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Your Community College

Distance matters for transfer students | Kevin G. Walthers

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Kevin Walthers
Contributed

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In 2016 the UCSB Economic Forecast Project asked me to speak on higher education issues in northern Santa Barbara County.

The Great Recession was fading into the rearview mirror, and many were anticipating innovation in many areas, including the delivery of college and university programs.

In this region, Econ Alliance was vigorously touting a comprehensive survey of local businesses that found there was near unanimity on the need for affordable and accessible four-year options.

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In other regions researchers were starting to discuss urban locations where fresh, affordable food options were not available. They were calling these regions “food deserts” and pointing out the negative impacts on families in these areas.

For northern Santa Barbara County (and even San Luis Obispo County) there was a similar pattern in higher education: the transformation of Cal Poly into a highly selective university left few baccalaureate options available for students on the Central Coast.

That led to the 2016 Economic Forecast presentation titled California's Higher Education Desert: Challenges and Opportunities for Northern Santa Barbara County.

Perhaps the most important data point in the presentation was a slide showing that Hancock students accounted for only a fifth of all CSU transfers from the three colleges on the Central Coast (AHC, Cuesta, SBCC) but provided 35 percent of all Latino transfer students.

It was clear then that there was a transfer equity problem and that the lack of proximity to affordable, accessible transfer institutions posed a significant barrier for Latino students.

Jump forward almost a decade to today, and we now have research-based confirmation that distance is indeed a barrier to transfer that impacts students in "university education deserts" and that the students impacted are more likely to be Latino.

Over the past two months the RP Group, a research organization focused on California Community Colleges, has been presenting the findings from their latest project, Exploring Geographic Barriers to Transfer for California Community College Students.

The RP Group identified two tiers of isolation based on this distance to a transfer institution from each of the 116 community colleges in California. Tier 1 colleges were community colleges more than 80 miles from a UC or CSU campus and Tier 2 colleges were located between 25 and 80 miles from a California university.

In total, 29 colleges met the criteria.

Allan Hancock College fell into the Tier 2 category due to proximity of Cal Poly and UCSB, but the reality is that only four colleges in the California System are further from a non-polytechnic CSU campus than AHC.

It is worth pointing out, though, that the tiers only predict the intensity of the impact. A particularly interesting finding was that in both tiers, students were more likely to be first generation or low income and that those students were more likely to be impacted by distance than others.

As the distance increases, the impact on the most underserved students grows. We see this phenomenon locally.

Hartnell College in Salinas is very similar to Hancock in almost every way, yet it outpaces AHC in transfer by almost 60 percent. It's not hard to determine why – with the nearest CSU more than 100 miles from AHC, Hartnell is only seven miles from CSU Monterey Bay.

In fact, Hartnell College consistently sends more students to CSUMB than AHC transfers in total.

This is not just an idle concern. This is an issue of systemic injustice for residents of the Central Coast.

For decades, the CSU has alternated between ignoring the needs of our region and breaking promises to serve our students. Now that AHC has a baccalaureate degree proposal with conditional approval, seven CSU schools (including Cal Poly) are claiming that it duplicates programs they offer.

It's worth noting that none of those schools have any intention of offering the programs in our region and at least one of them that has enrollment issues failed to attend our Transfer Day event to speak to our students about attending.

Over the next two weeks we will meet with each of the objecting institutions to explain how our program is not duplicative of anything the CSU offers and that it will not impact enrollment at the CSU in any way.

For the past five years, California higher education leaders have promised to eradicate system inequities in our system. It's time to fulfill the promise our students deserve.

Kevin G. Walthers, Ph.D., is the Superintendent/President of Allan Hancock College. The RP Group study can be accessed at tinyurl.com/RPGroup-Distance.

Tags

