

When the Student Is Ready, Victoria Deguzman Has Already Pioneered...



Dr. Victoria Deguzman (METRANS Associate Director), Photos by John Livzey

METRANS Associate Director Dr. Victoria Deguzman is breaking new ground at the University of Southern California's METRANS Transportation Center, an institution "dedicated to solving metropolitan transportation problems through research, education and outreach." But breaking new ground is nothing short of habit for her.

Her mission is not small. As METRANS Associate Director, Dr. Deguzman administers a transportation research center that serves as an umbrella organization to several local, regional and national centers with more than \$35 million in funding and numerous academic, agency, and corporate partners across the globe. Historically, she has successfully managed transportation research projects, outreach efforts, and educational programming. Several years ago, however, after a temporary dip in funding, Dr. Deguzman began developing alternative affordable programs that could leverage the center's resources and have a real impact, while continuing the search for new funding. In one instance, she started a formal professional development program for transportation students, and it proved to be a huge hit.

"I created a program where I advised students, served as a source of information, and hired them to fulfill many of the administrative functions of the center, organizing them into teams and leaders, and giving them a sense of real-world job experience. They loved it instantly. I soon had a line of students out my door who wanted more than just information and jobs—they wanted personal-growth consultations with me. Unfortunately, I could not get to them all. But I also could not ignore this kind of student need and I knew I was not the best person to address all of the varied requirements of these future transportation professionals alone. So, I started a mentoring program and brought in professionals that could. I organized a pilot program and handpicked five people from our advisory board and five students and put them together. It had never been done at the university level by a research center like ours. Now we're in our sixth year and we have matched more than one hundred students with mentors."

But that is far from the only transformation she has engineered.



“When I joined METRANS, we were chiefly a research center; most of what we did was produce and disseminate research. But I was able to leverage our resources into additional significant student outreach and enrichment programs. We now have numerous professional development programs that support our existing students, that recruit new students to transportation, and that have resulted in students getting scholarships, internships, and jobs.”

Word spread about the mentor program and once again the need was just too great to meet. Dr. Deguzman reports that students were learning so much from their mentors that they were asking for more opportunities to be guided by active transportation professionals. So she set out to make that happen.

“I started another program, *Lunch with a Practitioner*. It’s a hybrid of a seminar and the mentoring program where a practitioner has lunch with a small, invitation-only group of about 20 students, allowing students the opportunity to learn both from their mentor and also from other transportation professionals. We are now in our fifth year; this past year, we expanded the series to include all interested students and the general public. In a way, we had little choice.

“Initially, I wanted this to be an intimate, invitation-only gathering. But, much to my chagrin, we found an upcoming lunch advertised in the USC newspaper, *The Daily Trojan*. At that point, there was no way we could turn people away. So, I’ve had to accept that these will not be the small, intimate gatherings I had planned. I also changed the name to the *Practitioner Speaker Series*, to more accurately reflect its size and scope. But this success just means we are doing something right, so to recreate the smaller professional development I had originally envisioned, last spring I launched a different program I call *Get the Job*, an invitation-only series zeroing in on the ultimate task for all students, getting that first real job.”

The program students and professional participants offer glowing praise. Though helping students was Dr. Deguzman’s primary purpose, the programs have brought secondary benefits as well.

“Our student programming has actually turned into a really valuable recruiting tool for the industry. We’ve had students from different majors wanting to switch their majors to transportation just to be a part of it. And then, we have so many professionals asking for our students that we’ve become a job-placement resource as well. Based on employer feedback, we have established a great deal of credibility. Now, they reach out to us when they have positions to fill, and we only send students that we’re very comfortable will be both an asset to the employer and a good representative of the center.”

Wanting to expand her success even more, Dr. Deguzman sought another avenue to spread the professional development gospel farther.

“A few years ago, I realized that I could not get information out fast enough and broadly enough to reach our audience, so I launched a student-run, student-written, and student-produced, weekly transportation e-newsletter, *METRANS On the Move*, with transportation news, events, opportunities for professional engagement, and a long list of scholarships, internships, and job openings. And subscription requests poured in from universities, agencies, and firms nationwide. Our brand of topics and articles that our students cover really seem to interest a whole range of readers, beyond just students. And that shows in our distribution numbers and geography. To date, we now have more than 3,000 subscribers across the globe.”

Though her reach is now global, Dr. Deguzman remains locally loyal as well. While keeping the goals of the center and her students at heart, she also found an extraordinarily successful to expand her programs yet again.

“Last year I launched an industry support and engagement program, which formalized something that has been happening for several years now. It began when I became our WTS-LA student coordinator, and was tasked with recruiting students for attendance at WTS-LA events and membership. I made sure that the students not only attended the events, but also assisted with event support. They benefitted immensely from timely and insightful presentations and personal access to public and private sector

decision-makers and leaders in the industry. They enjoyed their participation so much that I began to reach out to other groups to see if they might consider a similar arrangement. It proved to be a win-win for both the students and the organizers, and our students now staff events for numerous agency and professional events, often in exchange for complimentary admission. These groups come back to us each year and, in several cases, have actually hired the students for both internships and full-time positions.”

Dr. Deguzman is quick to point out that this isn’t the first time she and her programs have been a “victim” of their own success.

“Our research seminar series used to draw about a dozen people. Today we’re only limited by the capacity of our venue. In fact, we’re the most well attended research seminar university wide. We fill whatever venue is available. We average 65 people per program because our rooms cannot accommodate more; we have a waiting list and often have to turn people away. But that speaks directly to our mission globally and my mandate specifically. It’s all about finding innovative ways to serve the students and the center’s objectives as dynamically and valuably as possible.”

She also uses those same descriptives for her colleague, USC Viterbi School of Engineering Vice Dean of Academic Affairs and WTS-LA director-at-large Prof. James Moore. She credits him for welcoming her to WTS-LA.

“Jim is just wonderful and he represents USC at WTS-LA. METTRANS wanted representation, too, because of all of the wonderful things WTS-LA provides for students. As I mentioned, now I also advocate for and support students throughout the greater Los Angeles region in WTS-LA. I solicit student participation and membership. I coordinate student attendance. And I make sure that every student that attends a meeting dresses right and follows the rules that I created for them. For example, they’re not to sit together. They are to make two meaningful connections. And they are to send personal, hand written thank you notes to the industry practitioner who sponsors their attendance. If they’re not the kind of person who wants to follow these guidelines, this is just not the program for them.”

Dr. Deguzman cares most about her students and helping them help themselves. But she’s actually quite modest about her achievements, as well as the considerable time and passion she devotes to her students and her work. She also downplays her noteworthy support of the WTS Los Angeles and WTS Orange County chapters.

“My association with WTS has been one of the most meaningful in my career, and I pay that one forward by supporting WTS and the next generation of transportation professionals.”