

 LEADING STRATEGIES

Fostering a Culture of Care for a Student Ready Institution

By Lisa Perry and Erin Webb

The ever-changing landscape of higher education presents enrollment management (EM) professionals with challenges related to workload, staff morale, conflicting values, staff turnover, and student satisfaction. As higher education confronts the reality of today's enrollment climate, it is time to consider how organizational cultures impact staff well-being and, by extension, the quality of service provided to students. This article provides a comprehensive exploration of the transformative journey undertaken by the University of California, Merced's enrollment management (EM) team to reshape its organizational culture, emphasizing the importance of aligning norms and values with a student-ready mindset. Building upon a previous article titled "The Relationship Between One-Stop Support and New Student Enrollment" (Perry 2023), the authors discuss practical concepts, leveraged by one institution, for developing an enrollment management centralized service model that focuses on meeting the needs of current students while fostering a sense of belonging for staff.

An institution's organizational culture can influence employee morale, student satisfaction, and the ability to thrive in this ever-changing world (Gedifew and Mulu-neh 2022; Kinni 2001; Leontev 2017). As the higher education market becomes more and more competitive, it is important for institutions to consider how they stand out and how they will continue to attract new students (Leontev 2017). Perry (2023) discussed the predicted shift in student demographics that may im-

act future higher education enrollment practices and how current organizational structures may not meet the needs of this diverse population. Considering the changing needs of future students and how an institution's organizational culture may impact a university's capacity for change, it's important for EM professionals to consider how to strategically create an organizational culture that presents a student-ready environment that also fosters a sense of belonging.

During 2020, the EM leadership team at the University of California, Merced initiated a two-year endeavor aimed at enhancing their organizational culture and the overall experience of students and staff members. The goal of this endeavor was to create a culture where their diverse staff could experience a true sense of belonging consequently enabling them to provide transformational student support. Leveraging a clear theory of action, the UC Merced EM leadership team sought to achieve improved service to students by gaining buy-in at all levels of the organization. The UC Merced EM leadership team leveraged *Be Our Guest* (Kinni 2001), scholarly research, and student data to develop a plan for changing staff attitudes and shifting the organizational culture to one that uses student satisfaction to inform decisions.

Problem

Centralizing the student enrollment service experience is one way higher education can foster a student-ready environment (Altieri 2019, Perry 2022); however, the act of centralizing services is not enough. The team behind the services must use a lens of care to design enrollment management processes that embrace equity and the unique experiences of all students (Benjarano and Valverde 2012). According to Sahaghan and Napier (2002), an organization's culture represents the norms and values that guide behaviors and inform decision-making processes for the institution. Implementing a mutually agreed-upon set of norms and values that cultivate a student-ready mindset within an institution is essential for enhancing the matriculation experience, particularly when contemplating the adoption of a centralized service approach.

In 2005, UC Merced implemented a centralized student support system for enrollment management, commonly known as a one-stop. This model, called the Students First Center (SFC), offers comprehensive assistance to students, with staff members who are cross-trained in admissions, financial aid, registrar services, and billing. The SFC operates on an 80/20-service model, and the goal is to address 80 percent of customer inquiries within the SFC with the potential to refer the

remaining 20 percent to staff members in their respective "home offices," which include admissions, financial aid, and the registrar's office. Generally, students do not comprehend the difference between a SFC staff member and a home office specialist; a key objective of the one-stop service model is to ensure that students receive consistent and uniform support regardless of which staff member provides the service. It is critical that all staff in these departments are trained to meet the same customer support expectations, thereby creating a seamless service experience for students.

The SFC opened in conjunction with the university in 2005. According to research (Perry 2022), UC Merced is the only university to have opened with a functioning one stop. This unique situation presented campus leaders with specific challenges in implementing such a service model. Notably, the process of adopting a centralized service model at UC Merced lacked a well-documented theory of action and framework that would demonstrate how the partnership aligns with the overall EM organizational strategy. Over the years, these factors contributed to some challenges for the SFC, including conflicting values and the "bobcat shuffle." The bobcat shuffle refers to the run-around students may experience when attempting to solve a problem involving multiple departments.

