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Your Community College

AHC's innovative baccalaureate proposal: Tailored solutions for Central Coast needs | Kevin G. Walthers

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Kevin Walthers
Contributed

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In October of 2023, a diverse group of 175 community leaders from across northern Santa Barbara County and southern San Luis Obispo counties gathered with a unified goal: to address the unmet need for baccalaureate degrees on the Central Coast.

Allan Hancock College proposed a unique degree for California, a Bachelor's of Applied Professional Studies. This degree is designed with two groups in mind: local employers (who consistently tell us that they struggle to recruit and retain office managers and other white-collar positions) and local students (who are denied access to the California State University system due to geographic and family constraints).

The degree proposal received overwhelming local support from the Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors, cities from Pismo Beach to Solvang, school districts, every chamber of commerce in our region, and dozens of you who wrote letters of support.

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Despite universal support from our community bolstered by the documented need within our request, the application fell just a few points short of advancing based on a scoring rubric designed to compare programs across the state without

consideration of geography and access to the California State University system. While disappointing, the outcome is not devastating. We've been asked to refine and resubmit the application by making a few tweaks to the curriculum and providing a more specific needs assessment.

Our team is already working on the new submission, due in August. The delay will not have a material impact on implementation, assuming that the approval process starts moving again quickly.

The Hancock baccalaureate proposal is admittedly unique among other community college bachelor's degrees. Other such degrees are more focused on jobs in health information, biomanufacturing, equine management, and even mortuary science. The programs are targeted to specific industries and are documented to increase outcomes for students of color in other regions.

That said, the need for students and employers on the Central Coast is not easily targeted to certain industries or jobs. As noted recently in a talent pipeline analysis conducted by the local economic development collaborative REACH, our region lacks a "large, central industry or employer to help organize and articulate private sector talent priorities."

AHC's baccalaureate proposal for a degree in applied professional studies is a key component to build a talent pipeline.

California is big and complex and the solution to increasing access must take on different forms in different areas.

The California State University system addresses issues of access in other parts of California: CSU operates permanent centers in the Imperial Valley, Palm Desert, and Visalia.

Within the last three weeks CSU announced that Cal Poly will take over management of the Maritime Academy in Vallejo, and Sacramento State will build a new center in Placer County.

The students of northern Santa Barbara County – overwhelmingly Latino, low-income, and first-generation – deserve the same access that other isolated communities receive.

The California Community College system's Vision 2030 calls for leading with equity by focusing “on students who are harmed by persistent systemic barriers linked to their racial and ethnic identities.”

We see these systemic barriers on the Central Coast. Cal Poly and UCSB are elite institutions that, combined, deny admission to more than 100,000 applicants each year.

Hancock's official partner CSU (Cal State Channel Islands) is more than 100 miles away in Camarillo. During a visit organized by the Santa Maria Valley Chamber of Commerce in 2019, officials from CSUCI offered to provide programs if the community would fully fund them.

A hybrid program at UCSB funded through the UC President's Office showed promise, but ultimately fizzled during the pandemic.

As the pandemic receded, AHC partnered with Cal Poly administrators and spent approximately 18 months working through the Aspen Institute's transfer initiative with the goal of increasing transfer for students.

This fall, Cal Poly will offer a degree in sociology on the Hancock campus, but only 20 students make up the cohort. As of this writing, there are no identified plans or timeframes to expand this opportunity to other majors.

The resources available to us differ significantly from those in most of California, so the solution should be tailored to our unique circumstances.

All Californians deserve equitable access to all forms of higher education. Your friends at Allan Hancock College are committed to making that happen.

Kevin G. Walthers, Ph.D., is the superintendent/president of Allan Hancock College. To show your support for the ACH Baccalaureate, go to hancockcollege.edu/unitedcc.

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