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South Orange County Community College District Chancellor Julianna M. Asperin Barnes highlights district priorities and progress in her State of the District remarks.

REVIEW

SOCCCD CHANCELLOR RECOUNTS A 'CHAMPIONSHIP' YEAR

Enrollment and workforce grew; facilities and technology were upgraded

By Lou Ponsi
contributing writer

Julianna Barnes, chancellor of the South Orange County Community College District, said 2025 was a championship year - a year of record enrollment, workforce expansion, new facilities and technological upgrades.

The longtime educator lauded the accomplishments of the district in her State of the District address on March 4 at the Advanced Technology & Education Park in Tustin, a 61.4 acre developing campus dedicated to workforce training.

Now, three months into 2026, the district will continue building on the achievements of the past year, Barnes said.

It was a year of record enrollment, workforce expansion, new facilities and technological upgrades, Barnes said.

"In 2025, the South Orange County Community College District showed up with purpose and ready to lead for our students and communities," the chancellor said. "Like champions, we trained, we planned and we trusted one another."

Completed projects at Saddleback College include the renovation of its softball stadium, opening of a redesigned central quad with new landscaping and shaded seating, and a revitalized College Center, featuring expanded behavioral health space, a multicultural center and a new café.

Construction continued on the three-story Math and Computer Science Building, scheduled to open this spring.

Additional projects at Saddleback slated to begin in 2026 include electrical upgrades, landscaping enhancements and HVAC replacements.

At Saddleback, excellence was also recognized through student achievement, strong workforce programs and expanded basic needs support, Barnes said.

"Veterans services and strong education initiatives continued to earn national recognition," the chancellor said.

Irvine Valley College also launched impactful projects, including a \$102 million Student Services Center and Student Union, designed to consolidate all student support functions into one 73,000-square-foot hub.

The campus also completed new EV charging stations and expanded its Promise Program, offering two years of free tuition and additional support

for eligible students, and Caring Campus, a nationwide initiative in which Classified professionals from across the campus lead activities to help ensure student success.

Progress continues on the construction of an Arts Promenade and Coffee Structure, an outdoor creative space scheduled to open in 2026.

"At Irvine Valley College, innovation and creativity expanded opportunities for students," Barnes said. "A nationally recognized transfer culture, grown in STEM and career education and the continued impact of the arts village reflected a campus moving forward with momentum."

Saddleback's automotive technology and culinary arts departments both opened facilities in the Advanced Technology & Education Park.

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PHOTO COURTESY OF SOCCCD PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Kolin Williams, Saddleback College Student Veterans of America program coordinator, receives an award from a representative of State Sen. Catherine S. Blakespear's office.

AWARD-WINNER

Veterans center gives students returning from service a purpose Saddleback members bolster community

By Brian Robin
contributing writer

Thrive, not just survive. That was David Jones' mantra, the message he tells every member of the Saddleback College Student Veterans of America chapter. It was a message, however, that didn't come easy. Nor did it come quickly to Jones, who took a rather circuitous journey to his role as president of Saddleback College's SVA.

"My predecessor (as SVA president), Jackie Chen, told me I should join the club, and I thought it was kind of lame. I thought it would be kind of like a high-school glee club," he said. "Me and my buddy were about to go through EMT school and asked why we should join the club. Jackie said, 'Do you like doing fun activities out of town? You can go bowling, to the beach, to restaurants and the

school will pay for it?' Well, we have to join this club.

"I went in for selfish intentions and became very selfless afterward. It's been a real blessing, being able to give back."

And here, as Jones, Kierstyn Gunn and their fellow Saddleback College SVA members discovered, the giving-back goes both ways.

Under the selfless and guiding watch of Kolin Williams, the program coordinator, the Saddleback College SVA recently earned Chapter of the Year honors at the Student Veterans of America National Conference. When Saddleback College claimed the honor - vaulting more than 1,600 chapters across the country - it marked the first time a community college earned the award, which recognizes outstanding support of student veterans through innovative programming, strong partnerships and meaningful service.

