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Your Community College

Kevin G. Walthers: Addressing poverty, expanding degrees

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Kevin Walthers  
Contributed

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It’s no secret that the cost of living in California, and the Central Coast in particular, is substantially higher than other parts of the country.

Last month the United Way unveiled a revelation that was not so striking as it was confirmation of what we intuitively know: the real cost of living in Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo counties far exceeds the standard used to define national poverty statistics.

Recognizing that federal poverty data focus on the cost of food and fail to capture the cost of housing, transportation, and childcare, United Way of California developed the Real Cost Measure (RCM), to capture the total impact of regional economies on working families.

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United Way Director of Program and Policy Development Henry Gascon presented data showing the basic cost of living for a family of four in Santa Barbara County exceeds \$110,000 per year, and noted that more than 40 percent of families fall below the RCM.

This is not for a lack of effort on the part of our struggling neighbors – 96 percent of the families below the RCM have at least one working adult in the home.

So how do we fix this? We start with access to education.

Although there are many avenues to address poverty, none are more powerful than expanding access to higher education. The RCM data show that higher education is a powerful antidote to poverty: those with four-year degrees are employed at higher wage jobs and are less likely to be unemployed.

Unfortunately, the pathways to a four-year degree are extremely limited in our region.

Expanding the capacity to provide four-year degrees is a policy priority at the local and state levels. The City of Santa Maria identified this as a top goal during its planning processes prior to the pandemic.

REACH, the region's primary economic development convener, included expanding access to baccalaureate degrees as a top goal in its Vision 2030 plan, noting that the lack of local access to bachelor's degrees is a "significant barrier for socio-economically disadvantaged communities."

The California Community College Chancellor Sonya Christian identified equitable baccalaureate attainment as a key pillar in the Chancellor's Office Vision 2030 master plan.

The solution to address this issue seems relatively straightforward: allow Allan Hancock College and Cuesta College to offer baccalaureate degrees that meet the immediate needs of our community.

A few weeks ago, our two colleges presented a united front on this matter and revealed to the community the applications we will submit to the California Community College system.

The Hancock proposal creates a Bachelor of Science Degree in Applied Professional Studies that will support a variety of industries including childcare, agriculture, professional service firms, and non-profit organizations such as the YMCA and Boys and Girls Club.

The outpouring of support has been tremendous. Following the joint announcement, local government and school district leaders across the region offered to draft resolutions of support to include in the degree application.

Community businesses and individuals are also writing letters affirming the vision makes sense for our region. I've sent thousands of emails to local leaders; not one response has questioned the logic of our proposals.

There is one question repeatedly posed, though: why can't the California State University system serve the low-income students and their families in our region?

The answer is unnecessarily complicated, and the bachelor's degrees proposed by Hancock and Cuesta will almost certainly be challenged by the California State University system as "duplicating" degrees already offered by the CSU.

We beg to differ – not only because the degrees are substantially different, but also because duplication does not exist when there is no alternative in the region.

With Cal Poly SLO serving an important but uniquely narrow statewide mission, students from northern Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo counties have only one option available if they want to access the same quality of education available locally to almost all Californians: relocate more than 100 miles from family to earn a baccalaureate degree from a CSU school.

As noted recently by a Cal Poly spokesman to the San Luis Obispo Tribune, "lower-income students traditionally have less mobility" than their more affluent peers.

Which begs yet another question: why should the low-income families in our region have any less access to a four-year degree than those living in other parts of the state?

This answer is simple: they shouldn't.

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Kevin G. Walthers, Ph.D., is the superintendent/president of Allan Hancock College. To learn more about the Hancock and Cuesta baccalaureate proposals, visit [www.hancockcollege.edu/unitedcc](http://www.hancockcollege.edu/unitedcc).

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