

**Santa Monicans for Renters' Rights**  
**College Board Questionnaire 2026**  
Candidate: Dr. Luis Barrera Castañón

**Your Candidacy**

**1. What is your understanding of the role of a Santa Monica College board of trustees member?**

The Board's role is to set vision, policy, and accountability. The Superintendent/President's role is to lead the institution and implement the Board's direction across the college. The Board is not there to micromanage the administration and there are clear role distinctions embedded in state educational code as well as accreditation practices. But the campus community and the public should be able to understand in very clear terms the goals the Board set, the progress being made, and where the college needs to improve.

Trustees are also stewards of public trust. SMC is a public institution that receives taxpayer support and serves students, employees, and the community. Trustees are responsible for making sure the college is fiscally responsible, transparent, student-centered, and responsive to the local community and stakeholders who depend on it.

**2. Why are you running to be a trustee of Santa Monica College?**

I am running because I made a promise to my younger self in 2002-03 when I was Student Body President at Santa Monica College that I would do so. I became a student leader during a time when the state was facing significant budget challenges, and the SMC Board of Trustees had to make difficult decisions that affected faculty, staff, and students. As students, we often felt outside of that process. We wanted more transparency, more communication, and a clearer understanding of how decisions were being made. That experience stayed with me, and it shaped my belief that students, employees, and the community deserve public institutions that are more open, accountable, and easier to understand.

I am also running as a higher education and workforce development professional who believes SMC must stay at the forefront of innovation and change. For 35 years, the college has held the #1 flag on transfers to the University of California system. This accolade must remain central to our mission. But transfer alone are not enough to meet the full needs of today's students, workers, employers, and community.

Degrees still matter, but applied skills, competencies, workforce readiness, and lifelong learning are now more important than ever. Students need multiple pathways to success, whether that means transferring to a four-year university, gaining industry-relevant skills, entering a new career, advancing in their current profession, or returning to college later in life. Our Santa Monica community averages over 70% of its residents with bachelor's degrees. With these numbers our community is not seeking transfer pathways. Those in our community who have been displaced by Artificial Intelligence, or part of the film industry need to reskill and find other pathways that do not require a bachelor's degree. Our college can offer that reskilling and

upskilling opportunity at no-cost to our local community, and I think that by providing this option we meet a need that is regional.

**3. What skills, background, and experience do you possess that prepare you for this office?**

I bring lived experience, professional experience, and current governance experience to the Board of Trustees.

My family came to California after the Guatemalan civil war and the targeted disappearances of Indigenous people. I grew up unknowingly undocumented in Culver City and later came to Santa Monica College after a friend suggested that additional certifications might help my plumbing career. In two and a half years, I went from being a timid undocumented student carrying shame about my status to serving as Student Body President. SMC changed my life. It helped me transfer to UC Berkeley and opened doors I did not know were possible.

Since then, I have spent nearly 20 years working across economic development, workforce development, K-14 education, talent development, and adult learning. I have built workforce programs, education pathways, employer-connected talent pipelines, and public policies focused on opportunity for people who have not always been well served by traditional systems.

I also bring operational and fiscal experience. I have managed millions of dollars in grants and revenues, and I understand what it means to keep an organization financially stable while still serving the people who depend on it.

As a current Trustee, I have worked with the Board to think seriously about SMC's mission and future. We should protect SMC's extraordinary transfer legacy. But we also need to strengthen workforce development, dual enrollment, lifelong learning, and the college's connection to the changing regional economy.

**4. What sets you apart from the others running to be a trustee of Santa Monica College?**

What sets me apart is the combination of lived experience as a formerly undocumented SMC student and Student Body President, nearly 20 years of professional experience in workforce and economic development, operational experience managing millions in grants and revenues, and direct experience serving on this Board.

I am not approaching these issues only as concepts. I have worked on state legislation to advance educational pathways, expand workforce programs, formalize talent pipelines, and bring accountability, transparency, and local control to educational systems. I know how budgets work, I know how Sacramento works, and I know what it means to be a student at SMC who is one decision away from a different life path.

