfers were anxious to find paid jobs on campus. One of the first events they put together was an informational SDSU Transfer Day for community college students. Promising as these steps were, Martha and Michelle often felt that they were forging a path alongside campus partners with limited resources.

Their efforts gained focus and momentum after they attended a convening in 2017 organized by the California State University (CSU) Student Success Network. The Network holds a range of activities designed to foster collaboration and student-centered innovation across CSU campuses. Geared specifically toward middle leaders—faculty,

administrators, staff—these opportunities for interaction have proven highly effective at instigating and nurturing change that promotes equitable outcomes for all students.

San Diego State University (SDSU)

With an undergraduate enrollment of over 30,000 students, SDSU is one of the largest and most selective universities in the CSU system, accepting only about a third of applicants.

Of the 30,612 enrolled students, one-third each are white and Hispanic/Latinx respectively, 13% are Asian, and 4% are Black/African American. In 2019, the campus had a transfer acceptance rate of 19.91%. Transfer students make up about 13% of SDSU's student body.

The CSU Student Success Network brings together students, faculty, staff, and administrators to collaborate, experiment, and share evidence to support equity for all students. Though the Network is facilitated by the Education Insights Center at Sacramento State, it hosts activities across the state and encourages participation from every campus. Network participants can draw on the Network's resources, knowledge, and growing community of people committed to evidence-based and student-centered approaches to address a range of issues that affect student learning, engagement, progression, and success. The Network's activities—an annual conference, regular convenings, the Middle Leadership Academy, and applied research—aim to empower middle leaders in the CSU system to establish policies and processes that enable all students to succeed and thrive.

Inspiration from the Network's Transfer Convening

“That first meeting really opened up our eyes to see what we can do,” says Martha. Cal Poly Pomona hosted the convening and had an actual central transfer office—something to which Martha and Michelle aspired for SDSU. One of the assignments of the convening was mapping out the journey of a transfer student and the resources available to them. With this inventory, Martha and Michelle identified where transfer students were not being served. For instance, there was no central office where transfer students could go for support. They also realized they needed to connect transfer students in meaningful ways to a greater array of resources across the university.

Representatives from other, similarly resource-strapped campuses were finding their own ways to serve the transfer population. As the attendees cross-pollinated ideas and tapped each other for counsel in the ensuing months, Martha found it encouraging to know that “we’re doing good work and we know we’re not alone in trying to serve this population.”

Change Perception, Change the Culture

Martha and Michelle realized that implementing the changes they envisioned for transfer students required dispelling myths in the upper echelons of campus leadership. According to Martha, some transfer students have expressed that a few faculty members and staff also have doubts about the capacity of transfer students to do university-level work. They harbor the misconception that students might not have enough time for the required schoolwork and out-of-classroom opportunities, or that they might struggle academically if they have been out of college for several years. In essence, the intersecting identities of transfer students are viewed as weaknesses, rather than assets to the university.

With leadership buy-in, these perceptions can gradually shift. Martha’s supervisor at the Weber Honors College is supportive of transfers and created an on-ramp for them to enroll. These students are proving to be capable and, Martha says, “it’s been good for the younger students in the program to learn from transfer students.”

The task remains to garner wider support, to cultivate a shared conviction that transfer students make a rich contribution to SDSU, and ultimately to spread this ethos across the CSU system. The transfers themselves struggle with misconceptions about their authenticity as university students. Many perceive that the system is not designed for them, and feel that they’re imposters or don’t fit in.

A part of the remedy lies with the many staff and faculty who were themselves transfer students or the first in their families to attend college, but until recently did not share their stories with students. Michelle comments, “They forget that they have a really important story, too, that students can connect to.” Martha and Michelle actively seek out these former transfer and first-generation students, encouraging them to speak up. Hearing a professor say, “I too was a transfer student,” or “It took me a couple community colleges before I was able to go into a four-year [university],” or “I’m the first member of my family to attend college” can have a profound impact. It changes the way transfers view themselves and gives them a sense of pride. It also makes a difference for the rest of the students who may not even be conscious of these hard-won routes to university. Their view of first-generation and transfer students as outliers fades. This is powerful equity work.

