



ANNUAL HIGHER EDUCATION
SUMMIT



EVOLVING HIGHER EDUCATION
FOR AN EMERGING FUTURE

April 24, 2026

#CVHigherEd

WELCOME

This year's theme, Evolving Higher Education for an Emerging Future, reflects the moment before us. Higher education is being reshaped by artificial intelligence, economic transformation, changing student needs, and new expectations from workforce and policy partners. Here in the Central Valley, we see this not only as a challenge, but as an opportunity to be a leader in this work.

The CVHEC Summit brings together higher education leaders, philanthropic partners, policymakers, K-12 collaborators, and workforce stakeholders from across our region - all committed to strengthening opportunities for Central Valley students and communities. In a region as dynamic and important as ours, collaboration across systems and sectors is how meaningful progress happens.

Today's conversations are designed to focus squarely on what comes next. Our systems leaders panel will explore how we can work more effectively across institutional and sector boundaries, while our presidents panel will help define CVHEC's strategic direction and regional priorities for the years ahead.

What makes this moment especially exciting is that the Central Valley is helping shape the future of higher education in California. Great work is happening here, and the state is beginning to recognize the strength of this region's leadership, innovation, and partnership. I believe the rest of the country will soon see it too. We have come to call these regional collaborations - Doing it the Central Valley Way!

Thank you for joining us and for your commitment to the students, institutions, and communities of the Central Valley.

Together, we have the opportunity not only to serve this region, but to be seen as leaders in the nation.



Sincerely,
Benjamin Duran, Ed.D.
Executive Director
Central Valley Higher Education Consortium

AGENDA

9:00 – 10:00 am	Registration and Breakfast
10:00 – 10:15 am	Welcome on Behalf of CVHEC Board of Directors & Review of the Agenda
10:15 – 11:15 am	Leading Together: Shaping the Future of Higher Education in California
11:15 – 11:30 am	Voices of the Valley
11:30 – 12:10 pm	A Conversation with Central Valley Presidents: New Priorities for Higher Education in the Region <i>Topics include AI, Workforce Alignment, Data Sharing, and Enrollment/Reconnect</i>
12:10 – 1:10 pm	Lunch & Sponsor Recognition
1:10 – 1:50 pm	AI and Emerging Technologies for Student Success: What's Next for Higher Education across the Nation
1:50 – 2:05 pm	Voices of the Valley
2:05 – 2:45 pm	Partnership and Policy: Advancing Higher Education in the Central Valley
2:45 – 3:00 p.m.	Where do we go from here? Reflecting on Today and Closing Thoughts





10:00 – 10:15 am

Welcome on Behalf of CVHEC Board of Directors

Juan Sánchez Muñoz, Chancellor, UC Merced

Review of the 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 earned his Ph.D. in Education from UCLA, focusing on curriculum and instruction. Before joining UC Merced, Dr. Muñoz served as president of the University of Houston Downtown where he launched the university's largest capital campaign and led recovery efforts after Hurricane Harvey. He also served as senior vice president and vice provost at Texas Tech University. Dr. Muñoz has authored academic articles, book chapters, and essays, and contributed to The Handbook of Latinos and Education. He has held leadership roles on various boards, including the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities and Excelencia in Education. He also serves on the California Strategic Growth Council, appointed by Governor Gavin Newsom. Dr. Muñoz is a graduate of several prestigious leadership programs including 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.

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10:15 – 11:15 am

Leading Together: Shaping the Future of Higher Education in California

Introduction by André Stephens, President, Fresno Pacific University
Moderated by Juan Sánchez Muñoz, Chancellor, UC Merced



Introductions by

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.



Moderated by

JUAN SÁNCHEZ MUÑOZ

CHANCELLOR, UC MERCED

Dr. Juan Sánchez Muñoz, a Central Valley native, has served as chancellor of UC Merced since 2020. He previously led the University of Houston Downtown and held senior roles at Texas Tech. He earned his Ph.D. from UCLA and serves on the California Strategic Growth Council, appointed by Governor Gavin Newsom.



