WITH EXCELLENCE

SPECIAL EDITION

SDCCD

celebrating

10 YEARS

SAN DIEGO PROMISE

CITY COLLEGE • MESA COLLEGE • MIRAMAR COLLEGE
COLLEGE OF CONTINUING EDUCATION

EST. 2016

MAKING COLLEGE A REALITY FOR THOUSANDS...





















"Ten years and thousands of graduates later, the San Diego Promise has proven to be one of the most important investments this District has ever made. As we look to the next decade, we imagine what could be if we expand the Promise to every member of our community."

— Gregory Smith, chancellor, San Diego Community College District

"I have seen the Promise provide students with greater hope, confidence, and stability as they pursue their education. When financial stress decreases, students can focus on their coursework, stay enrolled, and progress toward graduation and meaningful careers."

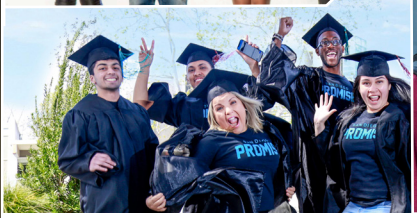
— **Dometrives Armstrong, associate dean of Nursing Education, San Diego City College**















10 YEARS











SAN DIEGO COMMUNITY COLLEGE DISTRICT

SAN DIEGO PROMISE

CITY COLLEGE • MESA COLLEGE • MIRAMAR COLLEGE
COLLEGE OF CONTINUING EDUCATION

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Questions, comments?
We'd love to hear from you.

Email us mcpa@sdccd.edu.

FALL
2026

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Ten years after its launch, the free tuition program continues to transform futures and strengthen communities



Philip Kist was one of 186 students who took part in the inaugural class of the San Diego Promise in 2016. Today he is a drainage engineer for the Metro-North Railroad in New York.

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CHANCELLOR'S LETTER

A decade of Promise, a future of opportunity



TEN YEARS AND THOUSANDS OF GRADUATES LATER, the San Diego Promise has proven to be one of the most important investments the San Diego Community College District has ever made.

Over the past decade, nearly 20,000 students have shown us what becomes possible when financial barriers to higher education are removed. San Diego Promise students have earned degrees and certificates, transferred to leading universities, launched careers, supported their families, and uplifted the communities they call home. Their success is a powerful reminder that talent exists everywhere and we are responsible for providing opportunity equitably.

As we celebrate this milestone, the need for affordable higher education is even greater today than it was when forward-minded leaders like Chancellor Emerita Constance M. Carroll helped establish the Promise in 2016. Community colleges build our middle class and no student should have to choose between paying for groceries or gas and attending college.

That is why we are looking ahead to the next decade with an ambitious vision to expand the San Diego Promise to every member of our community and provide even greater support for our students. Data examining the economic impact of the San Diego Promise confirms that educational opportunity strengthens families, supports employers, expands economic mobility, and contributes to the long-term prosperity of San Diego County. Labor market analytics firm Lightcast, who conducted the study, shows the return on investment for the San Diego Promise program reaches far beyond our college campuses, contributing $1 billion in social benefits across California.

Future plans for program growth aim to build on this impact and give every member of our community a pathway to prosperity. This includes serving part-time students, who are the majority of our enrollment and are balancing work and family responsibilities while pursuing their education. We are exploring opportunities to support military families, career changers seeking new skills, and others who currently don't qualify for financial aid. We are pursuing a future where every student participates in work-based learning experiences, including paid internships that allow Promise students to accelerate their career growth. And, as the District completes affordable student housing developments, we see opportunities to provide San Diego Promise students with safe, affordable housing so they have the security necessary to excel.

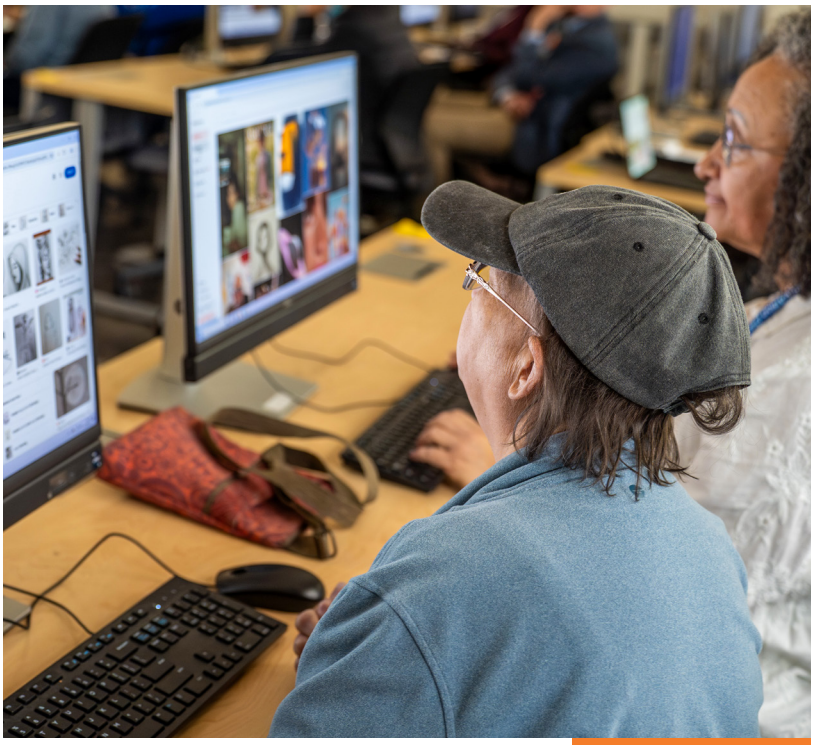
Just as our community partners helped make the first decade of the Promise possible, they will play a vital role in its future. Our goal is to build a permanent endowment that ensures every student who wants to attend one of our colleges can do so, regardless of financial circumstances.

The first 10 years of the San Diego Promise have demonstrated what is possible when a community invests in its students. Together, we can ensure that the San Diego Promise continues to open doors, expand opportunity, and transform lives for generations to come.

Gregory Smith

GREGORY SMITH
CHANCELLOR

SDCCD students among the first to earn AI literacy microcredentials



STATE AND HIGHER EDUCATION leaders announced the launch of the AI-Ready California pilot, a microcredential program designed to provide universal artifical intelligence literacy education across the state. The program began in July with an initial cohort of 500 students from both the San Diego Community College District as well as unemployment insurance claimants in the Reemployment Services and Eligibility Assessment program in the San Diego area.

Future participants will access the training via San Diego State University's Global Campus, which offers undergraduate, graduate, and advanced certificate programs in an online and/or hybrid modality.

"AI-Ready California reflects the best of what public education can do when we work together to expand opportunity for students, workers, and communities," said SDCCD Chancellor Gregory Smith. "San Diego Community College District is proud to help launch this effort because AI literacy must be accessible to Californians across every background, zip code, and stage of life. As AI continues to reshape learning and work, community colleges have an essential role in helping eliminate equity gaps in education and employment while preparing our students and communities to participate fully in the future economy."

Upon completion, participants — who ultimately will represent a full spectrum of generations, economic backgrounds, and educational levels — receive a microcredential that can:

• Serve as an entry point to additional learning opportunities through industry partners and academic institutions;

• Provide access to workforce development resources;

• Function as an accessible growth opportunity for employees; and,

• Signal AI literacy to employers.

Developed in partnership with the California community colleges, California State University system, Amazon Web Services, and Instructure, along with support from the James Irvine Foundation, AI-Ready California is a statewide initiative developed through the CSU–Industry AI Workforce Acceleration Board to provide foundational AI literacy education to all Californians.

"AI-Ready California reflects what public higher education does best: bringing together education, industry, and government to expand opportunity and prepare Californians for the future of work," said SDSU President Adela de la Torre. "Building on San Diego State University's early leadership in AI education, we are expanding this work with our partners to make foundational AI literacy accessible to more Californians, ensuring that more people have the skills and confidence to thrive in our changing economy."

