

WITH EXCELLENCE

FALL 2025

SDCCD



Lead With Purpose

City College alumnus empowers youth through science, culture, and community. Page 8



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GRAPHIC DESIGN

Gloria Orbegoza

PHOTOGRAPHY

David Brooks, Howard Lipin,
Remo Sagastume

CONTRIBUTORS

Campus Information Officers:

Cesar Gumapas, Anabell Pulido, Stephen Quis,
Brenna Leon Sandeford

Writers: Allura Garis, Anne Krueger,
David Ogul, Hoa Sanchez

San Diego Community College District
Marketing, Communications
& Public Affairs Office

3375 Camino del Rio South, Suite 335
San Diego, CA 92108

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CHANCELLOR'S LETTER

Every story begins with Be.



THIS YEAR, WE WILL SERVE 90,000 students across our four colleges — San Diego City, Mesa, Miramar, and Continuing Education. Each of those learners, and the hundreds of thousands of San Diego Community College District alumni in our communities, has a powerful story of hope and courage that guided where they started, where they have arrived, and where they will go next.

Last fall, the SDCCD launched its first-ever tagline alongside a refreshed logo and brand identity: Be. Belong. Become. This simple yet powerful phrase captures the essence of who we are and what we strive to offer every person who walks through our doors.

To **Be** means you are welcome just as you are. You don't need to fit a mold. You don't need to have it all figured out. You simply need to show up — and you'll be seen, heard, and valued. To **Belong** means you'll find connection. Our colleges are communities where learners, faculty, classified professionals, administrators, and partners work together to create spaces for support, inclusion, and success. We are intentional about building environments where everyone knows they matter.

And to **Become** is the promise we make to every learner: your goals, your dreams, and your future are within reach. Whether you're here to earn a degree, learn a new skill, change careers, or change your life, we are here to invest in your success. In this special edition of WE magazine, you'll see a fresh design that reflects our new brand — and more importantly, you'll find stories that reflect our values. These are stories of transformation, resilience, and hope. They are stories of people who chose to Be, found where they Belong, and are on their way to Becoming.

Take in their journeys, see yourself in their reflections, and imagine what's possible for you — and for all of us — when we live in the spirit of Be. Belong. Become.

Gregory Smith

GREGORY SMITH
CHANCELLOR

**Be.
Belong.
Become.**



Partnerships help students earn bachelor's degrees

Transfer guarantee to SDSU starts in fall 2026, and ASU Online tuition savings available now

OVER THE SUMMER, THE SAN DIEGO Community College District announced two major partnerships with San Diego State University and Arizona State University that will provide new pathways to bachelor's degree programs.

In a Memorandum of Understanding, SDCCD and SDSU will expand access to higher education through guaranteed admission for eligible students from San Diego City, Mesa, and Miramar colleges — the SDCCD's three credit colleges —

A City College student walks across the stage during the 2025 commencement ceremony at Balboa Park.

"SDCCD's mission is to uplift San Diego's diverse communities through accessible and affordable higher education opportunities."

SDCCD Chancellor Gregory Smith

starting with those applying for fall 2026 admissions. Students must be receiving an associate degree for transfer from an SDCCD campus in a specified field, be California State University eligible, and meet other minimum requirements. Nursing and majors that require an audition (dance, music, theatre, etc.) are excluded.

In addition, SDCCD is proposing to develop a STEM-oriented academic building at the planned SDSU Mission Valley Innovation District — a space designed to house education, research, and industry partnerships. The facility would be one of the first known collaborations in California in which a CSU campus and a large community college district codevelop and co-locate academic programming and student services in a shared physical space at an innovation district.

"SDCCD's mission is to uplift San Diego's diverse communities through accessible and affordable higher education opportunities," said SDCCD Chancellor Gregory Smith. "This partnership will expand pathways to economic prosperity for San Diegans while supporting local industries and businesses and strengthening our regional economy. We are excited to be part of SDSU's Mission Valley Innovation District, facilitate collaboration between our faculty, and provide our students with unprecedented support to achieve their academic goals."

Through a separate partnership, which began this fall, eligible students and alumni from City, Mesa, and Miramar colleges can save 22% on tuition when they transfer to ASU Online through the California Community College Achievement Plan. The program is a promising opportunity to expand access to undergraduate degrees from a global research university, especially for place-bound students, including those who work and those with families.

New bill will expand paid internship, apprenticeship opportunities

On October 3, Gov. Gavin Newsom signed AB 323 by Assemblymember Mike Fong (D-Alhambra), a bill co-sponsored by the Los Angeles Community College District and the San Diego Community College District that will expand paid work-based learning opportunities for community college students across California.

The legislation strengthens the Strong Workforce Program by enabling community college districts to provide direct financial support to students, employers, or both for paid internships, apprenticeships, externships, and other work-based learning experiences.

"California's community colleges are engines of economic mobility, and AB 323 ensures that all students — regardless of their financial circumstances — can access the hands-on training that leads to good-paying careers," said Fong, chair of the Assembly Higher Education Committee.

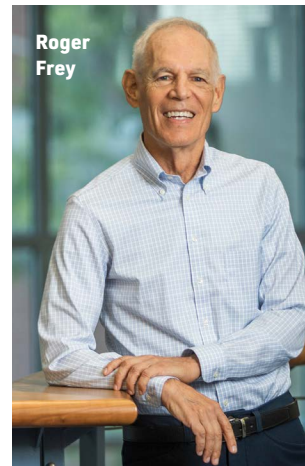
The bill addresses a critical gap in workforce development by authorizing community college districts to use Strong Workforce Program funds to directly support paid work-based learning opportunities. This change recognizes that many community college students cannot afford to participate in unpaid internships or work experiences, creating barriers to career advancement for low-income and first-generation students.

The legislation specifically authorizes community college districts to use Strong Workforce Program funds to provide direct support for apprenticeships, internships, externships, and student-run enterprises that increase employability and employment outcomes. AB 323 takes effect on January 1, 2026.

\$1 million gift supports Ready2 Work

THANKS TO AN unprecedented \$1 million gift from philanthropist Roger Frey, the San Diego Community College District can now ensure students pursuing healthcare careers are no longer held back by costly licensing and testing fees.

The gift, the largest of its kind in SDCCD history, builds upon Frey's earlier \$600,000 contribution and marks the first major donation toward a new \$10 million endowment campaign that will permanently sustain the SDCCD's Ready2Work program. Established in 2024, Ready2Work benefits healthcare students at the SDCCD's four colleges — San Diego City, Mesa, Miramar, and Continuing Education — by reimbursing them for required licensing, certification, and testing expenses, removing financial barriers to in-demand careers.



"For all of the students who have sacrificed so much to earn their degrees, I hope this gift will remove their last obstacle to achieving new and rewarding careers," said Frey, a longtime supporter of the SDCCD who also has been instrumental in building the District's tuition-free San Diego Promise program.