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Inspire 2035

A Roadmap for Our Future Success

The South Orange County Community College District has a bold and future-forward comprehensive plan which encompasses our new strategic and facilities goals for the next 10 years. Through Inspire 2035, we reaffirm our commitment to student success and equity, economic and social mobility, innovation and technology, environmental sustainability, and institutional effectiveness. To learn about the plan, please visit: socccd.edu/inspire2035



South Orange County Community College District

Saddleback College • saddleback.edu

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OPINION

Why California must expand community college bachelor's degrees



Julianna M. Asperin Barnes
Chancellor
South Orange County
Community College District

community College District, we see both the challenge and the solution.

Community college baccalaureate degree programs are one of the most effective tools we have to bridge this gap. They allow students, especially working adults, first-generation college students and place-bound learners, to continue their education without uprooting their lives. And they do so at a cost that makes opportunity attainable.

Consider this: a bachelor's degree at Saddleback College or Irvine Valley College costs approximately \$10,500. Compare that to at least \$25,800 at a California State University or more than \$62,000 at a University of California campus. For many students, that difference determines whether they move forward or stop altogether.

But affordability is only part of the story.

Programs like Saddleback's No. 1-ranked nursing program are already aligned with workforce needs. Our health care partners, including Mission Hospital, CHOC and Hoag, consistently share the same message: The demand for highly trained nurses continues to outpace supply.

We are already producing the best-prepared associate-degree nurses in the state. Imagine the impact if those same students could seamlessly continue into bachelor's programs, right where they started.

Expanding community college bachelor's degrees isn't just about access — it's about maximizing excellence.

It's about taking programs that are already leading the state and extending their impact to meet regional workforce needs. It's about ensuring that talent doesn't stall out, but instead continues to grow — benefiting students, employers and entire communities.

And Californians agree.

A recent survey found that 8 in 10 voters support allowing community colleges to offer bachelor's degrees. That support crosses political, economic and demographic lines. People understand what is at stake: access, affordability and workforce readiness.

Yet California's current system con-



PHOTO COURTESY OF SOCCCD PUBLIC AFFAIRS
Connecting with the campus community, South Orange County Community College District Chancellor Julianna M. Asperin Barnes walks with students.

tinues to limit progress. Community colleges face lengthy approval processes, caps on new programs and barriers that prevent expansion — even when there is clear workforce demand and proven program success.

In contrast, these same barriers are not faced by private colleges when they expand baccalaureate programs in California, often charging 10-20 times what community colleges charge for tuition, leaving students with unconscionable debt burdens.

In a state known for innovation, this approach is outdated. We can and should do better.

Other states like Florida and Washington have embraced community college baccalaureate degrees and are seeing strong results — closing workforce gaps and increasing degree attainment. Meanwhile, California continues to restrict one of its most effective pathways to economic mobility.

At SOCCCD, we are committed to changing that.

Through our Inspire 2035 vision, we are focused on expanding access,

strengthening workforce alignment, and building programs that already demonstrate excellence — like our No.1 nursing program at Saddleback College.

But we cannot do it alone.

The call to action is clear: If community colleges admit the top 100% of students, we must also provide 100% of those students with a pathway to success — including access to affordable, local bachelor's degrees.

Because when we have programs that are already the best in the state, the goal should not be to stop there.

It should be to build on that success — and open more doors for the students who have earned their way through them.

This is not just an education issue. It is an economic imperative. It is a workforce solution.

And most importantly, it is a matter of equity.

California's students are ready. Our programs are proven. Our communities are counting on us.

Now, our policies must rise to meet the moment.

#1
in Transfers
IN ORANGE COUNTY
TO EVERY UC
ivc.edu/discover

Irvine Valley College



PHOTO COURTESY OF SOCCCD PUBLIC AFFAIRS
Board of Trustees members, from left, Marcia Milchiker, Carolyn Inmon, Ryan Dack, Chancellor Julianna Barnes, Lisa Bartlett and Terri Rydell get together at the SOCCCD State of the District event.

Year

FROM PAGE 1

Both district colleges have instructional buildings at the facility, and the district also leases parcels to educational and commercial companies which offer work programs and internships to students.

Barnes also plans to build on the success of dual enrollment partnerships with local high schools, allowing students to earn transferable college credits and explore career pathways while still in high school.