The AI-Ready California initiative offers an accessible, online learning experience built around two interconnected learning dimensions:

• Civics and Responsibility: Participants learn to use AI safely and responsibly, with emphasis on privacy, data protection, and appropriate use.

• Career and Workforce Readiness: Learners gain practical skills to leverage AI for productivity, job-seeking, and long-term adaptability in an AI-augmented labor market.

"AI literacy is essential to thriving in our rapidly changing economy," said Stewart Knox, secretary of the California Labor & Workforce Development Agency. "With AI-Ready California, we're working to ensure Californians, regardless of background or experience, have the skills and confidence they need to use AI responsibly and productively. Our partnership with higher education and industry reflects a shared commitment to preparing Californians for the future of work through expanded access to learning today."

For more information about AI-Ready California, including enrollment details and program requirements, search "AI-Ready California" through SDSU's Global Campus at globalcampus.sdsu.edu.

"AI literacy is essential to thriving in our rapidly changing economy."

Stewart Knox, secretary of the California Labor & Workforce Development Agency



Families explore City College during Noche de Familia

As part of Chicanx/Latinx Heritage Month, San Diego City College welcomed students and their families in September for Noche de Familia, an evening designed to give them a firsthand look at college life. Guests explored the campus Makerspace, took in a show at the planetarium, and connected with free campus and community resources before ending the night with live mariachi and a dinner of elote, flautas, churros, and aguas frescas. The event gave students' support systems a chance to see where they learn and grow, reflecting City College's commitment to them as partners in student success.



Mesa College student earns leadership award

Mesa College alumna **Kristin Wilhite** earned first place in the 2026 Psi Beta Leadership Award, a national honor recognizing outstanding student leadership. After initially struggling to find her place on campus, Wilhite became deeply involved in Mesa College's Psi Beta chapter, serving as treasurer, vice president and twice as president while organizing the largest psychology event in chapter history.

"Joining Psi Beta National Honor Society at San Diego Mesa College has been life-changing for me," Wilhite said. Now studying at Cal Poly Humboldt while continuing coursework at Mesa College, Wilhite hopes to build a career in corporate wellness, crediting mentorship, and leadership opportunities at Mesa College for helping her discover a new path forward.

Miramar College earns award for student wellness

San Diego Miramar College's Mental Health and Wellness Services Department has received the 2026 Excellence in Mental Health and Well-Being Award from Insight Into Academia magazine. The recognition is a measure of an institution's individual programs and initiatives that significantly advance core values of student and employee mental health and well-being through programs, initiatives, and other campus priorities deserving of this national recognition.

SDCCE receives approval to launch vocational nurse training program

San Diego College of Continuing Education has received state approval from the California Board of Vocational Nursing and Psychiatric Technicians (BVNPT) to launch a new Vocational Nurse Training Program, expanding tuition-free pathways for students seeking careers in healthcare.

The first cohort of 20 students is scheduled to begin in August 2027, with classes taking place at SDCCE's Harbor View Campus in Barrio Logan. Applications for the first cohort will be available in January.

SDCCD TO CREATE AFFORDABLE HOUSING FOR STUDENT FAMILIES

A long-term lease agreement will convert a downtown office building into approximately 60 units

THE SAN DIEGO COMMUNITY COLLEGE DISTRICT Board of Trustees has approved a long-term lease agreement that will transform an existing downtown San Diego office building into approximately 60 affordable housing units for students with partners and dependent children. Located at 845 15th St., the six-story building will be converted into one- and two-bedroom apartments with occupancy anticipated in 2028.

Under a build-to-suit agreement with developer L2HP, the project is expected to provide rents substantially below market rates, helping address one of the most significant barriers to student success: housing insecurity. District officials say the housing community will offer student families access to affordable living near educational programs, public transit, employment centers, and essential services.

The project, which would be open to students attending any of the SDCCD's four colleges, builds on the District's broader student housing strategy, which includes the nearly 800-bed affordable student housing community currently under construction at nearby San Diego City College. Together, the initiatives support the goals of SDCCD's $3.5 billion voter-approved Measure HH bond to expand educational opportunity and improve student success.

"Housing insecurity remains one of the greatest barriers to educational attainment for many students," said SDCCD Chancellor Gregory Smith. "When students and their loved ones have a safe and affordable place to live, they can stay enrolled, complete their programs, and build a foundation for lifelong prosperity."

Board President Geysil Arroyo said the project reflects the District's commitment to supporting student parents and caregivers. "This is about more than housing," Arroyo said. "It is about creating stability, expanding access to education, and helping students succeed."



The building at 845 15th St. will be converted into one- and two-bedroom apartments with occupancy anticipated in 2028.

MEASURE HH

Keeping campuses running smoothly

Inside SDCCD's Capital Renovation and Renewal program

Measure HH is often associated with high-profile projects such as new theaters, student housing, and innovative classroom space, but some of the bond measure's most important work is on a much smaller scale and often behind the scenes.

Across San Diego City, Mesa, Miramar, and Continuing Education colleges, as well as District facilities, the Capital Renovation and Renewal program is funding nearly 200 projects that improve safety, modernize aging infrastructure, and protect the long-term value of District facilities. While these efforts rarely attract ribbon-cuttings, they help ensure that students and employees have reliable spaces to learn, teach, and work every day.

CAPITAL RENOVATION AND RENEWAL PROJECTS
(as of September 2026)

21	68
In progress	Completed

CRR projects generally fall into four categories: infrastructure upgrades, such as mechanical, electrical, and plumbing systems; safety and code compliance improvements; facility modernization projects; and site improvements, including pathways, fencing, and exterior repairs.

Many of these projects have construction values under $220,000, allowing them to move from identified need to completion much faster than major capital projects. Just as importantly, they help address issues before they become larger, more disruptive, and more expensive problems.

Recent projects illustrate the wide-reaching impact of the program. At City College, aging overhead gate doors were replaced at the Career Technology Center and the math and social sciences parking structures. Improvements were also made to the Career Center to better support students preparing for internships and transfer opportunities.

At Mesa College, crews replaced a failing condenser coil in the G-building chiller system, helping maintain comfortable learning environments while avoiding a potentially significant equipment failure. The college also upgraded fencing and netting at the baseball field and restored a heavily worn gymnasium floor used by student-athletes, physical education classes, and community groups.

"The improvements to our athletics facilities directly affect the student-athlete experience, and their level of play, every day," said Ryan Shumaker, dean of the School of Exercise Science, Health Education, Dance, and Athletics at Mesa College. "Whether it's a safer gym floor or upgrades that improve the functionality of our athletic fields and facilities, these projects create better environments to protect our neighboring community members as well as for students to learn, train, and succeed."

Elsewhere, Miramar College strengthened the fire sprinkler system in Building W, College of Continuing Education installed panic button systems at five campuses, and the District Services Center in Mission Valley received a new roof.

While smaller in scale than new construction projects, CRR investments play a vital role in fulfilling the promise of Measure HH. By improving safety, extending the life of facilities, and reducing future maintenance costs, these projects help protect public investments while supporting the thousands of students and employees who rely on District facilities every day.

Learning beyond the classroom

Students from throughout the San Diego region partnered with various Measure HH program management partners over the summer for hands-on internships.

While working alongside industry professionals to help shape their future goals, students gained experience through a variety of activities, including attending weekly site inspections, participating in safety training, scheduling milestone tracking, and coordinating campus operations.

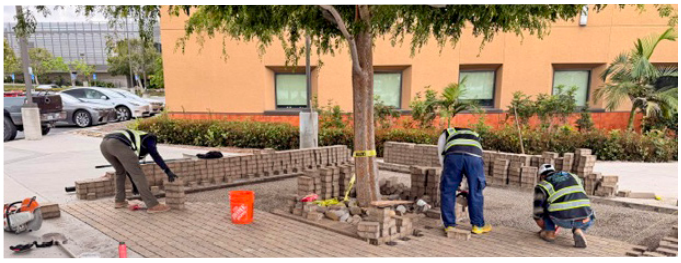
"Every day we're talking about how this is going to impact people lives," said Mesa College architectural design student **Lawrence Isaiah Jose,** who interned with Kitchell, one of the three program management firms selected to provide strategic oversight, financial accountability, and expert coordination for the effective use of bond funds. "I am helping create a beautiful community that will impact the lives of generations of students to come."