Patricia Santos, who completed her associate of science degree from Mesa College's Physical Therapist Assistant program in 2024, credits the fee reimbursement for making her licensure exam (a \$1,050 cost) possible.

"I am truly grateful to the donors who made it possible for me to pay for my licensure exam fees," Santos said. "I am excited to contribute to the field of physical therapy and make a meaningful impact on the lives of my patients, as well as give back to the community."

Frey noted it's not just students benefiting from Ready2Work but the greater San Diego region as well.

"For the students, the Ready2 Work program helps them obtain the licenses needed to achieve their professional goals," he said. "For the rest of us, the program strengthens the medical infrastructure we all depend upon."

\$526,631

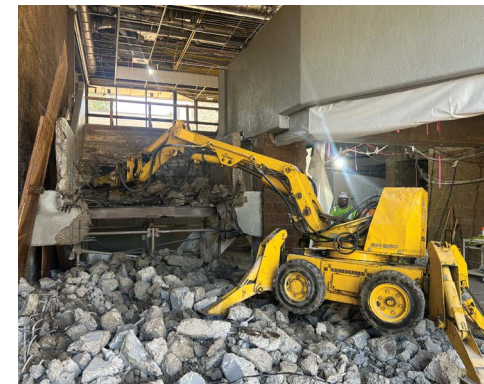
Combined cost for 1,100 SDCCD students taking licensing exams this year required for various healthcare program careers

Meet Brokk: The Measure HH robotic teammate

Move over, jackhammers, there's a new demolition specialist in town. For the Educational Cultural Complex Theatre remodel at San Diego College of Continuing Education, the District brought in Brokk, a state-of-the-art demolition robot, to help tackle some of the most challenging parts of the project.

Compact and remotely operated, Brokk can work safely in tight spaces, breaking down concrete and handling heavy demolition while operators stay clear of dust and debris. Its light frame allows it to climb stairs and move through confined areas, making it especially useful for a theater renovation with narrow access points.

The addition of Brokk helps the project team complete difficult work more efficiently and safely — an essential advantage as projects outlined in the Measure HH bond move forward.



This demolition robot can handle a tight squeeze.

OTHER PROGRESS ON MEASURE HH

The Board of Trustees approved eight design-build teams. These teams will launch the first phase of new construction and modernizations across all colleges. Valued at \$1.3 billion, these projects represent the most ambitious capital investment in the SDCCD's history.



THE SAN DIEGO COMMUNITY COLLEGE DISTRICT was awarded 1st place for “Best use of Theme, Community Contingent” at this year’s 2025 Pride parade awards. About 150 faculty, classified professionals, administrators, and community members walked alongside this year’s SDCCD float through Hillcrest. San Diego College of Continuing Education student Jessi Noreault designed the group T-shirt which was also largely displayed on float banners paired with the parade theme of “Unbreakable Pride, Unshakeable Power.”

TimelyCare added as a student health benefit

TimelyCare is a free health and wellness platform where all students will have 24/7 access to licensed, professional medical and mental health telecare from anywhere in the U.S. using any web-enabled device. Whether seeking crisis support for a late-night emergency or extra support to maintain a positive work-life balance during finals, the on-demand services are available when students need them most.

“This partnership reflects our continued commitment to ensuring that every student has access to the care and support they need to thrive, both in and outside the classroom,” said Poppy Fitch, dean of Wellness and Disability Support Programs and Services. “These services will significantly expand access to crucial resources, meeting our students where they are, on their schedules, and in ways that support their well-being and academic success.”

Services are 100% free of charge for enrolled students, with no insurance required. Just like campus health records, all TimelyCare records are confidential. Learn more and register with a student email address at timelycare.com.

SDCCD division honored for work in AI and education

The San Diego Community College District’s Institutional Innovation and Effectiveness division was one of hundreds of competitive applicants selected for two coveted recognitions by Arizona State University and Global Silicon Valley for its mark on revolutionizing artificial intelligence and education.

During this year’s ASU+GSV Summit, the SDCCD Emerging Tech Team, comprised of Innovation Systems Analyst Elaine Chance

and Faculty Specialists for Emerging Technology Rodrigo Gomez and Alison Gurganus, was selected as one of the 2025 AI Innovators. Vice Chancellor of Institutional Innovation and Effectiveness Michelle Fischthal, DBA, was named one of the Leading Women in AI.

“I am honored to be part of a team that is leading the charge in AI integration at SDCCD,” said Fischthal, who has led the District’s Institutional Innovation and Effectiveness division since February 2023.



SDCCD launches safety app
In an ongoing commitment to campus safety at its four colleges, the District recently launched the SDCCDsafe app. The free mobile app turns any smartphone into a personal safety device.

“The safety of our students and employees is our top priority throughout the San Diego Community College District,” said SDCCD College Police Chief Joseph Ramos. “The SDCCDsafe app allows each one of our community members across 10 campuses and the District Office to be proactive about their safety and help keep themselves, as well as their classmates and colleagues, safer. We encourage everyone to download the SDCCDsafe app today.”

The SDCCDsafe app can be downloaded in the Apple or Google Play stores.

Students continue to struggle with food, housing insecurity

MORE THAN TWO-thirds of San Diego Community College District students struggle with food and/or housing insecurity, according to a new survey. To address these issues, the District’s colleges are offering numerous resources and help for their students who need assistance.

The survey of San Diego students was part of the 2025 Real College Survey, which received responses from 77,000 students from 102 community colleges in California. Conducted between March 3 and April 10, more than 3,700 students from the four SDCCD colleges participated.

The findings tied to the SDCCD’s colleges — San Diego City, Mesa, Miramar, and Continuing Education — showed that:

- 67% of students said they were struggling with some form of food and/or housing insecurity
- 44% of students were food insecure (compared to 46% statewide)
- 59% had suffered from housing insecurity (compared to 58% statewide), meaning they could not afford to pay rent or had to move frequently
- 23% identified as homeless (compared to about 20% statewide)



All four SDCCD colleges have food pantries for students who are experiencing food insecurity.

“It’s essential for our students to have their basic needs for food and housing met so they can be successful in the classroom and in life,” said Susan Topham, SDCCD vice chancellor of Educational Services. “Without this foundation, our college students face challenges that can impede their academic progress.”

Each of the colleges in the District offer resources for students who are struggling with food or housing insecurity. The colleges all have food pantries and maintain lists of local resources to support students in need of shelter or a meal. They also offer transit passes, gas cards, clothing, and emergency grants.



READY FOR TAKEOFF

SDCCD’s Disability Support Programs and Services partnered with the San Diego Regional Airport Authority to put accessibility principles into everyday practice ahead of the opening of the New Terminal 1 on September 23. During the live passenger “dress rehearsal” simulation, disabled community members were engaged and represented in meaningful ways. The event reflects a growing relationship between DSPS and the Airport Authority, which last year also included a customized training for volunteers.

