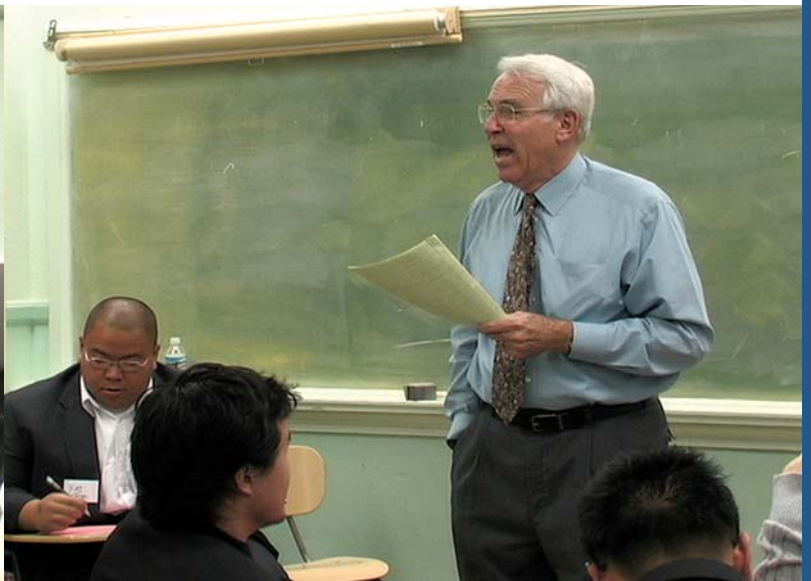




Photos for this article were supplied by Scott Stimpfel.



Scott Stimpfel

REEO: Giving Community College Students a Leg Up

In 2002, even though I had graduated from the University of Southern California (USC) *summa cum laude*, I found that I had very few job prospects. I had transferred to USC from Pasadena City College after my sophomore year, and I began to wonder if my difficulty finding a job might have something to do with the fact that I was a community college transfer student. I started asking other transfer students if they were having similar experiences. The answer was yes.

The truth is that community college transferees can be at a significant disadvantage relative to their peers at four-year institutions when it comes to finding a job after graduation. Transfer students miss out on the professional development process that is normally a part of one's freshman and sophomore years. During those two critical years, underclassmen are able to watch and learn while upperclassmen navigate the process of applying for internships and jobs. Underclassmen also develop tight-knit social networks with classmates to share information about recruiters, companies, and professional resources. Complicating matters further, most desirable internship applications are due within the first few months of the junior year, precisely when most transfer students are still acclimating to the culture of a four-year institution.

Students like me, who transfer to a four-year institution after two years of community college, are left to figure these things out on their own.

REEO'S GOAL

After graduation, fellow USC alumnus Chad Edwards and I decided to do something to empower community college and transfer students. With the support of faculty members at USC, we founded Resources for Educational and Employment Opportunities (REEO) in 2002. We envisioned REEO providing financial, professional, and academic resources to economically disadvantaged and ethnically underrepresented community college students interested in transferring to four-year institutions. At first, we organized informational events at local community colleges that attracted around twenty to thirty participants. Those same events now attract an average of more than three hundred students per session, and many of the attendees wait in line for more than an hour after the events are over to ask the speakers follow-up questions. Through its various programs, REEO has grown to help community college students do everything from building a professional résumé, developing a professional wardrobe,

and learning to interview, to preparing to transfer to a four-year institution.

REEO targets community college students as early as possible in their academic careers. As Chad Edwards explains, “We organize speaker panels and transfer workshops that encourage first-year students to begin thinking about both the transfer process and their own professional development sooner rather than later.” At these sessions, recent transfer students and faculty from four-year institutions spend time discussing the transfer process, financial aid, and the skills needed to succeed after transferring. “A community college is a commuter environment,” says Edwards, “The classes are smaller, and peer relationships are more transient. Making the move into a research-driven four-year institution can present significant challenges.” Speakers from REEO’s corporate partners also discuss skills that are critical for students to succeed in the workforce, including communication and networking skills, which tend to be underdeveloped in community college students.

REEO PROGRAMS

In their second year, students can apply to participate in REEO’s Rising Stars Program (RSP) if they have demonstrated outstanding academic achievement, leadership, and community service. RSP participants work closely with volunteer mentors from USC’s Marshall School of Business and network with community leaders, business professionals, and other students who have successfully completed the transfer process. “The students in the Rising Stars Program have incredible potential, and they are so determined to be successful,” says Bangaly Kaba, director of our mentor program and an MBA student at the Marshall School of Business.

