

RATINGS

Cutting-edge programs earn both colleges national acclaim

Student outcomes, cost, quality cited

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contributing writer

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

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

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

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

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

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



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Irvine Valley College students relax and socialize on campus.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Both campuses are part of the Accrediting Commission for Community

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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