

CVHEC Annual Higher Education SUMMIT



NAVIGATING HIGHER
EDUCATION IN A NEW ERA



Welcome to the 2025 Central Valley Higher Education Consortium Summit.

The CVHEC Summit brings together higher education leaders from Central Valley colleges and universities along with our philanthropic, legislative, state and national policy partners to share practices, policies and initiatives to increase access to more students, improve completion rates, reduce time to degree, and find greater success in their chosen careers.

Also joining us are friends and advocates from throughout the Central Valley invested in creating an environment for students and their communities to thrive.

The Central Valley covers 7 million acres across 10 counties and is home to one of the world's most productive agricultural regions. Despite the richness of the land, the Central Valley is also home to some of the poorest and most underserved counties and communities in the state.

These economic realities can make attaining a college education seem nearly impossible, so it is no surprise that the educational attainment of students in our region lags behind state and national averages. Our conversations today will be centered on issues that cut to the very heart of our collective educational mission.

As the pace of state and federal policy and program change shows little signs of slowing, it is imperative that our region's university and college leaders take the opportunity today to engage in thoughtful discussion with legislators, policy makers and fellow educators in search of concrete strategies and solutions for the benefit of all our students. With efforts to reconfigure the Department of Education and potentially disrupt vital education programs, we find ourselves in an unprecedented time. The CVHEC Summit sets the stage for a critical engagement and interrogation of these new circumstances.

On behalf of CVHEC, I welcome the many partners joining us today as we convene with the common goal of providing uncompromised access and opportunity for Central Valley students. We extend a special welcome to the K-12 representatives who collaborate extensively with Consortium member institutions.

We are deeply grateful to the state and federal legislative leaders and their representatives in attendance to be a part of this critical dialogue. We are also pleased to have California Attorney General Rob Bonta joining remotely today to share what his office is doing to address concerning issues facing higher education in the state, and of course to hear from you, the Central Valley's higher education community directly.

Thank you for joining us today and for your commitment to Central Valley students.

Sincerely,

Dr. Juan Sánchez Muñoz

Chancellor – UC Merced

Chair – CVHEC Board of Directors



Summit Agenda

8:00 – 9:00 am

Registration and Breakfast

9:00 – 9:15 am

Welcome on Behalf of CVHEC Board of Directors

Juan Sánchez Muñoz

Review of Agenda

Benjamin Duran

9:15 – 10:15 am

Stronger Together: Aligning Systems for Equitable Outcomes

Britt Rios-Ellis, Carole Goldsmith, Rowena M. Tomaneng, Nathan Dietrich, Yvette Gullatt, Alex Graves

10:15 – 10:30 am

Break

10:30 – 11:15 am

In Their Words: Real Students Talking about Central Valley Strategies

Lena Tran, James Preston, Aracelli Tilli, Abigail Soto, Izabella Cavazos, McKenzie Rosas, Zeidi Diaz

11:15 – 12:00 pm

Data at Every Level: Sharing National, State, and Local Insights

Steven Bloomberg, Chris Vitelli, Brandon Protas, Hans Johnson, Zenaida Aguirre-Muñoz

12:00 – 1:00 pm

Lunch

12:30 – 1:15 pm

The Path Forward: Higher Ed Policy and the New Administration

Primavera Monarrez, Juan Sánchez Muñoz, Jim Costa, Adam Gray, Shannon Grove, Esmeralda Zamudio Soria

1:15 – 2:00 pm

What the CVHEC is Happening in the Central Valley?

