

Introducing Articulation Officer Yolanda Coleman

by Monica Nolasco, Mission College

What motivates you? Student success? Future possibilities? A lot of us have been (are) working toward future possibilities, right? As an articulation officer at Mission College, Yolanda Coleman deals in possibilities every day—specifically, what possibilities will students in the articulation program be able to envision with help from the systems designed to benefit student transfers?

Yolanda considers herself a planner and lover of technology. She's about empowering students. She declares to the world, "We can do better. We can have an impact on outcomes." Perhaps most of all, Yolanda believes that college leaders should be partnering with students so that those students have the information they need to create not simply a course of study, but a course for life. She is a firm believer in the expression "Knowledge is power"—when the knowledge is strategically applied.

When I interviewed Yolanda, she told me, "Mission College is located in the Silicon Valley, so our systems that support students should work well. What's more, these systems should help students move along their career pathway seamlessly by putting the right information in their hands."

As I talked to Yolanda, I heard about her role in bringing technology-driven programs to the college campus, such as SARS Anywhere (a student and college personnel scheduling software application she introduced with Don Cordero), DegreeWorks (a web-based tool that helps students and advisors monitor students' progress toward degree completion), Banner (a database of student records and information), CurricUNET (a web-based curriculum management system for the development, review and approval of academic courses and programs), and the California Guided Pathways Project (created to help 20 California community colleges implement an integrated, institution-wide approach to student success by coordinating structured educational experiences that support each student

from point of entry to attainment of high-quality post-secondary credentials and careers). While implementing and maintaining these systems requires hours of dedicated time, those hours are well worth it.

What exactly is an articulation officer?

An articulation officer (AO) is an interlink who connects higher education institutions so that curricula align with university-level requirements in support of student transfer from one institution to another. What Yolanda values most about her involvement with articulation is her coordination with the state's AO peers.

Being part of the articulation community provides Yolanda with the opportunity to collaborate with peers whom she describes as "brilliant minds" who work to certify student records and maintain standards of quality in the college admissions and transfer processes.

"When things the team has worked on come together, I experience a beautiful feeling of esprit de corps. Everyone gets credit where credit is due, and all of us can have a sense of pride and accomplishment in what we were able to achieve—together!" Still, she cautions, "We can do better! There's always room for improvement. Whatever new system or process we want to put in place may take us five months or five years to bring to fruition. In the end, it's our collaboration in support of student success that makes the effort worth the time and work we put into it."

What drives Yolanda Coleman?

Yolanda told me about a vivid memory she has from childhood:

When my parents got divorced, my mom fell apart and became emotionally withdrawn because she had been over-reliant on my dad. Before their divorce, he took care of everything, but, eventually, his drinking problem after his military discharge got the better of him. He found himself wrestling with his own demons.

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Seeing my mom struggle broke my heart. I thought to myself at that moment, “This will never happen to me; I will not rely on someone so much that I can’t pull myself back up.” This was the moment my fierce independence came to be. To this day, I insist on being my own person.

Academics was always a priority for me regardless of what was happening at home. My parents didn’t go to college, so there was very little discussion about it at home and no one to help me navigate through the system.

Tina, my cheerleading buddy and best friend in high school, had parents who were teachers, and because of our cheerleading schedule, we spent a lot of time together. It seemed as if her family talked about college and education almost every day and that excited me. Her parents became my mentors, and all the advice they gave Tina, she passed on to me. Every class Tina chose, I chose. Every exam she took, I took. Every college she applied to, I applied to. I followed her every move!

I heard about historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) at a church event. When I asked a high school counselor and Tina’s parents about attending an HBCU (historically black colleges and universities), they all dismissed my inquiry, stating that HBCUs did not provide an education on par with that offered at California public colleges. I considered them “experts in education” and was simply too naïve then to question this further.

*In retrospect, what this experience taught me, and what I want to share with my colleagues, is this: **If a student asks a question about something you don’t know about, tell her or him you don’t know. Then, together with the student, find the answer that best suits that student. Help students explore their options!***

Although I was admitted to UCLA and SDSU (San Diego State University), I chose to attend UC Davis for three reasons—its “college-town” feel, its proximity to home, and the fact that Tina was attending UC Davis. (Yes, I was still following her!)

I have no regrets about the choice I made because UC Davis really shaped me! I didn’t know what I didn’t know and learned so much about myself, my history, and my culture. In my first year, I lived in an all-White dormitory with Tina, and just across the quad was a multiculturally themed dorm that I quickly gravitated to. I hung around more African American students, something that I didn’t have an opportunity to do in high school. I even joined an African American sorority (Delta Sigma Theta). For years I felt like a puzzle piece that almost fit but not quite perfectly. At UC Davis, in my new community, I finally fit! The puzzle felt complete!

*Now, after 30 years of counseling, teaching, and working on various other projects (20 of those years at Mission College), I am circling back around to the importance of “the puzzle” as it applies to every individual. **I want students, especially African American students, to feel that they “fit” and that they belong, no matter where or how they pursue their education.***

I now serve on the California Community College Chancellor’s Office HBCU Advisory Committee, assisting in the development of more HBCU transfer guarantees for students. I am also working with faculty, staff, and administrators to help build a stronger, more supportive African American community at Mission. We are doing this by coordinating culturally relevant activities and events that will lay the foundation for the Umoja Program, which we hope to implement in the future.

*My advice to students: Use your resources and ask questions. **One of my favorite sayings is “closed mouths don’t get fed,” so don’t be afraid to ask questions and be vulnerable.** You’ll be surprised at how many people are willing to help and support you! Lastly, if you do not fit into the puzzle you think you are supposed to fit into, don’t be afraid to try a different puzzle! ■*