The district continues to strengthen collaborations with local employers, community organizations and policymakers to ensure district programming aligns with workforce needs of the region.

Several largescale, districtwide infrastructure and technology initiatives were also launched in 2025.

The most significant was the launch of the new Banner enterprise resource planning system, which became the official system of record in July and now anchors student services, human resources and finance operations.

The district also expanded cyberse-

curity and emergency training, implemented multifactor authentication for all users and developed new AI-use guidelines for employees.

Facilities teams managed 15 to 20 projects in various stages, including districtwide ADA, electrical and HVAC upgrades.

Human Resources expanded recruitment capacity and celebrated the success of the BLOOM mentorship program in which 64% of interns transitioned into faculty roles, half from diverse backgrounds.

Following her presentation, Barnes participated in a panel discussion with Ronald Rochon, president of Cal State Fullerton; Mark Johnson, superintendent of the Tustin Unified School District; and Jeff Ball, president and CEO of the Orange County Business Council and a commissioner on the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges.

The discussion focused on the importance of collaboration across K-12 schools, community colleges and universities in order to enhance student pathways and reduce barriers to transfer.

The conversation also highlighted Orange County's evolving workforce needs and the role institutions play in preparing students for high-demand careers.

COMMUNITY COLLEGE SECTION STAFF

Managing Editor: Jennifer Karmarkar
Project Manager: Caitlin Adams
Creative Director: Tom Halligan
Senior Graphic Designer: Marissa Chamberlain
Copy Editor: Paul Davenport
Director of Communications: Caroline Wong

Have a story idea or comment for the section? Contact Caroline Wong at cawong@scng.com or 714-796-2202

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RANKING

District's community colleges recognized as top schools

SOCCCD Public Affairs

Both of South Orange County Community College District's colleges — Irvine Valley College and Saddleback College — have been named among the Top 200 community colleges in the nation by the Aspen Institute College Excellence Program and have been invited to apply for the 2027 Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence.

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," said Carolyn Inmon, president of the SOCCCD Board of Trustees. "Having both of our colleges recognized among the nation's best underscores the exceptional leadership, faculty and staff who make Irvine Valley College and Saddleback College so impactful. Together, they are shaping lives, strengthening families, and advancing economic mobility across South Orange County."

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 rigorous selection process, IVC will now advance to the next stage of the Aspen review, where data and institutional practices will be evaluated through 2027.

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 sup-



PHOTO COURTESY OF SOCCCD PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Students walk across the Irvine Valley College campus, one of two South Orange County Community College District colleges invited to apply for the 2027 Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence.

port.

"This dual recognition speaks volumes about the power of collaboration and innovation within our district," said Julianna M. Barnes, chancellor of the South Orange County Community College District. "It affirms that our colleges are not only delivering exceptional education but also transforming communities through access, excellence,

and opportunity. IVC and Saddleback continue to demonstrate that public higher education can lead the way in creating equitable outcomes and economic mobility."

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

ABOUT SOCCCD

South Orange County Community College District serves more than 60,000 students annually through Irvine Valley College, Saddleback College and the Advanced Technology & Education Park.



PHOTO COURTESY OF SOCCCD PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Members of the Saddleback College Student Veterans of America are recognized for recent awards.

Veterans

FROM PAGE 1

Williams didn't go unrecognized either. He was named a finalist for the SVA Chapter Adviser of the Year, which honors a faculty or staff member who demonstrates exceptional dedication to supporting student veterans through mentorship, advocacy and guidance.

"He is a huge difference-maker for our school," said Gunn, Saddleback College's SVA vice president. "He has helped get that foundation of our veterans' center. He helps out a lot with outreach, funding, and then he gives it to us to run with it from there. He is the main foundation and leader who has the connections that help us do our outreach and run our programs. It's been wonderful having Kolin around."

Williams has been around, mentoring and guiding student veterans since 2011. It comes naturally to him, and not just because of his master's degree in vocational rehabilitation counseling from Sacramento State. He may not have left the Fort Hood, Texas, environs when he drove a tank in the Army from 1995-99, but Williams saw the effects of overseas deployment on many of his fellow servicemen who served in Iraq and Afghanistan — effects like PTSD and traumatic brain injuries. Combine that with the tough transition every veteran goes through when they leave the military — which Williams himself experienced — and he saw a life's purpose in doing what he accurately calls "God's work."