Andre Stephans, Benjamin Duran, James Zimmerman, Kristin Clark, Lynn Cevallos

2:00 – 2:30 pm

Higher Education & Justice: A Virtual Forum

Juan Sánchez Muñoz, Rob Bonta

2:30 – 3:00 pm

Where do we go from Here? Reflecting on Today and Closing Thoughts

Benjamin Duran



9:00 – 9:15 am

Welcome on Behalf of the Board of Directors

Juan Sánchez Muñoz, Chancellor, UC Merced

Review of Agenda

Benjamin Duran, Executive Director, CVHEC

Juan Sánchez Muñoz

CHANCELLOR, UC MERCED

Dr. Juan Sánchez Muñoz, a California native with deep roots in the Central Valley, became the fourth chancellor of UC Merced in 2020. He holds a Ph.D. in Education from UCLA and previously served as president of the University of Houston Downtown, where he led major recovery efforts after Hurricane Harvey and launched the school's largest capital campaign. He also held senior leadership roles at Texas Tech University. A published scholar and contributor to *The Handbook of Latinos and Education*, Dr. Muñoz has served on national and state boards including the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, Excelencia in Education, and the California Strategic Growth Council. He is also a graduate of leadership programs at Harvard, UC Berkeley, and Georgetown.



Benjamin T. Duran

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, CVHEC

Dr. Benjamin T. Duran is a highly respected higher education leader, teacher and president-emeritus of Merced Community College in California. He retired as superintendent/president of the Merced Community College District in 2012 after serving 22 years in the district with the last 14 years as the CEO. Dr. Duran is now executive director of the Central Valley Higher Education Consortium (CVHEC), an organization that brings together 28 Central California community college, independent and university CEOs to collaborate on higher education issues in the 10-county region.



NOTES

9:15 – 10:15 am

Stronger Together: Aligning Systems for Equitable Outcomes

Introduced by Britt Rios-Ellis, President, CSU Stanislaus
Moderated by: Carole Goldsmith, Chancellor, SCCC

Britt Rios-Ellis

PRESIDENT, CSU STANISLAUS

Britt Rios-Ellis, M.S., Ph.D., is the 13th president of CSU Stanislaus, bringing over 30 years of experience in higher education and community health. A bilingual, bicultural leader, she is committed to student success, equity and community engagement. She previously served as provost at Oakland University where she advanced academic affairs and community initiatives. At CSU Monterey Bay, she co-founded the first Physician Assistant program in the CSU system and led efforts to diversify faculty. At CSU Long Beach, she directed Latino health initiatives and secured over \$59 million in grants. A recognized public health advocate, Rios-Ellis has served on national advisory committees and received multiple awards for leadership. She holds degrees from the University of Oregon and has completed national leadership programs.



Carole Goldsmith

CHANCELLOR, STATE CENTER COMMUNITY COLLEGE DISTRICT

Dr. Goldsmith is the newest chancellor of the State Center Community College District and previously served as president of Fresno City College from August 2016 to December 2021. Prior to joining SCCC, Dr. Goldsmith served as president of West Hills College Coalinga and held the office of vice chancellor of Educational Services and Workforce Development during her 13-year tenure with West Hills Community College District in rural West Fresno County. Dr. Goldsmith has lived in Fresno County for nearly four decades and earned a bachelor's degree in history from Fresno State, a master's degree in educational administration from National University, and a doctorate in higher education leadership from the joint doctorate program at Fresno State and UC Davis.



Rowena M. Tomaneng

DEPUTY CHANCELLOR, CALIFORNIA COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Working with Chancellor Sonya Christian, Dr. Rowena M. Tomaneng serves a key role in advancing Vision 2030, the California Community Colleges' strategic plan focused on equity. With nearly 30 years of experience in higher education, she specializes in diversity, equity, inclusion and student success. At San Jose City College, Tomaneng developed partnerships and secured federal grants to boost Latinx student success. Previously, as president of Berkeley City College, she created academic pathways for low-income, first-generation African American/Black, Latinx and Southeast Asian students. Dr. Tomaneng's leadership extends to multiple administrative roles at De Anza College. She was named California Assembly District 15 Woman of the Year in 2019. She holds degrees from UC Irvine, UC Santa Barbara and the University of San Francisco.