**5. List each organization other than SMRR whose endorsement you have sought and whether or not you completed a questionnaire for that organization. Provide a copy of any questionnaire(s) you submitted to any other organization(s).**

Santa Monica Democratic Club, questionnaire submitted

Coalition for Economic Prosperity in Santa Monica (CEPS), questionnaire submitted

**6. Please list your main funders, endorsers, and supporters, and provide an overview of your campaign's financial progress to date.**

Endorsers to date include:

- Dr. Sion Roy, Chair, Santa Monica College Board of Trustees
- Dr. Tom Peters, Vice Chair, Santa Monica College Board of Trustees
- Dr. Nancy Greenstein, Trustee, Santa Monica College Board of Trustees
- Rob Rader, Trustee, Santa Monica College Board of Trustees
- Anastasia Foster, Trustee, Santa Monica College Board of Trustees
- Dr. Susan Aminoff, former Santa Monica College Board Trustee
- Dr. Louise Jaffe, former Santa Monica College Board Trustee
- Caroline Torosis, Mayor, City of Santa Monica
- Kay Ambriz, Santa Monica Rent Control Board Member
- Dan Hall, Santa Monica City Councilmember
- Barry Snell, Santa Monica City Councilmember
- Ellis Raskin, Santa Monica City Councilmember
- Natalya Zernitskaya, Santa Monica City Councilmember
- Ted Winterer, former Mayor and former Santa Monica City Councilmember
- Mike Fong, California State Assemblymember, 49th Assembly District, Chair, Assembly Higher Education Committee
- Mike Soloff, Santa Monica Resident
- Denny Zane, Santa Monica Resident
- Patricia Hoffman, Santa Monica Resident
- Sue Himmelrich, former Santa Monica Mayor, Councilmember

Financial progress to date: I recently formed my campaign committee and submitted the necessary paperwork, so I have not begun fundraising yet. As of today, the campaign has not raised any funds. My goal is to raise \$45K or more by the November 2026 election. This will allow the campaign to communicate with voters, build visibility, and support outreach.

**7. Will you accept donations from developers and/or their paid lobbyists for your campaign?**

I intend to run a campaign that is rooted in friends, family, community members, and people who believe in the future of Santa Monica College. I would decline contributions from sources that are not consistent with my values. I will not accept contributions that compromise, or appear to compromise, my ability to make independent decisions as a Trustee. Therefore, I will evaluate contributions through that lens and remain committed to transparency, accountability, and compliance.

**8. Please provide a list of all organizations with which you are a member, along with a description of leadership positions held, whether related to your civic, community or professional endeavors.**

- Santa Monica Democratic Club, current member and former Executive Board member (community)
- Santa Monicans for Renters' Rights, current member (community)
- House of Haven, current Board Member; former Past Chair and Vice Chair (community)
- Raza Golf Foundation, current Board Member (community)
- Strive LA, former Board Member (community)
- Santa Monica College Young Alumni Council, former Founding Member (community)
- Executive Latino Leadership Association (ELLA), Founding Member (professional)

## **SMRR**

**1. How long have you been a member of SMRR? Please outline the extent of your relationship and engagement with SMRR.**

I joined Santa Monicans for Renters' Rights during the 2024 campaign cycle. I volunteered in get-out-the-vote efforts including canvassing and phone banking, and I publicly supported and canvassed for several SMRR-supported candidates.

**2. Do you pledge, if elected, to attend SMRR's monthly Steering Committee meetings to provide the College Board report (in rotation with other SMRR supported College Board members)?**

Yes, I regularly join the Steering Committee now and will continue to do so.

**3. Do you pledge, if elected, to discuss major policy issues related to your office with SMRR leaders prior to making decisions?**

Yes, I pledge to discuss major policy issues related to the college board with SMRR leadership. I would just need to understand what specific issues are relevant to SMRR leadership and perhaps coordinate a standing meeting prior to each Board meeting.

## **Issues Relating to the College**

**1. What are the top 3 goals you want to achieve during your term on the SMC Board? How do you think you can achieve these goals?**

First, restoring long-term fiscal stability. SMC must stop using one-time funds to pay for recurring expenses, and that principle should be reflected in Board policies and institutional practices moving forward. As Chair of the Board Policies Ad Hoc Committee, I will work to align our policies and strengthen our practices around long-term financial responsibility. The

goal is to grow our reserves, end the use of one-time money for recurring expenses, and put the college on a path not just to financial stability but to financial freedom.

Second, better aligning SMC's institutional goals with the state funding formula. The formula is built around transfer, workforce development, and high school dual enrollment. SMC excels at transfer, and that must continue. But we need stronger workforce and dual enrollment strategies so we can maximize state funding while better serving students, families, employers, and the regional economy. The college currently has no workforce development professionals funded by the general fund. That must change.

Third, building real data transparency and accountability. The public, students, faculty, classified professionals, and administrators should be able to clearly understand the college's finances, enrollment trends, student outcomes, bond investments, and progress toward institutional goals. I want SMC to create a public accountability dashboard and hold a State of the College event each year so the community can see where we are, where we are going, and where input is needed.

