

Santa Monica Democratic Club
2026 College Board Candidate Questionnaire
Oscar de la Torre

GENERAL INFORMATION

Candidate Name: Oscar de la Torre

Email Address: ODLT4SMC@gmail.com

Candidate's Current Occupation: Deputy Director

Candidate's Employer: Pico Youth & Family Center

Campaign Contact Person: Dina Cervantes, I.6.8 Strategy Consulting LLC,
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1. What qualifications do you bring to this office?

While serving as student body president at Santa Monica High School in 1989-90, I made a decision to commit my life to public service. I bring 22 years of public sector policy making, leadership, budgeting and governance experience serving Santa Monica and Malibu residents.

I served 18 years on the SMMUSD Board of Education from 2002 to 2020, where I advanced equity initiatives that improved graduation and college-going rates for historically marginalized students. I also served four years on the Santa Monica City Council from 2020 to 2024, during the height of the COVID epidemic, where I helped bring stability, vision and progress to our City during very challenging times.

I also served as Executive Director of a youth-serving nonprofit in Santa Monica for 20 years, delivering direct services to youth and young adults and creating academic pathways between PYFC, SMMUSD and SMC. I have the unique experience of being a former student and employee of SMC. In 1995-96, I was employed as the first program coordinator for SMC's Pico Partnership Program. While employed at SMC, I helped develop culturally relevant programming and mentored system-impacted youth who were enrolled at SMC.

Lastly, I am a parent of a current student who is thriving at SMC. Beyond bringing an intimate knowledge of the needs of diverse student groups, I also have a Master's degree in Public Affairs, where I wrote my thesis on Integrating the University of Texas Through Effective Retention Programs.

2. Why are you running?

SMC is currently facing serious challenges. If given the opportunity to serve, I want to leverage my many years of service to our public institutions, especially public education, so that we can work collaboratively to bring fiscal stability, strengthen effective student retention programs, uplift worker morale, and strengthen SMC now and into the future.

3. What are the top issues of your campaign, and how do they differ from other candidates in this race? How do you plan to address those issues once elected?

The top issues facing SMC revolve around financial, organizational and enrollment questions. From my experience, I also know that severe budget cuts create distrust and acrimony between key stakeholders in an organization.

I will apply my experience and collaborative style to ensure that we meet these challenges with integrity, honesty, increased transparency, enhanced communication and good, responsive governance. The goal is to ensure that faculty, classified staff, managers and students are heard and included in shaping SMC's future.

The top issues of my campaign will center student achievement and effective student support initiatives to improve recruitment, retention and graduation/transfer rates. Whether a student is seeking to attain a BA degree, transfer to a four-year institution, complete workforce training in a career pathway, or simply nurture a commitment to lifelong learning, I plan to be an advocate for their success.

Creating partnerships between the City of Santa Monica, SMMUSD and SMC to create student and workforce housing will be a top priority for me. I will also use my experience to help hire an effective Superintendent/President of SMC to lead our transition and future stability.

4. Please list all endorsements received to date (individual and organizational).

No formal endorsements have been publicly announced to date.

5. How long have you lived in Santa Monica or Malibu? Where else have you lived?

I was born and raised in Santa Monica and have lived in the Pico Neighborhood all of my life. Through my studies and internships, I have also lived in Chico, California; Austin, Texas; Puerto Rico; New York; and Washington, D.C.

6. Will you pledge to serve on the College Board for your entire four year term? Yes.

7. What is your history of watching, attending, or speaking at SMC Board meetings? (If incumbent, prior to your own service.)

I have personally attended two SMC Board meetings in 2026 and have watched approximately four to six meetings in 2026. I have also participated in joint meetings between the Boards of SMMUSD and SMC to discuss dual enrollment and childcare initiatives for our students and staff - we need to bring those joint conversations back.

Campaign Finance

1. How much money have you raised for your campaign to date?

I recently formed my campaign committee and submitted the necessary paperwork, so I have not begun fundraising yet.

