Just before graduating from the University of Southern California (USC) in 2014, Jasmine Torres spoke to the university’s Board of Trustees about her experiences as a student.

“Good morning. I grew up right in the USC neighborhood, where I went to Weemes Elementary School. My great grandma and I would walk across the USC campus when we went to the grocery store; and because I saw USC almost every day, when my teachers told me that I had to go to college one day, I assumed they meant USC…. In the fifth grade, I was selected to be in the USC Neighborhood Academic Initiative (NAI)—a six-year college-prep program for neighborhood students that promises a full scholarship to USC upon completion of high school and admittance into the university. It was then that I realized I held my dream in my little hands and all I had to do was not drop it.

Like many urban universities, USC sits in the middle of one of the most impoverished communities in the state, and has instituted several access programs like NAI to provide tutoring and support to local students. But these programs often cannot account for the various twists and turns that occur in the lives of students from poor and working-class families.

When I was thirteen years old—due to many family issues at home—I became homeless. On Christmas Day of 2006, I found myself riding on a public bus with nowhere to go. It was on that bus that I saw a blue and orange sign that read, “LA [Los Angeles] County Hotline. If you need emergency food or shelter, call 211.” I immediately got off the bus and walked towards the nearest pay phone. The woman on the other line of the phone referred me to a Hollywood youth shelter…. On this day, I entered the LA County foster care system.

At age thirteen, Jasmine was forced to choose between staying in her new group home and remaining in the NAI program, which was limited to residents of the neighborhood immediately surrounding USC.

“My safety and stability being my top priority, I decided to stay in the group home I was familiar with and forfeited my spot in the scholarship program … [but] USC gave me the courage to believe in myself … [knowing that] if I could get a scholarship once, I could do it again…. Throughout my times living in foster care, I had a huge USC banner in my room that reminded me every day to stay focused, telling myself again that the current situation was only temporary. Then one Friday afternoon in March [after having applied for admission], I got a phone call from my case manager [saying] that I had a package from USC. I hurried to the house, slowly opened it, and when I read the word “congratulations,” I fell to my knees and cried. Being accepted to USC is still one of the happiest days of my entire life.

Any program intended to promote students’ full participation—“an affirmative value focused on creating institutions that enable [all] people to thrive, … realize their capabilities, engage meaningfully in institutional life, and contribute to the flourishing of others” (Sturm et.al. 2011, 3)—must take into account the struggles and triumphs that some students experience before ever arriving on campus. These students are the community in our midst, and their success in college is one of the critical measures of any program of civic engagement.

I came to USC at seventeen years old, ambitious, and immediately knew that I wanted to get involved with my community and also become an advocate for other foster youth. As a freshman, I volunteered with the Joint Educational Project (JEP), where I tutored kids at the same elementary school that I went to as a kid and also mentored high school students at an after-school program…. [During] my sophomore year, I was invited to speak on a panel about education at Columbia University, and it was
during that trip to New York City that I met Vice Dean George Sanchez…. [who] encouraged me to do undergraduate research on the topic [of the foster care system]. It was that year that I applied and was accepted into the Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship for research. That same year I also traveled to Japan during the summer course taught by Dr. Sanchez…. And last summer, I was able to spend my summer at the University of Chicago for a summer research training program fully funded by the Mellon Foundation. It was each of these different opportunities that helped me grow into the stronger person, leader, and Trojan that I am today.

From Jasmine’s perspective as a first-generation college student, high-impact practices that are critical to student success—practices like undergraduate research and study abroad (Kuh 2008)—must be linked to curricular, cocurricular, and extracurricular opportunities. It is not enough to have a single program supporting full participation; instead, we must provide multiple pathways for students to pursue the interests with which they enter college.

Through my research, my experience, and the education that USC has provided me … I saw a great need for USC to provide support to Trojans who were formerly or [are] currently in the foster care system. I didn’t want to graduate without turning this idea into a reality so students previously in foster care would have a program to assist them in reaching their own graduation day. I approached Dr. Sanchez with my idea, and in conjunction with the School of Social Work, Dornsife College, and the Rossier School of Education, we were able to officially launch our program [in fall 2013]…. To support students’ full participation, we must advance student-led initiatives, especially when those efforts are well-researched and developed as part of a wider strategy of community empowerment. Such empowerment is a fundamental part of USC’s educational mission, and it creates a training ground for action that will extend long after our students have graduated. The program Jasmine envisioned—called Trojan Guardian Scholars—not only has a lasting legacy on the USC campus; it also has launched a future activist for societal change.

Available research on foster youth show[s] that nationally less than 50 percent of foster youth graduate high school, less than 20 percent enroll in any kind of college, and … less than 3 percent graduate with a bachelor’s degree (United Friends of the Children, n.d.)…. Our youth deserve a chance. This program began with the shared belief that every USC student should be embraced into the Trojan family…. [I] envision USC becoming a leader in foster youth educational research and practice…. I know I will one day stand at another podium like this, saying that 100 percent of our foster youth students graduate from the University of Southern California.

Working with Jasmine Torres has been one of the most fulfilling collaborations I have had as an administrator committed to civic engagement. I have learned as much from Jasmine about addressing the real needs of individuals and communities as from any conference I have attended or scholarly work I have done. The practice of walking the tightrope between student needs and institutional cultures is something I have learned to cherish about my work with Trojan Guardian Scholars as I collaborate with working-class students to make a difference in their own communities during and after college.

Together we can change the stereotypes and the statistics that affect foster youth every day. As a university that believes and invests in every one of its students—like USC did with me…. To support students’ full participation, we must advance student-led initiatives, especially when those efforts are well-researched and developed as part of a wider strategy of community empowerment. Such empowerment is a fundamental part of USC’s educational mission, and it creates a training ground for action that will extend long after our students have graduated. The program Jasmine envisioned—called Trojan Guardian Scholars—not only has

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REFERENCES