Nathan Dietrich

ASSISTANT VICE CHANCELLOR OF UNIVERSITY RELATIONS AND ADVANCEMENT, CSU

Nathan Dietrich is the assistant vice chancellor for Advocacy and State Relations for the California State University system. He leads efforts to represent the CSU's interests in Sacramento, building strong relationships with the governor's office, legislature and state agencies, while coordinating advocacy across campuses and with alumni. Previously, he served as associate vice president for public affairs and advocacy at Sacramento State, where he led government and community relations. Earlier in his career, Nathan worked for Congressman Robert Matsui and Congresswoman Doris Matsui, serving as a key liaison on major regional projects. He holds bachelor's degrees in political science and communication from UC Davis, and a master's in public administration and a political management certificate from USC.



Yvette Gullatt

VP FOR GRADUATE & UNDERGRAD AFFAIRS, VICE PROVOST FOR EDI, AND CHIEF DIVERSITY OFFICER, UC

Yvette Gullatt is the vice president for Graduate and Undergraduate Affairs, vice provost for Equity, Diversity and Inclusion, and chief diversity officer for the University of California system. She oversees initiatives that support student success including outreach, admissions, financial aid and teacher education. As chief diversity officer, she leads strategies to promote diversity, equity and inclusion across the university. Gullatt has held various leadership roles, including vice provost for education partnerships and interim vice president for student affairs. She has advanced policies supporting gender identity and inclusivity, launched programs to enhance college access and fostered partnerships to improve academic preparation for underrepresented students. Gullatt earned her B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. from UC Berkeley.



Alex Graves

VP FOR GOVERNMENT RELATIONS, ASSOCIATION OF INDEPENDENT CA COLLEGES & UNIVERSITIES

Alex Graves has served as vice president for Government Relations at AICCU since 2019, leading legislative advocacy and public policy efforts on behalf of California's independent colleges and universities. He serves as the primary liaison to the Governor's Office, Legislature, and California Student Aid Commission. Previously, he was a legislative advocate for the California State University system, focusing on admissions, financial aid, and teacher preparation policy. Graves also held roles at the Alzheimer's Association and the Institute for Higher Education Leadership and Policy. He holds a B.A. in politics from Occidental College and a Master's in Public Policy & Administration from Sacramento State, and is an alumnus of the California Education Policy Fellowship Program.



10:30 – 11:15 am

In Their Words: Real Students Talking about Central Valley Strategies

Introduced by: Lena Tran, President, Columbia College

Moderated by: James Preston, President, Lemoore College

Lena Tran

PRESIDENT, COLUMBIA COLLEGE

Dr. Lena Tran has served as the president of Columbia College in California since March 2022. Before that she was vice president of Strategic Partnerships and Workforce Innovation for San Jose City College. She previously served on the boards of directors of East Meets West Foundation and Silicon Valley FACES. Dr. Tran is the author of “Compassionate Vietnamese American CEOs: How Six Entrepreneurs Achieved Bottom-line Success by Leading with their Hearts.”



James Preston

PRESIDENT, LEMOORE COLLEGE

James Preston has 29 years of experience in education including 12 years in administrative roles and 17 years of teaching experience. Since 2022, he has proudly served as the president of West Hills College Lemoore which has been a leader in Open Educational Resources, innovative professional development and program design, and student support that emphasizes inclusive excellence. President Preston currently serves as the CEO representative for the Central Valley on the Statewide Affordability, Food and Housing Access Taskforce.



