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Your Community College

Don't believe the hype: College is essential | Kevin G. Walthers

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Kevin Walthers
Contributed

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Once undisputed, the value of a college education is now under a microscope.

Growing skepticism recently morphed into overwhelming sentiment — at least according to a recent poll conducted by NBC News.

The survey found that an astounding 63 percent of Americans think college is not “worth the cost because people often graduate without specific job skills and with a large amount of debt to pay off.”

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This line of thinking is no accident. Downplaying the value of college and attacking the “ivory tower” as an out-of-touch anachronism is now a common political mantra.

Yes, an issue does exist: too many colleges provide questionable degrees for an insanely absurd price. But the majority of higher education options are affordable and accessible to everyone.

Believing otherwise feels like stepping into the Upside Down.

A simple way to dispute the rhetoric: consider how expensive life becomes if you don't go to college. In April of this year, the Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC) released a report showing the median income for a college graduate in California to be \$90,000.

What about their counterparts who did not go to college? Only five percent of those with a high school diploma, and 12 percent of those whose high school diploma is their highest award, are making \$90,000. Perhaps even more telling is the college grads in the bottom quartile of the salary rankings still earn more than half of those with only a high school diploma.

But wait, there's more. The Lumina Foundation reported an interesting contradiction in their survey of American attitudes: 70 percent of those without a degree overwhelmingly believe that a four-year degree is in fact valuable; 63 percent of those who never enrolled in college say a "bachelor's degree would be worth it for them"; and, more than half believe that an associate's degree is a worthy investment.

However, we see a pivot when cost is discussed — 60 percent believe that even community college is too expensive.

The reality is that most Americans do believe college education is valuable. It's the cost that tarnishes the value.

But hang on — there's more to college than a bachelor's degree. Nursing is college. Welding is college. Public safety is college. Machining is college. These are valuable programs that lead to careers that can provide for a family in our region and across California, and they are still college.

Public perception is at the root of the problem.

How do we change perceptions? With information. Research from journalist and author Jeff Selingo can help students find their "dream school" — a college or university that is affordable, fits the student's goals, and is known for great outcomes.

Michael Itzkowitz — founder and president of the HEA Group, an organization focused on improving college access, value, and economic mobility — and the California Futures Foundation are focusing on publicizing colleges' return on investment (ROI).

They found that Hancock graduates earn approximately \$13,000 per year more than their peers who only completed high school. Without the two-years-free Hancock Promise, it takes a Hancock graduate only six months to recover their cost of attendance.

With the Promise, it's literally a matter of weeks to recoup their investment. That's a substantial ROI!

Hancock is also working hard to make earning a bachelor's degree more affordable. In fall 2026, Cal Poly will launch its second bachelor's degree to be offered on our Santa Maria campus.

Students seeking degrees in business administration or sociology can live at home while pursuing their educational goals from a world-class university without ever leaving their families.

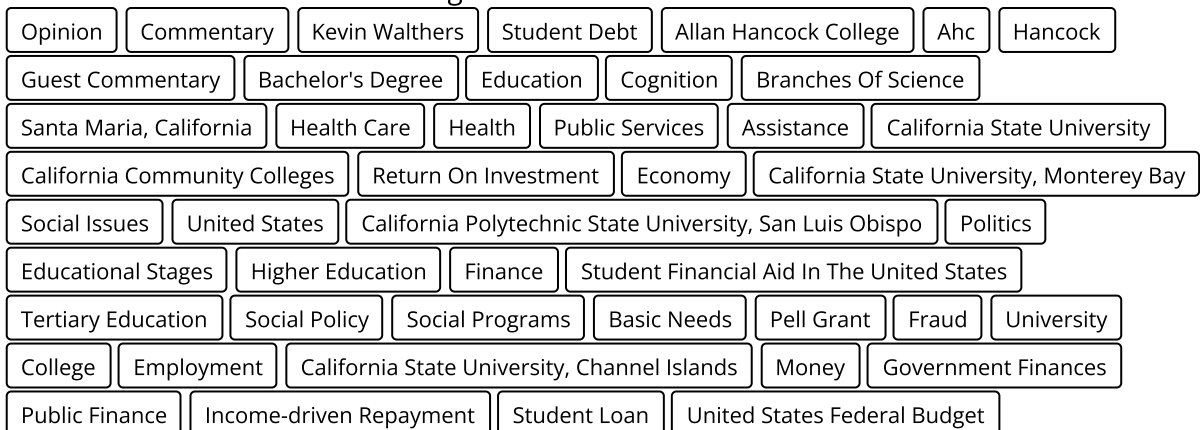
And over the next few years, Cal Poly will add two additional degree programs, ultimately serving as many as 400 students per year from our community.

It's a game changer for our region.

College is essential in the modern economy. The faculty, staff, and trustees of Allan Hancock College are committed to Changing the Odds by ensuring that college is available and affordable for all.

Kevin G. Walthers is the superintendent/president of Allan Hancock College. For more on the research cited here, see PPIC at ppic.org, Michael Itzkowitz at www.theheagroup.com, Jeff Selingo at jeffselingo.com, and the Lumina Foundation at luminafoundation.org.

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