



INSTITUTE for EVIDENCE-BASED CHANGE  
Informing Decisions · Improving Practice · Increasing Student Success

## IEBC Helps Southwestern College Efforts to Improve Student Equity



The effort among America's community colleges to improve student equity is a truly monumental challenge. Recognizing the scope of the changes needed can seem overwhelming.

Dr. Angelica Suarez, Southwestern College Vice President of Student Affairs, quickly realized successful creation of a student equity plan required two key elements. First: "Think big, start small has helped us not to get overwhelmed," said Dr. Suarez. "Developing the individuals and

coalitions – you aren't going to solve all your issues in the first year. Second: "In quality planning efforts, we knew we needed to establish our infrastructure. You can't build these programs without the infrastructure."

Southwestern College called on IEBC to help the college work with its student equity planning committee to ensure implementation of the basic infrastructure, designed to help the college scale up its efforts.

IEBC started working formally with Southwestern College in 2014 when the State of California began focusing on student equity and developing intentional approaches. Dr. Suarez was familiar with work done by Dr. Brad Philips, IEBC President/CEO, for CalPASS (California Partnership for Achieving Student Success), and knew he could help Southwestern College frame the conversation.

Bringing in IEBC as a neutral party helped Southwestern College start by looking at its internal issues from many perspectives. "Brad said, 'Angelica, you may not agree with this. You will have small gains with student services alone, but big gains with student services and academic affairs working together.' Because of his comprehensive work and his ability to engage with faculty, administrators, staff and students, Brad is able to connect at all levels," said Dr. Suarez.

"We have a lot of talent at the college, incredible people who stepped forward to work on these initiatives. We needed to have someone help us facilitate these conversations," she said. "As much as I take a holistic view, I wanted to make sure there was priority on an institutional approach, not only focusing on student affairs, but a partnership with our academic affairs faculty in the classroom."

Learning Assistance Services Coordinator and Academic Senate President Andrew Rempt played a key role in the process. "Our current administration is very good about looking at the brain trust on campus and drawing from that ... With this project, it was the scope more than anything else that

made it clear we needed someone from the outside to integrate our thinking. That's what IEBC did," said Rempt.

Southwestern College convened a committee of 25 people representing all college constituents. "We have a lot of very talented people at the college," said Dr. Suarez. "The struggle is finding time and space to do this work. IEBC recognized this. Brad was able to facilitate the conversations and get us organized."

While inclusion is vital, large committees can quickly get bogged down. Rempt recognized the value of IEBC's process and meeting structure in facilitating the critical conversations that needed to take place. "(Dr. Phillips) said, 'Let me help you find your voice on this and come to your own conclusions, and derive your own solutions.' And at the same time, he was helping us stay out of our own way. Everyone felt like they had the opportunity to weigh in; no one felt excluded," added Rempt.

"Brad comes in with no agenda. It's better to have someone from the outside looking in to say, 'Hey, you are sharing goals here that can be achieved by working together in this way.' Sometimes you can't see that. The silos that build up around operations, especially when resources are scarce, are hard to break down," said Rempt.

Objectivity is aided by a focus on the value of data informing decisions. But Dr. Suarez acknowledges data isn't always well received because we need to trust the data. "Sometimes when we review the data, we get upset about it; you get away from the conversation about how to help students. Brad led us in ways that helped us focus on interventions and the intersections between people at the table ... what the data says about students and what we're currently doing to impact change for a greater number of students.

"Brad could put the pieces of the puzzle together and approach the conversation as a trained therapist – to understand the data as one element in the dialogue – using data as a flashlight and not as a hammer," said Dr. Suarez. "Brad was very clear, IEBC is coming in to help us but they are not writing the plan. This is OUR plan, Southwestern's plan, and we're going to do it the Southwestern way."

Rempt points out many current interventions do not take place in the classroom, such as counseling. Through the process provided by IEBC, "we identified a direct hands-on need for our Basic Skills students." This led to implementation of a successful supplemental instruction program employing embedded tutoring. After starting with an initial 12 basic skills courses, embedded tutoring is now offered in over 100 basic skills and gatekeeper course, the largest such program in California. Courses with embedded tutors have resulted in higher levels of student success.

Dr. Suarez says a unique strength of IEBC is its specific perspective from inside the community college system. "(Dr. Phillips) has experience working within the California community college system and the K-12 system aligning efforts that promote student equity and success. He has credibility. He was a faculty member, administrator, and now supports colleges in their student success and equity efforts. And he understands what other states are doing, and leverages best practices. It's important because we don't have to explain our structure and culture to him; he gets it."

“We’ve always known we are all interconnected. With IEBC, Dr. Phillips has been instrumental in shining that bright light and letting us know we all have a piece, and we are all moving in the same direction,” said Dr. Suarez.

Rempt agrees. “We are seeing the needle move, we are seeing success here,” he said. “The students can be happy that IEBC is keeping us honest, asking to see our results.

“The students get increased access to more resources, more resources dedicated to them directly, through an investment in IEBC to help facilitate our work. The result is an increase in direct classroom intervention and ultimately student success,” added Rempt.

“Being able to more effectively and efficiently use your time and resources is key to success of any project. Brad keeps us on topic and focused. He listens, he’s engaging, there’s no hard sell. I always find it enlightening to just chat with the guy. He’s smart, he’s responsive. I wish we had more time with him!” said Rempt.

“We’ve been very pleased with the work IEBC has done to assist Southwestern improve our practices geared toward closing student achievement gaps,” said Dr. Suarez. “He has facilitated this work not only for our college, but also supports the region, such as helping to facilitate a summit around equity planning, integration and best practices. It’s IEBC seeing itself as a contributor, and partner, to the region”

“It speaks to the commitment – for the work he is doing (social justice) which is transformational. I believe in the work we continue to do at Southwestern and it will continue long after IEBC is no longer with us,” concluded Dr. Suarez.

#

Learn more about Southwestern College at [www.swccd.edu](http://www.swccd.edu)

Dr. Angelica Suarez is author of “Data in the Search of Equity,” a chapter in the new book, [\*Creating a Data-Informed Culture in Community Colleges\*](#).

Learn more about the Institute for Evidence-Based Change (IEBC) at <http://www.iebcnow.org>