"Without veterans' programs, we'd have so many problems with these veterans. All of those statistics you see about unemployment and suicides, it would be much worse if veterans resource centers didn't exist on college campuses. I'm 100 percent confident in that," Williams said. "Veterans resource centers on college campuses save lives. I have no hesitation saying that because I believe in that. It's hard work, but it's good work."

The work is all-encompassing, varied and purposeful. There's academic counseling, but there's also psychological counseling. Club members participate in community service, such as Recycle for Veterans, an organization founded by Saddleback College SVA alum Kyle Hansen that participates in beach cleanups and other environmental projects. They lobby politicians on behalf of veterans' issues, spending four days in Washington, D.C. in early March, meeting with several senators and members of Congress, including Rep. Mike Levin (D-Carlsbad) and Rep. Young Kim (R-Anaheim Hills). And they work on replicating the military camaraderie with fellowship events, such as fishing trips, golf tournaments and Angels' games.

"We try to provide holistic services to the people we serve," Williams said. "Not just academics. We deal with stuff that is pretty high level: housing issues, mental health issues, disability ratings and on and on and on."

Replicating that camaraderie is a silent, but necessary constant. Scratch a member of the Saddleback College SVA and you'll find the unique. After all, every veteran's journey is personal and distinctive. At the same time, your scratching re-

veals the similar, the shared experiences only veterans — regardless of branch, rank, duty or service time — possess.

Williams drove a tank in the Army. Jones was an infantry machine gunner in the Marines. Gunn was an Air Force medic. But each of them experienced the highs of brotherhood and sisterhood found only in the military. And each of them experienced the incomprehensible-to-civilians feeling of being emotionally marooned once they left the service.

"It was a tough transition," Jones said. "I like to make the analogy that your life in the military is like being on a giant aircraft carrier. You might get lost, but there's always people around you who know where you are going. Someone will have a purpose for you to get you going and someone will always be there to show you what that purpose is. Once you get out, you're on this little one-man rowboat. There's nobody but you pulling the oars, and there aren't too many materials for you to use or find your way with."

"...I got out and I had no idea what I wanted to do. I was pretty much alone, except for myself and my dad. I had a couple friends who stuck around. You think you know what you want to do when you get out. A lot of guys are gung-ho to be done with the Marines, and you get out and you realize I have nothing planned. It gets really lonely at times."

Gunn spent nine years in the Air Force and talked about "losing the sense of family once you get out." When she arrived at Saddleback, Gunn was the only female veteran in the college's SVA. One semester after she took over and revamped the organization's social media pages, so many female vets signed up in waves

that Gunn now organizes well-attended monthly events just for women vets. And that's just one of her numerous duties, because Gunn is everywhere, organizing monthly hiking events, overseeing social media posts, answering questions from club members and would-be club members. Oh, and doing all this and more while about to enter the RN program at Saddleback.

Then, there's Jones, who embraces his role as motivator and counselor with the knowledge he's already made a difference. There was the story from the girlfriend of an EMT classmate and fellow vet who thanked Jones for the impact he's made through his outreach.

"She said he'd come home and play video games. He was depressed and drinking and lonely. I was his only friend," Jones said, recounting the story. "Now, he feels like he has a community and a positive environment and he has that friendship. He looks forward to doing stuff outside of school, and he's more motivated doing his schoolwork. There are quite a few other people in the club with similar stories. I wanted to create an environment for other students."

"...The most important thing is making people feel welcome, making them feel loved and trusted. I've gotten more than a few calls at 2, 3 a.m. from people I haven't talked to, but people who need someone to talk to at that time. That's the biggest and most important thing: to be there when someone needs you."

"I have a saying: 'Thrive, not survive.' When we went to Washington, D.C. to advocate for veterans' benefits, that was the general thing I kept saying: 'Thrive, not just survive.'"

COMMUNITY

Public-private partnerships benefit students, businesses and OC

Grads ready for 4-year school or employment

By Nicole Gregory
contributing writer

Aligning education with workforce and economic needs is the primary goal of the community colleges of South Orange County Community College District, which constantly seek “to create seamless pathways” for students, from high school to college to employment or to a four-year university, according to the district’s Chancellor Julianna Barnes.