The SFC is an intra-organizational strategic partnership. The offices of admissions, financial aid, registrar and the SFC are a partnership designed to create institutional efficiency and improve the student experience. The original partnership was formed by founding campus leadership. The partnership was based on an underlying assumption that centralizing services was important to each home office. Although leadership stated their goals of creating institutional efficiency and improving the student experience, the way this would be accomplished and measured was never documented. Consequently, the one-stop student experience was impacted by conflicting values, opinions, and perspectives.

UC Merced EM is made up of approximately 85 full-time professional employees. There are six departments in the EM organization, each with its own director who reports to the associate vice chancellor of enrollment

management. The authors of this article are two of the directors within EM: Lisa Perry is the Director of the SFC, and Erin Webb is the university registrar. Both authors have been with UC Merced for more than fifteen years; throughout their tenure, changes in leadership have introduced new perspectives and assumptions. Given the absence of established and documented values, norms, and purpose behind the partnership, individual sensemaking occurred. As a result, new assumptions emerged, contributing to the continuation of the bobcat shuffle and a lack of trust among staff members within EM.

Conceptual Framework

The use of *Be Our Guest* (Kinni 2001) to improve the student experience is based on two conceptual frameworks, institutional receptivity and strategic partnership development. Institutional receptivity refers to the idea of transforming a campus into a student-ready environment rather than focusing solely on its readiness for administrative processes (McNair, *et al.* 2016). Enrollment management professionals play a pivotal role in developing systems to ensure language and practices align with the principles of a student-ready campus (Black 2004). As stated in the previous article, “The Relationship Between One-Stop Support and New Student Enrollment” (Perry 2023), a student-ready institution demonstrates a strong commitment to both student development and enhancing the overall student experience; to achieve this type of organizational culture, the institution must embrace the idea of change, challenge traditional approaches, and engage in a continuous learning process toward a common goal of addressing the needs of today’s student (McNair, *et al.* 2016; Riggs 2015).

According to Sahaghan and Napier (2002), an organization’s culture represents the norms and values that guide the behaviors and inform the decision-making process for the institution. At UC Merced, enrollment management leveraged *Be Our Guest* (Kinni 2001) to guide the organization toward a path of creating a shared organizational culture that values the student experience. UC Merced’s EM leadership wholeheart-

edly believes in evolving to meet the demands of modern-day students. The organizational culture developed through the *Be Our Guest* (Kinni 2001) journey presented EM leadership with a chance to overhaul long-standing traditions toward creating a culture that is firmly rooted in mutual respect and prioritizes enhancing the student experience (Sahaghan and Napier 2002).

According to Eddy and Amey (2014), there are three phases in the development of a strategic partnership; these phases are pre-partnership, partnership development, and partnership capital. Pre-partnership is dedicated to examining antecedents and motivations (Eddy and Amey 2014). The partnership development phase focuses on the formation and operation of the partnership; this step should include, but is not limited to, the development of goals, resource allocation, and defined responsibilities (Eddy and Amey 2014). Through the formation of the aforementioned agreements, the behaviors of the partnership will begin to take shape. The third phase of strategic partnership development is the creation of partnership capital; in this stage “the partnership becomes greater than the sum of its parts and evolves to form a recognizable organization in itself with norms, values, networks, synergies, and other resources upon which it operates” (Eddy and Amey 2014).

The formation of the original SFC partnership did not fully complete the aforementioned phases. Founding leadership intentionally tied the partnership to strategic objectives during phase one. However, with the opening of the SFC (and the university), the day-to-day demands intensified rapidly leaving limited room to engage in strategic discussions concerning partnership capital. During the initial years of the partnership, there was an evident lack of trust, conflicting priorities, and ongoing power struggles. Leadership’s theory of change was based on an assumption that consolidating customer service operations would save on resources (J. Lawrence, personal communication, July 15, 2019). According to Eddy and Amey (2014), partnerships that are formed based on resources are inclined to fail; although the SFC partnership did not fail, it did encounter a few challenges and remained stagnant for a significant amount of time.

