



Joanna Rodriguez utilizes The Spot, a center for basic needs at Irvine Valley College.

PHOTO BY DREW A. KELLEY, CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER

SERVICES

CRITICAL SUPPORT ALLOWS STUDENTS TO FOCUS ON THEIR EDUCATION

Food, housing, direct aid, referrals available

By Nicole Gregory
contributing writer

Helping students meet the basic needs of living, such as having a place to live, enough food and the ability to pay for emergency car repairs, is one critical way to boost their chances for academic success — which is why it is a priority for the colleges in the South Orange County Community College District.

“We have a food pantry, which we call The Spot,” said Martha McDonald, vice president of Student Services at Irvine Valley College, naming a source of support for students that she said is particularly popular. The Spot provides free bags of groceries, snacks, personal care kits and help applying for Cal Fresh, the food assistance program.

“We also have students with housing needs, and we provide emergency hotel vouchers for a local hotel that we partner with,” she said.

To help students connect with local and state programs that can offer assistance, McDonald and her colleagues arrange meetings with case workers. “We have a partnership with Cal State Fullerton with their social worker program,” McDonald said, adding that CSUF students work as interns in IVC’s Basic Needs Center. The center provides students with resources such as community dental referrals, therapists for mental health counseling, transportation, child care and more.

“Irvine is a very affluent community, and from the outside it looks like our students don’t have a lot of needs,” said Erin Pollard, director of College Equity Inclusion and Access at IVC. Yet, she said, “more than half of our students are eligi-

ble for financial aid, which means they’re at risk of not having the financial means to pay for the basics of living, starting with food.”

The high cost of living in the area directly impacts community college students, Pollard said. “We have families or individual students who earn decent income, but they can’t afford to live in our area. They’re in need of housing support and food support. Last year we had 186 students request housing support from us who were in unstable situations and about to lose their housing.”

At Saddleback College, more students need food than ever before. “We’ve seen a rise in basic needs services,” said Jennifer LaBounty, vice president of Student Services at Saddleback. “The most pressing is food insecurity.”

Hunger directly impacts a student’s ability to do well in college. “If you’re

hungry, you can’t do well in your classes, you can’t think clearly,” LaBounty said. Saddleback’s C.A.R.E. (Community Allocated Resources for Everyone) Corner connects students to food, diapers, clothing, hygiene products and financial assistance.

LaBounty said the California state chancellor has stated as an official mission that all community colleges must address basic needs of students, and the state provides funding for that. But donors help, too, LaBounty said, particularly by providing gently used clothing for students.

The need for housing is complex, but both colleges in the district approach it with an array of solutions, including emergency grants for students who may be out of work temporarily and can’t pay their rent.

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South Orange County Community College District Chancellor Julianna M. Asperin Barnes identifies with first-generation students.

ADMINISTRATION

Chancellor Julianna Barnes leads district with empathy

Fostering a sense of belonging a top priority

By Larry Urish
contributing writer

Julianna M. Asperin Barnes keeps a small glass ball on her desk. It serves to remind her that, as chancellor of the South Orange County Community College District, she must keep a high number of proverbial balls in the air.

“The trick is to determine which of the balls are rubber and which are glass,” Barnes said. “If you drop a rubber ball, that’s OK. But you must keep the glass ones in the air.”

Given all that she does, prioritizing her activities is mandatory. Clearly, her efforts are working, since the district is home to two of the top 15 community colleges in the nation.

With more than three decades of experience in higher education, Barnes maintains an enthusiastic commitment

to educational equity, community engagement and districtwide transformation in an ever-changing academic world. As a result, she has helped position the SOCCCD as a top-notch educational institution.

“One of the things I like most about my job,” Barnes said, “is that I get to support and advocate for so many first-generation, low-income students.” After all, she, herself, was a first-generation, low-income student.

“I used to think that the trials and tribulations (of being poor) were a detriment, and I used to hide that,” Barnes said. “But now I’m kind of proud of it. You learn lessons and develop positive characteristics; it’s about being resilient and having empathy for those with the same challenges.”

Barnes recalls her struggle, not only as someone who grew up with financial

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EMPLOYMENT

Both colleges pioneer solutions to workforce development

Partnerships with local businesses open doors

By Nicole Gregory
contributing writer

Administrators in the South Orange County Community College District are continually identifying and developing new career education programs that will put their students in the best possible position for employment. And they do this through ongoing partnerships with local businesses.

Whether the programs focus on emerging technology such as AI or more traditional programs such as business administration, they are each developed with careful analysis and must meet criteria, such as directly leading to jobs with a living wage, administrators say.

“We scan where our strengths are in our region and determine programs that align with existing areas of focus,” said Tram Vo-Kumamoto, vice president of instruction at Saddleback College. “We go through a process of looking at the labor market in the area, as well as programming in other community colleges, and we identify gaps.”