I plan to achieve these goals through clear Board direction, a strong working relationship with the Superintendent/President, transparent goals, regular public updates, and a shared governance process that brings administration, faculty, classified professionals, and students into the work.

## **2. The College's fiscal status is difficult. What is your plan to improve it?**

SMC can create long-term stability, but we must be honest about where we are. The college is facing an \$8 million deficit even after taking austerity measures that resulted in stricter financial controls as well as laying off 45 long-term members of our classified staff. While the college community has bravely taken the first necessary step in addressing the damage, more needs to be done.

My plan includes growing our reserves, ending the use of one-time money for recurring expenses, aligning our institutional goals with the state funding formula, creating an accountability dashboard to track progress, and investing in revenue-generating strategies outside of the formula.

Beyond the formula, we need new revenue strategies connected to the future of education and the needs of the region. One opportunity is targeted international student enrollment in programs that match global demand. Water security and sustainability are growing issues around the world. The City of Santa Monica has made important progress toward water independence and local water filtration systems, but that work is not meaningfully connected to SMC. SMC could build a stronger sustainability and water conservation pathway that attracts students, partners, and potential funding from regions where these skills are urgently needed.

We need clear numbers, shared facts, and financial discipline.

## **3. Given the fiscal pressures experienced by the college, particularly since the beginning of the second Trump Administration, do you think the Board of Trustees made the right decision in laying-off significant number of classified staff?**

Layoffs are serious. They affect people, families, students, departments, and the culture of the college. I do not take that lightly, and I would never describe layoffs as a victory or a simple solution.

At the same time, the financial reality facing the college was serious. When personnel costs climb beyond 85% of the budget and later reach roughly 92%, that is not just a difficult budget year. That is a structural problem. It limits the college's ability to invest in students, programs, technology, professional development, and innovation.

I believe the college should have acted earlier and with more clarity. Some Board members pushed for the college to begin addressing the problem sooner, but the process slowed down. That created more uncertainty for the campus community than necessary.

Given the severity of the structural imbalance and the options available at that point, I believe the Board had to act. The lesson is that SMC needs earlier warning systems, clearer budget information, stronger long-term planning, and a Board culture willing to confront structural problems before they become crises.

The goal cannot just be surviving the deficit. The goal must be getting SMC to a place where we have the financial freedom to invest again in students, faculty, classified professionals, programs, innovation, and the community. Fiscal discipline makes long-term student success possible.

#### **4. What can you point to in order to assure SMRR that you are capable of being a good steward of the fiscal health of the college?**

Throughout my career, I have managed millions of dollars in grants and revenues, with a focus on keeping organizations solvent, sustainable, and able to continue delivering services to the communities that need them most. I understand what it takes to keep an organization financially stable while still serving the people who depend on it.

As a current Trustee, I have pushed the Board to think critically about the college's fiscal future. I serve as Chair of the Board Ad Hoc Policies Committee, and I will use that role to push for stronger budget discipline, clearer long-term planning, and policies that prevent structural deficits. I have been clear that SMC cannot continue using one-time funds to pay for recurring expenses, and I have advocated for an accountability dashboard so the public can track our progress.

Fiscal responsibility is what allows the college to protect programs, support employees, invest in innovation, and serve students for generations. That is the standard I bring to this work.

#### **5. With all of the stress and strife in the world and on college campuses today, what will you do if elected to help alleviate tensions that may arise and keep SMC from being a hostile environment?**

SMC must provide and protect academic freedom, free expression, and open discourse. The college should create space for difficult conversations and make sure there are clear expectations for protest, speech, and conduct. When expression offends, the answer should not automatically be censorship. Often, the answer is more dialogue, more education, and a process where people can be heard.

But when conduct creates harm or threatens safety, the college must act before harm occurs. Expression should not become harassment, intimidation, or disruption that prevents students from learning or employees from doing their work. Campus safety must take priority. Anything that puts students, staff, and community at harm must be addressed.

As a practice and as an institution of higher education and learning, we must be open to testing the boundaries of our comfort if by doing so we learn more about our limitations, prejudices, or humanity.

**6. What specific steps will you take to reduce achievement gaps and increase both enrollment and completion rates of students from socio-economically challenged backgrounds?**

The first step is honesty about the data. We need to be transparent about which students are succeeding, which students are not, and where the college must intervene. That requires transparent, disaggregated data by race, income, first-generation status, age, program, and other equity indicators. If some students are not succeeding at the same rate as their peers, we have a responsibility to name that clearly and act.

