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EDITOR'S PICK

Your Community College

# The human cost of an educational turf war | Kevin G. Walthers

Feb 1, 2025



Kevin Walthers  
Contributed

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For many years, I and my colleagues at Allan Hancock College have been extolling the virtues of how local baccalaureate degrees would be an incredible asset in our community.

We've talked about how the proposed Bachelor of Science Degree in Applied Professional Studies meets the needs of students who are unserved by the Cal State University system, as well as local employers begging for a qualified and professional workforce.

It may be the one issue that unites everyone in northern Santa Barbara County: leaders from all political groups, business sectors, labor organizations, and service agencies have joined Hancock in advocating for local baccalaureates.

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As 2024 came to a close, I participated in meetings with two of the seven CSU campuses who assert that the proposed Hancock degree “duplicates” their work.

A maximum of 30 minutes was allotted for these discussions. I don't know about you, but 30 minutes is barely enough time to get past introductions let alone get into important and complicated conversations about course duplication and

solutions agreeable to faculty.

Suffice it to say, these meetings were less than productive. The message from both CSU campuses was the same: we will block your attempt to serve students, but we will not provide meaningful, in-person programs at scale for your region.

We explained the critical equity issue involved — that the overwhelming majority of our students are Latine from underserved families. The CSU explained that meeting the need would take time, faculty buy-in, and resources to build programs for our community.

We've heard this excuse over and over from CSU.

Therefore, it strikes us as particularly disingenuous given the immediate response to enrollment issues at CSU's Maritime Academy in Vallejo. In that case, the CSU moved with amazing speed — and found \$35 million — to merge the Academy with Cal Poly.

This self-serving action sends a clear message to our community: the CSU in fact can move quickly, but only to merge the only two CSUs that are not federally designated Hispanic Serving Institutions.

The core of our frustration is not the political turf war between the CSU and community colleges. It's the blatant disregard for our neighbors who are being left behind.

Take for example Ruben Ramirez, a local resident who has spent 16 years in law enforcement, first as a police officer and now as a park ranger for the City of Santa Maria.

Today, he is looking to advance his career in the city's recreation and parks department by earning his associate and bachelor's degrees.

Last semester, he completed 18 hours of credit at Hancock and landed on the Dean's List, all while working full-time to support his wife and children. Ruben will graduate from Hancock this summer, but his baccalaureate options are

currently limited to expensive online colleges due to the lack of an accessible local CSU campus.

Or take Anais Diaz, who is a prototypical community college student who was the first in her family to attend college. Anais struggled at Fresno State University before ultimately returning to Santa Maria.

She found her footing at Hancock, earning two associate degrees, including one in sociology, while working at Good Samaritan Shelter and taking an active role helping the less fortunate in our community.

Last year when Cal Poly announced a special cohort of classes that would be taught at Hancock and lead to a bachelor's degree in sociology, she was ecstatic.

She earned solid grades at Hancock (a GPA firmly above 3.0), had plenty of community service, and seemed to be exactly the type of student the program was designed for.

"As soon as I turned in my application, I bought a frame for my Cal Poly diploma," she told me.

When she received the letter telling her she would not be admitted to the 25-person cohort, she was devastated.

"I still have the frame in my closet," she said.

A straightforward solution to Ruben and Anais's problem does exist: CSU could agree to limit a baccalaureate degree to our immediate service area.

Currently, an agreement between CSU and the California Community Colleges allows degrees approved at one college to be recognized at any other college that can demonstrate the capacity to offer it. By setting this geographic limitation, we can effectively serve thousands in our region.

What may seem like a political fight and turf war to policy makers in Sacramento has real world impacts on the ground.

California residents — in particular the Californians that are our neighbors — deserve access to four-year degrees. The faculty, staff, students, administrators, and board of trustees at Allan Hancock College will not give up the fight to make that happen for the thousands of people in our region who share Ruben and Anais’s story.

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

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