Local businesses’ leaders play a key role in this process. Each program has an advisory board of people who are working in these businesses, said Rick Miranda, vice president of instruction at Irvine Valley College. “This advisory board tells us what skills are needed in the field because they’re the ones who are out there. Then we respond and adapt our programs to make sure we are successful in creating the needs to meet the industry.”

Miranda explained that at Irvine Valley College this often means giving students direct experience in developing skills and offered a few examples. “We have design model making and rapid prototyping — these are hands-on programs that are using state-of-the-art technology. Digital media arts uses the most recent computer-aided graphics. We’re building these visualization tools



Irvine Valley College hosts a fall Job Fair on Oct. 22.

PHOTO BY DREW A. KELLEY, CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER

for the world out there.”

Saddleback College also relies on guidance from advisory boards to help create programs in evolving areas. “They provide us with insight about what’s new and latest workforce needs,” Vo-Kumamoto said. “They review our curriculum, and we make adjustments based on their feedback,” she said.

Saddleback’s nursing program is ranked first in the nation in pass rates of the National Council Licensure Examination, the exam for licensing registered nurses across the country,

according to the National Council of State Boards of Nursing, which administers the exam. In addition to training nurses for Orange County’s growing number of hospitals, classes for acute care nursing assistant, administrative medical assistant, certified nursing assistant and emergency medical technician are being developed to meet needs of local health care settings, Vo-Kumamoto said.

Partnerships with local business also open new opportunities for students. “As part of our business administration and management program, which is a strong one, we host what we call an idea pitch competition at least once a year where our students pitch to local business organizations,” Miranda said. Business leaders listen to students present a business pitch and then offer feedback, helping students define their ideas so they can then go forward, he said.

Such partnerships are created with a coordinated effort, Miranda said. “We have a career development office to help students. We have a dean that oversees career ed. We also have a director who is going out to local business groups and making these connections,” he said. “We are building up the support for our faculty, and our students to have multiple access points to future careers.”

At Saddleback College, one partnership recently enabled 40 Saddleback students in the School of Business and Industry to attend a leadership workshop through Imagination Campus at the Disneyland Resort.

Sometimes a business requests a community college program to train individuals for a specific workforce gap. That was how Saddleback College partnered with the Orange County Transit Authority when it was approached to create a program to train new bus drivers, to address the current shortage of drivers.

“The OCTA worked with us and with support of the Orange County Community Foundation,” Vo-Kumamoto said. So far, that program has trained 92 graduates, and the Orange County Transit Authority has hired 38 of them, she said.

Programs such as accounting are also broken down into specific areas that address professional needs, Miranda said. For example, Irvine Valley College provides courses for students who want to obtain their associate’s degree in accounting, and also for students who’ve

already graduated and are planning to sit for a CPA license and need more accounting units.

“We are not only transferring students, but bringing them back as a post-baccalaureate, and then still giving them another certificate,” Miranda said. “And they are working with businesses from the beginning. They attend meet-and-greets, and they are being placed in top accounting firms.”

To address career needs of students who wish to improve their English, Irvine Valley College has created a series of English as a second language classes customized for a variety of workplaces. The college is developing noncredit ESL classes for students aiming to work in real estate and an ESL class for students who want to work in computer information management, among others. “We’re developing these noncredit programs to help our local community have a pathway through,” Miranda said.

In another unique partnership, Irvine Valley College has worked with Coastline College to develop a pharmacy technology program. “Coastline is offering the hands-on pharmacy piece, and IVC is coming in and doing the contextualized English piece with them to help these individuals through,” Miranda said.

All these collaborations and strategies to help students in their careers are championed by Julianna Barnes, chancellor of the South Orange County Community College District. “As we envision the future of the Orange County workforce, we can look to Saddleback College and Irvine Valley College, which are leading the way in transforming education to meet the needs of a rapidly changing workforce,” said the chancellor, who is on the board of directors for the Orange County Business Council and is co-chair of the OCBC Workforce Development Committee.

“By fostering strong industry partnerships, integrating cutting-edge technology and developing innovative programs, the South Orange County Community College District is not only preparing our students for the jobs of today but also equipping them with the skills and knowledge needed for the careers of tomorrow,” she said. “Through collaboration and forward-thinking strategies, we’re ensuring that our graduates are positioned to thrive in a competitive global economy.”



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Lake Forest Army Recruiters answer questions from students during Irvine Valley College's Fall Job Fair.

