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Your Community College

More than a commencement: A year of firsts at Hancock | Kevin G. Walthers

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Kevin Walthers

Contributed

Commencement is often the flashiest moment of an academic year. The pomp and circumstance, the turning of the tassels, caps joyously tossed into the air. Completion, success, and hope — all memorialized in a single moment.

The recent commencement at Allan Hancock College was a time for both celebration and reflection.

This year, Hancock celebrated its 104th graduating class. We welcomed approximately 8,000 family and community members onto the Santa Maria campus to cheer on 1,287 graduates who earned a combined 2,491 associate degrees.

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Many of those degrees were pursued while raising a family or working outside the home. This year's graduates included a mother-daughter duo who walked the stage together, and multiple parents who crossed the finish line with young children at their side — and sometimes on their hip.

As we look back on the past academic year at Hancock, there's much to celebrate. During the summer of 2024, our administrators identified several unmet community needs and began brainstorming solutions.

One discovery stood out: a lack of access to college courses for residents in Guadalupe. The response was immediate. By January 2025, a new four-night-per-week program was up and running, providing local families with Hancock classes — no commute required.

Soon after, Hancock announced a historic partnership with Cal Poly. After decades of dreaming, the promise of expanding higher education options became a reality in Northern Santa Barbara County.

Multiple Cal Poly bachelor's degrees are now in development and will begin rolling out on Hancock's campus in fall 2026. A sociology degree is already available, a business degree is next, and two more will launch by 2030.

But we didn't stop there. Just this week, we announced another landmark partnership — this time with CSU Channel Islands. Starting in fall 2026, students who have already earned their Associate Degree in Nursing (ADN) will be able to complete a Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) right here in Santa Maria.

The program will be more affordable than comparable options at private and for-profit colleges and will provide local healthcare networks with much-needed, highly trained talent. Less debt, more access — a win-win for our students and our region.

These partnerships are designed for students who are place-bound — those who can't relocate due to work, family, or financial responsibilities. Each CSU degree will be taught by Cal Poly or CSU Channel Islands faculty on Hancock's campus, removing traditional barriers to bachelor's-level education.

These collaborations will change lives, open doors, and strengthen the local workforce.

But at Hancock, we know students need more than degrees to thrive — they need support for basic needs, too. For years, Hancock partnered with the Santa Barbara County Food Bank to fight food insecurity.

That work led to the opening of a new Student Health Services facility this past year. The facility now houses a fully stocked food pantry, clothing closet, and health center. While access to education is essential, so is access to clinical care, mental health support, nutritious food, and clothing for students and their children.

Allan Hancock College is committed to changing the odds. That means going beyond offering classes — it means removing barriers and creating real opportunity. We are proud to be the community’s college, and we will continue to meet the evolving needs of Northern Santa Barbara County for decades to come.

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

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