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Your Community College

The Central Coast's forgotten students: A call for action | Kevin G. Walthers

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Kevin Walthers
Contributed

“It’s political.”

For the past year, Allan Hancock College has worked to bring four-year degrees to our region. We've followed all the rules, including those that arbitrarily create roadblocks that harm students.

But at each turn, we've been told that the issue is "political."

ADVERTISING



For far too long, we heard that message as an analysis – an overly simplistic explanation of reality in Sacramento. We expressed frustration that "it's political" was merely a way of kicking the can down the road instead of tackling the issue of educational access head-on.

I recently heard that phrase differently. An elected official commented that community colleges are "so political," and I finally realized the message they were conveying.

We have been acting on the side of reason, logic, justice, and equity when we should be building more political support.

Last month, we met with two of the CSU campuses that objected to Hancock offering a bachelor's degree in applied professional studies. It was one of the most surreal conversations I've had in my entire career.

Both institutions – the closest of which is four hours away on a good day – claimed that our specially tailored program to improve workforce outcomes too closely mirrored theirs and was therefore “duplicative.”

One institution downplayed the quality of its program by telling us that most of its business graduates don’t secure high-level jobs upon graduation, and that its program only prepares a few students to go on to a master’s program.

The other objected when we pointed out that the proposed AHC degree is specifically targeted to preparing individuals for supervisory positions, whereas the CSU degree “is designed to prepare students for a successful career in managing the business enterprise.”

Of course, the CSU description literally came from their own materials.

There is no logical argument preventing Hancock from serving this community. The California State University system has had decades to make the appropriate commitment to our region, only to postpone plans or pull back programs in the face of budget challenges.

Cal Poly is a unique part of the CSU that is impacted by its statewide mission, which limits access for local students. The recent expansion of the Cal Poly sociology degree to serve 25 students on Hancock’s campus doesn’t come close to addressing the full need.

As we enter 2025, we’re going to more fervently pursue the political route to serving our students. At every turn, we are going to challenge elected officials, appointed trustees at the state level, and the leaders of both the CSU system and the California Community Colleges.

The community we serve is overwhelmingly Latine with more than two-thirds of AHC graduates coming from educationally underserved homes. This is a social justice issue.

We no longer accept assertions from our colleagues within the state university system that they need more time to secure faculty buy-in and identify resources to serve students in northern Santa Barbara County.

We know that CSU can marshal resources almost overnight when they want to.

As an example, look no further than Cal Poly's acquisition of the struggling CSU Maritime Academy late last year to create the new "Cal Poly Solano" campus in Vallejo, which is 250 miles north of San Luis Obispo.

There was no apparent process to garner faculty buy-in to support the merger, and CSU found \$35 million to finance the new partnership in short order.

In 2023, the Maritime Academy enrolled 761 students, only 22 percent of whom are Latine — a similar percentage to the Latine population at Cal Poly SLO. These are also the only two institutions in the CSU system that do not qualify for the federal designation as Hispanic Serving Institutions.

In stark contrast, Hancock's main campus is fewer than 35 miles from Cal Poly and serves a student population of over 13,000, over two-thirds of whom are Latine.

Our community understands the challenges faced in our region and will be even more involved in advocating for our needs, for our neighbors, for our future.

The students, residents, and businesses of northern Santa Barbara County deserve to have the same access as those in other parts of the state.

This year, AHC is dedicated to making it happen.

Kevin G. Walthers, Ph.D., is the Superintendent/President of Allan Hancock College.

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