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Your Community College

Kevin G. Walthers: Higher education is not optional

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Kevin Walthers
Contributed



In a nation full of increasingly mixed opinions about the value of higher education, there seems to be a misunderstanding that I want to address:

A college education is the ultimate game-changer in today's economy.

Those who invest in their future through higher education open incredible opportunities for their personal growth and professional success. And the data don't lie: global consulting firm McKinsey and Company calculated that more than 85 percent of new jobs created in this decade will require some level of college credential.

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To meet long-term projected needs, McKinsey estimates that the United States needs to produce an additional 10 million college graduates by 2040. That's not 10 million total – that's 10 million more than are currently projected to complete college during that time.

This tracks with information from the Public Policy Institute of California that estimates a shortfall in California of 1.1 million college graduates by 2030 and analysis by Excelencia In Education that shows a national need for an additional 6.2 million Latino graduates by the end of the decade.

The personal and community benefit of higher education is well documented. Those with college educations have lower rates of unemployment, better health outcomes, higher engagement in civic life, and lifetime earnings that more than double those who do not pursue college.

Sure, there are examples of the “self-made” success stories, but those anecdotes are the exception rather than the rule. Our modern, interconnected economy is driven by knowledge and skills that must be learned.

This is true whether you are apprenticing as an electrician or preparing for medical school.

A strong economy with skilled workers benefits our community, our state and our nation.

However, colleges seeking to grow the number of graduates face strong headwinds beyond the growing social skepticisms. Perhaps the most daunting challenge is the changing demographics of our nation.

K-12 enrollments have been in steep decline for more than a decade, shrinking the pool of prospective students for colleges and universities. With fewer young people graduating from high school, colleges must take the intentional step of reaching out to traditionally underserved students in their community.

Allan Hancock College embarked on this journey several years ago by developing programs to increase completion in our community. Over the last decade, we opened dedicated centers for Dreamers and veterans, created a space to support students’ basic needs, and expanded our nationally recognized program that supports students involved in or impacted by the criminal justice system.

Most importantly, we embarked on a public/private partnership to implement the Hancock Promise, a financial aid program that guarantees students will get their “First Year Free.”

These programs are changing the odds for our community and show that Allan Hancock College is outpacing success rates nationally. The aforementioned Excelencia in Education report focused on large colleges that are graduating the most Latino students. Our internal data show that our Latino share of graduates (62 percent) outpaces most of those colleges.

The faculty, staff and administration at Allan Hancock College have made completion a top priority for our students. Over the past decade, Hancock has doubled the number of graduates in spite of declining enrollment. Over the past three years, the number of Latino graduates alone exceeded the college's total number of graduates from 2013.

Your community college is already pursuing the strategies recommended by national organizations to support economic growth. We're not resting on this success, as there is still more work to be done.

In the coming years we will be expanding our efforts to serve adult learners, increasing access to college classes in high schools, and pursuing four-year degrees that will benefit our local business community.

Your support of this effort is critical. Neighbors like you have ensured that we have modern facilities to provide cutting edge training through bond measures. And you have supported the initial Hancock Promise to ease the financial burden on students.

I ask you to continue supporting Hancock — and, by extension, our community— as we continue to prepare students for the future.

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

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