A Student-Centered Approach

Changing cultural assumptions about transfer students starts with believing that every transfer student can succeed. For instance, Martha has actively engaged students to join The Weber Honors College program. But she understood that any changes in practices and approaches needed to be student-centered. Thus, based on feedback from transfer students about the challenges they had enrolling in The Weber Honors College program, she advocated for lowering the unit requirement for transfer students.

Michelle and Martha model a student-centered approach for other campus advocates of transfer and first-generation college students. They create spaces in which to listen to the students and then use what they've learned to plan, advocate, and intercede. Because students' circumstances vary, Martha and Michelle come up with a range of ways to reach them, such as Zoom meetings (used prior to the pandemic) for those who can't always be physically present. Transfers might be older students coming back after years out of school; they may be parents, caretakers, and/or working. They might be recently out of a correctional facility. They may be veterans. They are often the first people in their families to attend university and they tend to be students of color. For Martha and Michelle, to be "student-centered" is to individualize supports while at the same time helping students support one another.

Forging Partnerships, Building Community

In the early days, Martha and Michelle took to heart a conversation they had with a transfer student. His story, along with those of other transfers, motivated them to found a transfer student organization. The work of this student elevated the voices of transfer students at SDSU and enabled Martha and Michelle to secure a small amount of funding. They used it to organize a Transfer Student Success Summit, which has since become a signature, annual transfer-specific summer event. The Annual Transfer Student Success Summit is free and connects new transfer students to campus resources and to high-impact practices such as internships, global engagement, leadership, and the broader honors community before new transfer orientation. Connecting students with these opportunities and resources earlier allows them to "hit the ground running," and to meet faculty, staff, and peers before orientation.

The outreach Martha and Michelle did with counseling and advising centers in community college "feeder schools" has widened the net of transfer allies. Feeder school staff make sure students know about SDSU informational sessions and word is getting out among these schools that SDSU has changed. Formerly, Martha heard, "SDSU doesn't want us. It's hard to get in." Now, Michelle says students come away saying things like "I felt really supported. I really feel like I have community and I belong, and that faculty and staff are so welcoming."

But Martha and Michelle recognized transfer students needed more than just one-off events. "How can we create community for these students?" asks Martha. "How can we have transfer advocates around campus and not just housed in special populations or special programs? You have to first build community. You have to keep transfer students engaged to retain them so they will persist, but it has to be intentional because we want them to graduate in a timely manner."

The annual Explore SDSU open house, where prospective students and their families can talk with the transfer student team or a transfer student panel, provides just one glimpse of the strong transfer student community at SDSU. Once a student chooses SDSU, they receive a warm congratulations message and invitations to a range of presentations, many via Zoom.

"Going from community college where the resources are at specific places, to SDSU—it's like going from a river to a sea. I would be lost if there was no office for transfer students."

— Maryam Abdul-Sattar
President, Transfer Student Outreach Alliance

"To change the culture, you have to start by building community. You have to start by creating student-centered spaces."

— Michelle Lopez

On the first day of classes, the transfer team also holds a community welcome meeting. Other staff come, and more opportunities to meet occur before the add/drop deadline. The transfer meetings are often combined with those for first-generation students, since 40% of transfers are also first-gens.

Community building is ongoing and can finally be centralized in the recently established Transfer Student Success Office. The transfer team holds some sort of activity or event every month, sends out a regular newsletter, and holds informal gatherings where students can receive help, air their worries, and give Martha and Michelle an on-the-ground information about problems to address.

Transfer Work is Equity Work

“There is a misperception that equity work is only done in certain spaces,” muses Michelle. “But we can build, and we can change the culture regardless of our location, regardless of our title.” Her work with Martha and the transfer allies across the campus is a case in point. They’ve been developing supports for specific subsets of the transfer student population, such as those transfer students who are also the first in their families to attend college.

Current data suggests that Martha and Michelle’s efforts are paying off. Their transfer student success work has contributed to high two- and four-year graduation rates. The two-year transfer graduation rate exceeds the Graduation Initiative (GI) 2025 goal, while the four-year rate is expected to exceed the GI 2025 goal.¹ Martha and Michelle remind transfer advocates that listening to the students is critical. Michelle says focus groups and conversations provide “qualitative information that we can share with our colleagues and say this is their experience... The numbers aren’t enough and [aren’t] really telling the whole story.” It’s in student stories that specific equity issues emerge.

