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Your Community College

Kevin G. Walthers: UnitED Central Coast: Hancock and Cuesta to make joint announcement

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Kevin Walthers
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Thursday, Oct. 5, will be an historic day for the Central Coast. That’s when Allan Hancock College and Cuesta College will team up to launch “UnitED Central Coast” — a major campaign to provide bachelor’s degrees for students in our region.

The time is right. The need is critical. And we’re ready and able to offer the bachelor’s degrees that our communities need.

Our proposed degrees will not be the first to be offered by community colleges in California, much less the nation. In 2014, the State of California launched a pilot program to allow community colleges to offer a limited number of baccalaureate degrees, joining more than 20 other states that already count on their community college systems to support critical workforce needs through bachelor's degrees.

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Following external analysis that showed the pilots to be incredibly successful, the California legislature expanded the program and made it permanent. The California Community College System is now permitted to approve up to 30 new programs per year, and Hancock and Cuesta both plan to submit our applications in coming months.

A huge factor in meeting the needs of local students is addressing the lack of access to California State University bachelor's programs. Hancock and Cuesta are two of just six California community colleges that are more than 100 miles from a CSU institution (the closest campuses for our communities are in Camarillo and Bakersfield).

In other remote parts of the state, this inequity is addressed with regional CSU campuses. San Diego State, for example, maintains a center over 100 miles east on the campus of Imperial Valley College. California State at San Bernardino operates a satellite campus in Palm Desert, and Fresno State offers undergraduate and graduate programs at College of the Sequoias in Visalia.

We met with leaders of the CSU system and held community meetings with the administration of CSU Channel Islands in Ventura County, and we received no support in addressing the needs of our region.

Our conclusion is that we should no longer wait for others to solve our problems when we have the knowledge and ability to work with our local stakeholders to develop solutions that work for us.

That brings us to Thursday night at the joint event with Hancock and Cuesta. Allan Hancock College will unveil a proposed bachelor's degree from our Business Department.

The Bachelor of Science in Applied Professional Studies is designed to develop students into professional managers for a wide variety of settings. They will be ready to serve as managers in hospitality, administrators for professional service firms, leaders in manufacturing or agriculture, administrators in local government, and entrepreneurs launching their own ventures.

It's a degree that fills a critical gap of entry-level managers that local organizations so desperately need.

Likewise, Cuesta College is proposing a bachelor's degree in education to address the critical teacher shortage on the Central Coast. Undoubtedly, some will challenge their proposal as a "duplicative" degree with other existing programs in education, but our school districts are desperate for local solutions to their teacher shortages.

Local K-12 districts struggle to recruit teachers from outside the area, then have even more difficulty retaining those teachers due to our high cost of living. Local students, on the other hand, struggle to access teacher prep programs.

Cuesta College alone has more than 1,400 students in pathways that lead to teacher education who must often leave the area to get their teaching credential due to the limited enrollment capacity of regional universities.

The UnitED Central Coast event will provide more information about these programs and how our local businesses and agencies can support the effort to bring accessible and affordable bachelor's degrees to the Central Coast.

In attendance will be California community college system leaders, the regional economic development sector, and elected officials at all levels of government.

We will gather in Boyd Concert Hall in the Fine Arts Complex on the Allan Hancock College campus at 4:30 p.m., and our entire business community is invited to join us to learn how they can support this critical campaign for workforce development.

It's time to fill the educational gap. To learn more, visit www.hancockcollege.edu/unitedcc.

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

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