After they transfer to a four-year institution, REEO offers third and fourth-year students the opportunity to participate in its Jump Start program. The Jump Start program provides additional academic, social, and professional support that many transfer students need as they adjust to life at a four-year institution. Our view is that we are a family; we don’t stop helping our students just because they have left the community college setting and are enrolled in a four-year institution. We are there for the students every step of the way to ensure that they achieve both their professional and academic dreams. Josh Milberg, Director of REEO’s Strategic Development, adds, “We’ve also started to leverage technology to cement the lasting bond between our students as they leave the community college environment. Our newly developed social networking portal will allow RSP participants to create life-long personal and professional connections.”

In my experience, community college students can face both academic and social hurdles during their first semester as they adapt to their new setting. To help allevi-

ate these difficulties, REEO works to create a family environment for them. By far, most of the students who come through our program are first-generation college students from economically disadvantaged or traditionally underrepresented ethnic backgrounds. They usually do not have a mentor to whom they can turn when they need to ask a question, get help, or just find someone to listen. To make matters worse, “There is a stigma associated with community college students,” says Program Director Dr. Harvey Wichman; “People assume these students are less intelligent, less ambitious, and less able to compete at an elite level.”

REEO is working hard to change this perception. By providing students in our program with access to advice, support, and resources both before and after they arrive on a university campus, REEO believes they will be more successful once they are there. “What people don’t understand,” says Dr. Wichman, “Is that students who have successfully transferred from a community college to a four-year institution often are incredibly motivated overachievers. If REEO can help alleviate the social, academic, and professional development obstacles that tend to exist for this population, at the end of the day their sheer determination often propels them well beyond their peers.”

Employers also have begun to recognize that this inner drive can make community college students valuable assets as prospective employees. KPMG, a leading international accounting firm, has made a significant commitment to help community college students through REEO’s programs. KPMG professionals regularly volunteer at REEO’s workshops to provide guidance and insight to the students, and KPMG also has pledged a number of scholarships to ease the financial burdens that many community college students face. “KPMG has demonstrated impressive leadership when it comes to providing resources to assist community college students. I would challenge more corporations to follow its lead and invest in these students,” says Edwards.

“KPMG is incredibly innovative,” says Milberg, “It has dedicated the time and resources to assist in the professional development of ethnically underrepresented and economically disadvantaged community college students whom other corporations continue to ignore.”

CHANGING LIVES

“REEO literally changes lives,” says Lisa Sugimoto, the Vice President for Student and Learning Services at Pasadena City College, where REEO first began doing outreach to community college students. “Before joining REEO, students would say, ‘I’m hoping to transfer to USC,’ or ‘I’m trying to transfer to UCLA.’” The first thing students do when they join REEO is write down their name and the university where they will transfer;

then they use that sentence as a script. “They hear themselves say ‘I’m a rising sophomore, and I *will* be transferring to USC in the fall of 2008’ each time they begin a conversation. It’s a subtle mental shift for the students but an important one,” says Sugimoto. This fundamental shift in thinking is a critical component of each student’s success.

I currently work in investment banking, and Chad Edwards is a Second Lieutenant in the United States Army, but we continue to oversee REEO’s expansion despite its relatively small budget. In addition to support from KPMG, Heller Ehrman has provided REEO with pro-bono legal services; otherwise, REEO would never have been able to afford the legal services we have needed to grow as an organization. We plan to expand even more rapidly during the next two years. I have a deeply personal passion to help all students who are transferring from a community college to a four-year institution succeed — especially those who are generally under-represented on university campuses. It is my hope that REEO eventually will be able to help community college students throughout the United States.

There is one story I’ll always remember. I met a woman who transferred to USC around the same time that I did. She and her children had slept on the streets outside of USC after a personal crisis left them homeless. She would walk around outside the walls of the campus and tell her kids that one day she would walk inside the gates as a student. It was her ability to envision herself as a student on the USC campus that got her through community college and into USC. If REEO is able to give each of our students that kind of confidence in themselves, we have succeeded.

Scott Stimpfel is pursuing an M.B.A. from New York University’s Stern School of Business. He is a lifetime member of the American Association of Community Colleges and a member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. He is a member of Beta Gamma Sigma, Phi Kappa Phi, and Alpha Gamma Sigma. Before attending New York University, he was a vice president in the New York office of Lehman Brothers, where he specialized in Mortgage-Backed Securities. He graduated from the University of Southern California (*summa cum laude*) with a B.S. in Business Administration, where he was inducted into Phi Kappa Phi in 2001.



Chad Edwards is a Second Lieutenant in the United States Army. Mr. Edwards previously was a senior consultant in the Los Angeles office of Navigant Consulting, Inc. His role included providing strategic, financial advisory and litigation-damage valuation services to companies facing distress and uncertainty in the health care industry. He graduated from the University of Southern California (*magna cum laude*) with a B.S. in Business Administration.

