

HORIZON



SOUTH ORANGE COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLEGE DISTRICT

Newsletter from the Office of the Chancellor • Issue No. 10 • Winter 2025



SOCCCD Contributes \$2 Billion to the Orange County Economy

The Economic Impact Report produced by Lightcast confirms that the South Orange County Community College District (SOCCCD) is a driver of economic growth and opportunity in the region. The study found that Saddleback College and Irvine Valley College added \$2.0 billion in income to the Orange County economy in fiscal year 2023-24, supporting more than 19,000 jobs across the county.

“This report shows that SOCCCD is a consistent and powerful engine for social mobility and regional growth. Our colleges prepare students for high-demand careers, strengthen local businesses, and provide taxpayers with an excellent return on investment.”

– Dr. Julianna M. Asperin Barnes
SOCCCD Chancellor

The study highlights several key findings:

- \$2.0 billion total annual impact, equal to 0.7% of Orange County's gross regional product (nearly the size of the entire utilities sector).
- 19,159 jobs supported, spanning industries such as real estate, healthcare, and business services.
- For every \$1 students invest, they receive \$3.70 in higher future earnings, with an average annual rate of return of 15.6%.
- California gains \$4.6 billion in social benefits from SOCCCD graduates, including higher business output and healthcare, justice system, and income assistance savings.



Click here to read the full 113-page report on the SOCCCD website.

You Make the State of the District Great

I am excited to invite our SOCCCD community and partners to the 3rd Annual State of the District, taking place on March 4, 2026, at the Advanced Technology Education Park (ATEP) in Tustin. This annual gathering has become a meaningful opportunity for us to come together — staff, faculty, students, and community leaders from across Orange County — to reflect on our collective accomplishments and look ahead to what's next.

The past year has been one of significant progress for SOCCCD. Throughout 2025, we continued to expand our workforce and career education programs, assuring that they aligned with regional labor needs. We also strengthened our public-private partnerships — particularly at ATEP — and kept developing innovative transfer and

baccalaureate pathways that create new opportunities for our students. We also made continued investments in student success, equity, and campus facilities at Saddleback College and Irvine Valley College, ensuring our colleges remain vibrant, accessible, and responsive to the communities we serve.

I am incredibly proud of the dedication and creativity of our faculty and staff, whose commitment makes these achievements possible, and of our students, whose resilience and ambition inspire our work every day. Together with the SOCCCD Board of Trustees, we remain focused on positioning our District as a leader in workforce development, emerging technologies, and community collaboration — connecting

education to economic mobility and long-term regional prosperity.

Hosting this year's State of the District at ATEP is especially fitting. As a center for innovation, applied learning, and industry partnership, ATEP represents the future we are building together — one that prepares students for the careers of today and those in the future.

I look forward to welcoming you on March 4 to celebrate how far we've come, share our vision for the year ahead, and continue this important work together.

*With gratitude,
Julianna M. Asperin Barnes*



Wednesday, March 4, 2026, 4-6 p.m.

SAVE THE DATE FOR 2026 STATE OF THE DISTRICT

**CLICK HERE TO
RSVP**



Inspire 2035

Our Road Map to the Future

Inspire 2035 is the District's comprehensive plan which encompasses our new strategic and facilities plans. It represents our vision for the next decade and our belief in the power of education to transform lives. Through Inspire 2035, we reaffirm our commitment to student success, economic mobility, technological innovation, environmental sustainability, and institutional effectiveness. Click to read the [Inspire 2035 plan](#) on the District website.

OUR VALUES

Community • We foster a collaborative and inclusive environment where relationships – within our institution and beyond – are built on respect, trust, and a shared commitment to student success and community impact.

Equity • We are committed to identifying and addressing systemic barriers to ensure fair access, opportunities, and outcomes for every member of our community.

Excellence • We uphold the highest standards in teaching, learning, and service, empowering our community to reach their full potential.

Innovation • We embrace creativity, forward-thinking solutions, and continuous improvement to meet the evolving needs of our students and community.

Belonging • We cultivate a welcoming environment where every individual feels valued, respected, validated, and fully included in the life of the college.

Student-Centered • We place students at the heart of everything we do, ensuring their needs, aspirations, and voices shape our policies, practices, and programs.

Empowerment • We inspire individuals to realize their potential by providing the resources, knowledge, and support needed to achieve personal, academic, and professional success.

VISION • Empowering students, transforming lives, and strengthening communities through education.



MISSION • We place students at the heart of our mission, transforming their lives and nurturing creative thinkers that enhance the vitality of the communities we serve. Grounded in principles of equity, belonging, and innovation, we ensure equitable access and foster outcomes that promote economic and social mobility.

SOCCCD'S PRIORITIES



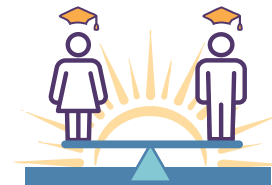
Student Centered

SOCCCD will foster an inclusive environment where students feel valued and supported.



Equitable Access

SOCCCD will ensure students have equitable access to opportunities to explore, enroll in, and succeed in their educational journeys.



Equitable Outcomes

SOCCCD will provide the support, resources, and opportunities needed for all students to achieve academic and career success.



Economic and Social Mobility

SOCCCD will advance the economic and social mobility of students.



Community Vitality and Engagement

SOCCCD will enhance community vitality and engagement.



Workplace Culture and Growth

SOCCCD will foster a safe environment where employees feel empowered, valued, and respected.

Student Trustee Blake Leonard:

A Student Veteran Redefining Leadership at SOCCCD

When Blake Leonard raised his right hand on the day he was sworn in as the Student Trustee for the South Orange County Community College District (SOCCCD), he stepped into a role he never imagined for himself. A Marine Corps veteran with seven years of service, Blake didn't arrive on campus intending to enter student government — let alone make history. But that's precisely what he did.