MILDRED GARCÍA

CHANCELLOR, CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY

Dr. Mildred García became the 11th chancellor of the California State University on October 1, 2023, becoming the first Latina to lead the nation's largest four-year public university system. She previously served as president of California State University, Fullerton and California State University, Dominguez Hills, where she improved graduation and retention rates and strengthened institutional finances. Before returning to CSU, she was president of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, advocating nationally for public higher education. She has also held senior leadership roles at several major universities and was appointed by Barack Obama to federal advisory boards.

A first-generation college graduate raised in New York City, Dr. García holds degrees from Teachers College, Columbia University and other New York institutions.



SONYA CHRISTIAN

CHANCELLOR, CALIFORNIA COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Sonya began her three-decade career in the Kern Community College District as a mathematics faculty member, later serving as division chair, dean, and from 2013–2021, the 10th president of Bakersfield College. She is a champion of equity and student success, leading California’s Guided Pathways coalition that secured philanthropic support for a 20-college demonstration project and helped generate a \$150 million state investment. Under her leadership, Bakersfield College launched one of California’s first community college baccalaureate programs and expanded Early College initiatives. She also advanced energy and climate workforce development, helping establish the California Renewable Energy Laboratory. Appointed by Gavin Newsom to the Student Centered Funding Formula Oversight Committee (2019–2022), she has also chaired the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges and remains a leading advocate for women’s leadership and data-informed policy.



KRISTEN SOARES

PRESIDENT, ASSOCIATION OF INDEPENDENT CALIFORNIA COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

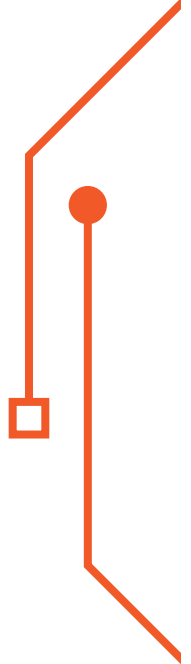
Kristen Soares is the fourth president of the Association of Independent California Colleges and Universities, representing more than 80 nonprofit institutions. She leads statewide policy efforts and serves as the sector’s chief spokesperson. Under her leadership, AICCU advanced key initiatives including a landmark transfer agreement with the California Community Colleges. Soares brings nearly 25 years of experience from the University of Southern California, where she led government relations and civic engagement. She serves on multiple state and national boards and holds a Bachelor of Science in Public Administration from USC.



MARIA ANGUIANO

**VICE CHAIR OF THE BOARD OF REGENTS,
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA**

Maria Anguiano serves as vice chair of the University of California Board of Regents and is a nationally recognized leader at the intersection of education, technology, finance, and social impact. A first-generation college graduate, she has dedicated her career to expanding educational access and opportunity. Anguiano previously served as executive vice president of the Learning Enterprise at Arizona State University, where she helped scale a global lifelong learning model reaching more than one million learners in over 140 countries. She also served as vice chancellor of planning and budget at University of California, Riverside, leading major strategic and financial initiatives. Her career includes leadership roles with Minerva Project, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and global finance firms, advancing innovation and opportunity in education worldwide.



11:15 – 11:30 am

Voices of the Valley

Introduction by Primavera Monarrez, President, Porterville College



Introductions by

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.



LILLY UVALLE

DEGREE COMPLETION REENTRY ADVISOR, UC MERCED

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11:30 – 12:10 pm

A Conversation with Central Valley Presidents: New Priorities for Higher Education in the Region

Introduction by Florence Dunn, President, CA Health Sciences University
Moderated by Brian Sanders, President, Modesto Junior College



Introductions by

FLORENCE DUNN

PRESIDENT, CALIFORNIA HEALTH SCIENCES UNIVERSITY

Florence T. Dunn has served as founding president of California Health Sciences University since 2012. Under her leadership, the University has grown rapidly, building the current campus and establishing three Colleges – Osteopathic Medicine, Pharmacy, and Biomedical Sciences and Health Professions – to fulfill its mission. She is a long-time advocate for education and community service.