Key Strategic Questions

The Network introduced Martha and Michelle to a series of strategic frameworks to guide their thinking on key issues. One of the frameworks presented during the convenings is the KWL (know, want, learn), which asks:

What we **K**now
What we **W**ant to know
How we’ll **L**earn

The Middle Leadership Academy

The Network’s 2018–19 Middle Leadership Academy (Academy) gave the SDSU team critical frameworks and connections to further support transfer students at SDSU. Martha and Michelle sent a team focusing on first-generation college students to the 2018–19 Academy, where presenters talked about how to use data and analytics to close achievement gaps and shared the ups and downs of their own battles to implement change initiatives. Throughout the year, Academy attendees had regular opportunities to engage with each other and reflect on their equity-focused work. Martha and Michelle’s experiences with trying to change hearts and minds were substantiated in the Academy material about the four kinds of people they’d encounter in their efforts on behalf of transfer students: “on board,” “kind of on board,” “pretending to be on board,” and “not at all on board.”



The SDSU’s first Middle Leadership Academy Group (from left to right): Dr. Henry Villegas, Dr. Nate Rodriguez, Tom Reisz, Dr. Martha Enciso, Michelle Lopez, Jezyle Diez, and the late Dr. Rey Monzon. Photo courtesy of Dr. Nate Rodriguez.

¹ The SDSU 2-year transfer student graduation rate was 60.1% for the Fall 2018 cohort, while the GI 2025 goal is 51% for 2-year transfer graduation rate. The SDSU 4-year transfer student graduation rate was 88.8% for the Fall 2016 cohort while the GI 2025 goal for 4-year transfer rate is 91%. For more information about GI 2025, see: <https://www2.calstate.edu/csu-system/why-the-csu-matters/graduation-initiative-2025>.

The Academy reinforced Martha and Michelle’s goals to expand partnerships and use data to inform their work. In learning how to “lead from the middle,” they were challenged to answer key strategic questions, starting with the “why” that motivates their work. Answering these questions helped them to stay focused and not waver in their commitment to serve transfer students.

Throughout their participation in the Academy, Martha and Michelle connected with other CSU leaders and learned about their work and tactics. The Academy afforded them a safe space where they felt a sense of belonging and were empowered to approach other colleagues with questions or concerns. As Michelle emphasized, “Everyone is doing similar work. It’s this energy that leaves you super empowered.”

Future Goals

Martha says the Network has “been a really good home... We can just be ourselves in this space.” Michelle concurs. “The Network has provided the validation that I needed at a tough time. I feel like everything that we’ve learned and the people we’ve connected to and the speakers—the community of support gives me hope.”

Martha and Michelle funnel that hope into new goals to support transfers. One is that SDSU establish recruitment and additional transfer-specific scholarships. Another is to create service-learning courses to engage transfer students in this high impact practice, prior to transfer. Martha and Michelle would like to see curriculum and activities developed specifically for transfers once they are on campus, but also for community colleges to partner with CSUs more strategically and offer credit-bearing courses pre-transfer.

They’d like to see the Network host another transfer-specific meeting or event. Michelle says, “it makes a difference to connect with other equity-minded leaders across the CSU System.” They’re eager to continue collaborating and expanding the possibilities with their cross-campus colleagues. They’re game to pull together a system-wide community Zoom to listen to each other and share what they’ve done: “We are very proud of the work that we have achieved in the last six years,” says Michelle.



The SDSU’s second Middle Leadership Academy Group (from left to right): Tom Reisz, Dr. Martha Enciso, Dr. Nate Rodriguez, Michelle Lopez, Jezyle Diez, Dr. Henry Villegas, and the late Dr. Rey Monzon. Photo courtesy of the Middle Leadership Academy.



For more information about the CSU Student Success Network and how to get involved with it, visit <http://www.csustudentsuccess.net> and/or email studentsuccessnetwork@edinsightscenter.org. To contact the San Diego State University Transfer Student Success Office in Faculty Advancement & Student Success, email Michelle Lopez at transfersuccess@sdsu.edu and Martha Enciso at menciso@sdsu.edu.