During a Student Veterans of America trip to Washington, D.C. earlier this year, Blake learned something surprising: no student veteran had ever served on the SOCCCD Board of Trustees. "I had no idea what the role even was," he recalled. "But as soon as I heard that no veteran had done it before, I said, 'Okay, I'm going to run.'"

Blake's path to leadership is rooted

in family and forged in military service. Raised in a tight-knit Irish-Italian family of entrepreneurs, he grew up surrounded by examples of self-starting grit and responsibility. His years in the Marine Corps sharpened that foundation. "I was blessed with some of the greatest human beings," he said. "My leaders showed me that leadership isn't complicated — do your part and take care of your people."

That philosophy shapes his approach to serving more than 50,000 students across SOCCCD. Though older than the typical student trustee and new to Southern California, Blake quickly found his voice on the dais. Fellow students tell him they appreciate his candor and directness — qualities he jokingly attributes to his Italian roots. "I say what I mean and mean what I say. Students need that. Some are afraid to voice what they believe or dream bigger. I want them to know they're not as far from greatness as they think — whether that's Stanford, Harvard, or anywhere else."

Blake believes in the potential of his peers. He worries that too many young people are hesitant to dream out loud, weighed down by social media pressures or fear of rejection. "It's sad hearing students say, 'I'll just go wherever accepts me,'" he said. "Why not dream?"

"I'm honored to serve here. If I can help even a few students realize how much potential they have, then I've done my job."

— Blake Leonard,
SOCCCD Student Trustee

Someone gets into those great schools — why not you?"

His message is simple: embrace ambition, communicate boldly, and don't underestimate yourself. "Even if education isn't your path, you need to know how to articulate who you are and where you're going. That soft skill will take you places."

Months into his trustee term, Blake has already made an impact — connecting with students across demographics, representing the district at public meetings, and pushing for student success with refreshing honesty and heart.

As for what comes after his trustee service, Blake remains open. "It's whatever God has planned for me," he said. But he does have dreams: completing his bachelor's degree, earning a MBA, and taking over his father's real estate brokerage in the Midwest. "It's a business with our family name on it. I feel a real purpose in carrying it forward."

And beyond that? "Maybe politics," he says with a modest shrug — but his confidence, clarity, and lived experience make that future easy to imagine.



Both Colleges Named Among Nation's Top 200 by Aspen Institute

Irvine Valley College (IVC) and Saddleback College have been named among the Top 200 community colleges in the nation by the Aspen Institute College Excellence Program. The colleges have been invited to apply for the 2027 Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence, the nation's signature recognition of high achievement and performance among two-year colleges.

The Aspen Prize, awarded every two years and accompanied by a \$1 million award, honors institutions demonstrating exceptional outcomes in teaching and learning, certificate and degree completion, transfer and bachelor's attainment, workforce outcomes after graduation, and equitable access and success for students from all backgrounds.

"This is a moment of tremendous pride for our district, with both of our colleges recognized among the nation's best underscores the exceptional leadership, faculty, and staff who make the colleges so impactful. Together, they are shaping lives, strengthening families, and advancing economic mobility."

- Carolyn Inmon, SOCCCD Board President

Irvine Valley College

For Irvine Valley College this marks another major milestone in a tradition of academic excellence and innovation. IVC was selected based on strong student outcomes in retention, completion, and transfer rates, along with evidence of continuous improvement and equitable practices. As part of the selection process, IVC will now advance to the next stage of the Aspen review, where data and institutional practices will be evaluated through 2027.



Saddleback College

Saddleback College was also named among the Aspen Top 200, reflecting its sustained commitment to equity-driven student success and innovation. In recent years, Saddleback has strengthened student outcomes through strategic initiatives such as expanding Zero Textbook Cost offerings, disaggregating course completion data to close equity gaps, and increasing proactive case management and basic needs support.

The Aspen Institute will announce semifinalists and finalists in 2026, with the 2027 Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence awarded in Washington, D.C.

"This dual recognition speaks volumes about the power of collaboration and innovation within our district. It affirms that our colleges are not only delivering exceptional education but also transforming communities through access, excellence, and opportunity."

- Dr. Julianna M. Asperin Barnes
SOCCCD Chancellor

IVC Celebrates 40th Anniversary

Irvine Valley College completed a year-long celebration of their 40th anniversary in late October, commemorating four decades of educational excellence, innovation, and community impact. From humble beginnings as a “little college in the orange groves,” IVC has gone on a remarkable journey to become one of California’s premier community colleges.

Since becoming the state’s 105th accredited community college in 1985, IVC has awarded more than 63,000 degrees and certificates, and supported thousands more in transferring to universities, launching careers, and pursuing lifelong learning.

To commemorate this milestone, IVC released a 47-minute documentary on its early years, with interviews of two dozen faculty members, classified professionals, and administrators



sharing about IVC’s formative years. Their insights and memories helped preserve the heart and soul of the college, and reminded everyone that Irvine Valley College is more than buildings and programs — it is a place where people come together to learn, grow, and create lasting friendships.



[Click here to view IVC’s 40th anniversary documentary “Little College in the Orange Groves” on the IVC YouTube channel.](#)

Saddleback at ATEP Grand Opening

Saddleback College opened two new buildings at the ATEP campus on August 11 during Professional Development Week. President Stern’s opening session was attended by hundreds of college staff and community dignitaries. After the provided lunch, there was a ribbon-cutting ceremony and tours of the two cutting-edge facilities for Saddleback’s culinary arts and advanced automotive programs.

