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Your Community College

Kevin G. Walthers: Changing the odds, one grad at a time

Jun 1, 2024



Kevin Walthers
Contributed

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Our apologies if you were held up in the traffic around Allan Hancock College last Friday.

As many were preparing for Memorial Day weekend on that Friday morning, thousands of family members were streaming onto campus to celebrate a graduate.

Our graduates come in a variety of forms — many are adults (including one who is 82 years old), at least one husband/wife pair walked together, a few brought their small children along, and even more crossed the stage with siblings or cousins.

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When all was said and done, more than 570 graduates crossed the stage, representing the 1,516 students who were eligible for a degree this year.

The crowd on the Bulldog football field matched the energy of their excited graduates. They cheered loudly, sounded air horns, and shot confetti in celebration.

For the family members, Friday was all about soaking up the moment. Here at Hancock, we have our eye on the long game and although we won't know the full impact of Friday's ceremony for years, we do know that education transforms families and communities.

As our neighbors become better educated, our economy prospers. Educated individuals are more likely to be employed, earn higher wages, enjoy better health outcomes, and actively participate in civic activities like volunteering and voting.

Many of last week's graduates will enter public service fields as police officers, firefighters, or emergency medical technicians. Others are headed to the workforce — one welding graduate I spoke to before the ceremony was absolutely giddy about his job prospects.

About 20 graduates will enroll in a pilot program sponsored by Cal Poly. These students will pursue a Cal Poly degree in sociology, offered in the evening on the AHC Santa Maria campus.

While that's a great start toward bringing baccalaureate degree attainment to our community, it helps only a select few of the hundreds of students who are unable to leave our region for a four-year degree.

Many of our students don't have the option to transfer due to family obligations or the financial burden of moving away.

Allan Hancock College has developed a locally designed bachelor's degree in Applied Professional Studies to address our region's needs. Tailored for local businesses, governments, and service agencies, this degree equips students with essential skills applicable to any organization, including basic accounting, human resources, purchasing, logistics, and leadership.

Remarkably, the total cost of tuition and fees for this four-year program is just a few hundred dollars more than what CSU charges for a single year.

So, what's next? Under California's community college baccalaureate degree process, Hancock submitted the program to the state for approval in January.

The degree application is now under review to determine whether it fits a local need without duplicating CSU degrees. The final decision is expected sometime this month. Early indications are positive – leaders at the California Community

College System have informally stated that the need is present and conversations with senior officials at Cal Poly indicate that they see no duplication.

We all already know the need is real. History has proven that California's system of higher education systematically excludes thousands of our neighbors from equitable access to four-year degrees.

But we are working to change history. Allan Hancock College is committed to addressing the need — that's how we Change the Odds for northern Santa Barbara County.

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

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