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LIFE PATHS

Changing course: How college redefined 2 lives

They found their way at IVC and Saddleback

By Lou Ponsi
contributing writer

When Juan Salazar and Sharla Clemente enrolled in Saddleback College and Irvine Valley College, respectively, they embarked on a quest to discover and pursue their passions. Both had a thirst for knowledge coupled with a desire to provide a better life for themselves and their families; the two colleges making up the South Orange County Community College District have provided the two students with an array of services to help guide them on their journey. Now, armed with the tools they need to achieve their goals, Clemente and Salazar are living proof that higher education is available to anyone, regardless of background.

From foster care

Irvine Valley College student Sharla Clemente doesn't shy away from her past, as dark as it was. Instead, Clemente channels those life experiences to use as a mechanism for serving and inspiring others. Clemente, 26, recalls with detail her days as a foster youth who was removed from her family for her own safety at age 13.

A victim of physical abuse, Clemente was shuffled from foster family to foster family, from Los Angeles to the Inland Empire, and said some of those situations were also destructive. She ran away multiple times and acknowledged being a "troublemaker," and by the time Clemente aged out of the foster system at age 18, a college education wasn't a consideration.

Then came a spark of clarity. Clemente realized she had a 4-year-old brother whom she had never met. "I think at that point, I was ready to start the journey of (healing), working on building a better life for my baby brother," she said. "I didn't want him to know what foster care felt like. I didn't want him to not know what our family or my father as an abuser was like." Clemente figured it was time to challenge herself and "prioritize" her relationship with her brother. She relocated to Orange County and enrolled in Irvine Valley.

Clemente began taking advantage of programs at Saddleback available to former foster youth and students from disadvantaged backgrounds. "I was a little bit nervous and kind of had the imposter syndrome," she said. "But I'm so grateful with the people that were here, the students that were here, the instructors, the counselors ... a lot of good people here in general."

At first, Clemente was considering a career in the medical field, but after taking science classes, realized that wasn't her passion. Instead, she majored in psychology and will graduate with an associate degree after the Spring 2025 semester. She took advantage of Irvine Valley's Extended Opportunity Programs and Services, a state-funded program for students who are educationally and financially disadvantaged.

The programs and services help students realize their full potential by guiding them in establishing and pursuing educational goals. Clemente is also part of NextUp, a supplemental program designed to help students and Guardian Scholars, a program that provides a variety of services to former foster youth. Last year, Clemente served as vice president of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Access within the Associated Students of Irvine Valley College. Currently, Clemente serves as the student trustee on the South Orange County Community College District Board of Trustees, where her role is to represent the students as a member of the district Governing Board.



PHOTO COURTESY OF JUAN SALAZAR
Juan Salazar turned his life around for his children and is working on his second degree.



PHOTO COURTESY OF SOCCCD PUBLIC AFFAIRS
Sharla Clemente serves as the student trustee on the SOCCCD Board of Trustees after overcoming a difficult childhood.

As student trustee, Clemente attends all Board of Trustee meetings and has the same responsibilities as any publicly elected trustee. "Sharla's journey as a student leader is not only exceptional but inspirational to many students at Irvine Valley College," said Rosa Prado, director of EOPS/CARE, NextUp, CalWORKs and Guardian Scholars programs at Saddleback. "Sharla's collaborative nature and genuine interest in the well-being of all students make her a strong advocate for the student community of the South Orange Community College District."

Clemente said involvement in student government and on the board of trustees has helped to develop her voice. She had the opportunity to visit Washington, D.C., and speak in front of congressional boards on behalf of foster youth. "I'm definitely grateful for the road that led to me here," Clemente said. "I ended up finding out that I had a passion ... for representing kids in foster care. I feel like that is my purpose. I feel like that's why I'm going to school."

