

Santa Monicans for Renters' Rights

College Board Questionnaire - 2026

Name: Oscar de la Torre

Email address: odelatorresm@gmail.com

Did you include the requested Additional Materials? Yes X or No ☐

Please email completed Questionnaire and Additional Materials to smrrinfo@gmail.com

Your Candidacy

1. What is your understanding of the role of a Santa Monica College Board of Trustees member?

The Board sets policy, approves the budget, protects the mission and vision of the college, hires and evaluates the President, and holds the President accountable. The President manages the day-to-day operation of the institution and implements Board-approved policies and direction.

A trustee should not micromanage, but a trustee should also not be passive. I would work respectfully with the President while asking clear questions about student outcomes, fiscal stability, enrollment, equity, worker morale, and public trust.

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

I am running to protect the promise of public education and workforce training for all students, especially those who have experienced marginalization.

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

I was born and raised in Santa Monica and I am a product of SMMUSD schools. I bring decades of public service rooted in education, youth development, working families, and the Santa Monica community. I completed an MA degree and I wrote my master's thesis on integrating historically segregated public universities through effective retention programs. I have worked in both the California Legislature and the Texas Legislature to advance policies to make higher education affordable and inclusive.

I served 18 years on the SMMUSD Board of Education, where I worked on budgets, educational policy, equity initiatives, labor issues, facilities, and student achievement. I also served four years on the Santa Monica City Council during the COVID pandemic and its economic aftermath.

For 20 years, I led the Pico Youth & Family Center, supporting young people and families and helping create stronger academic pathways between PYFC, SMMUSD, and SMC. I am also a former SMC student, a former SMC employee, and the parent of a current SMC student.

In 1995–96, I served as the first program coordinator for SMC’s Pico Partnership Program, supporting students who had historically struggled to access and complete college. My life’s work has been about helping more young people move toward opportunity, education, and dignity.

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

My experience sets me apart. I am a lifelong Santa Monica resident, a graduate of SMMUSD public schools, a former SMC student, a former SMC employee, and the parent of a current SMC student. I also bring 18 years of service on the SMMUSD Board of Education and four years on the Santa Monica City Council. That combination of lived experience, educational leadership, public service, and direct connection to SMC gives me a unique perspective on how the College can better serve students, families, workers, and the broader community.

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).

I have sought the endorsement of the Santa Monica Democratic Club and Community for Excellent Public Schools (completed questionnaire attached).

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

I will be launching my fundraising and endorsement effort next week.

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

No

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.

Member, Santa Monicans for Renters’ Rights; Member, Santa Monica Democratic Club; Co-founder, Mexican American Policy & Advocacy Association; Member and past Chair, Pico Neighborhood Association; Consultant, Pico Youth & Family Center; Consultant, Holistic Strategies.

SMRR

1. How long have you been a member of SMRR? Please outline the extent of your

relationship and engagement with SMRR.

I have been a member of SMRR since 2001-02. I have helped SMRR increase its dues-paying membership, especially in the Pico Neighborhood. I have helped SMRR recruit steering committee representatives. I have engaged SMRR in creating protections for tenants and have worked collaboratively with SMRR leaders to implement policies on the SMMUSD Board to protect residency status for students/renters who were displaced through Ellis Act evictions. I have helped shape SMRR's platform on tenant protections and I have worked since 2002 to help elect SMRR-endorsed 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

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

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? 1. Expand enrollment and retention of students. 2. Create a resident worker retraining initiative. 3. Protect effective student support services and lead the creation of student/workforce housing initiatives. The first two goals are essential to bring fiscal stability to SMC. We can achieve these goals by developing a five-year strategic plan to assess student and worker retraining needs and adapting our curriculum and career pathways to meet those needs. On the student/workforce housing front, we can achieve these goals through public-private partnerships between affordable housing providers, SMC, SMMUSD and the City of Santa Monica. I plan to leverage my institutional experience to lead in this area.

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

Santa Monica is an attractive City and SMC is one of the best community colleges in California. We are positioned to expand student enrollment and retention. This includes recruiting international and out-of-state students who can afford to pay the out-of-state tuition. We must also advocate for more funding from the Governor and the State Legislature.

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 a significant number of classified staff?