2. How much do you intend to raise by Election Day 2026?

\$60,000.

3. Candidates for local office often choose not to take campaign contributions from particular types of organizations or industries who are out of step with their own values. Are there any such sources from which you would decline donations? If so, which?

Yes. I will not accept donations from Big Oil, Big Pharma, MAGA or right-wing extremist interests. My campaign should reflect the working families, students, educators and community members I have spent my life serving.

Party / Activism

1. How long have you been a registered Democrat? Have you ever been registered as a member of another political party, or as Decline To State? If so, which party and why?

I first registered as a Democrat when I was 18. I did switch for a short time to the American Independent Party after becoming disillusioned with policies supported by Democrats that contributed to the mass incarceration of historically marginalized communities. At the time, I thought I was registering as more independent. I corrected that error in 2002 and have been a proud Democrat ever since.

2. What is your experience with political activism? Have you ever volunteered or worked for a political campaign other than your own, and if so, in what capacity were you involved?

I have been an activist since I was 17 or 18 years old, when I was elected student body president at Santa Monica High. In 1991, I led a press conference on the front steps of Santa Monica City Hall to call attention to a hate crime against my community.

I have also volunteered for the campaigns of various Democrats, including Barack Obama for President, Bernie Sanders for President, Victor Morales for U.S. Senate, Antonio Villaraigosa for Los Angeles Mayor, and Karen Bass for Los Angeles Mayor, to name a few.

I have also worked on local initiatives and measures including Measure LC, the airport-to-park campaign, Measure JJ, the living wage ordinance, and every parcel tax or bond campaign to support public schools in our community.

3. Which political candidates and/or ballot measures have you endorsed or supported publicly in the past? Please list as many as possible, especially where you endorsed during a contested primary.

Measure LC, Measure JJ, bonds and parcel taxes for SMMUSD and SMC, and Democratic candidates and community campaigns that support working families, public education, civil rights, youth opportunity and local democracy.

4. Have you ever signed for or publicly supported efforts to recall a public official from office? If so, please list the name(s) of the officials and why you felt they should be recalled.

Not that I recall. I believe recalls should be reserved for serious abuses of public trust, corruption, or conduct that makes an official unable to serve the public responsibly.

5. Please list any organizations with which you are a member, including any leadership position you have held in each organization.

Co-Chair/Co-Founder, Mexican American Policy & Advocacy Alliance; Member, Pico Neighborhood Association; Founder/Deputy Director, Pico Youth & Family Center; Past President, California Latino School Board Association.

6. Please confirm that you have read the latest version of the California Democratic Party Platform. List any items in the CDP Platform with which you disagree.

Confirmed. I have read the California Democratic Party Platform and do not have any items of disagreement to list at this time.

SMC Governance & Finance

1. What are your top priorities for Santa Monica College over the next four years?

Fiscal stability, organizational realignment, hiring an amazing Superintendent/President who aligns with our values, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, increased recruitment, retention and student success for all students: Emeritus students, transfer students, career pathway students, formerly incarcerated students, students with disabilities, foster youth, homeless students, and other students who need stronger support. I also want to work in partnership to create student and workforce housing.

2. How do you assess the College's current financial and enrollment outlook, and what steps would you take to ensure long-term stability?

SMC is at a crossroads facing a very challenging fiscal and enrollment crisis. Initiatives to strengthen recruitment, retention and graduation/transfer rates are crucial. Adapting to changes in federal policies related to visas for international exchange students, and to the overall climate impacting international student enrollment, requires thoughtful planning and execution.

Achieving a balanced budget while protecting vital student support programming is paramount.

Working with SMC's bargaining units as reductions in staffing are implemented must include constant communication and full transparency.

3. How would you approach working with the College administration to effectively implement Board policies and ensure accountability?

The goal is to collaboratively create an updated strategic plan that aligns our goals, resources and staffing patterns. I plan to leverage my many years in public sector leadership to create a culture of collaboration between SMC's major stakeholders and to strengthen morale, trust and overall institutional effectiveness.