Currently, we do not have a clear enough picture of how we are doing over time with student outcomes. We may receive updates once a year, but it is not always clear what changed, what interventions were made, or what we are doing next. I would push for more transparency around our goals, outcomes, completion rates, and student success metrics over time, so everyone in the campus community is aware of where we stand and how we can address gaps.

I would also institute monthly study sessions across all facets of the education pipeline so staff, faculty, administration, and students are aware of trends in education and what we can do together to meet the moment. I believe in shared governance, I believe in the role of each union to exercise its power, and I believe we should start from a common knowledge base to come up with solutions as a college community.

**7. What can you point to in order to assure SMRR that you are truly committed to reducing achievement gaps and increasing both enrollment and completion rates of students from socio-economically challenged backgrounds?**

I am that student. I grew up unknowingly undocumented in Culver City, the son of farmworkers from the fields of Salinas. My family sought refuge in California after the Guatemalan civil war and the targeted disappearances of Indigenous people. I came to Santa Monica College carrying shame about my status, looking for plumbing certifications. SMC gave me community, confidence, and a path forward. In two and a half years, I went from that timid undocumented student to Student Body President, and from there to UC Berkeley.

My commitment to reducing achievement gaps is not theoretical. It is the work of my career. For nearly 20 years I have built workforce programs, education pathways, employer-connected talent pipelines, and public policies focused on opportunity for people who have not always been well served by traditional systems. I have helped develop state administrative regulations, state laws, and local government policies focused on creating opportunity for people who have struggled with traditional education systems and need a pathway to self-sufficiency for themselves and their families.

I know what is on the line because I lived it. That is the standard I bring to this work.

**8. SMC was once known for having a higher percentage of full-time vs adjunct faculty members as compared to other community colleges. Has this changed? If so, please explain why, and what you think can and should be done (if anything) to reverse this trend.**

That ratio has changed, and it is a problem to many community colleges in the region. The reason for this ratio is that part-time faculty is less expensive to employ and thus generate more revenue for the colleges. That trend has continued to grow across our community college system, and it will not slow down until we can control costs. We need to look at other revenue-generating ideas and invest in a different future. Once we are able to bring additional funds into the college and that those funds will be continuous then we can begin to bring on more full-time permanent staff than the part-time workforce that we currently hold

**9. Higher education in California (and beyond) is changing a lot. What does the future of higher education at the College look like to you? What will you do if elected to facilitate your vision for the future of higher education at the college?**

The world has changed. Degrees still matter, but applied skills, competencies, workforce readiness, and lifelong learning are now more important than ever. Students need multiple pathways to success, whether that means transferring to a four-year university, gaining industry-relevant skills, entering a new career, advancing in their current profession, or returning to college later in life.

SMC should continue to be a transfer leader, but we also need to be a stronger workforce, lifelong learning, and upskilling institution. The average Santa Monican is 43 years old, with 74% having a bachelor's degree and 30% having advanced degrees. What this group needs now is upskilling, retraining, career transition support, and access to new skills in areas like AI, business, accounting, entrepreneurship, and technology. Others are worried about displacement or trying to figure out how their skills transfer into a new career. Too often, Santa Monica residents must go to private online educational providers for that support. There is nowhere in Santa Monica where they can gain these skills. If we cannot do this at the local college level, then our college is not fully meeting the needs of our community.

AI is also an issue of displacement, not only an academic issue. AI machines are already becoming a reality in other parts of the workforce. I foresee a reality where machines are doing work that humans currently occupy, especially in repetitive work such as janitorial and regular maintenance, as well as administrative roles. The college must take a proactive role to ensure that when these changes occur our staff have a path to other careers in our college and in our system.

To facilitate this vision, I would push for monthly study sessions on the future of education, stronger workforce development, general fund investment in workforce professionals, and a strategic plan with the next Superintendent/President that reflects our financial reality, our enrollment challenges, our student success goals, and the future of higher education.

**10. Do you support the College building student housing? If so, what will you do if elected to assure that it happens?**

Yes. SMC already has a plan for student housing, and the voters approved bonds that prioritize the students most in need. That should remain the goal.



One of the biggest challenges we need to address is the fact that only 60% of our students come to campus. We have a need to get more students to our campus, and having student housing will help us meet this goal. We have more than enough property to think creatively about housing.