Small business makes big impact

A brick walkway outside Miramar College's administration building, long buckled by tree roots into a tripping hazard, was fully restored over the summer – work too big for campus grounds crews, but a perfect fit for PowerOn Construction.

Behind the leadership of PowerOn Construction President Casey Stoute, a crew from the a certified small, veteran- and minority-owned firm, worked around class schedules and foot traffic to fix the issue without ever closing the path. This kind of attentiveness is what smaller, local contractors often bring and that larger firms may lack, said Miramar Director of College Facilities and Operations Dan Gutowski.



Learn more about CRR projects, small business opportunities, and other Measure HH related news at sdccd.edu/measure-hh.

"A program the size of Measure HH can either overlook small, local firms or intentionally make room for them. We chose the latter," said Joel Peterson, vice chancellor for Operations, Enterprise Services, and Facilities.

STUDENT VOICES IN LEADERSHIP



Meet the students representing City, Mesa, Miramar, and Continuing Education colleges during SDCCD Board of Trustees meetings

Every student brings a unique story to San Diego Community College District, and this year's four student leaders are helping ensure those stories are heard. Throughout the 2026-27 academic year, the presidents of the Associated Student Governments at San Diego City, Mesa, Miramar, and Continuing Education colleges will serve on a rotating basis at Board of Trustees meetings, representing the hopes, concerns, and experiences of the students they serve. From aspiring attorneys and healthcare professionals to future leaders in communications and public safety, each is driven by a desire to make a difference. Together, they will help bridge the gap between students and District leadership, ensuring student voices remain at the heart of important conversations and decisions.

JESSE LOPEZ, CITY COLLEGE

Learning about others' perspectives and taking action on resolutions drafted by his student government peers throughout the state is a driving force behind why Lopez decided to run for ASG president for City College last year. The second-year student is studying political science and history and has aspirations of becoming an attorney after transferring to a four-year college then law school.

Lopez is looking forward to meeting with state and national political representatives of the San Diego region to share with them not only those issues affecting City College, but schools around the greater region.

"It's really exciting. In this political climate, I really just want to help anyone and everyone," he said. "Getting involved is the best thing I could have ever done."

From left: Miranda Augelli, Mesa College; Jesse Lopez, City College; Hiasnaia Agudelo Cano, College of Continuing Education; and Michael Fuzy V, Miramar College.

During the upcoming year, Lopez is looking forward to learning more about how solutions are brought to the table and resolutions get passed to address various issues.

MIRANDA AUGELLI, MESA COLLEGE

Augelli, who is taking classes toward an associate degree in communication studies, was drawn to student government so that she could help serve others. Becoming Associated Students president is an extension of her desire to help people, which also manifests in the volunteer work she has done with Corazón de Niño, Children's Rehabilitation Institute Teleton, Ciudad de los niños Tijuana, and The Justice Workshop. In the year ahead, she is most looking forward to hearing from students as they express their concerns and hopes for Mesa College so that she might be able to help improve their college experience.

"Every student is the voice and the heart of our school," she said. "And the fact that I have the opportunity to represent that is amazing."

After graduating from Mesa College, Augelli plans to transfer to a four-year university to earn a bachelor's degree and eventually work in the film and entertainment industry.

MICHAEL FUZY V, MIRAMAR COLLEGE

Fuzy is enrolled in Miramar College's inaugural baccalaureate degree in public safety program, which will have its first commencement in spring 2027. He joined the program after receiving Administration of Justice for transfer degree from the college in 2025.

Becoming ASG president was happenstance for Fuzy who stumbled upon student government while acting as secretary of the college's Business Club. Once he found the opportunity, he said he ran with it, starting first as a senator before serving as an alternate and primary delegate, then treasurer for the Student Senate for California Community Colleges at the state level.

During his time at Miramar College, Fuzy noted missed opportunities for elevating resources available to students.

"One of the things I've seen make an impact around my campus is really just getting involved," he said. "That way you can help find solutions that much easier."

HIASNAIA AGUDELO CANO, COLLEGE OF CONTINUING EDUCATION

Born and raised in Colombia, and before moving to the United States, Agudelo Cano spent seven years teaching high school math and physics.

She is currently enrolled in a Total Body Strength and Balance course at College of Continuing Education's Mesa College campus, while also taking English, biology and psychology classes at Mesa College. Her future goal: become a nurse and work for UC San Diego Hospital.

When asked what advice she has for students looking to get involved at SDCCE, she said: "If you have questions, just ask. Be open to receive help; there are a lot of people that are going to want to help you back."

In her spare time, she volunteers with multiple organizations including weekly with the Streets of Hope San Diego, an organization that helps unhoused and at-risk youth. Her motto: "You grow up more when you help others to be successful."



Then-SDCCD Chancellor Constance M. Carroll, alongside then-San Diego Unified School District Superintendant Cindy Marten, announced the launch of the San Diego Promise during a 2016 new conference at Mesa College.

SPECIAL EDITION

Celebrating a decade of promising FUTURES

TEN YEARS AGO THIS FALL, A DREAM TOOK ROOT AT THE SAN DIEGO COMMUNITY COLLEGE DISTRICT: that a student's ZIP code or family income would never again determine whether they could afford an opportunity for a first-class higher education.

Launched as a pilot program with186 students in 2016, the San Diego Promise arrived at a moment of strain for the nation's community colleges. More than 10 million students across the United States were enrolled in for-credit courses; however, far too many potential healthcare workers, first responders, technicians, educators, and community leaders were being priced out of their own futures. Here in California, the average tuition and fees for full-time students at public two-year colleges rose 58% after adjusting for inflation during a five-year period ending in 2014-15.

Recognizing the indispensable importance of a community college education, President Barack Obama followed the advice of Second Lady Jill Biden, who was also a community college professor. During his 2015 State of the Union address, President Obama proposed America's College Promise, a blueprint encouraging states and local colleges to provide a free, two-year community college education in exchange for meeting academic benchmarks. Dr. Jill Biden was appointed honorary chair of the College Promise National Advisory Board and became the face of a national movement.

During my tenure as chancellor, SDCCD was on the cutting edge of that movement. And for good reason. While approximately 1.1 million California community college students paid no fees under the former Board of Governors Fee Waiver program, nearly 1 million others had to fend for themselves. In 2016, nearly 7 in 10 SDCCD students were struggling to support themselves or their families in an extremely difficult economy.

At the start, we recognized that covering the cost of tuition was not enough, since there were many other requirements and needs that students had. The San Diego Promise would also provide book grants, academic counseling, and peer mentoring to help students develop an educational plan for meeting their career and academic goals. These and other cohort-based programs became the foundation for improved student outcomes among participating students.

To uplift the program, we turned to our community for help, and it stepped up in a big way. Then-San Diego Mayor Kevin Faulconer connected the District with local leaders such as Padres owners Ron Fowler and Peter and Sheel Seidler. Longtime friend, five-time Oscar nominee and San Diego Mesa College alumna Annette Bening also recognized the Promise's transformational impact and helped drive fundraising. Vice Chancellor Susan Topham, former Vice Chancellor Lynn Ceresino Neault, and Executive Vice Chancellor Bonnie Dowd were among those at the forefront of efforts to establish and grow the initiative. District employees — college faculty, professional staff, and administrators who could most easily witness the program's power to transform lives — gave generously, as did longtime philanthropist Roger Frey, the San Diego Foundation, Price Philanthropies, U.S. Bank, and others.

Since then, the investment has paid and is paying rich dividends. Among our San Diego Promise students: Karin Rosibel Angel, who was living in her car when she wasn't sleeping on a couch, thrived at San Diego City College thanks to the Promise, earned her associate degree with honors, and secured a full-ride scholarship to the University of San Diego; and Ana Zavala Li-Ho, now a lab tech at a San Diego biotech company, who transferred to and graduated from UC San Diego with the Promise's support.