Applying Theory to Practice

In 2019 EM leadership reconvened to improve the relationship and complete the remaining phases of strategic partnership development. Organizational culture conditions in 2019 uncovered a need to develop shared values that aligned the EM organization's work with a common purpose, a purpose that transcended the task of student enrollment. Consequently, EM leadership launched a cooperative initiative aimed at instigating transformative change within the organization. To achieve such a significant level of transformation, it was critical to gain buy-in from staff members at all levels; Eddy and Amey (2014) draw on multiple authors' works to reinforce the importance of adopting change at an individual level. Because organizations are made up of individuals, it is reasonable to conclude organizational change begins at the individual level. To attain the desired outcome, leadership must help staff members make sense of the organizational culture initiative; each step of the change process must be strategically designed to ensure the development of a shared understanding regarding the initiative's purpose (Sahaghan and Napier 2002).

EM leadership leveraged several techniques to achieve institutional sensemaking that supported the common goals. First, EM leaders needed to understand and acknowledge the existing individual cultures within the departments; leadership addressed these differences and leveraged a common framing technique to bridge the varying cultures and overcome any potential resistance to the initiative (Sahaghan and Napier 2002). Second, a distributed leadership style was adopted to leverage the skills and operational expertise of mid-level managers. According to McPhail and McPhail (2002) mid-level leaders are a critical element in acquiring stakeholder buy-in. The third technique employed was transparency. The initial EM-wide organizational culture event was an open forum, offering all staff members a chance to learn about the project and provide feedback. The following section will discuss how this event led to the larger initiative and an opportunity to gain buy-in. Finally, the work was documented in a shared resource where the entire organization could access files. The practice of documentation

fosters consistent communication and allows the partnership to exist beyond the current staff's tenure (Eddy and Amey 2014).

The UCM EM Journey

In January 2020 the director of the SFC proposed a half-day training for all EM staff to understand their role within the one-stop student support model and the SFC quality standards. At the closure of this training, by a show of hands, staff were asked if they wanted the directors to invest more time in building a culture with shared norms and values within EM. Almost every hand in the room went up. The UC Merced EM leadership team left that first training disillusioned. They had initially assumed that the existing organizational culture was already functioning effectively. Regardless, the leadership team left the training session resolute in their determination to guide the EM organization through an organizational cultural shift. Staff were requesting an organizational culture with shared norms and values, which would take transformative learning and leading.

Transformative learning helps adults (staff) manage work and life obstacles while acknowledging their lived experiences (Cranton 2006; Drago-Severson 2009; Merriam and Bierema 2014). Drago-Severson (2009) introduced pillar practices to facilitate adult learning in an educational setting: teaming, providing leadership roles, and collegial inquiry; EM leadership leveraged all three of these concepts to promote a meaningful connection with the initiative. The use of teaming allowed staff to engage with the ideas presented to them in safe and constructive environments. Throughout the implementation, staff were provided opportunities to lead different initiatives and discuss the shared norms and values through critical reflection and dialogue. Intentional time dedicated to reflective practices of collegial inquiry provided staff members with opportunities to process various stages of the culture's development and an opportunity to share feedback.

The journey began with each member of the EM leadership organization reading *Be Our Guest* (Kinni 2001). After reading the book, which provided the



FIGURE 1 ➤ Visual Representation of UC Merced EM Staff Level Involvement in Vision Statement and Quality Standard Development

change context, the leadership team met to draft a shared aspirational vision statement and four service quality standards. From there, the leadership team engaged the next level division leaders, the associate directors, to refine the shared aspirational vision statement and four quality standards. The commitment and buy-in of the associate directors was essential—they needed to understand how this organizational change would impact their professional role, their work, and the work of all staff members. While this work was being done, all staff members were told to set aside work hours to read *Be Our Guest*. Figure 1 is a visual representation of the progression of how staff members were brought into the initiative and the corresponding stages of development. The initiative began with EM leaders, at the center of the figure, and worked outward until all EM team members were included.