Love for learning
Anyone who has ever considered

attending college but quickly dismissed the idea, thinking there are just too many obstacles to overcome, should meet Juan Salazar. Having earned an associate in science degree from Saddleback College in 2019, Salazar is now back at Saddleback and on the verge of earning a second degree, this one in engineering. Salazar, 35, is a member of Saddleback's nationally recognized robotics team, Rover, and was selected to attend the Society of Hispanic Engineers National Convention at the end of October. He is a participant in INCLUDES, an initiative of the National Science Foundation designed to make STEM careers available to underrepresented demographic groups. Salazar's accomplishments are notable, especially given his background. Salazar did not graduate from high school and acknowledges being "young and dumb and living life fast." Then at age 19, Salazar's life took a dramatic turn. He fathered one daughter and then a second daughter. "When I had my kids, that changed my whole perspective," he said. "And I just wanted to be a good father and set an example for my kids. One way or another, I was going to figure it out. I didn't want them to be raised by grandma or by some other individual." In 2011, Salazar enrolled in Saddleback College in search of a career path, while his wife agreed to devote her time to raising their daughters. "I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for her support," he said. In the coming years, Salazar was forced to put his education on hold a few times to take care of family responsibilities. At one point, Salazar was working three jobs, including a night job as a janitor, in order to provide for his family and pay for his education. He finally earned an associate degree in advanced manufacturing from Saddleback in 2019. After earning his degree, Salazar interned for a company, learning all aspects of manufacturing. He currently works at Urban Workshop, directly applying what he learned during his first time at Saddleback. Salazar then returned to Saddleback to advance his education and career. "So, I decided to work a little bit backwards ... I heard it one time where sometimes you take one step forward and two steps back," he said. Salazar, who has also served as a math tutor at Saddleback, figures to earn his second associate degree in engineering within three semesters. From there, he plans to attend a four-year university and pursue a degree in mechanical engineering. "I would have to say that I'm blessed and highly favored in the sense of landing at Saddleback because that school has a lot of different resources and individuals that have helped me out along the way and are continuing to help me out," he said. Salazar said his mentor at Saddleback is Art Nitta, dean of Science, Technology, Engineering and Math, whom he credits for offering advice on the best strategies for pursuing his passion. Nitta said Salazar displays "genuine enthusiasm" and a "love for learning." "He is one of the most memorable and exceptional students I've had the pleasure of working with at Saddleback College," Nitta said. "His genuine love for STEM is a source of delight for the staff and faculty who support our STEM program, as he continues to remind us why we also got on our own journey in STEM, that led us to Saddleback College." When it all seemed overwhelming, Salazar turned to his family to recenter himself. "To just sit down with my kids and play Barbies with them, watch Disney cartoons," he said. "At that moment, I felt no matter what pressures or anything that I was going through, everything was OK, because this is what I live for."

Chancellor

FROM PAGE 1

stress, but as a woman of color. She discovered that excelling in school was her way out of poverty. "During my first year of college (at UC San Diego; she later earned master's and doctorate degrees at San Diego State), I worked three jobs, including washing dishes in the cafeteria. It allowed me to get free meals. UCSD wasn't very diverse. While I found a sense of belonging in the cafeteria, I realized that students shouldn't be relegated to just one section of the college. Today, I like to make sure that all students feel welcome." Barnes served as president of Cuyamaca College, east of San Diego, for seven years. "After I first became a college president, I used to sit in the president's conference room, which had sketches on the wall honoring all of the past presidents. I saw that I was the first person of color to serve as president in 40 years. I got to see how I can represent a cohort of people who have never been represented in these top posts. I feel grateful to serve as a beacon for those

who've never seen a woman of color in a top position." Barnes' past experiences continually motivate her to advance initiatives that promote diversity, equity and inclusion across the SOCCCD. This helps ensure that all students - particularly those from marginalized communities - can receive a quality education. She has led endeavors that focus on students' basic needs: housing, food security, mental health assistance and financial support. "Many students don't see themselves reflected in the curriculum or in leadership positions," Barnes said. "All students, including those in marginalized groups, need to have a sense of belonging, of being validated socially and culturally." South Orange County Community College District has thrived under Barnes' watch. Over the past year alone, the district has seen a 12% year-over-year increase in student enrollment. The personal finance firm WalletHub last August named Irvine Valley College and Saddleback College the No. 1 and No. 5 community colleges, respectively, in California. Equally impressive are the colleges' No. 6 and No. 14 national rankings. Barnes' involvement in a variety of key local and state organizations - each

one yet another proverbial ball to be kept airborne - benefits the SOCCCD, the surrounding community and the California Community Colleges. She serves as a member and immediate past chair of the Community College League of California's board of directors; chair of the Orange County Community College Legislative Task Force; member and immediate past president of the Chief Executive Officers of the California Community Colleges' Board; and member of the California Community College Chancellor's Office's Artificial Intelligence Council. "At the state level (this involvement) is very beneficial for me as district chancellor. It allows me to shape policy and future legislation, which can positively impact my district, as well as the California Community Colleges." The chancellor understands that partnerships between the business community and the SOCCCD are essential to bridge the gap between education and the workforce. "It's important that our colleges tailor the curriculum to meet the specific needs of the current and emerging job market," Barnes said. "This ensures that students are acquiring the relevant knowledge and skills needed to be job-ready. Additionally, such

collaborations often lead to internship and apprenticeship opportunities for students, which provide them with hands-on experience, allowing them to be more marketable in the future." Along with her role as chair of the Orange County Regional Consortium, Barnes is an executive board member of the Orange County Business Council, where she serves as co-chair of the OCBC's Workforce Committee. Aligning programs and curriculum to meet the needs of business and industry, the OCBC promotes initiatives that boost career and technical education, as well as workforce and economic development efforts, throughout the county. "Our community is counting on our community colleges to produce the next generation of skilled and degreed workers to contribute to the workforce," Barnes said. Fair and equal access to education and key resources, however, remains paramount. "When we look at our data, we note that there are populations of students who are falling through the cracks," Barnes said. "We employ strategies to help them get to the finish line. It helps them and the community. That's what equity is. Being mindful of who is falling through the cracks and remedying that."