The San Diego Promise has evolved since its founding a decade ago. Tuition, health fees, and book grants are now covered for up to two years, and each student receives a new laptop. A record 3,490 students were a part of the program's incoming cohort last year. In all, nearly 20,000 students have benefited from the San Diego Promise since its launch through the 2025-26 academic year.

Community colleges address three important benefits for students and the community: high quality education, access, and affordability. The San Diego Promise addresses all three. During this 10th anniversary of the San Diego Promise, we celebrate with our community, who held fast to a dream and helped it become reality. Any student who dreams of going to college can now do so, tuition-free.

Sincerely,



DR. CONSTANCE M. CARROLL
CHANCELLOR EMERITA, SAN DIEGO COMMUNITY COLLEGE DISTRICT
MEMBER, COLLEGE PROMISE NATIONAL ADVISORY BOARD

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10 YEARS
SAN DIEGO PROMISE

Powered by Promise

TEN YEARS AFTER ITS LAUNCH, THE FREE-TUITION PROGRAM CONTINUES TO TRANSFORM FUTURES AND STRENGTHEN COMMUNITIES

BY DAVID OGUL

TEN YEARS AGO, JERUSALEN DAVILA WASN'T SURE COLLEGE WAS IN HER FUTURE. Raised in a low-income household in City Heights after coming to the United States as a young child, Davila arrived at San Diego City College seeking an opportunity. What she found from enrolling in the San Diego Promise program was something more: financial security, mentors, a community of support, and a pathway she never imagined possible. Today, she is pursuing a doctorate at UCLA, mentoring students, and helping others navigate the college journey she once faced herself.

"I really learned from the Promise community at City," Davila said. "It really informed my journey. And it really opened a lot of doors."

Her story is exactly why the San Diego Community College District launched the San Diego Promise in 2016: to ensure that financial barriers do not prevent talented students from pursuing higher education and achieving their goals.

For the past decade, the program has done just that. Nearly 20,000 students have benefited from the Promise through the 2025-26 academic year, using its combination of tuition support, counseling, mentoring, and student services to earn degrees and certificates, transfer to four-year universities, and launch meaningful careers. Among them are a growing family of current students and alumni like Phoebe Truong, who transferred to UC Berkeley after serving as student body president at San Diego Mesa College, and Zeeshan Mohamedy, who credits the Promise with helping him discover a career path that ultimately led him to graduate studies in mechanical and mechatronics engineering in Canada.

From the 186-student pilot program, the Promise has grown into one of the region's most influential student success initiatives. District data show participants consistently outperform their peers in key measures including unit completion, degree attainment, and campus engagement.

NEARLY

20K

students have benefited from the program through the 2025-26 academic year, using its combination of tuition support, counseling, mentoring, and student services to earn degrees and certificates, transfer to four-year universities, and launch meaningful careers

As enrollment has grown, so has the range of populations the program serves. Thanks to changes in state law and steadfast support from the philanthropic community, local residents, and SDCCD employees, the San Diego Promise is no longer limited to first-time, full-time students straight out of high school. Among the growing population of participants: former foster youth, veterans, and formerly incarcerated students; former San Diego College of Continuing Education students who weren't recent high school graduates; and students who completed their first year but couldn't attend full time in their second.

"One of the largest groups we're seeing now is active-duty military, veterans, and military dependents," said Andrew 'Luke' Menchaca, dean of Outreach and Student Affairs.

Menchaca also recounted a recent conference call with a group of adults eager to learn about the program. When he asked where they were calling from, they said they were incarcerated — a guard had told them about the San Diego Promise and arranged the call because they were due to be released within weeks. All of them applied, and all were accepted into the Promise after serving their time.

In recognition of the 10th anniversary of the San Diego Promise program, read on to learn more about the inspiring journeys of just a handful of our current and past San Diego Promise students.



Jillian Fortner

SAN DIEGO MIRAMAR AND CITY COLLEGES ALUMNA
Associate of arts, **communication and media studies and certificate of achievement, broadcast news**
San Diego Promise class: **2019**

For Jillian Fortner, mornings look a little different now than when she was a student at San Diego Miramar and City colleges. Her alarm rings at 1 a.m. before heading to work at 2 a.m. She takes her place in front of a TV camera at KTVZ by 5 a.m. where she provides the residents of the Bend, Oregon, area with their morning weather.

Fortner, who entered Miramar College in 2019 as a San Diego Promise student after graduating from Classical Academy High School in Escondido, considers herself a lifelong learner. After receiving her associate of arts, communication and media studies in 2021, she continued her education at both UC San Diego and San Diego City College, the latter for which she was on the staff with CTTV/Newscene broadcast news — a role in which she earned a student Emmy in 2023. Now, she's expanding her knowledge by working toward a Bachelor of Science in geoscience with a concentration in broadcast and operational meteorology from Mississippi State University.

"The Promise felt like joining a community. It wasn't just financial support. It was a built-in support system. The Promise staff helped guide me through all of that. They were always supportive, welcoming, and encouraging."

Time spent in the San Diego Promise program was not typical for Fortner, who was only on campus at Miramar College for a few months before everything shut down due to the COVID-19 pandemic. She recalls with fondness the unique commencement ceremony.

"It wasn't what I expected graduation to look like, but it was still special," she said. "We decorated the car, celebrated with family, and I genuinely felt recognized and appreciated."

Fortner's appreciation was mirrored in her reflections on the San Diego Promise program.

"The Promise felt like joining a community. It wasn't just financial support. It was a built-in support system," she said. "The Promise staff helped guide me through all of that. They were always supportive, welcoming, and encouraging. They made me excited to be part of the San Diego Community College District."

In 2020, when asked how the San Diego Promise was setting her up for success, she said it was helping her transfer to her dream school of UCSD. Mission accomplished, and so much more.



"It was beautiful to step into a safe space that is focused on accepting and uplifting you, while also encouraging and guiding you to take the next step."

Samara Seaton

SAN DIEGO MESA COLLEGE
Studying Communication and Marketing
(estimated graduation date: December 2026)
San Diego Promise class: **2024**

Samara Seaton was facing the same dilemma plenty of high school graduates confront when contemplating the debt needed to afford the rising costs of a university tuition, room, and board, as well as other associated expenses. She took her 4.2 high school GPA and enrolled at Mesa College instead, benefiting from the San Diego Promise, its wraparound student support services, and community building opportunities.

That was in the fall 2024. Now, she is set to graduate with associate degrees in communication and marketing in December 2026. She will join the junior class at Cal State Long Beach in the spring 2027. Her long-term plans: a dual Master of Business Administration/Juris Doctor program and her own business in the entertainment and media industry.

It's a long way from her initial plans for an associate degree in bioengineering. The way Seaton sees it, changing majors at a four-year college or university could have been cost-prohibitive, pressuring her to continue along an unrewarding career path.

"The San Diego Promise allowed me to explore college without taking a gamble," Seaton said. "It allowed me to move forward on my terms, to explore my interests without the financial pressures, and it help me find community through my involvement with Umoja, the honors club, and as a peer navigator."

Born in Los Angeles and living with her family on the East Coast during her grammar school years, Seaton moved back to California when her mother, Janue Johnson-Seaton, was offered a position as an assistant professor and professional learning coordinator at the Mesa College LOFT program (Learning Opportunities for Transformation).

Seaton said she was an overachiever at San Diego High School, a straight-A student who served as co-captain of the dance



team, and "was involved in every club." Acceptance letters were sent to her from several University of California campuses. To many, it was a surprise she opted not to choose that route. But Mesa College and the San Diego Promise made too much sense.

"Don't underestimate the power of a community college," said Seaton. Or the benefits of the San Diego Promise.

"It was beautiful to be able to do something that bettered my future. It was beautiful to step into a safe space that is focused on accepting and uplifting you, while also encouraging and guiding you to take the next step."

Obed Morales Betanzo

SAN DIEGO CITY COLLEGE ALUMNUS
Associate of arts, **child development**
San Diego Promise class: **2016**



"It ... gave me the confidence to pursue my goals."