After receiving buy-in from the associate directors, the EM leadership team was prepared to share the draft aspirational vision statement and quality standard definitions. A series of bi-weekly, hour-long meetings were hosted to lead staff members through this complex organizational change. They were given the opportunity to provide feedback on each of the four quality standards and how they are prioritized when they come into conflict with one another. This feedback was obtained by breaking staff members into smaller cross-divisional groups to facilitate conversations. The feedback provided was immediately considered and incorporated prior to the next meeting. The instant integration of feedback fostered buy-in from staff members; as individual staff began to see their perspectives incorporated into the initiative, their engagement level grew. Ultimately, at the conclusion of the meeting series, EM had

created norms and values by which to hold each other accountable.

The next step was to integrate the quality standards into the physical and virtual setting, the procedures and processes, and, most importantly, how staff members interacted with each other. To do this, another series of meetings was scheduled to review the intersections of the quality standards and delivery systems. It was essential that staff members agreed about how the quality standards would be demonstrated. Each meeting concluded with a call to action and an imperative to hold one another accountable to the agreed-upon norms and values.

Even with a proposed new organizational culture, the work was just beginning. Staff were invited to propose workgroups to incorporate the adopted quality standards throughout the workplace. They proposed the creation of a team guidebook, a review of the interdivision committees, and an in-depth review of the shared SFC lobby space. Workgroups shared their finished products with the entire division.

The EM leadership team continues to solicit insight from staff members and works to incorporate the agreed-upon norms and values throughout the division. Bi-weekly meetings with the EM directors occur to encourage accountability, plan further integration, and support collegial inquiry. Quarterly EM staff meetings are conducted to continually solicit feedback and to encourage staff members to incorporate the shared norms and values into their everyday work and the goals of the future.

Assessment

The short-term and long-term outcomes of any organizational change need to be measurable. To assess the immediate impact of the agreed-upon norms and values, a pre- and post-survey was conducted to measure the climate among staff. Each survey question was tied back to the divisional vision and four quality standards. After leading the staff members through the meetings to refine and solidify the new norms and values, the same climate survey was administered. Figure 2 (on page 35) demonstrates the four quality standards within

EM's staff climate and how they have progressed over time. Each of the survey questions, which in turn were tied back to the four quality standards, have shown an increase in staff agreement to the statement over time. Overall, staff members felt the climate within the division had improved.

To measure the long-term outcomes of this organizational change, the staff climate survey is administered once per year with the intent to continually measure the incorporation of quality standards into staff members' everyday lives.

Ultimately, the change in organizational culture was implemented to improve the experience of students. Therefore, measuring the impact of the organizational culture change on the student experience was imperative. Each Fall term, students who receive service from the EM division are surveyed. Again, each survey question is tied back to the divisional vision and four quality standards. In this way, the impact on students can be measured over time. Figure 3 (on page 36) demonstrates the results from the customer service survey in the Fall terms from 2020 through 2022. The three years of data show a strong satisfaction rating in the area of care, which is a priority quality standard.

While the UC Merced EM leadership team has made significant progress in reshaping its organizational culture to better serve students, the journey toward sustaining these changes and ensuring their continued success presents certain challenges. Not every staff member will become fully committed, but the goal is to foster a more positive and engaged environment while respecting individual differences. One notable challenge is the potential for waning commitment over time. As leadership transitions occur or external factors shift focus, there might be a tendency for the newly established norms and values to diminish in importance. Sustaining the commitment to the newly embraced culture will require ongoing reinforcement, continuous communication, and dedicated leadership champions. EM leadership hopes to address this challenge through the use of their shared team guidebook. The guidebook is an onboarding document designed to introduce new staff to the organization's culture.