LABOR STUDY

SOCCCD contributes \$7.1 billion to the Orange County economy

SOCCCD Public Affairs

The South Orange County Community College District showed a \$7.1 billion impact on the Orange County economy, according to a regional labor market study commissioned by the Orange County Regional Consortium in collaboration with Lightcast, company that provides labor market data analysis.

The study measured the economic impact created by SOCCCD on the business community and the benefits that Saddleback College and Irvine Valley College generate in return for the investments made by stakeholder groups, including students, taxpayers, and the greater community.

Some highlights from the report include the impact felt from successful alumni of the colleges, returns on investments for students and taxpayers, and how society is better because of the work done within SOCCCD.

Alumni impact

The education and training the colleges provide for county residents has the greatest impact. Since the colleges were established, students have studied at SOCCCD and entered the county workforce with greater knowledge and new skills. Today, hundreds of thousands of former SOCCCD students are employed in Orange County. As a result of their education from SOCCCD, the students receive higher earnings and increase the productivity of the businesses that employ them. In fiscal year 2020-21, SOCCCD alumni generated \$1.5 billion in added income for the county economy, which is equivalent to supporting 15,454 jobs.

Return on investment

In 2020-21, SOCCCD served 55,780 credit and 9,367 non-credit students. The total investment made by SOCCCD students in 2020-21 amounted to a present value of \$271.9 million, equal to \$37.7 million in out-of-pocket expenses. In return for their investment, SOCCCD students will receive a stream of higher future earnings that will continue to grow throughout their working lives—on average earning annual earnings \$10,100 higher than a person with a high school diploma and \$404,000 in higher earnings over a career lifetime.

Taxpayers' benefit

For every dollar of public money invested in SOCCCD, taxpayers will receive



PHOTO COURTESY OF SOCCCD PUBLIC AFFAIRS

The Advanced Technology and Applied Science building at Saddleback College

“The South Orange County Community College District has a long history of maintaining strong partnerships with the business community for the benefit of our students. This report helps confirm the essential value that Saddleback College and Irvine Valley College bring to the greater Orange County region and local economy, but also that an investment in education is a sound investment, with plentiful returns.”

- SOCCCD Chancellor
Julianna Asperin Barnes

ceive a cumulative value of \$1.80 over the course of the students' working lives. The average annual internal rate of return for taxpayers is 3.1%, which compares favorably to other long-term investments in the public and private sectors.

Social perspective

Society as a whole in California ben-



PHOTO COURTESY OF SOCCCD PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Saddleback College students enjoy the weather in front of the Student Services Center.

efits from the presence of SOCCCD in two major ways. Primarily, society benefits from an increased economic base in the state. This is attributed to the added income from students' increased lifetime earnings (added student income) and increased business output (added business income), which raise economic prosperity in California. For

every dollar invested in SOCCCD, people in California will receive a cumulative value of \$11.90 in benefits. The benefits of this investment will occur for as long as SOCCCD's 2020-21 students remain employed in the state workforce. Altogether, the social benefits of SOCCCD equal a present value of \$7.1 billion.

STEM

IVC engineering student helps design her own prosthetic

SOCCCD Public Affairs

When Haley Barrios was a child, she loved to build things.

“I still love tinkering with things, then taking them apart,” says Barrios, now a mechanical engineering student at Irvine Valley College.

This curious and industrious nature led Barrios to design her own prosthetic arm – and to pursue a degree in mechanical engineering. She is now a star student in IVC's Mathematics, Engineering, Science Achievement Program – established to advance equity, inclusion, access and success in calculus-based science, technology, engineering and mathematics majors for first-generation students from low-income households.

Barrios, who was born with congenital limb loss, grew up using a body-powered prothesis. “I have scoliosis and realized this type of device wasn't optimal for me,” she says. So when she was just 16, she began researching myoelectric prosthetics, which minimize strain on the

body since they are operated by electric sensors. After much research, she worked with Hanger Clinic – which specializes in prosthetics and orthotics – to create the final product she still uses today. “It was an intense, but rewarding undertaking,” she recalls, and required immersing herself in myoelectrics while collaborating with mechanical CAD engineers to customize a prosthetic that met her wants and needs.

This process eventually led her to the MESA program at IVC. “I am a first-generation student and couldn't pay for a four-year university,” Barrios explains. “For me IVC was the ideal option. They have a great STEM program with amazing engineering professors and strong relationships with all the UCs and California State Universities.”

After she graduates from IVC next year, she hopes to transfer to Caltech or UC Irvine to further her mechanical engineering studies.