Aracelli Tilli

STUDENT, MERCED COLLEGE - UC MERCED

Abigail M. Soto Toscano

STUDENT, DINUBA HIGH SCHOOL

Izabella Cavazos

STUDENT, DINUBA HIGH SCHOOL



McKenzie Rosas

STUDENT, DINUBA HIGH SCHOOL



Zeidi Diaz

STUDENT, FRESNO STATE



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11:15 – 12:00 pm

Data at Every Level Sharing National, State, and Local Insights

Introduced by: Carla Tweed, President, Coalinga College

Moderated by: Chris Vitelli, President, Merced College

Carla Tweed

PRESIDENT, COALINGA COLLEGE

Dr. Carla Tweed is the sixth president of Coalinga College, returning to her roots in the Central Valley where she began her education at West Hills. A proven leader in higher education, Dr. Tweed brings experience from roles including president at a private college and executive leadership at Yuba College. She is known for fostering community partnerships and her expertise in strategic planning. Passionate about rural education, she is dedicated to student success, diversity and inclusion. Dr. Tweed holds a Doctorate in Organizational Leadership from Brandman University and master's and bachelor's degrees from Chapman University. She is also a longtime CASA volunteer, advocating for children in need. She began her presidency at Coalinga College in January 2022.



Chris Vitelli

PRESIDENT, MERCED COLLEGE

Chris Vitelli is the superintendent/president of Merced College, having previously served as vice president of Student Services. With extensive experience in administration, he has held senior roles such as chief Student Services officer, chief Instructional officer, and Accreditation Liaison officer. Vitelli has also worked as dean of Instruction and interim vice president of Student Services at Columbia College and director of Student Services at the University of Florida. He has led initiatives to enhance student equity, expand outreach and strengthen partnerships with high schools and universities. A first-generation college graduate, Vitelli holds degrees from the University of Florida, Harvard University and Arizona State University.



Brandon Protas

ASSISTANT VP FOR ALLIANCE ENGAGEMENT, COMPLETE COLLEGE AMERICA

Brandon Protas, Ed.D., is the assistant vice president for Alliance Engagement at Complete College America, where he leads the planning and management of the CCA Alliance and supports institutions, systems, and states in advancing student success and equity in college completion. Prior to CCA, he spent nine years at the Community College of Denver directing its concurrent enrollment program and supporting accreditation through NACEP, while also serving on state and national advisory boards. He brings over a decade of experience in K-12 education from his work with the Sunnyside Unified School District in Tucson. Brandon holds a B.A. from Brown University, an MSW from Arizona State, and an Ed.D. in Educational Leadership from Northern Arizona University.



Hans Johnson

SENIOR FELLOW, PUBLIC POLICY INSTITUTE OF CALIFORNIA

Hans Johnson is a senior fellow at the Public Policy Institute of California Higher Education Center. His research focuses on improving college access and completion. He frequently presents his work to policymakers and higher education officials, and he serves as a technical advisor to many organizations seeking to improve college graduation rates, address workforce needs and engage in long-term capacity planning. His other areas of expertise include international and domestic migration, housing in California and population projections. Previously, he served as research director at PPIC. Before joining PPIC, he worked as a demographer at the California Research Bureau and at the California Department of Finance. He holds a PhD in demography and a master's degree in biostatistics from the University of California, Berkeley.



Zenaida Aguirre-Muñoz

PROFESSOR OF COGNITIVE AND INFORMATION SCIENCES, UC MERCED

Dr. Zenaida Aguirre-Muñoz is a professor of Cognitive Science at UC Merced, whose research bridges cognitive science, language, learning sciences, and assessment to improve STEM education and support dual language learners. She holds dual bachelor's degrees in Psychology and Spanish from UC Santa Barbara and earned her Ph.D. in Psychological Studies in Education from UCLA. Her career began as a research scientist at UCLA's CRESST, followed by faculty roles at Texas Tech University and the University of Houston. Her work has been supported by the NSF, NIH, Department of Energy, and U.S. Department of Education.



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12:30 – 1:15 pm

The Path Forward Higher Ed Policy and the New Administration

Introduced by: Primavera Monarrez, President, Porterville College
Moderated by: Juan Sánchez Muñoz, Chancellor, UC Merced

Primavera Monarrez

PRESIDENT, PORTERVILLE COLLEGE

Primavera Monarrez became interim president of Porterville College in July 2024. She previously served as the college's vice president of Student Services beginning in April 2018. Before joining Porterville College, she spent two years at Taft College as dean of Student Success and also served as interim vice president of Student Services. With over 15 years of experience in higher education, President Monarrez is dedicated to promoting student success, equity and ethical leadership. A Central Valley native, she is passionate about mentoring students and creating opportunities for those who may not see education as accessible. She holds a master's degree in Counseling with a focus on Student Affairs.