SDCCD colleges among best value in California

San Diego Miramar, Mesa, and City colleges were ranked second, third, and fourth in the state, respectively, for how quickly students recoup their educational costs, according to a first-of-its-kind analysis of California’s 327 two-year public and private institutions. The study, prepared by the College Futures Foundation and The HEA Group, examined more than 1.2 million students attending public, nonprofit, and for-profit institutions statewide, using U.S. Department of Education data.

Those with a higher education diploma earn more than a high school graduate 10 years after enrollment. The median annual earnings for SDCCD graduates exceed those of high school graduates by:

MIRAMAR COLLEGE	\$15,748
MESA COLLEGE	\$12,644
CITY COLLEGE	\$6,027

“In a state with a high cost of living, understanding this payback time frame is essential for learners making decisions that will impact their financial futures for decades.”

—STUDY’S AUTHORS



By overcoming life challenges and giving back to youth in underserved communities, City College alumnus Beto Vasquez epitomizes the spirit of SDCCD.

STORY BY DAVID OGUL
PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID BROOKS

BELONGING THROUGH STEM

PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION IS AT THE HEART OF
BETO VASQUEZ'S WORK IN COMMUNITY OUTREACH

IF YOU'RE SEARCHING FOR SOMEONE WHO EXEMPLIFIES THE SAN Diego Community College District's new tagline, "Be. Belong. Become.," look no further than Alberto "Beto" Vasquez.

Be. Vasquez, who spent many of his first 30 years in juvenile hall, jail, or prison, confronted his past when he arrived at San Diego City College in 2007 determined to build a better life through higher education.

Belong. Though often feeling out of place as an older, first-generation student, he immersed himself in programs such as the City College Math, Engineering, Science Achievement (MESA) program and Extended Opportunity Programs and Services, and student government — eagerly seeking out advice from counselors, instructors, and administrators.

Become. After earning two associate degrees from City College, Vasquez transferred to UC San Diego, completing both bachelor's and master's degrees in biology and later earned a Doctor of Education degree from San Diego State. He engaged community and students through Outreach Services at San Diego College of Continuing Education and, for the past eight years, has served as director of STEM Outreach and Community Engagement with UC San Diego CREATE (Center for Research on Education, Assessment and Teaching Excellence) promoting higher education and science, technology, engineering, and math pathways for underrepresented youth.

Vasquez is a man on a mission. "We've had a lack of representation in the science workforce for decades," Vasquez said. "It hasn't changed much, even though STEM has become one of the fastest growing industries. We're still essentially in the same place. So, I think we need innovation in our approach. We need different thought partners. We need to encourage folks about how to work together genuinely. And we can start by building small collaborations, like we're doing here."

The "here" is in the community room of the Keeler Court Apartments, operated by Community Housing Works in the southeastern San Diego neighborhood of Southcrest. The initiative, a collaboration between Community Housing Works, UC San Diego CREATE, San Diego Unified School District's Level Up SD program, and San Diego Foundation, brings together resources to support STEM camps designed to spark a love of math and science in K-12 students.

BRINGING IT HOME

This summer, Keeler Court Apartments — a 15-minute walk from College of Continuing Education's Educational Cultural Complex — hosted two, one-week STEM camps for 80 elementary school students who spent nearly eight hours daily exploring everything from the science of corn tortillas to volcanic eruptions without grades or pressure.

"We try to make science approachable, friendly, and fun, and getting the kids to want to learn," Vasquez said.

Every seat in the bustling community room is filled. Older students, graduates of earlier CREATE outreach, serve as tutors, offering support and celebrating each child's accomplishments. Vasquez recently got word that a former participant and tutor had been accepted to Princeton University.

"These kids have been doing science and math all their life, they just didn't know it was science and math," Vasquez said. "So, we show them, and suddenly they're not intimidated anymore."

WHO
Alberto "Beto" Vasquez

WHAT
San Diego City College alumnus, doctor of education, former San Diego College of Continuing Education employee, and current director of STEM Outreach and Community Engagement with UC San Diego's CREATE

HOW
Vasquez shapes his approach to STEM outreach by making it community-driven, inclusive, and accessible.

Said Susan Yonezawa, executive director at CREATE: "Dr. Vasquez is an innovative and passionate leader in the UC San Diego STEM Education space who has single-handedly transformed UC San Diego CREATE's footprint in K-12 STEM student- and community-facing education by crafting new inclusive programming for students in the southeastern San Diego community and, notably, blending the learning of scientific and engineering concepts with the uplifting of inclusive, indigenous, and cultural histories of those he aims to serve."

Take the tortilla. A favorite lesson details how the corn tortilla was millennia in the making. It evolved from teosinte, a wild grass native to southern Mexico, where farmers some 9,000 years ago began selectively breeding for higher yields, eventually creating the modern maize in the production of today's corn tortillas.

"Ultimately they're modifying the genetics for a preferred characteristic," Vasquez explained. "Happened with dog breeds; happens with a lot of different things."

HAVING AN IMPACT

It's hard to have a conversation with Vasquez and not come away impressed.

"I truly believe that Beto's superpower is his ability to connect with people, regardless of circumstance, and to motivate them to achieve their goals," said Denise Whisenhunt, a respected educator and longtime mentor now serving as president of Fresno City College, who met Vasquez when she was working as dean of Student Affairs at San Diego City College. "I have seen countless examples of where he brought people from the streets to campus who have been previously incarcerated or have faced some other hardship and supported them in their academic pursuits. He is a natural born leader, and students, regardless of where they have come from, respect him."

A nephew, Xavier Vasquez, 32, is one of many inspired by Beto's support.

"I had no plans on going back to school," he said. "I was a single father just trying to raise my boys. While working



Above: Beto Vasquez leads elementary school students during a STEM summer camp where kids were experimenting with different chemical reactions that replicated volcanic eruptions.

"I truly believe that Beto's superpower is his ability to connect with people, regardless of circumstance, and to motivate them to achieve their goals."

DENISE WHISENHUNT, FORMER DEAN OF STUDENT AFFAIRS AT SAN DIEGO CITY COLLEGE

for CREATE, I was with so many people younger than me and older than me who were going to college. Beto encouraged me to enroll at College of Continuing Education, where I earned a few certifications, and then I started at City in the fall of 2023 and graduated in May with an associate degree for transfer in business administration. I'll be at San Diego State starting this fall.

"He's doing life-changing work. He's bringing science and STEM to low-income communities. He's showing our youth what is possible."

Beto added of his work: "Education is open to anyone who wants to be served. As educators, we don't turn anyone away. No matter where you're coming from, everyone can agree we need to prepare our American workforce to be innovative if we are to continue to be leaders globally and continue to thrive as a nation. We need to prepare our young people to think bigger, to be aware of what kind of professions are out there." **WE**

Supporting the dream

At SDCCE, students find more than a path to citizenship – they find a community of encouragement, a place to be themselves



"The fact that a person offers his or her time for free to help you has such profound magnitude and helps you believe not only in yourself but that it is actually possible for you to become a citizen."

