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Your Community College

Kevin G. Walthers: Changing the odds through college completion

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Kevin Walthers



Community college enrollment is a hot topic among policy makers nationwide—and especially in Sacramento.

During the pandemic, public colleges and universities saw enrollments fall for two consecutive years. A new report from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, however, indicates that the tide is turning, with overall undergraduate enrollment in the fall of 2022 essentially stable and freshman enrollment rebounding significantly at community colleges.

While many complex factors are driving the decline in enrollment, it's hard to overstate the destabilization in college-going rates for the high school graduating classes of 2020 and 2021. It's been three years now since the pandemic declaration, and colleges continue to feel the impact of two consecutive graduating classes choosing something other than college upon their exit from high school.

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Allan Hancock College found that many students chose not to enroll despite financial incentives, such as the Hancock Promise and the (temporary) Promise Plus program that funded tuition for all fulltime students. We learned that students were working to support families, struggling with remote modalities, and expressing concern over vaccination policies (both pro and con) on campus.

The good news is that the students who persevered through the pandemic were able to complete their programs and graduated in record numbers.

In 2019, Hancock awarded associate's degrees to more than 1,000 graduates for the first time in the college's nearly century-long history. Even as the pandemic exploded in March of 2020, the college set a new record two months later — graduating just over 1,300 students, and then 1,350 graduates the following year.

These successes didn't happen in a vacuum or by accident. Ten years ago, we started talking in earnest about degree completion as a primary goal of the college. Staff, faculty and administrators signed on to the vision, and the number of graduates began to rise year over year.

In 2013 and 2014, when the state had emerged from the Great Recession, Hancock's completion rates were accelerating. At that time, the legislature and governor invested in programs to support student success and equity with expectations that the system would make rapid progress in student success.

As new state support flowed to the college, we used these funds to expand services for students, add new faculty, and create additional support programs. The steady climb of graduates continued through 2021, with the class of 2022 shrinking slightly but still weighing in as the third largest class in Hancock history.

The growth in completion also included a substantial increase in the number of Latinx students earning an associate's degree. For the past five years, Latinx students comprised more than 60 percent of our graduating classes with the actual number of Latinx graduates increasing by more than 40 percent.

This is how we change the odds. The Hancock team is committed to removing barriers and expanding access to the life changing programs offered by Allan Hancock College. Our data show that we have come a long way in just 10 years: the Latinx population in our last three graduating classes averaged 800 students per year, far outpacing the classes of 2009 through 2013; those five classes averaged 710 graduates per year in total.

In fact, the number of 2020 and 2021 Latinx graduates would have each been the largest graduating classes in the college's history prior to 2016!

We are justly proud of the equitable progress we've made over the past 10 years, and we're not done yet. Our Roadmaps to Success project is further clarifying the decision and degree path for students and accelerating their time to completion. In the Lompoc Valley, we are in the first year of a commitment that assures local access to full degree programs (and each can be completed in two years).

And of course, the Hancock Promise continues to ensure that high school graduates from Guadalupe to Santa Ynez and Lompoc to Cuyama will get their first year of college tuition free.

We are grateful for the trust you have placed in us and for the investment our neighbors have made to support student success.

We still hear occasional chirping from outside of our community that second guess us from the sidelines, but our neighbors know exactly what is happening at Allan Hancock College: our staff and faculty are Changing the Odds for northern Santa Barbara County.

Kevin G. Walthers, Ph.D., is the superintendent/president of Allan Hancock College.

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