Looking forward, “my dream is to be a mechanical engineer at a CAD company where I can specialize in designing prosthetic devices to help kids just like me.”



PHOTO COURTESY OF SOCCCD PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Haley Barrios, a mechanical engineering student at Irvine Valley College, designed her own prosthetic arm.

SCIENCE

Saddleback robotics team competes in national Mars Rover challenge

SOCCCD Public Affairs

Each year, over a hundred colleges and universities compete in The Mars Society University Rover Challenge. Saddleback College's Robotics Team is the only team hailing from a community college that participates in this competition held annually in the desert of southern Utah. URC is the world's premier robotics competition for college students, challenging teams to design and build the next generation of Mars Rovers that will one day work alongside astronauts exploring the Red Planet.

In addition to Saddleback, competing teams hail from colleges and universities including Cornell, University of Michigan, and UC San Diego.

“Our primary goal is education. In other words, education comes first. We are educating students in project management and engineering, and we are throwing them in a room and telling them, ‘You're going to build this.’ It is immersive learning,” said Mitch Haeri, professor and chair of the Saddleback physics and astronomy department and Robotics Team adviser. Each participating college works



PHOTO COURTESY OF SOCCCD PUBLIC AFFAIRS

The robotics team from Saddleback was the only group from a community college to compete in the Mars Society University Rover Challenge in southern Utah.

together to build a working Mars Rover, capable of being driven through the competition field by the students. Each

Rover must be able to perform service activities, such as collecting tools and delivering them to astronauts.

However, the primary goal is the collection and analysis of field samples for evidence of life on Mars, both living and fossils.

While building their Rover, the Saddleback team worked closely with professionals and adviser mentors. Participation in URC has allowed the Robotics Team to create unlikely collaborations across Saddleback, creating a sense of community. One such collaboration included the Automotive Technology Department, who assisted when help was needed to weld the rover chassis.

Saddleback student Christina von Urff, who was part of the team, said of her experience, “SC Robotics has greatly enhanced my Saddleback education because it urges its members to apply what we've learned in a classroom to real world situations – creating a mock Mars Rover. Additionally, being on the team has exposed me to more specialized areas of study, such as photonics, and expanded my technical STEM skills all while working alongside some of the most incredible people.”

Saddleback College is not only the only community college to compete, but they also ranked 17th, placing them above some Ivy League schools and other prestigious universities.

RATINGS

Cutting-edge programs earn both colleges national acclaim

Student outcomes, cost, quality cited

By **Jenelyn Russo**
contributing writer

Irvine Valley College and Saddleback College, both part of the South Orange County Community College District, have recently earned national and regional acclaim through high rankings, notable awards and successful reaccreditation, all underscoring the district's unwavering commitment to educational excellence.

Financial services company WalletHub released its 2024 community college rankings, and both Irvine Valley College and Saddleback College were recognized as two of the best in the country. Measuring 18 indicators of cost and quality across more than 650 U.S. community colleges, success metrics such as persistence rates and career outcomes placed IVC No. 1 in California and No. 6 nationally, while Saddleback College came in at No. 5 in the state and No. 14 nationally. The colleges scored 67.48 and 66.36 out of a 100-point scale, respectively.

Additionally, both schools were invited by the Aspen Institute as part of the top 150 community colleges in the country to compete for the 2025 Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence. Considered "the nation's signature recognition for America's community colleges," the Aspen Prize is awarded biennially to a U.S. community college for outstanding achievements in areas of student success and equitable outcomes. While neither school earned the top prize, both were honored to be selected to compete, and IVC landed among the top 40 in the country by earning an interview with the nonprofit.

With student outcomes at the core of these state and national accolades, IVC and Saddleback College's prioritization of student success through innovative programs is driving the schools' academic achievements.

"The whole focus and commitment to student success is a campuswide priority," said John C. Hernandez, president of IVC. "It is embedded in our mission statement ... and the very first goal in our strategic plan is to ensure equity, access and achievement for our students."

IVC's commitment to creating a culture that shapes the student



PHOTO COURTESY OF SOCCCD PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Irvine Valley College students relax and socialize on campus.

experience landed the school at the top of the U.S. Department of Education's list in California for student transfer rates to four-year institutions. As a result, the majority of the approximately 15,000 students who attend IVC come in with an expectation and desire to transfer.

In response, Hernandez acknowledged that IVC not only analyzes data to monitor students' progress in the classroom, but also participates in a national program through the Institute of Evidence-Based Change called Caring Campus, a model that drives behavior changes to strengthen and expand student success.

"This initiative has been critical in transforming into what we very proudly say is a culture of care," said Hernandez about Caring Campus. "When a student walks in and asks if this is the admissions office, rather than giving them a campus map and pointing them, people do what are called 'warm handoffs.' They literally will walk them over to an office and introduce them to a staff member and say this student needs assistance."