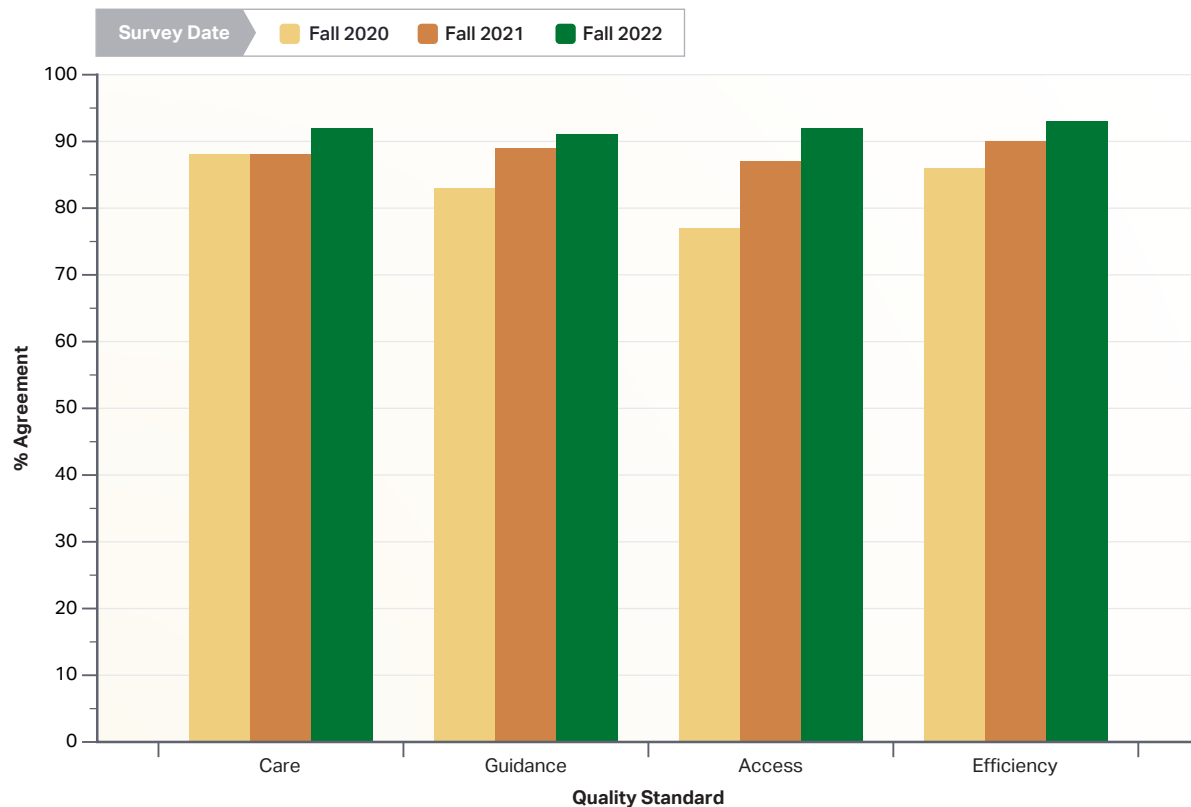


FIGURE 2 ➤ Staff Climate Survey 2020–2022

Another challenge involves accommodating the evolving needs of a dynamic student body. As demographics shift and societal expectations change, the culture that works effectively for one generation of students and staff members, may need adjustments for the next. The EM team's commitment to a culture of care was designed to be flexible and adapt to the unique preferences and expectations of incoming students while remaining rooted in its core values. The EM organization adopted a shared vision statement to address this concern and to create aspirational goals for the future: *Transformational support for student success.*

Summary and Recommendations

Creating an organizational culture within a higher educational institution where staff feel connected to the mission and values ensures students also feel a sense of belonging (Gedifew and Muluneh 2022; Kinni 2001;

Leontev 2017). Recently, a newly hired staff member in UC Merced's EM organization asked leadership how she was supposed to foster a student's sense of belonging if she had not yet found hers (J. Pena, personal communication, August 9, 2023). Leaders have a responsibility to create a culture of care where a diverse community feels comfortable to ask questions, staff members listen to understand, and all communicate with respect and honesty valuing each person's cultural and identity differences. This definition of care was created by the EM team and is the most important priority in the organizational culture. Through this ideal of care and the four other quality standards, EM aims to foster an environment where the team finds their sense of belonging.