Bettina Andersen, volunteer and former citizenship student

STUDENTS FROM AROUND the world gather at San Diego College of Continuing Education with a shared dream to become United States citizens. For it is there that they find more than a school — it is a community that encourages students to be themselves while providing the support needed for them to create the futures they've always envisioned.

One of those students was Bettina Andersen, who came to the U.S. from Denmark in 2014. In 2023, after losing her job and determined to gain the right to vote, Andersen enrolled in SDCCE's free citizenship program.

"I was incredibly grateful I could access quality education without the cost," she said.

Inside SDCCE's Mid-City Campus, often nicknamed the "United Nations" for its joyful mix of cultures, Andersen joined a classroom filled with American flags and even larger American dreams. She studied U.S. history and government, worked through mock interviews, and received personalized guidance from staff and volunteers, including Mike Wapner, a former municipal attorney.

Wapner, who has been volunteering with the program for nearly a decade, originally read in The San Diego Union-Tribune about a need for volunteers for SDCCE's citizenship program.

Twice a week, Wapner, who was looking for an impactful way to give back to the community, tutors adult learners at SDCCE's Mid-City Campus. He assists students in strengthening their English and prepares them for the civics test required for naturalization, ensuring they are ready when the time comes for their official U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services appointments.

"I help make sure their citizenship application is complete and that students are confident heading into their interviews," he said. "If I do spot an issue, I refer the student to the appropriate resource."

Wapner's legal background led him to deepen his knowledge of immigration law — a reflection of his commitment to the program and dedication to ensuring that students, including Andersen, feel both safe and informed.

Just two months before taking her Oath of Allegiance in 2024, Andersen's mother passed away. To honor her mother, Andersen easily said "yes" to Wapner's suggestion

Volunteers help students study American history ahead of the civics test that is required for naturalization during U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services appointments.



Bettina Anderson (second from left), a former student, now volunteers with SDCCE citizenship program thanks to the encouragement of her mentor Mike Wapner (left). Wapner has been providing his volunteer services, along with Dale W. Santee and Cheryl Brierton, on both the USS Midway Museum and in Mid-City Campus classrooms for nearly two decades.



Rudy and Louise Shappee were integral to launching a process for volunteers aboard the USS Midway Museum to also serve as mentors in citizenship classes at College of Continuing Education. The partnership is nearly 20 years old.

that she become a program volunteer. “The support I received in the classroom was beyond important,” Andersen said. “The volunteers secured a refuge for citizenship seekers. The fact that a person offers his or her time for free to help you has such profound magnitude and helps you believe not only in yourself but that it is actually possible for you to become a citizen. To be able to pass this positive experience forward is a privilege and a great honor for me.”



BUILDING LASTING COLLABORATION
It was not just Wapner who, 10 years ago, felt the call of that pivotal Union-Tribune article seeking volunteers for SDCCE citizenship classes. Rudy Shappee, a retired U.S. Navy chief warrant officer and former ESL teacher, was struck with an idea: enlist USS Midway Museum volunteers to support the student citizenship journey. He reached out to College of Continuing



SDCCE faculty member Mechelle Perrott (left) provides instruction to students and volunteers to prepare for mock citizenship interviews.

Education, and from there, a unique collaboration was born. With his wife, Louise, also a former teacher, Rudy helped design a formal training process for museum volunteers. Louise now tutors weekly at SDCCE’s Educational Cultural Complex.
For nearly two decades, volunteers from the USS Midway Museum have contributed more than 13,000 hours to SDCCE’s ESL and citizenship classes. The USS Midway Museum is the only military ship in the nation to offer civic volunteer opportunities that support the path to citizenship through a community college partnership.
“The USS Midway once protected the Constitution at sea,” said Wapner. “Now, through this partnership with SDCCE, it helps protect our country by supporting new Americans who want to uphold its values.”
The program now boasts 15 active volunteers serving between the Midway and citizenship classes, operating at full capacity with a waiting list.
Like Wapner and the Shappees, retired



THE “BE” MOMENT

Since 1914, San Diego College of Continuing Education has supported immigrants and refugees from all over the world in becoming new Americans. On average, between

40-50

students each semester receive a certificate of completion for meeting the required

270

hours for the Pre-Citizenship and Citizenship classes.

Volunteers are crucial for building a welcoming environment where students can feel free to be themselves while also preparing for the citizenship application, the Government and History Test, and the final U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services interview.

U.S. Air Force Col. Dale W. Santee began tutoring with SDCCE in 2016 following the Union-Tribune article. The story resonated since his father was a naturalized citizen, and his wife is a legal permanent resident.
“I had just retired and wanted to do something meaningful,” he said. “This felt right.”
After observing classes initially, Santee began tutoring at the Mid-City Campus both in person and online, which he continues to do to this day. Now, he leads the USS Midway’s civics program, interviewing prospective tutors for the SDCCE program and guiding new volunteers as they enter the classroom. For Santee, the real reward is seeing students succeed.
“Many of them were doctors, lawyers, engineers in their home countries,” he said. “They gave up everything to start over, and they never complain. They just want to learn, to build something better for their families. They’re some of the most hardworking, appreciative people I’ve ever met.” **WE**



Building spaces of unity

Thoughtfully designed collaboratives provide support, connection for greater student success



THE KUP UNITY VILLAGE

WHERE
Mesa College,
I-400 Building

THE SPACE
A place that
hosts student
support groups,
workshops, and
presentations.

San Diego Mesa College is proving that, when it comes to affinity groups, there really is strength in numbers. That's the driving force behind the college's CommUnity Spaces, a collection of inviting, thoughtfully designed areas for student support groups, all created to foster greater engagement and a deeper sense of belonging.

At the heart of these CommUnity Spaces, located on the second floor of the I-400 building, is the KUP Unity Village — an acronym for Kapwa, Umoja, and Puente — a hub launched in the spring for instructional presentations, workshops, webinars, cultural events, and opportunities to meet with friends, faculty, and professional staff. Each program brings its own cultural perspective: Kapwa centers around Asian American, Pacific Islander, and Native Hawaiian experiences, Umoja draws from the African-American experience, and Puente is grounded in Hispanic culture.



The Mesa College CommUnity Spaces collection opened its doors to students at the end of spring.



Student Angel Wilson performs during the grand opening of the KUP Unity Village.

"Students are looking for spaces to connect outside the classroom," said Patricia "Trish" Guevarra, a Kapwa counselor, coordinator, and assistant professor.

Counselors point to the similarities that make the unification of Kapwa, Umoja, and Puente work so well: all three take a cohort-based approach, where students move through classes as a group, which helps build community. Coursework is culturally relevant, and each program is dedicated to boosting retention, graduation, and transfer rates.

A wide range of events bring these spaces to life. These spaces come to life with a mix of math study jams and relaxed conversations, mental health mindful moments and karaoke nights in the lounge and other common areas.

Students have felt the impact. "KUP Unity Village... became more than just a physical space, but it's a place where I felt safe, seen, and supported," said Angela Lopez, a Puente student. "The KUP Unity Village gave me a calm environment to study, rest, and connect with others who share similar values of inclusion, culture, and community."

