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Your Community College

Kevin G. Walthers: Bachelor's degree at AHC? Challenge accepted

Feb 3, 2024



Kevin Walthers
Contributed

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In October 2023, community leaders from Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo counties came together in Boyd Hall on Allan Hancock College's Santa Maria campus to announce UnitED Central Coast, a regional collaboration to address critical higher education needs on the Central Coast.

At the core of this collaboration is the development of baccalaureate degrees at Hancock and Cuesta colleges that will provide meaningful educational opportunities for our region and support local workforce needs.

You may have heard that Hancock is proposing the Bachelor of Sciences in Applied Professional Studies, which will help provide local businesses in fields as diverse as agriculture, manufacturing, professional services, and health care with entry-level professionals for positions in office management, human resources, sales, and logistics.

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You might think that as an accredited educational institution we could simply develop a degree and have it approved by our accrediting agency. If only it were so simple.

Current legislation allows for the California Community College Board of Governors (BOG) to approve 30 degrees per year across the 116 colleges in the state. The BOG divided that into two rounds per year, meaning that only 15 will be approved this spring, and we won't know the fate of our program until the end of May.

Our submission document is substantial, reaching approximately 500 pages. Program and course outlines are at the heart of the proposal, but the bulk comes from a required analysis of duplication with California State University programs.

Community college baccalaureates can be authorized as long as they avoid “unnecessary duplication” with other public universities in California.

The Hancock team spent countless hours comparing our courses with all 23 CSU schools, and every University of California institution. Our analysis demonstrates that our degree will be unique in the state.

Duplication is a much-debated issue between CSU and local colleges seeking to serve their communities.

It's not uncommon to hear a CSU official erroneously proclaim that the legislation “prohibits duplication.”

Last year Feather River College proposed a degree that would train students in forest fire prevention and recovery. One CSU campus hundreds of miles away objected, claiming that they “intended” to develop a similar program and therefore no need existed for one in remote Quincy, California.

(Spoiler alert: the BOG approved the Feather River College degree. Students are currently preparing for a career that will protect their neighbors from the dangers of wildfires.)

This bureaucratic obstruction is as baffling as it is unproductive. On the Central Coast, our two closest educational neighbors — Cal Poly and UC Santa Barbara — denied admission to more than 100,000 applicants last year.

This pattern is common across the state, even as a bachelor's degree is increasingly essential for navigating California's high cost of living. If we are to meet future workforce demands, the state must expand capacity rapidly.

Community college baccalaureates offer a gateway to the middle class for local students and will provide highly skilled workers for businesses of all types with literally no impact on the state's university systems.

We've long tried to navigate this challenging situation. For more than a decade, local leaders pursued additional opportunities for our region. Yet each promising start resulted in a flame out as leaders within the CSU or UC encountered their own internal restrictions, funding challenges, and then the COVID-19 pandemic.

One collaboration with CSU even included \$1 million set aside by the AHC Board of Trustees to help launch a program, but that also failed to materialize.

Ultimately, the best answer to local needs is to develop a local solution. We are fortunate to have world-class universities such as Cal Poly and UCSB in our region. These universities are driving forces in the regional economy and sources of innovation that is unique within the state.

Our submission of a baccalaureate degree is specifically designed to enhance those missions rather than compete with them.

Allan Hancock College, along with our friends at Cuesta College and Santa Barbara City College, are committed to being partners in a regional solution to support local industry and local workers.

We are up for the challenge of navigating an overly complex bureaucratic maze because we know our community. Or, in the words of State Chancellor Sonya Christian: "our time is now."

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

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