Obed Morales Betanzo has come full circle. Morales enrolled at City College in fall 2016 as part of the inaugural San Diego Promise cohort. Now — after earning an associate degree in child development from City College, and a bachelor's degree in child and family development and master's degree in education counseling from San Diego State University — he's back at City College as an adjunct professor, determined to earn tenure at the school that helped change his life.

He credits the San Diego Promise for fueling his success.

"The program impacted me in many ways," Morales said. "It was a first step and gave me the confidence to pursue my goals."

He learned about the opportunity while in the Child Development program at San Diego College of Continuing Education, the adult-education division of the SDCCD.

He later used the San Diego Promise to support his transition to City College, where he was part of the Phi Theta Kappa international honor society. That was followed by undergraduate and graduate programs at SDSU where he participated in a study-abroad program in Kathmandu, Nepal, through the university's College of Education.

Attending SDSU would not have been possible without the San Diego Promise.

"The guidance the Promise program provided was critical," he said. "I wouldn't have known anything about FAFSA, I wouldn't have known anything about how to sign up for classes, I wouldn't have known about any of these things you need to succeed in college."

Morales has been passing on the knowledge he gained to a new generation of students. His work experience includes serving as an instructor at a San Diego charter school, a guest teacher for the South Bay Union School District, and an instructor of introductory courses at City College. He has also worked as an academic coach and lecturer at SDSU.

His future plans? "Education and giving back to the community," Morales said. "Being part of the first San Diego Promise cohort and graduating from City have strengthened my commitment to supporting underserved demographics."



Phillip Kist

SAN DIEGO MIRAMAR COLLEGE ALUMNUS
Associate degree for transfer, **mathematics**
San Diego Promise class: **2016**

Phillip Kist made the most of the San Diego Promise, completing 18 units in his first semester as part of the program's inaugural cohort in fall 2016. "They're giving me an incredible opportunity, so I decided to do the best I could and stock up on classes," he said at the time. "This program has helped a lot and provided the motivation to succeed."

Indeed, it did. Kist, an alumnus of University City High School, took classes at City, Mesa, and Miramar colleges, earning an associate degree for transfer in mathematics from Miramar College in 2019 before transferring to San Diego State University. He landed a job as a junior civil engineer in New York while still an SDSU senior, then graduated with a bachelor's degree in civil engineering in 2021. Three years later, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority hired him as a drainage engineer for the Metro-North Railroad, where he's worked out of Grand Central Terminal for about 18 months.

He is an ardent advocate of the San Diego Promise.

"A lot of people focus on the money, but there were a lot of benefits that weren't monetary: the connections, the support system, the ability to have a one-on-one with a school counselor. And they also had a mentor and outreach group that worked with us," he said.

Kist tutored math part time at Miramar College and now mentors community college students near his home in Danbury, Connecticut.

"I don't know if I'd be here without the Promise. If so, it certainly would have been more of a struggle. The communication and direction provided through the Promise helped me understand higher education," said Kist, who passed on that insight to a brother who later earned a business finance degree from Cal State Los Angeles and now works for the County of Los Angeles.

"The Promise offered a really good start to growing up. It gave me the resources and allowed me to go to a smaller college where you could develop meaningful relationships with people who care about you," he said. "You have smaller classes taught by professionals in their field, whose primary focus is teaching. It also let me stay home with my parents while going to college instead of spending money on rent and food."

"I don't know if I'd be here without the Promise. If so, it certainly would have been more of a struggle."

"When you reduce all these barriers to accessing higher education, you're opening the doors to so many people from so many populations who otherwise might not have an opportunity."



Phoebe Truong

SAN DIEGO MESA COLLEGE ALUMNA
Associate degree for transfer, **sociology**
San Diego Promise class: **2021**

When a family emergency kept Phoebe Truong from attending UC Santa Cruz after graduating from University City High School, the San Diego Promise provided her with a pathway to a future even more rewarding than she had previously imagined.

Mesa College was just a few minutes from her home, and virtually everyone else in her immediate family had gone there. The Promise program's dedicated counselors, required orientations, and help in creating an educational plan made the last-minute decision to enroll at the family alma mater almost seamless.

"It was an uncomplicated process," Truong said. "The Promise also made it possible for me to attend college without worrying about the financial aspect. I don't think I would have — at least not right away — been able to continue my educational journey without the Promise."

At Mesa College, Truong found work as an Outreach ambassador and administrative assistant in the Honors Program. She was elected Associated Students president, a position that led to an appointment as a student representative on the SDCCD's Board of Trustees, as well as opportunities to take part in the Community College League of California's Annual Legislative Conference in Sacramento and the Association of Community College Trustees' National Legislative Summit in Washington, D.C.

Graduating with an associate degree for transfer in sociology from Mesa College in 2023, Truong continued her studies at UC Berkeley. There, she remained active in student and campus affairs, working with the Transfer Student Center to help transfer students like herself navigate the academic and cultural landscape at one of the top research universities in the world. Other opportunities included interning at the UC Berkeley Basic Needs Center.

Truong graduated from Berkeley in 2025 with a bachelor's degree in society and environment and a minor in public policy. She's currently living in San Francisco and working remotely for a San Diego-based accounting firm while exploring law school or a similar postgraduate program for a career in public service. A return to San Diego in a professional role with Mesa College is not out of the question.

"When you reduce all these barriers to accessing higher education, you're opening the doors to so many people from so many populations who otherwise might not have an opportunity," said Truong. "The Promise really is making a difference."

Zeeshan Mohamedy

SAN DIEGO CITY, MESA, AND MIRAMAR COLLEGES
Completed 48 units in one year before transferring to UC San Diego
San Diego Promise class: **2018**



"Having the opportunity to go to a community college and have the freedom to change tracks, while also getting ahead, helped me discover what I really wanted to do."

When academic standout Zeeshan Mohamedy used the San Diego Promise to enroll at the San Diego Community College District in 2018, his story inspired a community.

As Mohamedy explains it, Westview High School — his alma mater — is often ranked among the region's top academic performers. The competition for acceptance into the finest universities can be fierce, particularly for a first-generation American in the local Pakistani community. When he opted for classes at City, Mesa, and Miramar colleges instead, it raised more than a few eyebrows.

"Word got around," Mohamedy said. "Not everyone was happy. But it inspired a lot of younger kids to go to a community college, too."

Which only makes sense.

"At the Poway and San Dieguito high school districts, the pressure can be ridiculous," Mohamedy said. "You have to take up to a dozen or more AP classes to get into some of the schools you feel like you need to get into. Then there's the financial aspect: why pay for something when you don't have to?"

Not that Mohamedy was an academic slouch. He wrapped up his prerequisites to transfer to UC San Diego within a year by taking 10 units in the summer, 23 in the fall, nine during winter intersession, and 15 in spring — most of which were taken at Mesa College. At UCSD, Mohamedy majored in cognitive science, with a specialization in machine learning and neural computation. He graduated with a bachelor's degree in 2021.

He went on to work as an AI model trainer, but company cutbacks in the rapidly evolving field led him to consulting work and launching a marketing company. A stint with an AI robotics company in 2026 sparked a passion for that field, leading Mohamedy to enroll in a graduate program in mechanical and mechatronics engineering at the University of Waterloo in Ontario, Canada, home to a highly renowned Department of Mechanical and Mechatronics Engineering.

As he looks back on his journey, Mohamedy is more certain than ever about the higher education path he chose through the Promise. "Having the opportunity to go to a community college and have the freedom to change tracks, while also getting ahead, helped me discover what I really wanted to do."



Jerusalen Davila is paying it forward.

Born in Ixtlahuaca de Rayón, near Mexico City, and raised in a low-income household in City Heights, Davila wasn't expecting to go to college right out of high school. But at City College, the San Diego Promise gave her something more than free tuition — it gave her a foothold.

