In October of 2015, University Centers opened Starbucks at UC San Diego, a highly-anticipated retail coffee shop, which was specifically requested for in several retail surveys over the years. Maria Orozco was hired in April of 2015 to be the General Manager. As a student affairs department, University Centers did not have any direct experience in (self)-operating a quick service restaurant. Hiring a general manager that could not only manage the highly visible restaurant but plan and design all the numerous processes that are involved - from scratch - was a daunting challenge for us all. Her many years of food service experience provided us with immediate expertise and shaped many of the critical decisions we were required to make. We now see it in action, on a daily basis, in what has become one of the busiest college campus Starbucks coffee shops in the nation.

From day one she set the tone with a “can do” attitude, even in the midst of a host of challenges and deadlines. Her steadfast leadership, combined with a caring and oft times humorous disposition was the central theme from planning and construction to the grand opening. In the early months, prior to the UC San Diego opening, she interacted with colleagues at San Diego State, UC Riverside and UC Irvine, not only obtaining valuable training but also, contributing to their stores and helping them learn the details of managing a food service operation. Remarks from campus and Starbucks officials were common, “we are so thankful that you sent Maria up to help work with our manager.”

Opening the Starbucks in the Price Center involved hiring, training and scheduling over 75 employees, mostly students – from scratch. Together with HR, Maria was instrumental in assembling this large team and then rallying them to each obtain over 40 hours of Starbucks required (documented) training. She did so by carefully listening to each student’s needs, then drafted a sophisticated training schedule to accommodate them, even in the beginning of a very hectic fall quarter. She then led the team to a highly successful store opening amidst construction delays, campus policies and corporate (Starbucks) expectations. The restaurant opened at the busiest time of year without any delays and with the full complement of Starbucks offerings. Almost from the start, the store consistently achieved (independent) scores in the 90s for quality and satisfaction. While others warned us that it would take over a year to achieve food costs comparable to other sites, she and her team did so within months. While some doubted that training this initial group of students advanced barista skills within a 3-week time frame was unachievable, she coordinated it all and pulled it off. The opening went smooth, and as stated above, this is now one of the top performing Starbucks in the region.

This past month Maria was also recognized by the Starbucks Corporation by being nominated for Store Leader of the Quarter by “creating a culture of warmth and belonging, where everyone is welcome.” “Because of Maria’s leadership and ability to execute at a high level, this location has become the most admired place to work... Maria role models a genuine balance of Starbucks Mission/Values and University Centers Mission/Values. Her dedication to both inspires her team to emulate those behaviors.” Currently the store employees 62 students and 4 full time employees, becoming more efficient with the available resources while still delivering top-notch service. Maria strives to accommodate each person to their preferred schedule while providing others the chance to progress. Remarkably, 80% of the original group of baristas returned to work in the following academic year, a testament to her creation of an appealing place to work on campus. She has served as a trusted mentor and friend to many while maintaining a highly efficient, high volume workplace.