President Dunn has more than three decades of banking experience in California's Central Valley. Prior to joining the University, she was senior vice president and regional manager for the Sacramento and Central Valley regions of California Bank & Trust, where she led strategic planning, financial management, budgetary oversight, and marketing.

She has served in leadership roles on numerous boards across health care, education, agriculture, manufacturing, and business. She currently serves on the Central Valley Higher Education Consortium Board and other private boards and foundations, and previously served thirteen years on the Community Health Systems Board (formerly Community Hospitals of Central California), including as chairman.

Moderated by

BRIAN SANDERS

PRESIDENT, MODESTO JUNIOR COLLEGE

Dr. Brian K. Sanders has served as president of Modesto Junior College (MJC) since January 2024. He began his 30-plus-year career in the Yosemite Community College District in 1995 as an MJC mathematics professor and later became dean of Science, Mathematics, and Engineering. In 2016, he became vice president of Instruction for Columbia College, and returned to MJC in 2022 as vice president of Instruction before becoming President.

He earned his Doctorate in Educational Leadership from UC Davis in 2014, along with an M.A. in Mathematics from the University of Oregon and a B.S. in Mathematical Sciences from UC Santa Barbara. Dr. Sanders is known across the California Community Colleges for his innovation, problem-solving skills, and knowledge of processes and regulations, working collaboratively to develop long-term solutions for community colleges and their students.

He has been active in his community, including the Kiwanis Club of North Modesto, Beyer Band Boosters, Modesto Girls Softball League, and Boys and Girls Clubs events, and regularly participates in local activities and fundraisers. In his spare time, he competes in World League Fling Golf, where he is highly ranked in the Masters division.



SAÚL JIMÉNEZ SANDOVAL

PRESIDENT, CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, FRESNO

Dr. Saúl Jiménez-Sandoval, an immigrant to California's San Joaquin Valley native, brings a deep connection to the region in his role as the ninth president of California State University, Fresno, a position he has held since 2021. After nearly 15 years teaching and serving as dean of Arts and Humanities and provost, he has transformed Fresno State into a national leader in student success, research, and community engagement. Under his leadership, the university achieved Carnegie "R2" status, record research funding, top rankings for social mobility, and launched Bulldog Bound, a groundbreaking direct-admissions program expanding access across the Central Valley.

Dr. Jiménez-Sandoval holds dual B.A.s in History and Spanish, and an M.A. and Ph.D. in Spanish and Portuguese literature from University of California, Irvine, and continues to advance Fresno State's mission to transform lives, strengthen communities, and drive regional innovation.



JERRY BUCKLEY

PRESIDENT, REEDLEY COLLEGE

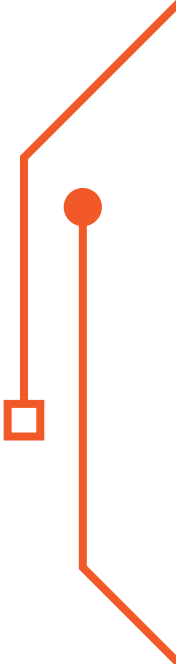
Dr. Jerry Buckley is the 20th president of Reedley College, assuming the role on June 3, 2019. With more than 29 years in higher education, he has served as vice president of instruction, senior dean, and assistant superintendent across multiple California community college districts, including the Santa Clarita Community College District and the Grossmont-Cuyamaca Community College District. Buckley earned his Ed.D. in Educational Leadership from San Diego State University, an M.A. in Biology from California State University, Fullerton, and a B.S. in Biological Sciences from University of Southern California. He emphasizes student-centered learning, equity, and inclusion while strengthening Central Valley partnerships and advancing career, transfer, and academic success initiatives.