Partnerships with businesses and other Orange County institutions ensure that these pathways are easy for students to navigate and relevant to the immediate needs of local industries.

One such partnership is with Tustin Unified School District, where high school students take community college classes in dual-enrollment programs offered by Saddleback College and Irvine Valley College.

“In collaboration with local feeder high schools, Irvine Valley College offers students the opportunity to begin workforce-aligned coursework while still in high school,” said Rick Miranda, vice president of instruction at Irvine Valley College. “These programs are intentionally designed to introduce students to career pathways, build early college momentum and accelerate time to completion.”

Another valuable partnership is with Cal State Fullerton, where many students of Saddleback and Irvine Valley colleges transfer to get their bachelor’s degree. And partnerships with local Orange County businesses help administrators at both community colleges make sure their curricula are closely connected to needs of local employers.

“We have workforce advisory boards that work with the colleges in particular industries -- for example, health care,” said Barnes, who serves as co-chair of the workforce committee with the Orange County Business Council. In addition to medical professionals, hospitals and medical centers need workers for their human resources and technology departments, she said.

“Health care remains one of the region’s most critical workforce needs,” said Miranda, “and IVC has responded with a growing portfolio of programs in allied health. From medical assisting and phlebotomy to emerging programs in physical therapy, respiratory care and dental hygiene, the college is preparing students for both entry-level and advanced roles in a rapidly expanding sector.”

Advanced manufacturing and the cybersecurity industries also have immediate employment needs, Barnes said. “We interface with business and industry to better understand what the needs are, and then we then work internally to be sure that we are providing students with those curricular opportunities to match those needs,” she said.

Partnerships are central to preparing students for meaningful careers, Miranda said. “These collaborations create structured opportunities that extend



PHOTO COURTESY OF SOCCCD PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Orange County Business Council President and CEO Jeffrey Ball, SOCCCD Chancellor Julianna Barnes, Cal State Fullerton President Ronald S. Rochon, and Tustin Unified School District Superintendent Mark Johnson share their knowledge and expertise.

learning beyond the classroom and into the real world, allowing students to engage directly with the industries they aspire to join,” he said. “Through internships, clinical placements and work experience education, students gain hands-on experience while still enrolled, building both technical skills and professional confidence.”

One example is the 30 to CPA pathway in accounting at IVC, Miranda said, which “offers a clear progression from coursework to internship to employment.” Partnerships between IVC and the Coastline Regional Occupational Program provide students with English language learner health care pathways in pharmacy technician and dental assisting, he said.

Saddleback College’s Economic and Workforce Development initiative provides customized training tailored to local employers and those across South-

ern California, said Israel Dominguez, director of economic and workforce development at Saddleback College. These specialized training programs for employees are designed to help companies stay competitive in a rapidly changing economy.

“Our focus is not just on skill development, but on helping businesses innovate, improve productivity and strengthen their organizational culture,” Dominguez said. “We work directly with employers to ensure our programs are responsive, practical and impactful.”

These efforts benefit students, businesses and Orange County. “For students, the advantages are clear,” Miranda said. “They gain access to structured career pathways, real-world experience and opportunities to enter the workforce more quickly. Work-based learning ensures that students graduate not

only with knowledge but with experience, an increasingly essential component of employability.”

The collaborations are equally significant for businesses. “Partnerships with IVC provide access to a reliable pipeline of skilled, job-ready candidates,” Miranda.

“Employers play an active role in shaping curriculum through advisory boards, ensuring that graduates are trained in the skills and competencies most needed in the workplace,” he said. “This alignment reduces onboarding time, improves retention and strengthens overall workforce quality. Beyond individual benefits, these partnerships contribute to broader regional outcomes. They help close the gap between education and employment, support economic growth and expand access to high-wage careers for historically underserved populations.”

BOARD

Trustee Marcia Milchiker honored for 40 years of service

SOCCCD Public Affairs

The South Orange County Community College District recognized Trustee Marcia Milchiker for 40 years of service during SOCCCD Board of Trustees meeting on Dec. 15, 2025. Milchiker joined the board in December 1985 and has become one of the longest-serving community college trustees in California.