I would also like to host bi-weekly, solutions-focused meetings between the administration and at least two Board members, including Board members who do not always agree, to bring more unity to mission-critical work.

4. How do you assess Santa Monica College's current approach to transparency, public engagement, and community trust? What specific steps would you take to ensure accountability and meaningful public input in Board decision-making?

During challenging times, government entities can build and maintain trust through communication and shared governance. I support providing quarterly reports to the public regarding SMC's bond program. There has been some criticism on promises made regarding community space that should be supported with bond dollars and I do believe more accountability is needed to ensure that we do right by our residents/taxpayers who fund these bonds.

Through a solutions-focused strategic planning process, we can engage our key stakeholders in creating a new vision for SMC. I personally plan to outreach to key stakeholders, especially students, faculty and staff, on a more consistent basis. Board meetings should also include quarterly updates on strategic plan implementation and corresponding budgets.

5. Santa Monica College recently faced a significant budget shortfall that led the Board to approve layoffs, prompting substantial public debate over the College's financial management and long-term planning. What is your assessment of how the Board handled the situation? How would you balance fiscal responsibility, workforce impacts, educational quality, transparency, and long-term institutional stability when making difficult governance decisions?

Smaller reductions earlier can prevent larger reductions later. It seems like the Board failed to make budget adjustments in a timely manner, which caused larger budget cuts than expected. I know these decisions are never easy, but stronger planning, transparency and earlier action can reduce the harm to students and workers.

I would use equity as a compass in budgetary decision-making. I would make cuts as far away from the classroom as possible. Sustaining effective student support programs would also be

my priority. Fiscal responsibility should not come at the expense of the students who most need SMC to be strong.

Students & Learning

1. What specific steps would you take to improve student outcomes at SMC, including transfer rates, completion, and workforce readiness? How should success be measured?

Success should be measured by effective recruitment, retention and graduation/completion rates. I would ensure we not only talk about transfer rates, but that we also have transparent Board discussions on retention, drop-out/push-out, and graduation rates among diverse student groups.

Data collection should inform us on the reasons why some students succeed and why others do not. We can also consider exit surveys for students and staff to assess our approach and program strength. I would also advocate for a rigorous evaluation of key programs to assess how we can improve our work and also celebrate our collective achievements.

2. How should SMC address student housing insecurity, and how should access to any new student housing be prioritized?

Unhoused students at SMC should receive priority in the City's housing initiatives. SMC should also partner with SMMUSD and the City of Santa Monica to develop a workforce and student housing program. East Los Angeles College recently approved such a program, and I look forward to emulating best practices in student and workforce housing initiatives. This will be a priority for me.

3. What role should Santa Monica College play in supporting student mental health and well-being?

SMC is in the business of developing people. There are many bright spots in current programming and services, but we can definitely improve. I will bring my many years of experience to work with staff to build an age-appropriate and culturally appropriate menu of support programs that helps students develop into healthy, conscious and engaged students. We will see improved retention and graduation rates as a result.

4. How should Santa Monica College balance the use of digital learning tools and emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence, with concerns about academic integrity, student engagement, and educational quality? What guidelines or limitations, if any, should the College adopt?

AI is here and it has already had an impact on student learning. I think we must teach students to use the technology responsibly and not become overly dependent on it. SMC should adopt clear guidelines that protect academic integrity, support student learning, and help faculty and students understand both the opportunities and the limits of these tools.

Campus & Community

1. In light of increasing political tensions surrounding public education nationwide, how should SMC balance academic freedom, free expression, inclusive learning environments, institutional neutrality, and disruptive campus protests?

Colleges and Universities must be a beacon of constitutionally protected free speech and academic freedom that can help shape future leaders. We must be thoughtful on how we create a safe and welcoming space for all. I would like to expand courses that educate our students and staff on intercultural solidarity. I call it Unity Studies. We must continue to build understanding and unity amongst our diverse community, and I truly believe knowledge and education trumps hate. That's why the right wing in this country is attacking public education.