SEAN HANCOCK

PRESIDENT, CLOVIS COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Dr. Sean Hancock is deeply honored to serve as Cerro Coso Community College's eighth president, where the mission is to improve the life of every student they serve. He is a champion for higher education, empowering faculty, staff, and students for over 24 years. Dr. Hancock has previously held numerous leadership roles at both public and private institutions of higher learning, including vice chancellor of student and institutional success, vice president of instruction and student services, and campus director. A California community college alumnus, Dr. Hancock graduated with an Associate of Arts in Business from College of the Sequoias. He also holds a Bachelor of Arts in Management and Organizational Development from Fresno Pacific University, an MBA with a concentration in Finance from TUI University, and a Doctorate in Educational Administration from University of the Pacific. Dr. Hancock is a 2019 alumnus of the Aspen Institute's Rising Presidents Fellowship in partnership with the Stanford Graduate School of Education, and a 2023 fellow of the Wheelhouse CEO Institute on Leadership at UC Davis. Recognizing the profound impact that education has had on his own life, Dr. Hancock has dedicated his career to changing lives through the power of education.





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Thank You to Our Summit Sponsors

The Central Valley Higher Education Summit is made possible through the partnership and support of organizations committed to educational equity and opportunity.

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COLLEGE FUTURES

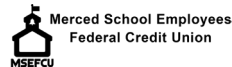
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1:10 – 1:50 pm

AI and Emerging Technologies for Student Success: What's Next for Higher Education across the Nation

Introduction by Robert Pimentel, Chancellor, West Hills Community College District
Moderated by Lisa Lawrenson, President, San Joaquin Delta College



Introductions by

ROBERT PIMENTEL

CHANCELLOR, WEST HILLS COMMUNITY COLLEGE DISTRICT

Robert Pimentel is an experienced higher education leader with deep roots in California's Central Valley and a longstanding commitment to student success. A proud graduate of West Hills College, he later earned undergraduate and graduate degrees from California State University, Fresno and California State University, Bakersfield. Pimentel has dedicated nearly two decades of service to the West Hills Community College District, where he has worked closely with faculty, staff, and community partners to strengthen educational opportunities for local students and families. Drawing on his own journey through the region's community college system, he is passionate about expanding access, supporting first-generation college students, and removing barriers to achievement. Pimentel's leadership focuses on innovation, inclusivity, and building pathways that empower Central Valley students to reach their academic, career, and life goals while strengthening the communities they serve.



Moderated by

LISA AGUILERA LAWRENSON

SUPERINTENDENT/PRESIDENT, SAN JOAQUIN DELTA COLLEGE

Dr. Lisa Aguilera Lawrenson has 31 years of experience as a community college professor, administrator, and social justice educator/trainer in California and Washington. She has expertise in culturally relevant curriculum design, social justice strategic planning, and mentoring. Her dissertation focused on the experiences of Hispanic students in developmental English in community colleges.

In addition to serving as an English/Multicultural Humanities professor, Dr. Aguilera Lawrenson has served as the dean of Humanities at American River College (ARC), the associate vice president of Instruction at ARC, the interim vice president of Instruction at Cosumnes River College, the Interim Vice President of Student Services at ARC, the vice president of Instruction at ARC, and most recently as the assistant superintendent and vice president of Instruction at San Joaquin Delta College where she was hired in 2020. In 2022 she became the first Latina superintendent/president in the history of Delta College. She has led initiatives in basic skills/curriculum, equity, international education, strategic planning, college redesign, and governance.



Introductions by

JOSÉ BARRAL SÁNCHEZ

VICE DEAN, UCSF - FRESNO REGIONAL CAMPUS

Dr. José M. Barral Sánchez, M.D., Ph.D., was appointed vice dean of the UCSF School of Medicine Regional Campus at Fresno effective May 1, 2025. He oversees medical education, faculty development, and research growth, including the expanding partnership with UC Merced.

He earned his M.D. from Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey and a Ph.D. in Biochemistry and Molecular Biology from Baylor College of Medicine, followed by postdoctoral studies at the Max Planck Institute for Biochemistry.