The celebration was attended by her family, friends and neighbors as well as board members, district leaders, faculty, staff and students.

Milchiker also received formal commendations from the City of Laguna Niguel and the City of Laguna Woods.

Throughout her tenure, Milchiker has been a champion of accessible, high-quality education; innovative academic and workforce programs, and responsible stewardship of public resources.

“It has been the honor of a lifetime to serve this District and the communities of South Orange County,” Milchiker said. “I am deeply grateful to my fellow trustees, our exceptional faculty and staff, and the countless students who have inspired my work over the past four decades. This recognition is truly humbling, and I share it with everyone who has been part of this journey.”

Chancellor Julianna M. Asperin Barnes praised Milchiker.

“Trustee Milchiker has set a truly trailblazing example of public service,” Barnes said. “For 40 years, she has led with integrity, vision, and an unwavering belief in the power of education to transform lives. Her impact on this district — and on generations of students — cannot be overstated. We are profoundly grateful for her leadership and her enduring commitment to our mission.”



PHOTO COURTESY OF SOCCCD PUBLIC AFFAIRS

The SOCCCD Board of Trustees honors Trustee Marcia Milchiker with a resolution recognizing 40 years of leadership and service to students and the community.

CHEMISTRY MAJOR

Making the most of her 'second chance' at education

Campus leader earns 3 national honors

By **Jenelyn Russo**
contributing writer

Irvine Valley College student Ofelia "Lia" Veisalov is making the most of her community college experience, distinguishing herself through academic achievement, campus leadership and a commitment to community service. The third-year chemistry student was recently awarded nearly \$11,000 in scholarships through Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society, setting her up for success as she pursues a doctorate in education.

An international student from Israel, Veisalov arrived in Orange County and began attending IVC in fall 2023. She chose to study chemistry with plans to become a college professor, driven by a lifelong fascination with science and a natural ability to explain complex concepts in a relatable way.

"It made sense to me because my brain is really good at pattern recognition, so under all that math, I could understand the themes that are connecting the subjects together," Veisalov said. "I make it very understandable and easy to digest, so I want to do that for as many people as possible."

Upon arriving at IVC, Veisalov discovered numerous opportunities to develop her leadership, academic and workforce skills. She currently serves as president of the International Students Club and vice president of leadership for the IVC chapter of Phi Theta Kappa. She is also a peer mentor in the college's honors program and works with IVC librarian Rachel Fleming on research into Zero Textbook Cost programs.

Veisalov's involvement with Phi Theta Kappa has not only strengthened her skills but also prepared her for her next step of transferring to a four-year university. After submitting a national scholarship application open to Phi Theta Kappa transfer students across the country, she earned three awards recognizing her academic and leadership accomplishments.

Veisalov earned the 2026 New Century Transfer Scholar award, a distinction given to one student per state and accompanied by a \$2,750 scholarship. Selected from more than 2,300 nominees at nearly 1,400 colleges nationwide,



PHOTO COURTESY OF SOCCCD PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Lia Veisalov, campus leader and IVC chemistry student

the program honors students for their academic achievement, leadership and meaningful contributions both inside and outside the classroom.

Veisalov also earned a spot on Phi Theta Kappa's 2026 All-USA Academic Team, one of the nation's most prestigious honors for community college students, along with a \$3,000 scholarship. Chosen from more than 2,300 nominees across the country, the award recognizes the nation's top 25 students for their academic excellence, leadership and service to their communities.

Additionally, out of approximately 3,000 applicants nationwide, Veisalov was selected as a 2026 Guistwhite Scholar, a distinction recognizing Phi Theta Kappa students for exceptional academic achievement and leadership. She will receive a \$5,000 scholarship to support her bachelor's degree studies, along with a commemorative medalion.

Veisalov said that her participation in Phi Theta Kappa has "transformed" her education journey, but it wasn't something she felt certain about at the

outset. As an older re-entry student, the 30-year old admits she initially battled imposter syndrome. But with the encouragement of IVC's Phi Theta Kappa adviser Kurt Meyer, she embraced her story and was able to see beyond her doubts.