I also believe the college must be more creative with its land and partnerships. With AB 648 now signed into law, SMC has more room to think about how its properties can support housing not only for students, but also potentially for workers and partners connected to the college. We should work closely with the City of Santa Monica and the County to understand the best use of our land and how it can meet real housing needs.

If elected, I will continue to push for the college to move forward on student housing on the existing approved plan and to evaluate additional district-owned land for student, faculty, staff, and workforce housing partnerships, in coordination with the City, County, neighbors, and campus stakeholders.

**11. If and when the College builds student housing, what percentage would you like to see devoted to affordable student housing, including housing for unhoused students and students at risk of becoming unhoused?**

At the heart of each of these decisions must be those that are in most need. That is not to say that our properties cannot also house those that can pay prevailing rents, because we must also provide a space where students from different economic backgrounds can cohabitate to learn and grow from each other. But the priority is those students and workers that simply cannot afford the rents in our city. There are existing percentage carve outs that the state has adopted, we could do something very similar, which we are doing now, but ultimately, we should use data to inform what the actual need is for our community and act accordingly. This housing project must be a project that is self-sustainable otherwise we will not be able to meet the needs of any of our students.

**12. Among its other important obligations, what obligations do you believe the College has to the communities of Santa Monica and Malibu? What goals and plans do you have for the College vis-à-vis the Santa Monica and Malibu communities?**

SMC was founded to meet the needs of the local community and regional economy. Since the 1930s, SMC then met the local needs of the community by creating pathways to local four-year colleges. Local Santa Monica youth and surrounding communities benefited from this approach, so much so that this practice was copied by the community college system.

But our focus on transfers has made the college less responsive to the needs of local Santa Monica residents. Santa Monica has changed and so has the economy. The average Santa Monican is 43 years old, with 74% having a bachelor's degree and 30% having advanced degrees. What this group needs now is upskilling, retraining, career transition support, and access to new skills in areas like AI, business, accounting, entrepreneurship, and technology. SMC should be the place where the local community can come for that kind of learning and upskilling.

We should continue to be a transfer leader, but we also need to be a stronger workforce, lifelong learning, and upskilling institution. If the local college cannot help people adapt to the future of work, then we are not fully meeting the needs of our community.

I would also support a more formal structure for collaboration between SMC, the City of Santa Monica, and SMMUSD, whether that is an annual education summit, a joint working group, or a task force focused on practical issues like dual enrollment, workforce pathways, housing, student basic needs, and youth opportunity. The point is not to create another meeting. The point is to create shared work, shared timelines, and shared accountability.

**13. The college has a remarkable music program. Do you have ideas for taking that program more visibly into the community of Santa Monica?**

I don't have any new idea for music program expansion. I think we do a great job already, there's probably more we can do with marketing, but those costs are being limited by the financial austerity measures we've taken over the last decade. Once we fix our financial situation then we can more creatively think about strategies to expand or better market these community resources.

**State Ballot Measures**

**1. Do you support the Howard Jarvis measure (or any substitute for that measure) to require a two-thirds vote on any and every form of new local tax? Why or why not? Will you actively encourage your supporters to vote the same way as you on this measure?**

No, I do not support limiting local control. Every community is different, and some communities need flexibility in enacting local policies. We cannot apply a universal guideline to all communities, especially for this type of practice. Local control needs to remain. I would actively encourage and try to inform my constituents on these matters.

**2. Do you support the measure to require that any ballot measure imposing a new super-majority vote requirement must itself pass by that same super-majority in order to become effective? Why or why not? Will you actively encourage your supporters to vote the same way as you on this measure (assuming it appears on the ballot)?**

No, I do not support limiting existing ballot measure controls. Citizens must have a way to do direct governance. For too long, special interests have dominated our representative government. I saw this firsthand as a policy advocate. It is important for state resident to have a path for direct governance. I would not limit that ability, and I would share these thoughts with my constituents.

**3. Do you support the measure to condition the right to vote on new voter identification requirements? Why or why not? Will you actively encourage your supporters to vote the same way as you on this measure?**

No, I do not think we need government-issued IDs to vote. We have not had voter fraud issues in the past. These are scare tactics. Our system has worked. It is not broken. However, if we do want government issued IDs for voting then we need to make sure that everyone has access to IDs and that there are no institutional or economic barriers to IDs. In my line of work sometimes having an ID can be the difference between having a job or not. And the state makes it difficult at times for residents, particularly those impacted by the criminal justice system to attain an ID.

A statewide identification requirement that comes with the resources to ensure IDs are easy to attain would actually help more people beyond just voting. But it cannot be used as a strategy to limit voting but rather one that helps expand access.