"The San Diego Promise gave me the financial security and the mentors I needed," said Davila, a Hoover High School graduate. "When I got to City, there were people who were willing to help me, there were spaces that welcomed me. I felt welcomed. I had a support system in place already, and I had individuals I could reach out to."

She threw herself into that support sys-



tem, joining the Puente Project, EOPS, First Year Services, and the Dreamer Resource Center. She joined City College's Honors Program and made the Dean's List all three years she attended. That foundation carried her far. After earning an associate degree in sociology, Davila transferred to UC Berkeley for a bachelor's degree in Chicano/Chicana Studies and is now a second-year doctoral student at UCLA on a full-ride scholarship.

Now 27 and living in Culver City, Davila is turning her own experience into a career built around helping others navigate the path she once walked. As a graduate researcher, she works with high school students in Koreatown and South Los Angeles on the finer points of college applications, and she mentors undergraduates at UCLA. She hopes to build a career in academia — and hasn't ruled out one day returning to teach, or becoming an administrator, at City College. In the meantime, she's taken part in more than a dozen conference presentations focusing on her research into the challenges facing undocumented students. Her focus includes undocumented college students, Latine college students, community colleges, transfer students, and college access.

A decade after first stepping onto City College's downtown campus, Davila said the San Diego Promise still shapes how she sees herself and her work.

"The Promise has been a part of me for 10 years now," she said.

Jerusalen Davila

SAN DIEGO CITY COLLEGE ALUMNA
Associate of arts, **sociology**
San Diego Promise class: **2017**

"I felt welcomed. I had a support system in place already, and I had individuals I could reach out to."

The ripple effect

From individual achievement to regional prosperity, the benefits of free tuition continue to compound

BY LESLIE STUMP



TEN YEARS AFTER ITS launch, the San Diego Promise is delivering benefits far beyond the classroom. A new economic impact analysis by labor market analytics firm Lightcast estimates the program has generated more than $1 billion in combined economic and social benefits, demonstrating how investments in student success strengthen communities and local economies.

Since 2016, the San Diego Promise has expanded from an inaugural cohort of 186 students to nearly 3,500 incoming students last year. The program provides eligible students with up to two years of tuition-free education at San Diego City, Mesa, and Miramar colleges, along with dedicated counselors and other support services that help students persist and succeed.

"The San Diego Promise ensures college is affordable for everyone," said San Diego Community College District Chancellor Gregory Smith. "Through this program, we are building a brighter future each student, their diverse families, and the greater San Diego community."

The program's impact has long been evident in student success stories. Now, for the first time, researchers have quantified its broader value to society.

According to the analysis, former San Diego Promise students are projected to generate $642.6 million in added personal income over their working lives. Their education and skills are also expected to create $352.1 million in added business income while reducing costs associated with health care, income assistance, and the justice system by an estimated $18.2 million. Together, those benefits exceed $1 billion.

"I don't know what our story would be without the San Diego Promise," said Aurora Alvarez, a San Diego College of Continuing Education student who transitioned to City College to study psychology. Her son also participated in the program before transferring to San Francisco State University. "I honestly thought we wouldn't make it. School in this country is so expensive."

The study found significant returns for students as well. The average San Diego Promise associate degree graduate is expected to earn approximately $10,200 more annually than someone with a high school diploma, translating to nearly $480,000 in additional lifetime earnings.

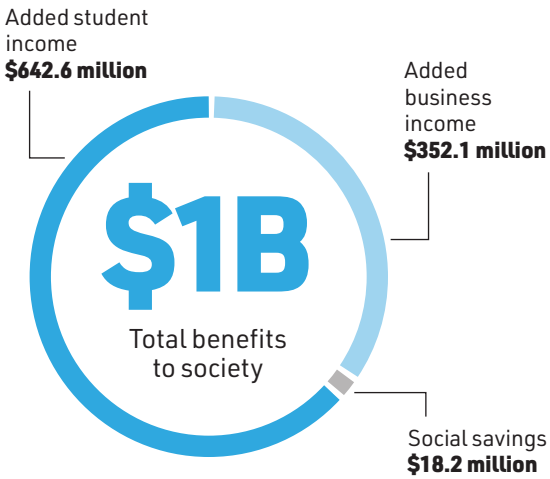
Taxpayers benefit, too. Researchers found that every public dollar invested in the San Diego Promise is expected to return $5.70 through increased tax revenues and reduced demand for public services.

That impact is already emerging. In fiscal year 2024-25 alone, alumni working in San Diego County generated $3.5 million in added income to the regional economy, a figure expected to grow as more Promise students complete their education and enter the workforce.

As the San Diego Promise enters its second decade, the study affirms what students, educators, donors, and community supporters have seen for years: expanding access to higher education creates lasting benefits for individuals, families, and the region.

"The San Diego Promise is more than a scholarship — it's a long-term investment in the people, potential, and prosperity of San Diego County," the study concludes.

SOCIAL BENEFITS IN CALIFORNIA FROM SAN DIEGO PROMISE



Source: Lightcast impact model



By the numbers

$3,866,430

Assembly Bill 19 California College Promise funding expected in 2026-27 for the District's three colleges. These state funds support traditional first-time college students.

NEARLY

$3.5M

Monies raised since 2016 through support of generous donors to uplift students who fall outside of AB 19 funding.

MORE THAN

$200,000

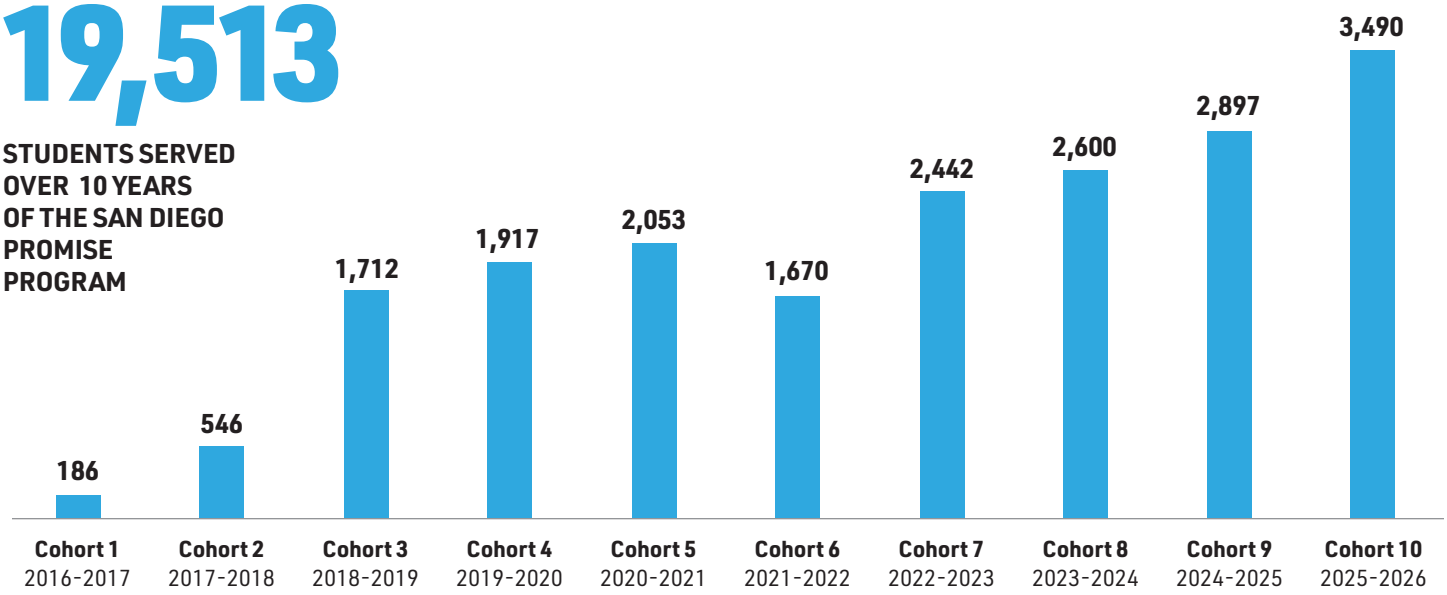
Emergency funds provided to 431 San Diego Promise students during the 2025-2026 academic year – about $465 each – for unexpected costs that could have derailed a student's progress.