Juan Sánchez Muñoz

CHANCELLOR, UC MERCED

Dr. Juan Sánchez Muñoz, a California native with deep roots in the Central Valley, became the fourth chancellor of UC Merced in 2020. He holds a Ph.D. in Education from UCLA and previously served as president of the University of Houston Downtown, where he led major recovery efforts after Hurricane Harvey and launched the school's largest capital campaign. He also held senior leadership roles at Texas Tech University. A published scholar and contributor to The Handbook of Latinos and Education, Dr. Muñoz has served on national and state boards including the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, Excelencia in Education, and the California Strategic Growth Council. He is also a graduate of leadership programs at Harvard, UC Berkeley, and Georgetown.



Rep. Jim Costa

21ST DISTRICT, U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Congressmember Jim Costa represents California's 16th Congressional District. He has served the San Joaquin Valley in the U.S. House of Representatives since January of 2005. Raised on a dairy farm in Fresno's Kearney Park area, Rep. Costa is a third-generation family farmer. As a member of Congress, Costa has applied his farming background to fighting for Valley water, agriculture and the economy. A product of Fresno County schools, Costa is a graduate of San Joaquin Memorial High School and has a bachelor's degree in Political Science from California State University, Fresno. Before being elected to the House, Costa served for 24 years in the California State Legislature.



Assemblywoman Esmeralda Zamudio Soria

27TH DISTRICT, CALIFORNIA STATE ASSEMBLY

Assemblymember Esmeralda Soria represents California's 27th Assembly District, covering communities across Merced, Madera, and Fresno counties. Now in her second term, she was reappointed in 2025 as chair of the Assembly Agriculture Committee and also serves on the Governmental Organization, Banking & Finance, and Economic Development committees. A first-generation American and daughter of farm workers, she was raised in the Central Valley and worked in the fields alongside her parents. She earned a bachelor's degree from UC Berkeley and a law degree from UC Davis. Before joining the Assembly, she served on the Fresno City Council, focusing on public safety, housing, and economic growth. In the Assembly, she continues to advocate for healthcare, disaster recovery, and community investment.



Rep. Adam Gray

13TH DISTRICT, U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Congressman Adam Gray represents California's 13th Congressional District, which includes Merced County and portions of Madera, Stanislaus, San Joaquin, and Fresno Counties. He serves on the House Agriculture and Natural Resources Committees and is the Whip of the Blue Dog Coalition. Prior to his election to Congress, Gray spent a decade in the California State Assembly representing Merced and Stanislaus Counties, where he championed bipartisan, commonsense solutions. During his time in Sacramento, he founded the California Problem Solvers Caucus and played a key role in establishing a medical school program at UC Merced, developing new water storage infrastructure, and improving water access for Central Valley farmers. Born and raised in Merced, he continues to reside there and serves as an educator at UC Merced.



NOTES

1:15 – 2:00 pm

What the CVHEC is Happening in the Central Valley?

Introduced by: André Stephens, President, Fresno Pacific University
Moderated by: Benjamin Duran, Executive Director, CVHEC

André Stephens

PRESIDENT, FRESNO PACIFIC UNIVERSITY

Dr. André Stephens has 30 years of experience in Christian higher education in California including as vice president for student development at Biola University. Serving in this cabinet-level role, he led a team that provided authentic, meaningful learning experiences to foster the Christian character of students. Dr. Stephens completed his B.A. in Communication with a public relations emphasis at Biola, his M.A. in Speech Communication with an emphasis in intercultural/interpersonal communication at California State University, Fullerton and his Ph.D. in Education with an emphasis in higher education administration/student affairs at Claremont Graduate University.



