Facilities Shares Relationship-Building Approach for Student Success

They tend to know everyone. They have the types of interactions with students that contribute to student success. And they support the campus in ways that other staff and faculty may never see.

Members of San Diego State University’s facilities and custodial staff become sounding boards, surrogate parents, even sometimes first responders. They impart wisdom. They’ve been called over to pose in graduation photos, and have received Christmas cards, flowers and other trinkets of appreciation.

During the “Building Better Relationships with Students: A Panel Discussion with Facilities & Custodial Staff” panel discussion held Thursday at the Office of Diversity and Innovation, five staff members described the importance of those types of interactions.

SDSU Chief Diversity Officer J. Luke Wood hosted the talk, which explored ways that custodians, groundskeepers, service workers are often uniquely positioned to support students.

Many of the actions taken by the panelists in support of student success were simple ones anyone can replicate: a kind word to start the morning, a sympathetic ear, taking opportunities for an act of kindness.

“Sometimes just saying hello, making eye contact—those things are so important,” said Benita Mann, assistant director of housing facilities services. “We make the connection by showing them that we care about them.”

Rhonda Graves said she makes a point to introduce herself to freshmen on move-in day and tells them “I’m the person who cleans your floor.” That’s not just a connection, it’s a subtle hint not to make her job more difficult.

Graves said, “They come to you like you’re their mom all the time—‘Rhonda, does this look OK?’” The personal connection can be long-lasting; Graves said she has heard back from alumni who have gotten married and had children.

Mery Santacruz and Manuela Pacheco Cuevas, two custodians, said some students just need a few friendly words of encouragement, to keep pushing, or that they can do it.

They become proactive. Pacheco said she once noticed a usually upbeat student who seemed distressed; it turned out he was worried about not having a textbook he couldn’t afford. She consulted her own son, who came up with an online solution.

And Johnny Eaddy, director of logistical services who started at SDSU in 1987 as a custodian, said students’ daily familiarity with staff brings a high degree of trust. “They know they can just come on lay it on you,” he said. The employees, he said, represent “a comfort zone, being non-judgmental.”

And Eaddy said not be deterred by students walking around with their heads down who appear to be “in their own little worlds.” In those cases, “breaking the ice and taking the lead (to) say hello” is the key to interacting with them.