Umoja coordinator and counselor Jordan Nash emphasized that affinity programs are open to all interested students, just like how anyone can immerse them-

selves in Irish literature or Greek civilization, regardless of background. What's key, Nash said, is that "it's important for folks to know that these spaces are integral to college success for all."

PROXIMAL SUPPORT

Elsewhere in the I-400 building, are also the Dreamer Resource Center, Cal-WORKS office, Promise Program advisers, and the Rising Scholars program for formerly incarcerated students. In addition to the KUP Unity Village, Mesa College recently opened an expanded Family Resource Center within the Learning Resource Center for student parents to study with children in tow, attend student-parent workshops, and connect with others navigating similar challenges. This is a critical resource at a campus where one in four students is a parent juggling academics, work, and childcare.

"These spaces are a powerful expression of Mesa College's deep commitment to equity and student success," said Mesa College President Ashanti T. Hands. "They serve as daily reminders to our students that they are seen, that they belong here, and that who they are — and who they're becoming — matters. In these spaces, their aspirations are met with unwavering support every step of the way." **WE**

"The KUP Unity Village gave me a calm environment to study, rest, and connect with others who share similar values of inclusion, culture, and community."

Angela Lopez, Mesa College Puente student

Districtwide Support for All Students

All SDCCD colleges have been working to launch unique support initiatives and spaces for a wide range of student groups. This includes, but is not limited to:

CITY COLLEGE: a newly opened Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander (AANHPI) Connections Center.

MIRAMAR COLLEGE: an in-progress remodel of the I-building, where The Kaleidoscope will house the Leading Equity, Anti-Racism and Diversity (LEAD) Office, the Pride Center, and resource centers for Latine, Black and African American, Native American, and Asian American Pacific Islander students.

COLLEGE OF CONTINUING EDUCATION: among its seven campuses are the Immigrant-Based Support Program Student Center at the César E. Chávez campus, an Intercultural Center at its Mid-City Campus, and, a new Veterans Center is in progress at the Educational Cultural Complex.



City College's newest AANHPI Connections space is dedicated to fostering belonging, cultural pride, and student success.

Action through belonging

Community college gave SDCCD retiree **Rusty Krumm** a sense of purpose that he paid forward



WHO
Rusty Krumm

WHERE
SDCCD
District Office

WHAT
Vocational
specialist with
the Disability
Support
Programs
and Services
WorkAbility III
program

WHEN
From 2002
to 2025

FOR 23 YEARS, ALBERT “Rusty” Krumm dedicated himself to creating spaces of belonging and opportunity for students with disabilities throughout the San Diego Community College District. Before retiring this past spring, he dedicated his career to helping hundreds of students feel seen, preparing them for careers, and advocating for their needs.

As a vocational specialist with the Disability Support Programs and Services WorkAbility III program, and previously as an employment outreach specialist, Krumm’s influence extends across the District. He helped shape a culture of belonging and inclusion among faculty and staff — he was a trusted voice who understood the challenges of students with disabilities because he had lived them.

“Rusty is an amazing example of what people with significant disabilities can accomplish when access is ensured,” said Poppy Fitch, dean of Wellness and Disability Support Programs and Services.

A spinal cord injury left Krumm quadriplegic at age 12. At that time, 1969, living a meaningful life with disabilities was uncertain. Education and inclusion were afterthoughts in a world not built for people with disabilities. Doctors advised his parents to institutionalize him. They refused.

“Schools weren’t accessible. There were no disability rights laws, no internet, no road map. It was learn-as-you-go,” Krumm recalled. “But growing up in a small town in South Jersey had its upside; people looked out for each other.”

That sense of community planted early seeds of resilience. Still, adulthood came with its own barriers. After moving to San Diego in 1982, Krumm struggled to find employment. Like many people with visible disabilities, he faced limited opportunities. Instead of giving up, he turned to the SDCCD and enrolled in classes at San Diego City and Mesa colleges.

“For years, I volunteered and took classes just to feel part of something,” he said. “Community college gave me a sense of purpose before I even realized that’s what I was looking for.”

A turning point came in 2002 when Rusty, then working at a nonprofit independent living center, met DSPS instructor Lori Contreras. After witnessing his passion for advocacy, she encouraged him to apply for an open position in the WorkAbility III program at the SDCCD. It would become his first full-time job at age 43.

“That is when I found belonging. I was overwhelmed with gratitude when I got my long-awaited job. I was so happy I wanted to frame my first paycheck,” Krumm said. “There is such a remarkable difference between collecting disability benefits and collecting a paycheck. I cried knowing I was giving back.”

And the District, he said, led by example in supporting him. Krumm remembers various hardships, including local wildfire emergencies and when he broke his femur, where the District and his immediate supervisors stepped up to support him and his colleagues. “That kind of support shows you what real belonging looks like,” he said.

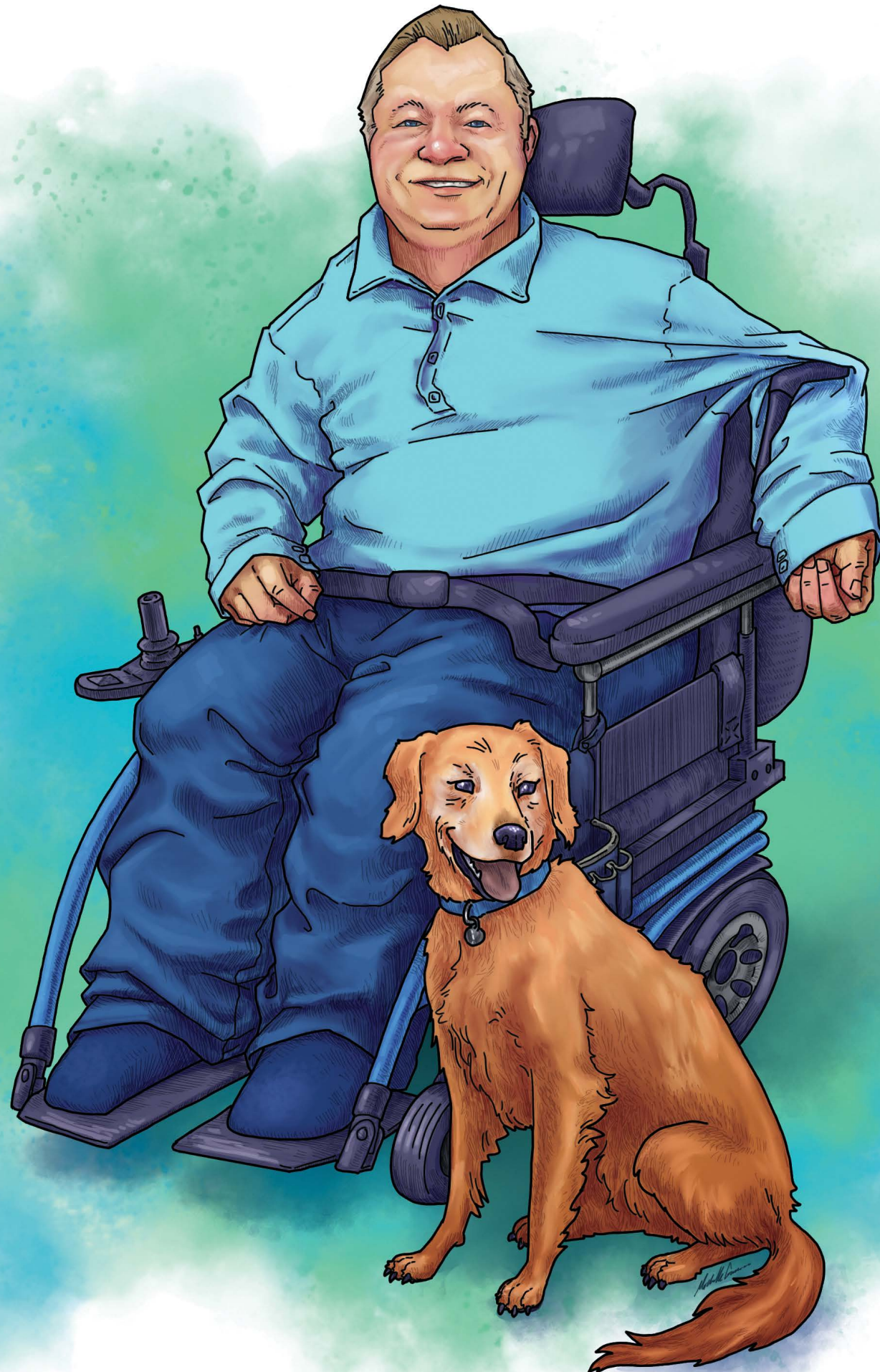
Assistive technology also played a role in his own success. At Access to Independence and the SDCCD, Krumm found workplaces that not only understood his needs but also anticipated them.

