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Your Community College

Kevin G. Walthers: Two-year Promise will ensure college stays affordable

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Kevin Walthers
Contributed

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It wasn't so long ago that attending college was considered affordable. If you're over the age of 50, you likely attended a public college or university away from home and paid for all or most of it with a part-time job.

Flash forward to just this week and the national news sounded the alarm about tuition and board at elite private colleges nearing \$100,000 per year.

The days of affordable college are now akin to lore as today's college students must often achieve what feels to be an impossible dream: balance the astronomical tuition increases with the ever-rising cost of housing in order to successfully earn a college degree.

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Want to know a little-known fact? The actual inflation-adjusted cost of providing an undergraduate education at public colleges and universities has remained relatively flat.

What has changed is the price students pay at many state institutions. Why is this the case? Over the last three decades, policymakers in all 50 states increasingly transferred funding away from higher education to other parts of the state's

budget to fund healthcare, roads, public safety, and even tax cuts.

Therefore, for 30 years, colleges and universities have been directed to raise tuition to cover shortfalls, essentially creating a tax on college students to fund general government.

Allan Hancock College has been changing this reality for our community. Even though our tuition and fees have remained flat for years, many families in northern Santa Barbara County never considered attending college because of the cost.

This impacts not only families but our local businesses, as employers find it increasingly difficult to find skilled workers. Successful, healthy communities have a college-going culture, one that collectively understands the value of a post-secondary credential.

The first phase of the Hancock Promise – a pledge to cover the first year of tuition for any new high school graduate in our community – was specifically designed to increase the college-going rate in our region.

The impact was immediate: local enrollments at Hancock spiked, with the region seeing more than half of their graduates enrolling at Hancock upon graduation.

Hancock has since set records for our total number of graduates while reducing the number of units a student takes to reach their associate degree.

Essentially, we succeeded in meeting the demand for accessible and affordable higher education.

Six years after the initial launch of Promise, we are pleased to announce HP2 – two years free at AHC.

The Allan Hancock College Foundation successfully raised more than \$10 million to fund an endowment that will preserve the Hancock Promise in perpetuity and add a second year to the program.

High school graduates in our district — from the Santa Maria River to the Gaviota tunnel — are now eligible to receive two years free at AHC.

While the original Promise promoted a college-going culture, HP2 will build a college-completing culture. A degree from Hancock is a direct pipeline to additional income for graduates, increased opportunities for transfer, and expanded career options.

This life-changing opportunity is no frivolous handout. Students are required to successfully complete 24 units, including math and English, in the first year to be eligible for a second year.

The Hancock Promise is a powerful tool allowing families to provide their children with the same opportunities that many of us had when we graduated from high school, and the HP2 eligibility requirements create accountability in these young adults.

We are grateful for the support of this community in making the Hancock Promise and HP2 possible. The ability for a college the size of Allan Hancock College to raise \$10M speaks to the value that our neighbors hold for education.

We commit to providing local students with every chance to succeed and to continue holding ourselves accountable for the critical role we play in the community.

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

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