Dr. Barral Sánchez previously held leadership roles at Kaiser Permanente Tyson School of Medicine and University of Texas Medical Branch, receiving awards including the Regents' Outstanding Teaching Award and Pew Scholar recognition. He is dedicated to advancing UCSF Fresno's mission of research, education, and improving health in the San Joaquin Valley.



TOU BEE THAO

SJV PRIME MEDICAL STUDENT,
UCSF- FRESNO REGIONAL CAMPUS

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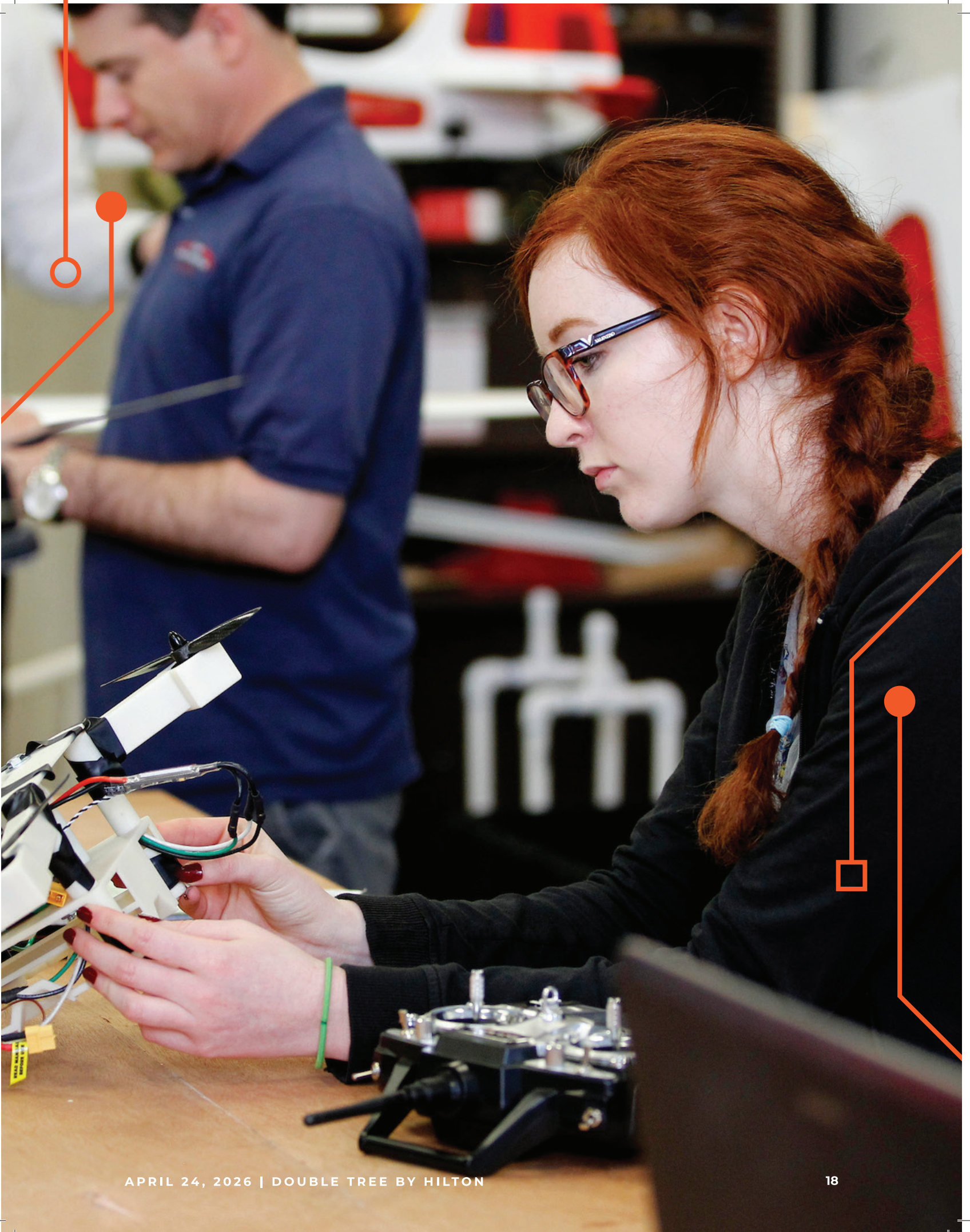
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2:05 – 2:45 pm