"The San Diego Promise is more than a scholarship – it's a long-term investment in the people, potential, and prosperity of San Diego County."

ECONOMIC IMPACT ANALYSIS BY LIGHTCAST

19,513

STUDENTS SERVED OVER 10 YEARS OF THE SAN DIEGO PROMISE PROGRAM



Donors are helping students pursue brighter futures

Legacy of opportunity

BY ANNE KRUEGER



"It was in my DNA. Support for public education is a core value for my family."

San Diego Promise donor Becky Phillpott with husband Steve

EVERY YEAR, THOUSANDS of students arrive at San Diego Community College District campuses carrying dreams that often compete with financial realities. Some are the first in their families to attend college. Others are balancing school with work, military service, or family responsibilities. For many, the San Diego Promise helps turn college from a possibility into a reality.

Behind that opportunity is a community of supporters who believe that potential should never be limited by financial barriers. Among them are San Diego Promise donors Fred Colby and Becky and Steve Phillpott who understand the power of education to transform lives.

Colby says his life was changed by a San Diego Mesa College political science professor who sparked a love of learning. Colby, who had dropped out of two colleges before attending Mesa College, went on to earn a bachelor's degree at Claremont McKenna College and pursue a career as head of the San Diego Arts Foundation.

When Colby looks at today's students, he sees many who are facing costs and pressures that can make a college education feel out of reach. His support helps ensure that the next generation has access to the same life-changing opportunity he found at Mesa College more than five decades ago.

"I wanted to give students something that says 'we care about you; we want to support you,' " Colby said. "It's to make it easier for students so that they know one person cares about them and wants them to succeed."

Time and again, Colby continues to deliver on his promise to support students, including a generous pledge for a $25,000 matching gift during the October Keeping the Promise giving day.

In addition to directly supporting the San Diego Promise, Colby also sponsors a scholarship fund at Mesa College named after Fred Horn, the professor who inspired him. He also funds a scholarship at the community college in Fort Collins, Colorado, where he now lives.

Colby stayed in touch with professors and mentors from the SDCCD after he graduated from Mesa College in 1970. Just shy of two decades later, in 1988, he was elected to the District's Board of Trustees where he served two four-year terms.

Community college was free when Colby attended, and although it's still reasonably priced, Colby said he supports the San Diego Promise because he knew students can be burdened with expenses while attending college.

"When you start in education, it can be pretty intense and it can be pretty demanding," he said. "It can be overwhelming. The financial side of it can be a killer."

Becky and Steve Phillpott of Scripps Ranch are also supporting the San Diego Promise because of their strong belief in the power of

education.

Becky's parents, both elementary school principals, always emphasized the importance of education.

"It was in my DNA," she said. "Support for public education is a core value for my family."

Both Becky and Steve took community college classes, and their three children all attended SDCCD colleges. After serving in the Navy, Steve was the chief information officer for Western Digital in San Jose for eight years in addition to working for several major technology and biotech companies. Becky is a longtime member of the SDCCD Trustee Advisory Council.

Becky said they want to help make sure community college is accessible to everyone.

"The Promise program gives the opportunity for students who do not have the economic means otherwise to go to college," she said.



"I wanted to give students something that says 'we care about you; we want to support you.' "

Fred Colby, 1970 graduate of Mesa College

Steve said the dedicated counseling and tutoring offered through the Promise program is important for students.

"One of the values of the Promise program is the support network," he said. "The support network helps to improve the success rates for students."

Ten years after the launch of the San Diego Promise, thousands of students have earned degrees, transferred to universities, and begun careers they may never have imagined when they first stepped onto campus. Behind many of those journeys is a community of supporters who chose to invest in possibility.

Their gifts do more than cover educational expenses. They send a powerful message to students across San Diego County: someone believes in your future.



Supporters of the San Diego Promise gathered in 2025 for a luncheon at Balboa Park.

Growing support

In the 10 years since the San Diego Promise program was launched at the San Diego Community College District, generous donors have given almost $3.5 million to provide a free education for thousands of students at the District's colleges.

The funds came from a variety of sources. A gala in 2018 honoring actress Annette Bening, a San Diego Mesa College alumna, raised more than $200,000 to fund tuition fees, textbook grants, and support for students. Born from that event was the Annette Bening Promise scholarship, which each year provides $500 to one Promise student each at San Diego City, Mesa, and Miramar colleges, as well as one from College of Continuing Education looking to transfer into the Promise program. The student must demonstrate academic excellence and a commitment to service.

10 YEARS

SAN DIEGO PROMISE

If you would like to make an impact on students' lives through the San Diego Promise, visit sdccd.edu/donate.

Former SDCCD Chancellor Constance M. Carroll was a strong advocate of the Promise program, and an event celebrating her 2021 retirement, along with a $200,000 donation from the San Diego Foundation, bolstered program funding.

In addition to hosting major events, the SDCCD has put on a Keeping the Promise giving day in October since 2018. The annual giving day has celebrated students by bringing together hundreds of new and existing donors and has raised more than a total of $153,000. At times, individual donations were bolstered by matching gifts from community partners.

Vice Chancellor of Development and Entrepreneurship Laurie Coskey said SDCCD focuses its efforts on raising funds for students who are not covered by the statewide Promise that guarantees free tuition for first-time, full-time students. The additional students include part-time students, students with disabilities, formerly incarcerated students, or military and military dependents.

"The Promise is a program of opportunity for students, no matter their background, to have their tuitions and books paid so that they can have the opportunity to go to college," Coskey said.

She said a major gala is being planned for October 2027 to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the Promise.

DONORS AND SUPPORTERS

The San Diego Community College District gratefully recognizes the generous individuals, families, foundations, and organizations whose philanthropy support students. Through these efforts, all students are empowered to overcome barriers, pursue their goals, and build brighter futures for themselves and our community.



Donation period January 2026 through September 2026.
Apologies to anyone who was inadvertently left off this listing.
Please contact Isiah at ibell@sdccd.edu, and we will address our mistake.

$100K AND ABOVE

Conrad Prebys Foundation
Don Spanninga
Roger Frey
San Diego County Citizens' Scholarship Foundation
U.S. Bank

$50,000-$99,999

Molina Family Foundation

$10,000-$49,999

Ann Parode Dynes
Cynthia Shevlin
Department of Labor Foster Youth Grant
Fred Colby
Fredericks Family Charitable Fund of the Jewish Community Foundation of San Diego
Gregory Smith
San Diego Indian American Society
SDSU Research Foundation
Sempra Foundation
Steve & Becky Phillpott Charitable Trust
Wendy Hart
Willard David McKinney

$5,000-$9,999

Craig Milgrim
Fern M. Steiner
Glenn Ishioka
John Valencia
Laurie Coskey
Richard and Eloise Johnston Scholarship
The Turner Construction Company Foundation
William and Delores Fischer Education Scholarship Fund

$1,000-$4,999

Amanda Ficken-Davis
Anthony Damon
Candace Waltz
Constance M. Carroll
Dennis Seisun
Dometrives Armstrong
Eleanor Hodges
Eric Davy
Gafcon
Janice Ingold Lau
Joan Anderson
Ken Hinds
Michelle Fischthal
Norman Cobb
P. Wesley Lundburg
Poppy Fitch
Rhea Coskey
Ricky Shabazz
Shelly Hess
Susan Topham
Thomas Downs
Ursula Kroemer Leimbach
Yiwen Tao