At Saddleback College, the nursing associates degree program is receiving national recognition for its high pass rate of the National Council Licensure

Examination, or NCLEX, the nationwide examination for the licensing of nurses. The school has achieved a 100% pass rate for the last four semesters, placing it at the top in the country across all programs.

Saddleback is also a state and national leader in ZTC rates, which means that for approximately 58% of total enrollments, there are zero textbook costs. This not only reduces costs for the more than 40,000 students who attend annually but allows faculty to introduce other learning materials for instruction, such as prepaid electronic books, open educational resources or published articles.

"The idea that we are still teaching through textbooks at most colleges and universities means we're not really preparing our students to be lifelong learners if the method of teaching and the source of information is not what they would use after they graduate their educational program," said Elliot Stern, president of Saddleback College. "So for us, it's really preparing students to be lifelong learners and giving them learning in a more engaging way."

Both campuses are part of the Accrediting Commission for Community

and Junior Colleges, or ACCJC, and recently completed their seven-year accreditation cycle. Not only did IVC and Saddleback receive the full seven-year accreditation with no findings or suggestions for improvement, but both also received commendations, recognition in areas where the schools went above and beyond in their approach.

IVC was commended for its exemplary practice in providing transfer students with support, an effort that has resulted in transfer rates and student outcomes that are among the highest in California and the nation.

Saddleback received two commendations highlighting the school's student-centric decision-making in areas that ranged from the built environment to data analytics. For example, the Gateway Building on campus is the new home for student support services and is intentionally designed to provide a high-end experience, including a queue-less check-in system and a genius bar.

Additionally, Saddleback has revamped its student services approach by proactively reaching out to students based on identified needs at enrollment and then providing support information via email, text or phone.

"Now we come to them instead of waiting for them to come to us," Stern said. "As a result, more students are availing themselves of those services, and we no longer see the kinds of inequities that we were seeing."

Through the California Promise Program, both campuses waive tuition fees for first-time, full-time enrollments and are seeing high participation from low-income and first-generation students. Saddleback is also piloting Part-Time Promise, a state-funded grant program that extends benefits to students unable to attend full-time due to work or family obligations.

From career pathways that support students who plan to transfer to four-year institutions to credential programs and adult education opportunities that equip English learners for career readiness, SOCCCD is changing the way students are preparing for successful, adaptable futures in an ever-evolving job market.

"As educators, we have a responsibility to redesign our learning environments so that every student can achieve their potential and succeed," Hernandez said. "And that changes the narrative and the focus from putting the onus on students to putting it on us."

Students

FROM PAGE 1

A more comprehensive solution is in the works. "Irvine Valley College and Saddleback have plans to support students through residential housing on campus," LaBounty said. Until then, she said, Saddleback offers referrals to community partners that can direct students to local low-income housing, as well as social workers who may provide housing resources.

The needs of students, many of whom are working parents, can be wide-ranging and the colleges in the district work to address them all. "In the past couple of years, we've really been concentrating on expanding our support from just being a food pantry to true holistic support," said Pollard at Irvine Valley College.

She gave a recent example of a student who is a single mother of four and is facing \$2,000 in car repairs, which includes fixing the brakes and replacing old tires. Her car is now unsafe and she can't continue driving it to her job or to school until she can fix it. Pollard and McDonald will help this student with emergency funding. "We can get her car in working order and keep her as a student," Pollard said.

And this is the ultimate aim — making sure students can continue to attend college and reach their academic goals.

"So often, the students we lose that don't return to us are the students in these kinds of categories. They want to be at IVC, they want to be continuing their education, they just can't do it," Pollard said. "So that kind of support has really been life-changing for the students who've been able to help."

LaBounty said she experienced this herself years ago.

"I was a student with four young small children and going back to school," she said and described a typical mindset of students in that situation. "Your time is consumed by making sure everyone is eating and has clothes washed and there's a clean place to rest your head. You're in an increased state of stress, and psychologically, the cortisol blocks learning. And when your stomach is growling, you're embarrassed, you feel less-than, you have imposter syndrome and think maybe you shouldn't be focusing on this."

"Some of our students have two or three jobs and are not able to reach that economic mobility. We want to remove those barriers for students and increase their ability to learn in the classroom."

McDonald concurs. "How can you prepare for an exam if you're living in your car or if the home you're living in doesn't have Wi-Fi? How are you going to have that dedicated, focused time to study? The approach we have taken here is that we've embraced the Caring Campus framework," she said.

At Irvine Valley College, she explained, every employee is tasked with checking on students to find out if they're OK or if they're having trouble with basic needs.

