



Transforming Access into Opportunity

UNDERSERVED, FIRST GENERATION TRANSFER STUDENTS NEED PIPELINES TO HIGHER EDUCATION

By S. Terri Gomez

Last fall, a student named Priscilla reached out to me asking for some help with transferring to Cal Poly Pomona. She was accepted for spring 2019 from Mt. SAC, but a final review of her transcripts revealed she still needed to take a transferrable math course.

Priscilla was a mother committed to raising her young daughter and earning her degree in early childhood studies. She was unsure of her next steps.

I invited her to campus, where we discussed her transfer journey. She also spent time in **PolyTransfer**, our transfer resource center, speaking

with transfer students who had just completed their first semester and a faculty member. Priscilla left with a plan, an advocate and transfer resources.

Priscilla's journey to Cal Poly Pomona was long and had many detours. Last fall, she successfully transferred and also participated in the PolyTransfer summer program with 100 of her peers to help with the transition to the campus. I was excited about the on-campus opportunities that awaited her, and I was so proud of her for getting past this hurdle.

I am passionate about higher education's power to change lives and the responsibility of expanding educational opportunities for others. As a faculty member, department chair, program director and administrator, my work in higher education has been focused on educational pipelines and fostering access and equity. I have spent my career trying to better understand the pipelines' leaks, detours and stops, particularly for underserved, first-generation college students.

Many students begin their educational journey at community college, but there are many obstacles. On average, transfer students will attend three community colleges to complete their transfer requirements, and many attend part-time. This slows their academic momentum.

Another significant barrier is the lack of clear transfer pathways. Although over 80 percent of students aspire to transfer, only one third transfer within six years. Only 10 percent of low-income students transfer to a four-year institution and earn a bachelor's degree.

I know firsthand the difficulty these students face.

Like half of our CPP students, I attended community college. Although I graduated near the top of my high school class, my parents insisted I attend San Bernardino Valley College. They worried about my ability to adjust in a different environment, but the main reason was financial: I am the youngest of six children from a working-class family. How in the world would they pay for housing and books, even if my tuition was covered? Living at home and attending an affordable community college made financial sense. It also provided an opportunity for me to acclimate to coursework and access support services.

I was fortunate to participate in a rigorous and empowering transfer transition program at UCLA, which transformed my educational trajectory.

I went on to earn my bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees in political science at UCLA and joined Cal Poly Pomona's Department of Ethnic & Women's Studies.

In 2014, the CSU wanted to invest in innovative academic support programs. We seized the opportunity to create a first-year experience transfer program. From my UCLA experience, I understood the importance of providing a meaningful transfer experience to first-generation students, who often feel out of place on university campuses. I became

the founding director of PolyTransfer – one of the first CSU programs to provide targeted support and programming to underserved students from community colleges.

PolyTransfer is unique in that it serves the broader transfer community with an array of engagement opportunities: college coffee hours, research workshops and transfer student week celebrations, to name a few. Our work takes an assets-based approach, which recognizes and honors the skillsets our transfers bring to the university. It is precisely this navigational capital that will help them succeed and move on to graduate school or begin a meaningful career.

We have committed to increasing the number of community college transfer students who attend Cal Poly Pomona, but admission is not enough. We are building a "transfer receptive culture," which means we take institutional responsibility for how we receive our transfer students.

Simple things matter, like making sure our orientation literature acknowledges graduating in two years, sharing research and internship opportunities targeting transfer students, providing transfer scholarships and designing programs to support students who already know a thing or two about college.

Our work is yielding important results. In just four short years, Cal Poly Pomona has more than doubled the two-year graduation rates for transfer students, from 13.8 to 32.3 percent. We have seen dramatic increases in graduation rates for our first-generation, low-income and minority students.

The challenge facing American higher education is not simply to improve access, but to substantially improve the completion rates for students with whom we have not been historically successful.

This is the moral imperative behind the **CSU Graduation Initiative 2025** – to eliminate equity gaps. The CSU produces a large percentage of degree earners for California's economy; it is crucial to maintain and increase the number of graduates, and therefore markedly increase the academic achievement and degree attainment of our students. Cal Poly Pomona is at the forefront of these efforts, working hard to make the university a welcoming and supportive home.

S. Terri Gomez is the associate vice president for student success in the Division of Academic Affairs, overseeing student success initiatives, university advising, academic support services, first-year experience programs, and campus progress on the CSU Graduation Initiative 2025.



Hear Terri Gomez speak about her commitment to transfer students.

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