Benjamin Duran

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, CVHEC

Dr. Benjamin T. Duran is a highly respected higher education leader, teacher and president-emeritus of Merced Community College in California. He retired as superintendent/president of the Merced Community College District in 2012 after serving 22 years in the district with the last 14 years as the CEO. Dr. Duran is now executive director of the Central Valley Higher Education Consortium (CVHEC), an organization that brings together 28 Central California community college, independent and university CEOs to collaborate on higher education issues in the 10-county region.



James Zimmerman

SPECIAL ASSISTANT TO THE PROVOST - TRANSFER INITIATIVES, UC MERCED

Dr. James Zimmerman currently serves as the special assistant to the executive vice chancellor and provost for Transfer Initiatives. In his wide-ranging academic career as both faculty member and administrator, Dr. Zimmerman has been recognized as a leader who can build consensus, motivate and operationalize campus-wide plans. He enjoys the challenge of aligning constituents toward the essential institutional goals of developing, managing and resourcing exceptional and innovative undergraduate learning environments that benefit diverse student populations.



Kristin Clark

DUAL ENROLLMENT LEAD, CVHEC

Dr. Kristin Clark is a veteran higher education leader with over 30 years in California's Community College System. She served as chancellor of the West Hills Community College District until retiring in August 2024 and previously led Lemoore College, earning national recognition including the Aspen Prize Top 100 and Achieving the Dream honors. Known for advancing Open Educational Resources, dual enrollment, and flexible academic calendars, she holds a doctorate from the University of Pennsylvania and has taught, published, and presented nationally. Dr. Clark remains active on boards such as California Health Sciences University and the Central Valley Higher Education Consortium, and in March returned from retirement to join CVHEC as dual enrollment lead.



Lynn Cevallos

FOUNDER & PRESIDENT, COLLEGE BRIDGE

Dr. Lynn Cevallos has nearly 30 years of experience developing innovations to improve math outcomes at the secondary and post-secondary levels. She began her work in community colleges addressing the remedial math bottleneck, later expanding to high school and middle school to map the roots of the issue. Her pursuit of systemic solutions led her into leadership roles across government, higher ed, K-12, nonprofits, and corporations. At UCLA, she earned a Doctorate in Educational Leadership, researching intersegmental partnerships to improve college success by tackling barriers like math remediation. Her dissertation laid the foundation for College Bridge, the nonprofit she founded in 2011, where she now leads initiatives improving STEM college completion for low-income, minority, and rural students—successfully closing equity and achievement gaps in math for thousands.



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AG Rob Bonta

ATTORNEY GENERAL, STATE OF CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

On April 23, 2021, Rob Bonta was sworn in as the 34th Attorney General of the State of California, the first person of Filipino descent to occupy the position. Attorney General Bonta's passion for justice and fairness was instilled in him by his parents, who served on the frontlines of some of America's most important social justice movements. It's why he decided to become a lawyer — to help right historic wrongs and fight for people who have been harmed. He worked his way through college and graduated with honors from Yale University and attended Yale Law School. Attorney General Bonta has led statewide fights for racial, economic, and environmental justice and worked to further the rights of immigrant families, renters, and working Californians. He previously worked as a Deputy City Attorney for the City and County of San Francisco, served as an Alameda Council Member and represented Oakland, Alameda, and San Leandro as an Assemblymember.

As the People's Attorney, he sees seeking accountability from those who abuse their power and harm others as one of the most important functions of the job. He has taken on powerful interests and advanced systemic change — pursuing corporate accountability, standing up for workers, punishing big polluters, and fighting racial injustice. Attorney General Bonta is the son of a proud native Filipino mother and a father who taught him the value of public service to his community. He is married to Mia Bonta, and they are the proud parents of three children: Reina, Iliana, and Andres.



2:30 – 3:00 pm

Where do we go from Here?

Reflecting on Today and Closing Thoughts

Introduced by: Benjamin Duran, Executive Director, CVHEC

Benjamin Duran

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, CVHEC

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NOTES

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