"What that means is that anyone on campus, whether you're faculty, whether you're a staff member, whether you're a manager, you go out of your way to ask students how they're doing so that we can identify those needs that maybe they're not sharing. And that has worked out quite well in terms of students being willing to share information, not just at the financial aid counter, but maybe with our custodial staff. Our philosophy is that it doesn't matter what each of our titles are — our main role is to support our students."



PHOTO BY DREW A. KELLEY, CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER

Irvine Valley College's The Spot provides students with fresh fruit and vegetables, personal care items and other assistance.



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WORDFEST OC

Celebrating the power of words to connect, heal and inspire

Poetry, stories, writing, performances featured

By Lou Ponsi
contributing writer

Simply defined, Saddleback College’s inaugural WORDFEST OC was a celebration of written and spoken words in all their creative forms.

The daylong literary festival, held Oct. 18 on the Saddleback campus, featured poetry readings, storytelling, writing workshops, spoken word performances, art displays and panel discussions.

“The festival brought people together to celebrate the beauty and power of spoken and written words, with their capacity to inspire, to teach, to heal and to connect us through our shared humanity,” said Saddleback English professor Gina Shaffer, WORDFEST OC organizer. “I thought we should have a showcase that lets the community as well as the campus celebrate the talents that we have.”

The keynote event of the festival was “Origin Stories: Indigenous & Immigrant Voices of Orange County,” which featured poet Adelia Sandoval, a linear descendant of her Acjachemen ancestors, the first inhabitants of Orange County; Gustavo Hernandez, poet laureate of Orange County; and novelists Lan Cao and Namrata Podder.

All read excerpts from their works reflecting on the complexities of the immigrant experience, including the role reversal that occurs when children of immigrants take on greater authority than their parents because they have mastered English and adapted more quickly to the American way of life.

“The exchange between the panelists and with the audience was so intimate and deeply affecting,” said Shaffer, who moderated the session. “I felt like the discussion was an enlightening and healing experience for all participants.”

A panel discussion titled “War of Words” centered around the topic of book banning, including the motivation behind the controversial practice and why access to print materials is necessary in order to preserve democracy.

Panelists included Saddleback English Department instructors Ray Zimmerman and Jennifer Hedgecock and librarian Alicia Zach.

“I think students seem to really understand that or have had experience



PHOTO BY DREW A. KELLEY, CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER
Sandy Siegel performs “Moon River” during WORDFEST OC hosted by Saddleback College on Oct. 18.

with being able to identify some of the hardships that they’re experiencing in literature,” said English professor Catherine Hayter, who moderated the panel discussion. “And I think that the controversial themes seem to really resonate with them and help them through those experiences.”

Another session celebrated the works of student writers, artists and musicians for the WALL 2024 Literary Journal, an award-winning student produced collection, which has been recognized nationally as a top community college literary-art magazine.

Co-hosted by Shaffer and WALL editor-in-chief Will Stanley, the session included four choreography students dancing to a moon-themed medley of songs and a guitarist-vocalist singing “Moon River” — all linked to the lunar motif of this year’s WALL.

Another presentation included five

students, with two donning cowboy hats, giving an oral interpretation of “Blue Suede Shoes,” an apocalyptic western by WALL staffer Amber Franklin.

A panel discussion, “Creative writing in the age of AI,” centered, in part, around the potential legal issues of using content generated by artificial intelligence, which is becoming increasingly prevalent.

Gustavo Arellano, LA Times columnist and author and self-described “chronicler of the hidden histories of Orange County,” chronicled highlights of his career in journalism, which included his nationally recognized “Ask a Mexican” column featured regularly in OC Weekly.

WORDFEST OC also included a storytelling and art workshop for kids and a collection of booths representing culture clubs and campus literary journals.

“I think it’s amazing that our campus

is creating an event like this,” Stanley said. “I think that it’s natural for a community college’s student body to be pretty scattered. We all go home. We all have our own lives. So, it’s hard to bring everybody together around something central. But I’m really grateful for our school creating something that we can gather around and all participate in.”

The event was sponsored by the School of Humanities & Social Sciences; the School of Arts, Media, Performance & Design, the Student Development Office; Associated Student Government; the Saddleback College Foundation; the Office of Equity, Inclusion, and Access; and the Office of Student Success.

“I hope this becomes an annual event,” Shaffer said. “We really wanted to have a variety of activities for all ages, and not only have students, faculty, and administrators involved, but also the community. It’s a pretty full day.”



Saddleback College • Irvine Valley College

Recognized as two of the top community colleges in California, both colleges were awarded the prestigious Aspen Prize “Top 150” – recognizing them as one of the best 150 colleges in the entire country for delivering equitable outcomes for Black and Hispanic students, and for improving retention and graduation rates.



Saddleback College
saddleback.edu



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