**Partnership and Policy:
Advancing Higher Education in the Central Valley**

Introduction by Britt Rios-Ellis, President, California State University, Stanislaus
Moderated by Chris Vitelli, Superintendent/President, Merced College



Introductions by

BRITT RIOS-ELLIS

PRESIDENT, CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY 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.



Moderated by

CHRIS VITELLI

SUPERINTENDENT/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.



SENATOR ANNA CABALLERO

CALIFORNIA STATE SENATOR FOR DISTRICT 14

Senator Anna M. Caballero has built her career on listening to communities and delivering results for California families. Born to a family of Arizona copper miners, she was inspired by the farmworker movement and earned her law degree from UCLA after studying at UC San Diego. She began her legal career representing farmworkers and later co-founded a firm providing affordable services, also founding Partners for Peace to support youth and families in the Salinas Valley. In 1998, she became Salinas' first female mayor, later the first Latina in the 28th Assembly District, and served in Governor Jerry Brown's cabinet overseeing 16,000 employees and a \$27 billion budget. Now representing California's 14th Senate District, she champions affordable housing, rural hospitals, climate action, public infrastructure, and community investments.



SENATOR SHANNON GROVE

CALIFORNIA STATE SENATOR FOR DISTRICT 12

Shannon Grove, a native of Kern County, served in the United States Army and witnessed the fall of the Berlin Wall while stationed in Frankfurt, Germany, in 1989. After her military service, she co-founded Continental Labor and Staffing Resources with her sister-in-law and currently serves as its CEO, connecting workers with local employment opportunities.

Grove was the first woman veteran elected to the California Legislature, serving the 34th Assembly District from 2010 to 2016. She was elected to the State Senate in 2018 representing the 16th District and led the Senate Republican Caucus for two years. In 2022, she was elected to the newly drawn 12th Senate District, covering Fresno, Tulare, and Kern counties.



ASM. JOAQUIN ARAMBULA

CALIFORNIA STATE ASSEMBLY FOR THE 31 DISTRICT

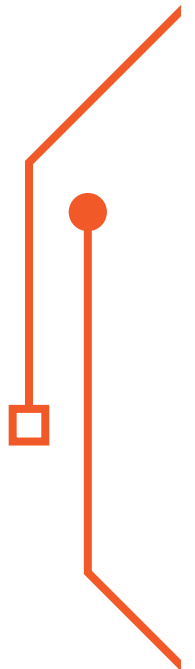
A physician, policymaker, and community leader, Joaquin Arambula has built a career dedicated to improving the well-being of families across California's Central Valley. Since his election to the California State Assembly in 2016, he has represented the 31st Assembly District centered in Fresno. As the first Latino physician in the Legislature, Dr. Arambula brings a unique leadership perspective shaped by years of service as an emergency room doctor in Selma. He previously chaired the Assembly Budget Subcommittee on Health and Human Services, where he helped guide significant state investments in health care access, community health initiatives, and economic development. Through collaborative leadership and a focus on practical solutions, Arambula works to expand opportunity and strengthen the long-term prosperity of communities throughout the Central Valley.



ASM. ESMERALDA SORIA

REPRESENTATIVE OF THE 27TH 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, the Assemblymember was raised in the Central Valley and worked in the agricultural 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 as a Fresno City Councilmember, focusing on public safety, housing and economic growth. In the Assembly, she continues advocating for healthcare, disaster recovery and community investment.







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