We must continue to build understanding and unity among our diverse community, and I truly believe knowledge and education can defeat hate. That is why the right wing in this country is attacking public education.

2. How should the College adapt its programs to meet evolving workforce and economic needs?

We should have advisory boards with business leaders from emerging industries giving us feedback on pathways, course creation and workforce needs. More internships and career pathways are needed. Worker retraining initiatives are also sorely needed. We must recruit older students and meet their workplace training needs.

3. Do you support the Club's resolution calling for a citywide ban of artificial turf on locally owned public land?

Yes.

4. In what ways should SMC strengthen pathways between K-12 education, community college, and career opportunities?

Create a P-16 Education Coalition to think beyond the antiquated K-12 model and build stronger pathways from early education to college, career, and lifelong learning. The connection between SMC, SMMUSD and the City of Santa Monica should be strengthened to support career pathways. To be effective in leveraging our public resources, we must employ collective impact while creating pathways and career opportunities. If elected I will work with the P-16 Education Coalition to create a SMC college tours for middle school students to increase dual enrollment classes along with multi-lingual workshops for both parents and students to teach them how to navigate SMC enrollment.

5. What role should Santa Monica College play in the broader Santa Monica community and regional economy?

SMC should be training our students to occupy the jobs of the future while also serving as a center for community, culture, lifelong learning and economic opportunity.

Ballot Measures

1. Do you support the California Billionaire Tax Act, which would impose a one-time emergency 5% tax on those worth more than \$1B? Why or why not?

Yes. Billionaires can afford to pay the tax, and they got rich from the infrastructure, workers, consumers, public systems and taxes we all help pay for.

2. Do you support the state ballot measure which would require voters to present government-issued identification when casting ballots? Why or why not?

No. I do not support voter ID laws that create unnecessary barriers to voting. When I vote, they are able to verify my name without an ID, and the system works. We should be expanding access to democracy, not making it harder to vote.

3. Do you support the proposed state taxpayer initiative which would limit the ability of local governments to raise revenue through certain taxes and fees including real estate transfer taxes? Why or why not?

No. Local control is vital to a better quality of life. Local communities need the ability to raise revenue for housing, services, infrastructure, public education and community needs.

4. Do you support the proposed ballot measure which would set aside 25% of the airport land for 3000 units of affordable housing, in addition to the remainder which would become a Great Park? Why or why not?

I believe in the spirit of Measure LC that I help to pass with the voters. My understanding is that the measure may no longer be moving forward in its original form. In principle, I support using public land to meet public needs, including affordable housing, parks, open space and community benefit. Any final proposal for the airport land should include meaningful public engagement and a serious commitment to affordability, sustainability, open space and local community needs.

5. Based on results from the first few years of implementation, do you believe that 2022's Measure GS should be amended? If so, how and why?

I am not prepared to call for a specific amendment at this time. I would want to review the first few years of implementation, the revenue generated, the impacts on housing and local taxpayers, and the original goals of the measure before taking a final position.

Additional Questions

1. If elected, how would you attempt to interact with the Santa Monica Democratic Club and other political organizations to ensure community buy-in on new proposals?

I plan to get more involved in SMDC and to maintain open communication. If elected, I would make myself available, listen to concerns, share updates on SMC issues, and work to build community.

2. What is the most important topic that was left off of this questionnaire?

“How can we address the achievement gap, especially since SMC is a minority-majority institution?” ...this should be a central question for SMC’s future.

3. Please describe whether and how you used generative AI tools in preparing your responses. If elected, how would you use these tools in governance, if at all?

These responses are my own views, experience and voice. I used AI support to clean up grammar and clarity.

If elected, I would approach generative AI carefully and transparently. It may be useful as an administrative or research tool, but it should never replace independent judgment, public accountability, student privacy, academic integrity or the human relationships that good governance requires.