No. I believe smaller cuts should have been made earlier, and one-time funding should not have been used to sustain ongoing staffing expenditures. Laying off significant numbers of classified staff is not a healthy or sustainable staff-reduction strategy. The Board should have pursued earlier fiscal discipline, greater transparency, and a more strategic approach to protecting students, classified employees, and the long-term stability of the College.

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?

I have helped balance the budget on the SMMUSD Board of Education 18 times. I also voted to bring in outside support in FCMAT to ensure SMMUSD budgets were sustainable for at least 3 years after approval. I have helped balance the budget 4 times for the City of Santa Monica during one of the most challenging fiscal periods of our City's history. I have also helped the Pico Youth & Family Center, a youth-serving nonprofit, stay open through very challenging budget reductions while continuing to serve the youth of our community.

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 should be a leader in promoting peace, unity and intercultural understanding. We must protect constitutional rights and create a safe and welcoming environment for all, especially those student groups that historically experienced marginalization. Ultimately, through its curriculum, invited speakers, panels, AS-led and student club events and partnerships with nonprofit agencies, SMC can lead by example where dialogue, respect and understanding grows. I am committed to making SMC a beacon of progressive thought where relationships are built, ideas are challenged and humanity is uplifted.

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?

All change begins with awareness. In my first three months as an SMC Board of Trustees member, I plan to bring forward an agenda item that will inform the Board on enrollment, retention, transfer rates, graduation rates, dropout & push-out rates, etc. The data will be disaggregated by race, ethnicity, gender, etc. so that we are clear on the problems and opportunities we face. A solutions-focused dialogue will determine the short-term solutions and a strategic planning process will help identify longer-term solutions. I will also advocate for voluntary exit surveys of all students to attain baseline data to determine what is working for those who succeed and what is challenging for those students who do not. I will also ensure that the Board establishes benchmarks and reasonable goals in these areas for our President/CEO so that we can evaluate her/his work over time.

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?

This has been my life's work and one of the main reasons on why I am running for this position! I worked for 18 years on the SMMUSD Board of Education advancing initiatives to address and close the academic achievement gap. This includes hiring Pedro Noguera, implementing an Equity Fund, reducing student-teacher ratios in our south side schools. Moreover, I continue to work with the Pico Youth & Family Center to deliver direct services to the youth of our community, many of whom depend on support services outside of their family for their upliftment. This has been central to my life's work. I bring both policy experience and direct service experience, and I will continue to make equity, retention, completion, and student success central priorities on the SMC Board.

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.

SMC has shifted to hiring more part-time adjunct faculty as a way to reduce costs. I would like to learn more about the direction of our staffing patterns but I do believe SMC teaching jobs should pay competitive salaries and benefits and should provide pathways to full-time teaching careers. Full-time faculty provide more stability and institutional strength that benefits our students and community.

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 future of higher education is what we will build and offer at SMC! Pursuing a BA degree has become unaffordable for many students and many are opting for shorter certificate programs that lead to decent paying jobs. I want to create a P-16 Education Task Force to bring together multiple partners from early childhood development to at least four years of education after high school. This can be a part of our strategic planning process so that we can create a collective vision for education in our community.

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

Yes, and I plan to lead on this issue!

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?

My goal is to work with the City of Santa Monica and various housing providers such as Community Corporation of Santa Monica to provide outreach and workshops to students who qualify for voucher programs in the short term. The percentages must align with adequate funding so that our student housing goals are realistic.

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?

In the past, my advocacy succeeded in implementing preferential enrollment policies that benefit our resident student population. I will continue to hold SMC accountable to that goal. Residents of Santa Monica and Malibu pay the taxes that make SMC possible and they deserve preferential treatment in enrollment, transparency, honesty and a good neighbor policy.

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 would support more community performances in partnership with SMMUSD and DTSM. I recently helped organize a Music in the Park event and I believe we need to be more inclusive of SMC's music program during City-sponsored events.

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?

I do support a two-thirds vote on new taxes at the local level because Santa Monica is one of the most taxed jurisdictions and this is hurting our ability to attract and retain businesses that provide employment for our residents.

2. Do you support the measure to require that any ballot measure imposing a new supermajority 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)?

Yes, I think it is fair to require the two-thirds tax measure to also receive a two-thirds vote for approval.

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. The current voter identification system works. I wouldn't advocate for any measure that suppresses the vote.