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Your Community College

Kevin G. Walthers: Facing FAFSA frustration? Bulldog Express has your back

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Kevin Walthers
Contributed



If you live with or know any high school seniors, you're likely aware of the unusual stress they are facing this year when it comes to committing to college.

You've heard the news about the major crisis with the U.S. Department of Education's cumbersome rollout of the updated Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA).

The FAFSA application is the most important document a student can send to a college or university as they apply for admission. The FAFSA is used not only for federal financial aid; it's also a vital tool for colleges and universities to determine locally funded student aid.

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Without accurate FAFSA information from a family, it's almost impossible to provide families with the actual cost they will pay to start college.

Allan Hancock College faces the same struggles as other colleges and universities this year when it comes to providing up-to-date financial information to potential students.

Student information is arriving late from the federal government and, thus far, it's plagued with errors that must be corrected manually by our amazing financial aid team.

Fortunately, Hancock differs from large universities that are not integrated with their local communities.

We serve local students, we know our local high schools, and we are our community's college. Our faculty, staff, and administrators are singularly focused on ensuring that local students have access to affordable, quality education.

So, how do we overcome the FAFSA problem?

The first step: commit to working around it. Regardless of the situation, our incoming freshmen are eligible for the Hancock Promise if they sign up for 12 or more units, take math and English, get an abbreviated education plan, and fill out the FAFSA.

This year, we are allowing students to postpone their FAFSA application until the kinks are worked out as long as they meet all the other steps.

Getting this message through the layers of panic, frustration, and confusion is no easy task.

To cut through the noise, Hancock is hosting a new outreach initiative called Bulldog Express. Launching in June, students can come onto campus on Monday and Tuesday afternoons for FAFSA assistance and help with completing all the enrollment steps. Bulldog Express will run through late July (be on the watch for more information coming soon).

Recently, dozens of Hancock counselors, staff, and administrators visited local high schools from Santa Ynez to Lompoc to Santa Maria, including our local private schools and continuation schools.

The goal: to provide one-on-one assistance with FAFSA and course registration. The effort resulted in more than 1,100 high school seniors finalizing their Hancock application, completing an abbreviated student education plan, and registering for fall classes.

This is how you build a college-going culture in our community, but more importantly it's how you stave off the questionable practices of predatory for-profit colleges that often confuse students into accepting large loans to attend programs of questionable quality.

If decision day for college admission nears and a student you know doesn't have a clear picture of their financial commitments for college, remind them that Hancock is a great option for starting their higher education career.

The newly announced second year of the Hancock Promise creates the opportunity to earn a transfer degree or career education degree for no tuition cost. If students carefully select their courses, they can also navigate the two years without ever having to buy a textbook.

Our staff is working hard to provide local options to this national problem, and Hancock remains committed to being our community's college. Picking a college is stressful enough. Paying for it shouldn't be. This is just another way that Hancock is Changing the Odds.

Kevin G. Walthers, Ph.D., is the superintendent/president of Allan Hancock College. For more information on Bulldog Express, visit www.hancockcollege.edu/

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