$100-$999

Aerika Loyd
Amertah Perman
Andrea Gonzales
Andrew Menchaca
Anne Gloag
Antoinette Griffin Brown
Barbara Naas
Benjamin St. Germain
Beth Kransberger
Billie Johnson
Brett Bell
Carmen Moi
Cat Prindle
Catherine Stoll
Channing Booth
Christopher Manis
Claudia Perkins
Crystal Rodriguez
Daniel Nakaji
Daniel Troy
David Spence
Duane & Trini Hanson
Edith Quintero
Elizabeth Armstrong
Elizabeth Flynn
Elizabeth Hubert
Feroza Ardeshir
Gail & Robert Conrad
Geysil Arroyo
Gregory Sanchez
Herald Kane
Ian Kay
Ingrid Greenberg
Jackie Sabanos
Jaime Seiverd
Janet Lonner
Jared Burns
Jason Wigen
Jay Jeffcoat
Jill Nevarez
Jim Mahler
John Beresford
John Murphy
Justin Estep
Karee Wardrop and Janet Peterson
Kathryn Humes
Kay Faulconer Boger
Khalid Akhtar
Kurt Smalberg
Leslie Stump
Lezlie Davenport-Allen
Lisa Cole-Jones
Lola Gaona
Lynda Marquis
Margaret Lamb
Margaret Meyer
Marichu Magaña
Masahiro Omae
Matilda Chavez
Michael Lopez
Michen Denney
Nancy Spector
Paul Martin
Raymond Wong
Regina Bochicchio
Richard Weinroth
Rick Matter
Sharon Nichols
Sherran L. Heitmann
Sheryl Endicott
Silvia Nogales
Sonja R. Reid
Steve Mayman
Susan Allen Murray
Susan Coskey
Tassanee Chitcharoen
Theresa Savarese
Todd White
Toshiye Estes
Veleka Iwuaba
Veronica Camarillo
Wayneshia Savage

Paying it forward

MANY EMPLOYEE DONORS CHOOSE TO FOCUS THEIR GIVING EFFORTS ON SUPPORTING San Diego Promise students. Laurie Coskey, vice chancellor of Development and Entrepreneurship, said hundreds of employees donate to the Promise through the employee payroll deduction program, as well as during the annual Keeping the Promise giving day. "Employees are donating anywhere from $5 a month to $200 or $300 a month to the Promise program," she said. "They support the Promise because they believe in our students and the efficacy of the Promise." Here's what some had to say about why they choose to support the program:



"I support the San Diego Promise because education has the power to transform the lives of students, families, and entire communities. Many of our students have the ability and determination to succeed but face financial barriers that can make a college education feel beyond their reach. The Promise gives students hope, opportunity, and the reassurance that their community believes in their potential."

Dometrives "Dee" Armstrong, associate dean, Nursing Education at City College

"When the District started the Promise program in 2016-17, I was excited about the opportunity to help other students receive the same educational opportunities that I did when I attended community college. By funding not just enrollment fees but books and additional wraparound services, we give students the best chance at success."

Amanda Ficken-Davis, supervisor, Chancellor's Office and Board Protocol and Compliance





"As a former community college student, this mission is deeply personal to me. I was a first-generation college student, and I know I would not be where I am today without my own community college journey. Community colleges open doors – sometimes doors that students may not have imagined were possible. They create opportunities, remove barriers, and give students the chance to build a different future for themselves and their families. Supporting the San Diego Promise is one way I can give back to the system that gave so much to me. I hope my support helps our students pursue their dreams, achieve their goals, and, one day, have the opportunity to pay it forward for someone else."

Shelly Hess, dean, Curriculum and Instructional Services

Keepers of the Promise

Dedicated classified professionals, counselors, and mentors uplift and support student success

BY ALLURA GARIS
PHOTOS BY DAVID BROOKS



Armando Carignan Palacios shares his Promise experience with members of College of Continuing Education community.

A SCHOLARSHIP CAN HELP A STUDENT PAY FOR COLLEGE.

A caring mentor, counselor, or staff member can help them believe they belong there.

For thousands of San Diego Promise students, that combination has proven transformative. While free tuition opens the door, it is often the people behind the program who help students walk through it.

Across the San Diego Community College District, those individuals have become the quiet force behind some of the program's most inspiring student success stories.

At San Diego Mesa College, Outreach Coordinator and Promise Supervisor Jennifer Park uses her intuition and past experiences as a first-generation college student to listen for "the story under the story" when she connects with students in the program.

Park remembers navigating student support services with her immigrant mother and later finding college enrollment confusing herself, even after years working in higher education. Those experiences remind her to slow down and listen to what a student may not be saying.

At San Diego City College, Student Services Technician Rachel Rojas remembers noticing unresolved items on a student's account when she was helping the student with an unrelated Promise question. Missing documentation had prevented the student from receiving a Pell Grant, but Rojas worked with financial aid to resolve the issue. The result: the student was able to access several thousand dollars she needed for rent.

As first-generation college graduates and City College alumni, Rojas and her colleague Saedy McCoy recognize that the assistance they provide can ripple across generations, which is illustrated by former San Diego Promise students returning to help younger siblings enroll.

For Rojas, this is reflective of her motto: "Don't do college alone."

One student, Elizabeth, has repeatedly turned to McCoy for assistance while navigating significant barriers and preparing to transfer.

"A quick tip that seems obvious to staff could mean generational change for a student," McCoy said.

That impact can extend beyond a single encounter. Promise students earn certificates and degrees, transfer to four-year universities, and pursue meaningful careers, creating opportunities that can reach their families and communities.

At Mesa College, Student Services Technician Claudine Castagna



Saedy McCoy (left) and Rachel Rojas recognize that assisting Promise students can impact entire families for generations to come.

10 YEARS
SAN DIEGO PROMISE



At Meas College, Jennifer Park (left) and Claudine Castagna impart lessons learned from their own personal experiences to h elp uplift students.



knows asking for help can itself be a barrier. Her own experience as a college student with social anxiety mirrors how she supports students, sometimes walking them to another department to ensure they get the help they need.

At San Diego Miramar College, Project Analyst Breanna Hinojosa focuses on connection. Her family's relationship with the SDCCD began when her mother took classes to learn English, while Hinojosa began her own college experience online during the pandemic.

(From left) For Mikey Yanam, Jennifer Aguilar, and Breanna Hinojosa, supporting Miramar College Promise students harkens back to lived experience.

"I strive to be that familiar face for Promise students so they are not scared to ask questions and know that they are supported through every step of their journey," Hinojosa said.

For Miramar College Project Assistant Mikey Yanam, that support is especially personal. A recent San Diego Promise student himself, Yanam arrived at Miramar College feeling "alone and lost," but with the support he received, he was able to earn two associate degrees and is preparing to transfer. He now greets students who arrive with the same uncertainty he once experienced.

"Going above and beyond looks like a normal day in Miramar's Promise office," Yanam said.

Former Miramar College Promise student Jennifer Aguilar, now a certification specialist at Ascent Funding and instructor at Canyon Hills High School, says the Promise helped mold her future.

"Take advantage of everything the San Diego Promise has to offer, from workshops and sessions to meeting with counselors and mentors," Aguilar said. "No path is ever linear, and that's okay. Never be afraid to ask questions or ask for help."

The San Diego Promise pathway also reaches adult learners at San Diego College of Continuing Education, where tuition-free noncredit education can be a launching point for students transferring to City, Mesa, or Miramar colleges.

San Diego Advance Counselor Armando Carignan Palacios knows that journey well. After coming to the United States from Mexico, he found himself starting over in an unfamiliar educational system. Following College of Continuing Education, he transitioned to City College with support from the San Diego Promise and, this fall, began a doctoral program at San Diego State University.

That path shapes how Carignan Palacios supports students who, like him, are starting new chapters of their own. Rather than handing them a website or referral, he stands side-by-side with them to help with applications, financial aid, San Diego Promise requirements, and enrollment, providing what he calls a "warm handoff" to the colleges.

His message: "You are not alone, and you belong in college."

As the San Diego Promise enters its next decade, at its heart are the people who help students take the next step and, in many cases, inspire them to do the same for others.

For Castagna at Mesa College, supporting Promise students has elevated her career experience.

"This is the best job I have ever had," she said. "I genuinely feel good about the work I do."

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The San Diego Community College District is celebrating 10 years of commitment to providing free education to deserving students through the San Diego Promise.

Nearly 20,000 stories have been Powered by Promise since 2016, and with your help we can power the next generation of students.

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