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Your Community College

## **A historic commitment: Bringing four-year degrees closer to home | Kevin G. Walthers**

Mar 29, 2025



Kevin Walthers  
Contributed

March 17 may not be etched into local history books, but the events of that day will forever impact future generations in northern Santa Barbara County.

That day, I stood alongside Cal Poly President Jefferey Armstrong on the Boyd Concert Hall stage as he made a pledge on behalf of the Cal State University System: within the next five years, our community will gain access to three new bachelor's degree programs.

Paired with the existing Cal Poly sociology program, this expansion will bring four distinct degree options to our neighbors who otherwise may be unable to earn a baccalaureate degree close to home.

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We call it a 2+2 program; Allan Hancock College provides the lower division classes leading to an associate degree (taking approximately two years) and Cal Poly instructors teach the upper division coursework on our campus leading to a bachelor's degree (also an approximate two-year process).

The sociology 2+2 program launched in fall 2024; the next degree to be offered — in business administration — will launch in the fall of 2026 and two additional degrees will follow soon after.

Hancock degree-earners and northern Santa Barbara County residents will be top priority for admission, fulfilling Cal Poly's pledge to be "stewards of place."

It's been a long road to get to this point.

When I arrived at Hancock 12 years ago, my first community meeting was with Vicki Conner and Ken Parker of the North County EconAlliance. They presented a report that measured student interest in degree programs and documented local workforce needs, showing a clear need for local baccalaureate degrees.

At the time the country was still emerging from the Great Recession and college attendance was not top of mind for local students.

Faculty, staff, administrators and trustees led a community-wide effort to develop a sense of urgency around student attendance and completion. The community, led by the Hancock Foundation, rallied to create the Hancock Promise, ensuring local families understood college was affordable and attainable.

Our student body government manned tables, encouraging students to "petition to graduate." Our local high schools began enrolling their freshmen in our college success classes, giving high school graduates a head start when they get to Hancock, and faculty began developing pathways to streamline program completion.

All this work ... worked. The needle was moving as the number of graduates grew.

In 2013, we graduated about 725 students. Eleven years later we've nearly doubled that to 1,400 graduates (950 Latino) in 2024. That's changing the odds!

When the state launched the opportunity for community colleges to offer their own baccalaureate degrees, we jumped in. The support was incredible — we had the backing of the cities of Santa Maria, Buellton, Guadalupe, Lompoc, Solvang, and Santa Barbara County plus regional businesses, chambers of commerce, EconAlliance, and every school district Hancock serves.

In October of 2023, we launched UnitedED Central Coast, a partnership with Cuesta College focused on increasing degree options for students in the region.

The kick-off event attracted a lot of attention and we rode the momentum, developing our own degree for state consideration — a bachelor's degree in applied professional studies.

In the audience on that October day was Assemblymember Gregg Hart. The community outpouring of support that he witnessed made it clear — something needs to change.

After a year of watching our local degree hit bureaucratic roadblock after roadblock, Assemblymember Hart decided to cut through the red tape and filed a bill to expedite our degree plan by removing CSU from the approval process.

It appears that was the final push that the CSU needed to open the door to serving our region, and Cal Poly seized the opportunity to go big, making a major commitment that will serve thousands of students for generations to come.

The commitment made on March 17 marks more than just a promise — it's a turning point for higher education access in northern Santa Barbara County.

As these new degree programs take shape, the focus now shifts to execution: ensuring the right resources, faculty and support systems are in place to help students succeed.

This initiative isn't just about expanding options; it's about transforming lives and strengthening our local workforce. Looking ahead, we must continue to champion these efforts, working collaboratively to turn this vision into reality and open new doors for future generations.

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

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