Shifting an organizational culture, whether for an entire institution or a singular department, takes time, intentional thought, and deliberate effort. Whatever theoretical framework or organizational change theory

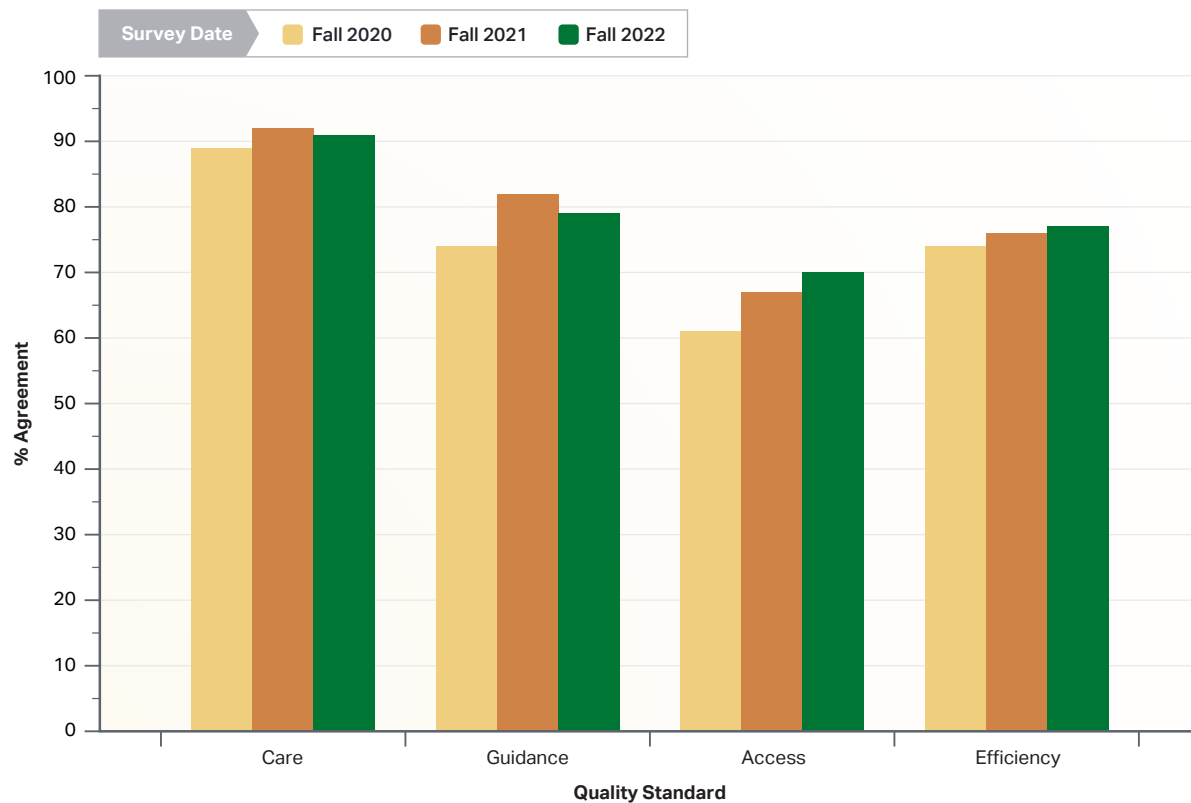


FIGURE 3 ➤ UC Merced EM Customer Service Survey Results
Measured in Fall Terms 2020–2022