"At the beginning, I felt like I didn't really belong and that I didn't have the skills to be a leader," Veisalov said. "I really challenged myself to not listen to it and to prove to myself and to others that I could do it. ... I got to be pushed out of my comfort zone into this snowball of opportunity and growth."

As vice president of leadership for Phi Theta Kappa, Veisalov led the chapter's Honors in Action project, a program that combines academic research, critical thinking and service to address real-world challenges. This year, their theme was how the social media presence of colonized communities can either help or hinder the preservation of their stories.

Veisalov and her fellow Phi Theta Kappa members met with leaders of the Juaneño Band of Mission Indians Achachemen Nation and helped enhance the tribe's social media presence. The project not only contributed to Veisalov's individual scholarship awards but also earned the IVC chapter honors at Phi Theta Kappa's PTK Catalyst 2026 annual conference recently held in Baltimore.

As she prepares to graduate this spring and continue her education toward a bachelor's degree and beyond, Veisalov says her experience at IVC has validated her decision to become an educator and inspired her to provide the same opportunities to other community college students that she has been fortunate to receive.

"When I see the impact that I can do just as a student leader and be able to touch so many people and help change lives the way that my professors changed mine, I feel like it's more important than anything," Veisalov said.

Veisalov said her decision to attend IVC felt like a "second chance" at higher education, one she was determined to embrace as she pursued every opportunity available.

"I'm very grateful that literally every faculty that I've met is really passionate about teaching, and they really care about the students," Veisalov said. "Looking back, I would do it all over because of all the opportunities and growth that I've experienced here."



PHOTO COURTESY OF SOCCCD PUBLIC AFFAIRS

A Saddleback College student reflects the South Orange County Community College District's districtwide Caring Campus initiative, strengthening collaboration and support for student success.

SERVICES

Student success strengthened through districtwide Caring Campus

SOCCCD Public Affairs

South Orange County Community College District is elevating its culture by bringing Caring Campus, an Institute for Evidence-Based Change initiative to increase community college student retention and success, to the district level. Caring Campus, which fosters students' sense of belonging, creates a bridge between District Services and the district's two community colleges, Saddleback College and Irvine Valley College.

As only the second district office in the nation to implement Caring Campus, according to SOCCCD, the district will ensure that care and support flow from District Services to both the colleges and students. This district-level implementation aligns with the district's strategic plan, which calls for cultivating a positive culture and climate for students and employees.

"I spent my entire career at a community college before becoming chancellor of SOCCCD, and I am very aware of the dynamic between colleges and the district office," SOCCCD Chancellor Julianna Barnes said. "I know the im-

portant role the entire ecosystem plays in climate and culture, which ultimately leads to successful and equitable outcomes for students. I thought the best way to address this was to bring Caring Campus to our district level."

All employees across District Services will set goals and action steps that align with Caring Campus, helping them better understand their role in supporting student success even though they are not in traditional student-facing positions.

"District Services is the support arm for our colleges, so not only will these employees be recipients of Caring Campus work, but also the givers, as they will support colleges who will then directly serve students," Barnes said. "It's a reciprocal relationship and partnership that will help ensure we're always prioritizing doing what is right for our students."

Irvine Valley College and Saddleback College have also both individually adopted Caring Campus. Barnes said this has helped elevate and strengthen the learning culture at each institution, which in turn supports stronger student outcomes, including persistence, retention, and overall success rates.



SADDLEBACK COLLEGE

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A HEAD START

Dual enrollment programs for K-12 students expanding

Encouraging college-going behavior a primary goal

By **Jenelyn Russo**
contributing writer

At Irvine Valley College and Saddleback College, part of the South Orange County Community College District, a growing number of students are using dual enrollment programs to earn college credit before high school graduation. It's a pathway that is expanding across the county and the state as students look to reduce college costs and shorten the time to a degree.

As part of the Vision 2030 plan published by the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, there is a stated goal for every California high school student to graduate with at least 12 units of college credit. In support of this goal, both IVC and Saddleback offer options for K-12 students to get a head start on a college degree or certificate through dual enrollment.