“Having an employer who understands and embraces assistive technology makes a world of difference. The SDCCD went above and beyond, not only supplying assistive devices but also ensuring I had access to the latest technology and tailored everything to my needs.”

Now happily retired, Krumm enjoys spending time with his family and community, and he continues to be an active advocate. He currently mentors a young man with multiple disabilities, helping him navigate education, independence, and employment.

“He’s a triple amputee who was home-schooled his entire life. It’s been a fun and eye-opening experience, and I’m hopeful he’ll soon be connected with SDCCD, California Department of Rehabilitation, and the WorkAbility III program,” shared Krumm. [WE](#)

ILLUSTRATION
BY MICHELLE
GUERRERO



“Being invited into a student’s journey is something I never took for granted. When someone reaches out for support, it’s a brave act. I always tried to meet them with compassion.”

Rusty Krumm



leaders to deepen their expertise — at a cost of around \$10,500.

“This is great news for local students and current public safety employees looking to obtain a degree in the public safety sector,” said Wes Lundburg, Ph.D., president of Miramar College.

Among the first cohort are Garcia, Ulizes Sanchez, and Erika Tello — each bringing a unique story and motivation for joining the program.

Garcia, a former communications dispatcher for the Riverside Fire Department, earned her associate degree in administration of justice during the pandemic before entering the workforce. The mother of two is eager to gain new skills that will help her better connect with her community during high-stress situations.



Destiny Garcia



THE “BECOME” MOMENT

Most students in the program are already working in fire service, law enforcement, lifeguard operations, or emergency medical response. The curriculum includes 22 upper-division courses such as Contemporary Public Safety Practices, Ethics in Public Safety, Strategic Planning, and Advanced Criminal Investigation. The inaugural program culminates in a semester-long research project in spring 2027.

“In a tense incident, I want to learn how to work with different personalities and guide everyone toward a positive outcome,” she said.

For Sanchez, who is currently working as a firefighter out of Station 12 in Lincoln Park, the degree is a step toward fulfilling a childhood dream: becoming a captain — and eventually a battalion chief — with the San Diego Fire-Rescue Department. He earned his EMT certification and associate degree in fire protection technology at Miramar College before joining the field.

As a child in Barrio Logan, Sanchez witnessed a fire break out at a furniture store. He remembers the helplessness he felt — and the language barrier between responders and residents.

“No one could speak Spanish, but I could,” he recalled. “I wanted to help, but I was too afraid.” Now, he’s determined to be the kind of leader his community can count on.

Tello, a U.S. Navy veteran with 21 years of service, brings a wealth of experience from her time as an emergency manager in Bahrain. Since enrolling at Miramar College last year, she’s earned Fire Inspector Certifications and volunteers with the Imperial Beach Fire Department.

“This education will bridge the gap between my national service and my heart to serve the community in a more direct, impactful way,” she said.

Graduates of the program will be equipped to pursue living-wage careers, advance professionally, and serve their communities with greater impact.

“This bachelor’s degree will not only strengthen the community’s trust in Miramar College,” said Lundburg, “but it will allow first responders to be in line for promotions and salary advancements that come with obtaining a four-year degree.” **WE**

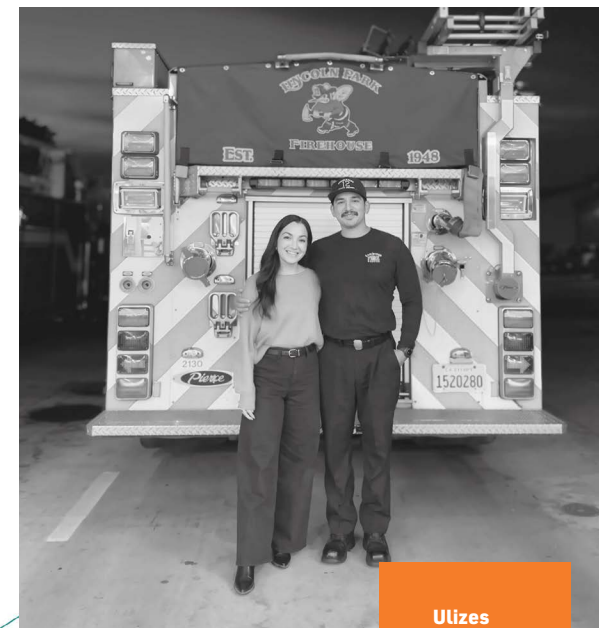
“This education will bridge the gap between my national service and my heart to serve the community in a more direct, impactful way.”

Erika Tello,

U.S. Navy veteran and baccalaureate student



Erika Tello



Ulizes Sanchez

RISING TO SERVE

Miramar College’s new public safety management bachelor’s degree empowers students to become leaders in their communities

When Destiny Garcia heard about the new public safety management bachelor’s degree at San Diego Miramar College, she saw more than a chance to advance her career — she saw a way to make a difference in her community.

This fall, Miramar College welcomed 43

students into its inaugural baccalaureate program, which includes two tracks for students in either emergency management or law enforcement. The four-year degree builds on the college’s well-established associate and certificate programs within its School of Public Safety, offering a pathway for current public safety professionals and aspiring

"This is a true celebration of teamwork, resilience, and commitment to quality nursing education."

