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Your Community College

A legacy of leadership | Kevin G. Walthers

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Kevin Walthers
Contributed

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This marks my 14th year as a college president in California and my 12th at Allan Hancock College.

Thirteen years ago, I took the role of president of Las Positas College in Livermore, new to the state and new to the massive California Community College (CCC) system.

On my first day, a small stack of mail awaited me on my desk, mostly addressed to the “college president” or to my predecessor.

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One letter, however, was addressed to me. Inside the oversized envelope was a custom-made card featuring original photography from Dianne Van Hook, congratulating me on my new position and welcoming me to the CCC.

Dianne had just completed her 23rd year at College of the Canyons, a remarkable tenure in any CEO position, but particularly exceptional in higher education, where college presidents average about five years in the job.

Dianne, or DVH as her CEO colleagues affectionately call her, extended an offer of assistance as I navigated my new career. We spoke a few times, and I appreciated the wisdom of someone who started as a president while I was still an undergraduate at the University of Texas.

It wasn't until two years later – when I arrived at Hancock – that I truly grasped the impact of DVH.

Hancock and College of the Canyons are part of the same subregion of community colleges. We often meet as a group – mostly by phone in the early days and now by Zoom – to discuss the pressing issues facing our colleges.

Rarely does an issue arise that DVH hasn't encountered before, often multiple times.

Diane is a force of nature in the world of community colleges. She arrived at the College of the Canyons in 1988, tucked away in a remote suburb of northeast Los Angeles County. As Santa Clarita grew, so did College of the Canyons.

Dianne's vision for the college expanded throughout the community, turning the college into a critical engine for regional economic growth.

Over a decade ago, she saw the need for accessible four-year degrees, leading to the development of the College of the Canyons University Center.

Today, thousands of students can earn bachelor's and graduate degrees on the College of the Canyons campus in a building appropriately named after Dianne Van Hook.

More recently, she challenged the California State University's objection to community colleges offering locally driven, four-year degrees.

College of the Canyons proposed a new bachelor's degree in sustainable architecture that would “train students in energy efficiency building codes, water conservation, air quality standards and decarbonized building design so they can work as technicians” in environmentally friendly building design and construction.

The CSU balked, claiming that Sacramento State offered similar programs.

DVH would have none of it – fiercely defending her students and community. After 36 years, when most would be on autopilot, DVH was still fighting for College of the Canyons students and the greater Santa Clarita region.

This fall will be different in Santa Clarita and across California. A new board at College of the Canyons decided they wanted new leadership. This, of course, is the board’s prerogative – anyone in this line of work understands that we all serve at the will of the board.

For the first time in more than three decades, we will kick off a school year without DVH at the helm of College of the Canyons. I’m not privy to the details, nor should I be, about why the board made this abrupt change, but it’s clear to all of us within the system that they bungled the transition and tarnished the college’s reputation.

Meanwhile, DVH continues to mentor California college presidents. She chose to retire rather than engage in a process that would only create chaos on campus.

In her farewell letter, she didn’t reflect on her achievements; instead, she applauded the faculty, staff, and administrators who “bring magic with them and, as a result, [created] a place of higher education that inspires those who dare to dream and has redefined what community college can be for its students.”

Diane may not be in her office this fall, but her spirit will resonate through the scores of college presidents across the state who she mentored. We’re a better college, a better college system, and a better state because of Dianne Van Hook.

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

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