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Your Community College

Kevin G. Walthers: What a difference a decade makes

Jul 1, 2023



Kevin Walthers
Contributed

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Summer is always a welcome opportunity for relaxation and reflection.

This summer is particularly poignant for my family and I: July 5 marks the 10th anniversary of our arrival in the Santa Maria Valley. We arrived excited to join the great work of Allan Hancock College, and although sometimes it feels like just yesterday, it truly is remarkable how much has changed in 10 years.

In 2013, the nation was emerging from the Great Recession. Thanks to the exceptional leadership of Hancock's board of trustees, the college weathered the recession better than many colleges. Although enrollment caps and hiring freezes were needed, no layoffs or furloughs occurred.

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Following the recession, it was time to focus on community engagement. The board of trustees wanted to see a college that's a vital part of the entire community — from the Santa Ynez Valley to Guadalupe and Lompoc to Cuyama.

Community reengagement efforts began with a fresh infusion of special program funds for outreach. While we continued to work with our high school partners, Hancock's outreach expanded beyond the schools to engage families at

community events, such as Santa Maria's Downtown Fridays, the Elks Rodeo, the Old Town Market in Lompoc, and the Fourth of July celebration in Solvang. Today, Hancock maintains more than five dozen local organization and event sponsorships (up from only five in 2013), and our student ambassadors attend more than 100 events each year in support of the communities throughout northern Santa Barbara County.

At the same time, we also focused on engagement with our current students. We launched significant efforts to improve student success and improve completion rates. Concurrent enrollment offerings grew rapidly, allowing high school students to earn college credits.

Today, an innovative pilot project at Orcutt Academy High School will soon see a full cohort of 30 students graduate simultaneously with a high school diploma and an associate degree from Allan Hancock College.

Five years ago, we also launched a major initiative to remove financial barriers to higher education: the Hancock Promise. This landmark program promises a first-year fee-free at Hancock to all local high school graduates.

Thanks to the financial support of our community, we are close to expanding the Hancock Promise to cover two full years of tuition and fees.

Of course, a look back over the past 10 years would be incomplete without a reflection on Hancock's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In spring 2020, our faculty and staff quickly pivoted to provide high-quality programming in mostly remote modes, and most students hung on for the ride.

Our stringent safety protocols, communication processes, and instructional methodologies ended up being replicated by other colleges across the state.

Additionally, when the County needed help supporting their COVID response, Hancock answered the call by organizing our empty campus and student workers into a central food distribution center, a COVID testing site, and a vaccination clinic.

Tens of thousands of our friends and neighbors came to campus for months and, in the end, more than 250,000 people received food bags and one-third of all vaccines administered in the Santa Maria/Guadalupe service area were provided at Allan Hancock College.

The results of an entire decade of engagement efforts are telling. Enrollment is returning to pre-COVID levels, but more importantly, student completion is at an all time high.

The past four years have seen record numbers of graduates (for both degrees and certificates) and the number of Latino/a graduates actually exceeds the entire graduating class from 10 years ago.

Allan Hancock College is changing the odds for our community, and I'm proud to be a part of this effort.

However, with reflection comes forward thinking.

Over the next decade, we are committed to expanding the Hancock Promise, adding four-year bachelor's degrees, and remaining at the forefront of important community issues.

Our next evolution will be an exciting force for positive change and support for our neighbors in northern Santa Barbara County.

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

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