DOMETRIVES "DEE" ARMSTRONG,
ASSOCIATE DEAN OF NURSING EDUCATION AT CITY COLLEGE



Students practice drawing and administering injections during a nursing class at City College.

COMMITMENT TO CARE

Nursing Program rises to the top in national examination

San Diego City College's Nursing program continues to thrive. This year, the program graduated 57 students, and of those graduates, 100% who have taken the National Council Licensure Examination (NCLEX) passed, with four still waiting to take their exams. The NCLEX, which is required for students to pass to officially receive their registered nurse credential, uses real-world case studies to measure a nurse's ability to think critically and make competent decisions.

"This achievement reflects the dedication of our students, faculty, and clinical partners," said Associate Dean of Nursing Education Dometrives "Dee" Armstrong. "A 100% National Council Licensure Examination pass rate is a powerful testament to the quality of education and preparation our program offers, reinforcing our commitment to excellence in nursing education and patient care."

Armstrong noted that the first-time national pass rate for the NCLEX-RN was approximately 91.2% this year.

"I am incredibly proud of our graduates and the nursing team who continuously exceeds expectations for our students. This is a true celebration of teamwork, resilience, and commitment to quality nursing education," she said.

Over the summer, the Nursing Program was awarded the San Diego State University Career Services Grant in support of student success. The grant of \$117,000 over two years will help students succeed in the program by making available mentorships and mental health counseling. A peer mentorship program will be led by second-year students who will support first-year students with oversight from two nursing faculty members. The grant also will help with licensing fees for the NCLEX exam.

FACES OF CITY COLLEGE



"I feel like the people at City really care about you. The professors care about what you're learning, they're accessible if you need them, and there is a lot going on."

Louise Nicolei Perez, president of the Asian and Pacific Islander Student Alliance, saw a "You Belong Here" banner at City College as a sign to stay local, instead of heading to Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University in Florida. The decision changed her whole career trajectory. Rather than becoming a pilot, she earned a bachelor of science associate degree and is now focused on becoming a registered nurse.



"I'm a people person. I love meeting new people and getting to know them. That's where I draw my inspiration. The people around me inspire me. It's all very circular."

I draw my inspiration. The people around me inspire me. It's all very circular."

John Dalton, former member of San Diego-based hip-hop group The KneeHighs, studies music at City College while also being a mentor to other student musicians. Dalton's journey with sobriety underscores the power of change, as he channels his past struggles into future creativity. Dalton credits the music program with giving students an opportunity to grow creatively while also gaining practical skills for the industry, as well as helping build confidence.

22K

Visits to the Knights' Table Food Pantry during the 2024-25 academic year.



Professor named Knight of the Order of Academic Palms

San Diego Mesa College professor of French **Uriel Ornelas** has been named a Knight (Chevalier) of the Order of Academic Palms (l'Ordre des Palmes académiques), one of France's highest honors recognizing service to education and culture. The distinction was presented by Adrien Frier, Consul General of France in Los Angeles, during a ceremony at the Résidence de France in Beverly Hills on September 12, 2025.



Unsung hero

Each year, the Unsung Hero Award recognizes a colleague whose quiet dedication has a powerful impact on our campus. This year, Mesa College is proud to honor **Ikuko McAnally**, whose steady presence brings clarity, compassion, and consistency to every task, from navigating complex budgets and grants to supporting equity driven programs. McAnally's behind the scenes work strengthens student initiatives and uplifts everyone around her.



WINNING ATHLETICS

Mesa College among top two-year athletic programs

San Diego Mesa College finished second in the 2024-2025 Ron Case Cup standings, cementing its athletics program among the top in the nation.

Presented by the National Alliance of Two-Year College Athletic Administrators, scoring for the Ron Case Cup is calculated based on a college's top five men's and top five women's team finishes in state championships.

This year, Mesa College was led by:

- **State Champions:** Women's Beach Volleyball, Men's Cross Country, and Women's Cross Country
- **State Finalists:** Men's Track & Field (6 individual state titles) and Men's Volleyball
- **Third in State:** Women's Track & Field (1 individual state title)

The Ron Case Cup ranks programs from across California, Oregon, and Washington, based on their success in state championships.

"This is an incredible accomplishment and a reflection of the hard work, talent, and dedication of our student-athletes, coaches and support staff."

RYAN SHUMAKER, DEAN AND ATHLETIC DIRECTOR
AT MESA COLLEGE



BY THE NUMBERS

Mesa College Outreach Office

During the spring term, the Outreach team, consisting of 14 student ambassadors, two project assistants, and two Promise project assistants, supported:

97

Number of hours of campus tours

164

Number of hours fielding questions through Ivy.ai chat (aka: Olympia, the Mesa College website chatbot)

278

Number of hours at feeder and CCAP (College and Career Access Pathways) high schools

536

Number of hours of tabling and community events

1,896

Number of active Year 1 and Year 2 cohort students in the San Diego Promise program thanks to outreach efforts at area high schools



RICKY SHABAZZ
PRESIDENT



ASHANTI T. HANDS
PRESIDENT



Skilled biotechnology technicians are urgently needed in the local workforce.

Biotech boost at Miramar College

A three-year grant from the National Science Foundation, an independent federal agency that supports science and engineering in the United States, will fund San Diego Miramar College's Building Pathways from High School to College for Increased Biotechnology Career Readiness, which will support the training of future biotechnology technicians.

"This is a terrific accomplishment for our STEM and science programs," said Wes Lundburg, president of Miramar College. "It is our long-term strategic vision to become the San Diego region's 'go-to' institution for training the next generation of skilled workforce professionals in the field of biotechnology. These funds will help build the foundation."

To address the urgent need for skilled biotechnology technicians, the goal of the project is to create a direct pathway to Miramar College for biotechnolo-

gy related technical training for students, according to professors Rebecca Bowers-Gentry and Shawn Hurley. As principal investigators, Bowers-Gentry and Hurley will lead the new initiative with Heather Holmes, Kim Teston-Fierro and Tracey Milani in partnership with local industry and educational partners to provide opportunities that will seamlessly guide high school students to a certificate of achievement in biotech at Miramar College and to skilled technician careers in the biotechnology industry.

The Advanced Technological Education (ATE) program focuses on the education of technicians who work in high-tech fields that drive the nation's economy. Because two-year community and technical colleges are the leading sources of technician education in the United States, faculty from these higher education institutions have had leadership roles in most ATE projects since the program began in 1993.

\$469,540

Amount of the Advanced Technological Education grant from the National Science Foundation



P. WESLEY LUNDBURG
PRESIDENT

Campus Notes

Jacquie Keller named to board



Jacquie Keller, chief marketing officer of Neurochase, has been named to the San Diego Miramar

College Foundation Board as a community member. Keller is a distinguished San Diego-based Life Sciences executive with over two decades of global commercial leadership, renowned for scaling revenue, driving innovation, and successfully navigating complex mergers and acquisitions and financing landscapes. Her expertise spans corporate, strategy, business development, sales, marketing, clinical research, reimbursement, and investor relations within innovative medical device companies like Neurochase Limited, ClearPoint Neuro, Inc., Philips, and Volcano Corporation.

