Ariana Castillo has come a long way since enrolling at Sacramento State. The civil engineering major, on track to graduate in Spring 2013, sports a 3.4 grade-point average and is president of the Society of Hispanic Professional Engineers (SHPE). Chief among her presidential duties is organizing the upcoming Regional Leadership Development Conference hosted by Sac State.

The event will bring 200 undergraduates and professional engineers to Sacramento from March 29 to April 1. The conference will focus on sustainable technology with an emphasis on Sac State’s California Smart Grid Center.

“Engineering students from Stanford, UC Berkeley, UC Davis and many East Coast universities will come here,” Castillo says. Those are among the schools that SHPE competed against two years ago when it won the National Academic Olympiad in Cincinnati. Although Castillo was a member of that championship squad, she wants to let others have the chance to compete in this year’s nationals in Fort Worth, Texas.

SHPE is committed to ensuring that its members excel in their respective fields of engineering, science and other technological professions. The society also promotes higher education to hundreds of local and regional youths with academic potential who otherwise might not attend college. Each year, it hosts a science night for K-12 students and their parents.

Last summer, Castillo helped organize Principles Review for Incoming Students in Mathematics (PRISM), a bootstrap program to help entering freshman engineering students pass the math diagnostic tests needed to start in either pre-calculus or calculus in the fall semester.

Academic excellence in those calculus courses was also part of the program’s strategy. “We stressed good math habits and how to work with their peers,” Castillo says. “The
students are more likely to listen to older Sac State students who have not only the knowledge but also the experience of navigating college life.” She’s in the process of securing outside funding to offer the program again this summer.

Her summer plans include landing an internship with a local engineering firm or securing an undergraduate research position. She’s planning on graduate school with the goal of earning a doctorate, specializing in water resources. Her commitment to flood control was prompted by a flood in Vacaville when she was 16 that ruined the family home.

Her parents live in Chandler, Ariz., where her father, a mechanical engineer, commutes to work each week to Philadelphia. “My dad recommended that I study engineering,” she says, “because I was so good at math.”

Castillo considers Sac State’s College of Engineering to be first-rate. “The professors are knowledgeable and excited about teaching.” She’s no less pleased to be presiding over one of the nation’s largest campus chapters of Hispanic engineers.

“We do a lot of community outreach,” she says, “like last fall’s program for elementary and middle school students that got them fired up about building things.”

Dean Emir Jose Macari of the College of Engineering and Computer Science considers Castillo “a wonderful example of the types of students we have at Sac State. She came to us as a young and shy high school graduate, and she has turned into an accomplished leader and future engineer.”