General Dual Enrollment programs on both campuses allow students in grades 9-12 to enroll in up to 11 units per semester of open courses, on campus or online, with parent and principal approval, provided they meet prerequisites. K-8 students may also enroll but must obtain instructor approval in addition to meeting the same requirements.

A newer option for high school students is the College and Career Access Pathway partnership agreements that IVC and Saddleback have with local high schools and districts. CCAP programs allow students to take college courses for credit, with most offered at the high school campus during the regular school day. Students may take up to 15 units through CCAP per semester, and all courses are taught by the college's instructors.

Two of IVC's largest CCAP partners are Irvine Unified School District and Tustin Unified School District.

"The ability for a student to take a class at their high school with their peers that is also a college-level course taught by a college-level instructor, and for them to see how they can have success, really opens up a lot of doors and gives students an opportunity that they might not have otherwise had," said IVC director of Dual Enrollment Ryan Cummins.

Saddleback, which began offering



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Irvine Valley College President John Hernandez speaks about dual enrollment opportunities.

CCAP in 2020, has agreements with Capistrano Unified School District and Saddleback Valley Unified School District, as well as California Online Public Schools, a network of tuition-free online public charter schools in California.

"It helps students prepare for the rigor of college," Kari Irwin, Saddleback assistant dean for career education, said. "It also gives them exposure to other topics that might not be available in their high school portfolio, and it helps build confidence that they can be a college student. We want to encourage that college-going behavior."

As the colleges developed their CCAP agreements with their partner high schools and districts, both campuses were intentional about offering courses that not only meet lower-division general education California State University and University of California transfer requirements but also align with existing pathways and academies at the high schools. The partnerships also provide sufficient wraparound services to ensure successful student outcomes.

Saddleback's approach to CCAP course offerings is certificate-oriented, with one- or two-year pathways avail-

able that allow high school students to earn a low-unit certificate. Options include the New Media Marketing certificate, a five-course sequence that blends general business knowledge with an introduction to marketing skills.

Additionally, some of Saddleback's 40 CCAP sections of classes this term give high school students a head start leading to the college's automotive technology program at the district's new 50,000-square-foot Advanced Technology & Education Park in Tustin. This fall, CCAP sections will grow to 55, including courses that prepare students for Saddleback's culinary and hospitality programs at ATEP as well.

IVC is offering 94 CCAP sections this spring semester, including 32 at Legacy Magnet Academy in Tustin, which was recently recognized by the California Department of Education with the California Exemplary Dual Enrollment Award.

Response to dual enrollment at IVC and Saddleback has been strong. At Saddleback, nearly 7,900 class enrollments in 2024-25 represented more than 4,600 students. For the second time this year, the college is awarding graduation cords to high school stu-

dents in partner districts who earn 12 or more college units.

IVC recorded more than 7,200 enrollments across fall, spring and summer 2024-25, representing 3,900 students. So far in 2025-26, the college has seen more than 6,000 enrollments by about 2,900 students. This summer, 15 CCAP classes will be open exclusively to Irvine USD students, and dual enrollment numbers are expected to surpass last year's total.

At IVC, enrollment fees and tuition are waived for all dual enrollment students, and at Saddleback, CCAP courses are at no cost while General Dual Enrollment is tuition-free. Beyond saving money, these dual enrollment programs give students a head start on college and are linked to higher rates of high school graduation, college enrollment and degree completion. And along the way, students build the confidence they need to take that next step toward higher education.

"Dual enrollment takes down some of those barriers that students may have had in their perception of college," Cummins said. "They see that they can do this, that college is something that's achievable, and they can be great at it."

Two Award-Winning Colleges

Saddleback College and Irvine Valley College have earned several accolades this year, including the prestigious recognition from the Aspen Institute College Excellence Program, where both colleges have been named one of the Top 200 community colleges in the nation. With strong transfer and graduation rates, as well as impressive academic programs and exceptional student services, the colleges offer thousands of students pathways to reach their career and educational goals.



Irvine Valley College • ivc.edu



Saddleback College • saddleback.edu

South Orange County Community College District

"Our district is unique in that we have two nationally ranked colleges serving our communities. It's proof that when you choose a South Orange County Community College District college, you are choosing one of the best in the country."

— **Dr. Julianna M. Asperin Barnes, SOCCCD Chancellor**

