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Your Community College

Kevin G. Walthers: The time is now for Allan Hancock College baccalaureate

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Kevin Walthers
Contributed



This week marked the formal introduction of the new chancellor for the California Community College System, Sonya Christian.

Chancellor Christian’s vision for the future is one where all Californians have access to higher education and four-year degrees. Those of us at Allan Hancock College welcome the advocacy.

Baccalaureate options in Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo counties favor students from outside of our region, and lack any affordable public option for local families. The lack of accessible bachelor’s degrees effectively shuts out some of the most vulnerable students in our state: children of farmworkers and laborers, those who have child/sibling/aging adult care responsibilities, and those who can’t afford to move for access to the California State University system.

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The isolation of our community has been recognized by local economic development groups and by REACH, a multi-county economic development collaborative.

A key REACH education initiative calls for additional four-year degree opportunities, expanded community college offerings, and in-person satellite education centers “to lift people out of poverty and prepare local residents for high-wage jobs.”

We live in a higher education desert. Cal Poly SLO operates with a statewide mission, and accepts fewer local students than a traditional CSU campus would take.

Hancock and Cuesta, the largest of the six colleges in the state that are more than 100 miles from a traditional CSU campus, are assigned Cal State Channel Islands in Camarillo as our “official” partner institution. The reality is that students from our region could get to Cal State Bakersfield faster!

One option to address the higher education desert would be for the CSU to replicate what it has done in the Imperial Valley, where they launched a center that offers the upper division half of a baccalaureate degree.

It’s a proven model that works in many places across the nation. In Utah, a new partnership between Salt Lake Community College and the University of Utah will bring a dozen bachelor’s degrees to Herriman, a growing community on the opposite corner of the Salt Lake valley from the university.

Salt Lake Community College already offers associate degree programs in the area, but the travel time to get to “The U” was seen as too onerous: about an hour trip each way on the county’s light rail system.

SLCC president Deneece Huftalin told me via email “geographic access is as important as financial access,” and explained that SLCC seeks to build in areas that allow students to attend school where they work and live.

“It’s definitely an equity issue,” she concluded.

Imagine if we followed this model on the Central Coast. Students wouldn’t have to choose between the basic needs of their family and the life-changing promise of a college degree.

Local businesses wouldn’t struggle to find talented employees to expand their business and grow the economy.

AHC offered resources to support a CSU 2+2 model that would serve our families, but this never rises to a critical priority for the CSU system.

We held off on entering into the community college baccalaureate degree arena in the hope that promises of a “CSU Santa Maria” partnership could be developed, but we can’t wait any longer.

Next month, in partnership with Cuesta College, we will unveil degree programs designed to meet the needs of students and employers in our region.

Our programs are designed to mirror the outcomes of the existing community college baccalaureates in California (and other states) by offering high quality programs at affordable prices to students. We also expect that, like other programs, these degrees will be most impactful for minority and low-income students.

The process won’t be easy. It’s increasingly apparent that the CSU system opposes the expansion of baccalaureates to California community colleges, even in higher education deserts such as ours.

A recent CalMatters story noted that CSU faculty fear “losing money” from an expansion of community college baccalaureate options, although the system turns away thousands of transfer students every year.

Community members I meet are baffled by the opposition to community colleges seeking to fill the void where CSU can’t. Education is critical to long-term societal success, both for communities and individuals on the Central Coast. It’s time to stop saying “we need this” and start saying “we’re doing this.”

Or, as Chancellor Christian would say, “Our time is now.”

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

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