is used, staff need to have common, shared norms and values to impact student success on campus. In pursuit of shaping a new culture or refining an existing one, it's essential to understand that this is an ongoing process, not a one-time endeavor. A top-down approach is not necessary; effecting change within a specific departmental or divisional organizational culture can occur without direct involvement from senior management, though the endorsement of the highest campus leadership can be advantageous. Effective implementation of organizational culture improvements demands unified leadership commitment and a designated champion; a distributed leadership model can help provide support, foster accountability, and demonstrate a deeper

commitment to the initiative. Clear call-to-actions are pivotal, guiding individuals and teams toward specific goals. A final thought on organizational cultural initiatives is to endeavor to make the exercise meaningful. Teams must connect with the importance of the effort and not perceive the initiative as busy work. Organizational cultural change begins at the individual level (Eddy and Amey 2014), and the presence of a non-committal member could potentially undermine the initiative's success. Buy-in at all levels is critical and can potentially be one of the more challenging aspects of the initiative, but with time, commitment, and a champion, organization-wide support can be achieved.

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About the Authors



Lisa Perry

Lisa Perry, Ed.D., is the Director of UC Merced's Students First Center (SFC). She has

been with the SFC since the campus opened in Fall 2005 and is a key player in the development and implementation of the department, which primarily serves the Offices of Admissions, Financial and Scholarships, and Registration. She and her team strive to encourage student self-sufficiency and success through the use of social media and technology. As a driving force behind the SFC's growth, she championed a transformative enrollment management-wide organizational culture initiative. Through this endeavor, her visionary leadership

cultivated an environment dedicated to enhancing the student experience.

Perry has shared her expertise on one-stop development and student service technologies with colleges and universities throughout the United States and Canada. In her role, she also routinely works with the UC Office of the President to increase the number of online course offerings across all ten UC campuses. Perry is a graduate of California State University, Chico, and California State University, Stanislaus, and has worked in all three tiers of California's higher education system. Her authorship includes a chapter titled "What was it like? Being in the Pioneer Class at UC Merced," featured in *New Directions for Higher Education* Special Issue: From Range-

land to Research University: The Birth of University of California, Merced and an article titled "The Relationship Between One-Stop Support and New Student Enrollment," published in AACRAO's *SEM Quarterly*. She conducted groundbreaking research through her dissertation titled "One Stop Enrollment Management Service: An Evaluation of The Relationship Between Centralized Services and New Student Enrollment." Using a quantitative analysis, she uncovered compelling evidence that the one-stop service model implemented at UC Merced is significantly contributing to increased new student enrollment, particularly among historically-marginalized populations, offering promising solutions to address student melt in higher education.

**Erin Webb**

Erin Webb, Ed.D., has served the University of California, Merced for sixteen years and

is currently the University Registrar. Dr. Webb has been actively involved in university registrar work for the past 20 years and attends and presents regularly at national and regional conferences.

Her experience within the registrar's office dates back to her days as an undergraduate at Azusa Pacific University working as a student assistant. After completing her undergraduate and master's degrees, she joined Fullerton College as part of their admissions and records team. When the opportunity came to work

at the University of California, Merced—a new research university that opened in 2005—she jumped at the chance to make a difference in the lives of students in her hometown, all while getting to work at a start-up institution. During her tenure at the University of California, Merced, Webb has served as the principal project manager on numerous successful implementations, including degree audit software, a general education revamp, cohort-based tuition, and the exclusive use of students' lived names. Because of these successes, the Office of the Registrar is widely viewed as a model for how to effectively leverage technology and partnerships—particularly in resource constrained envi-

ronments—and to do so while maintaining a commitment to customer service.

Webb earned a B.S. in accounting from Azusa Pacific University and went on to pursue an M.Ed. in college student affairs. Her passion for the community college student experience is never far from her heart, so as she began work on her doctoral degree, her research focused on the experiences of transfer students who attended the California public education system but never completed a bachelor's degree. She earned her Ed.D. in educational leadership from California State University, Stanislaus in 2016.