Cleanup crew

Students from Miramar College's Emergency Medical Technician and Fire Academy programs demonstrated their commitment to service and community engagement by volunteering in a campus clean-up at Lincoln High School on August 7. The effort was part of preparations to launch Lincoln High School's Fire Program for the upcoming academic year.

The student volunteers – future first responders – spent the day working alongside faculty, San Diego Fire-Rescue, and community leaders to ensure the facility was ready to welcome the next generation of fire service students. Their willingness to dedicate their time and energy is a testament to their dedication to the communities they will one day serve.

The collaboration between Miramar College and Lincoln High School reflects a shared goal: to provide students with meaningful, hands-on opportunities that connect classroom learning with real-world service.

\$169,387

The amount awarded for a three-year grant from the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office to launch the first-ever Rising Scholars Program at the Educational Cultural Complex

Uplifting Rising Scholars

San Diego College of Continuing Education has been awarded a three-year grant from the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office to launch its first-ever Rising Scholars Program at the Educational Cultural Complex, a milestone achievement to advancing restorative education and reentry support.

While the College of Continuing Education already offers more than 80 tuition-free certificate programs and critical wraparound support services, the Rising Scholars Program is specifically designed to eliminate barriers to education for students impacted by the criminal justice system. The program will provide justice-impacted individuals with essential academic and personal resources, including legal rights referrals, community service connections, and reintegration support, while fostering personal growth and pathways to career success.

"For the first time ever in our 110-year

history, San Diego College of Continuing Education has received funds to deliver highly targeted resources and support to justice-impacted students who are so ready and willing to change the trajectory of their lives," said Tina M. King, College of Continuing Education President. "We are profoundly grateful to the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office for their support and including noncredit students in this program. This grant is more than funding, it's a commitment to equity that ensures justice-impacted individuals are seen and supported to rise as learners, leaders, and changemakers in their communities."

The Rising Scholars Program at SDCCE is part of a broader statewide initiative. SDCCE joins a growing number of California community colleges leading the charge in advancing educational equity for justice-impacted populations. Nathan Klein will be the program's first Rising Scholars Counselor.



"I finally realized that if something didn't change, I was either going to be in prison for the rest of my life or found dead somewhere."

FRANCISCO CONTRERAS, who, at 15, dropped out of high school and spiraled into a cycle of drugs, gang violence, and incarceration. Now, at 47, with support from San Diego College of Continuing Education, he is a high school graduate and is advancing in his construction career and continuing his studies at SDCCE.

The Roundup

Prioritizing mental health



In September, the Educational Cultural Complex held a grand opening event for its Be Well Mental Health Center in Room 177. This new center is dedicated to supporting the well-being of students by providing a safe space and access to mental health resources. The opening marked a milestone in College of Continuing Education's commitment to student well-being.

"Sustained in Unity" drives SDCCE forward



This year's college-wide Convocation, held at the San Diego Central Library, centered on the theme "Sustained in Unity." The event set the tone for a year grounded in equity, inclusion, and community and featured acclaimed anti-racist educator Tim Wise as keynote speaker. Those in attendance helped launch the new academic year with energy, purpose, and collective commitment.

Task force focuses on inclusiveness



College of Continuing Education is deeply committed to fostering a campus environment grounded in inclusivity, equity, and respect for all – regardless of background or immigration status. The Safety, Inclusion, and Belonging Task Force, established earlier this year, aims to develop meaningful strategies, solutions, and resources that support the community in today's social climate. Additionally, the task force is implementing more support for employees who are assisting students by providing space for reflection and continued access to critical resources. The task force is currently developing mock trainings to de-escalate tense situations and active training scenarios around navigating through any challenging situations with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement that may occur.



TINA M. KING
PRESIDENT

Budding chef heads to the French Alps

Melissa Chavez draws culinary inspiration from Mesa College professor Tonya Whitfield

About two years ago, Melissa Chavez knew something was missing in her life. Like many others, her day job left her unfulfilled and uninspired. Hoping to find a better fit, she made a list of everything she loved — music, plants, and baking. That list helped her see a new path forward.

With a fresh sense of purpose, she made a life-changing decision: she moved from Palm Desert to San Diego in 2023 and enrolled in the Culinary Arts Program at San Diego Mesa College. In May 2025, she earned an associate degree and certificate in Culinary Arts and Culinary Management.

Today, Chavez is taking the next step in her journey. In the French Alps, where she secured an internship at the Mercure Aix-les-Bains Domaine de Marlioz Hôtel & Spa — ready to apply what she learned at Mesa College.

WE recently checked in with Chavez who explained how she found Mesa College and what she is cooking up next.

Who inspired you to pursue a culinary career? Chef Tonya Whitfield is a huge source of inspiration. Her passion for teaching and the way she supports and challenges her students made me think about becoming a teacher myself one day. Watching how she helps others grow made

me want to do the same — share what I've learned and help others discover their own passion for cooking.

How did you know Mesa College's culinary program was the right fit for you? I remember the first summer I went to Mesa College to pick up a textbook. Seeing the campus for the first time, I could immediately picture myself there. It was such a beautiful place. Once classes started and I got to see the Culinary Department — I knew without a doubt that this was the right place for me.

What were some of the highlights of the program? One of the biggest highlights is the hands-on experience we get from day one. The facilities are incredible. The professional kitchen and on-campus restaurant make the learning environment feel very real and dynamic. We don't just learn from textbooks; we're in the kitchen applying techniques, learning how to work as a team and understanding what it takes to succeed in the industry. The community at Mesa College is also something truly special. Everyone is passionate, supportive, and motivated, which makes the experience even more meaningful.

What are some of the most important lessons you learned from the program? One of the most important lessons I've learned in the program is not to let failure stop you from trying. In the kitchen, things don't always go as planned, recipes don't turn out right, techniques take time to master, and mistakes happen. But I've learned that failure is just part of the process. What really matters is having a positive attitude and the willingness to keep learning. That mindset has helped me grow and become a better chef.

What would you say to anyone considering the program? Go for it! Don't let lack of experience, age, or any other factor stop you from trying something new. **WE**




PARTING SHOT

PHOTO BY
REMO
SAGASTUME



CARRYING ON

MIRAMAR COLLEGE FIRE ACADEMY 16, AND ITS INSTRUCTORS, TOOK PART IN THE 9/11 Memorial Stair Climb at the Hilton Bayfront in downtown San Diego over Labor Day weekend. The cadets climbed the equivalent of 110 stories to honor the lives lost on 9/11. The academy team was the top fundraiser of the event, bringing in more than \$20,000 to support San Diego County firefighters and their families.



Destiny's college journey is motivated by her family

