

South Bay Higher Education: The Need for an Independent Four-Year University to Serve the Chicano/Latino Community

A Position Paper by the
San Diego Chicano/Latino Concilio on Higher Education
September 2026

... if there is to be a genuinely emancipatory approach to university educational leadership, it demands a decolonizing approach that fully supports both individual and community empowerment (Darder, 2015, cited in Lam and Hernandez, 2026).

Introduction

This position paper by the San Diego Chicano/Latino Concilio on Higher Education argues for the establishment of an independent, four-year public university in San Diego's South County. Such an institution is sorely needed by the South County region, of which over sixty percent is Chicano/Latino.

Chula Vista is a city of approximately 276,000 in the South County area of San Diego, of which 61 percent is Chicano/Latino. Other cities in South County include National City (57,807, 64 percent Chicano/Latino) and Imperial Beach (25,206, 53 percent Chicano/Latino). South County is San Diego's largest region without a four-year university.

Many Chicano/Latino students in South County are place-bound, unable to attend a four-year university outside of San Diego due to family responsibilities and/or financial limitations. Their only reasonable options are San Diego State University in mid-city, Cal State San Marcos in North County, and UC San Diego in La Jolla. While CSUSM has a strong representation of Chicano/Latino students, SDSU's undergraduate student enrollment is only 36 percent, while UCSD's enrollment is only 27 percent Chicano/Latino.

For most of its existence, SDSU provided a guarantee of admission for local, eligible students. However, in a quest for more high-income students with higher standardized test scores (i.e., white students), SDSU eliminated its admission guarantee for local students in 2009. UCSD has a long history of formulaic, biased admission criteria that severely limited its representation of Chicano/Latino students on the campus. While all UC campuses eliminated standardized tests in their admission criteria after the Covid pandemic, thousands of STEM faculty are advocating for the return of such tests as part of the UC admission process. If the UC returns to standardized test criteria, it will undoubtedly reduce the number of working-class Chicano/Latino students at campuses like UCSD.

Thus, the largely working-class communities in South County desperately need an affordable, public, four-year university located in their region. In addition to the access provided to a four-year credential by such an institution, a South County university could ensure that Chicano/Latino students have validating experiences and construct knowledge that enables them to serve as change agents that can challenge the long history of anti-Mexican racism and exploitive capitalism in San Diego. Such hindering conditions in Chicano/Latino communities have become worse under the current presidential administration, increasing the imperative for state and local solutions to the subordinate status of Chicano/Latinos throughout the United States.

The South County Higher Education Task Force

California Assembly Bill 622, authored by Assembly Member David Alvarez, established the South County Higher Education Task Force. According to its website, the task force's "goals and focus" are:

- Address the South Bay "college desert" by expanding local bachelor's degree access.
- Formulate governance and financing models for a multi-institutional hybrid campus.
- Submit final findings and legislative recommendations to the California Legislature by July 1, 2027

<https://pub-chulavista.escribemeetings.com/Meeting.aspx?Id=7340828a-7985-4dc3-b822-461481da8ba3&Agenda=PostAgenda&lang=English>

Early indications from the task force are that it is considering replicating a model of "hybrid campus" sponsored largely by the Metropolitan State University of Denver (Colorado). This model seems to provide space in South County facilities for academic programs that are governed by an independent university such as SDSU or UCSD. For example, SDSU operates a nursing program from Chula Vista's Millenia Library. Likewise, beginning in fall 2026, UCSD and Southwestern College will offer a Bachelor of Science in Public Health at a facility in Chula Vista.

Such efforts are somewhat laudable. However, they are woefully inadequate to meet the higher education needs of Chicanos/Latinos in South County. The size and limited number of such offerings contributes to their inadequacy. In addition, any academic or degree-granting program offered by CSUSM, SDSU, or UCSD will admit its students according to the admission criteria of those institutions. Inevitably, an SDSU program in South County will have only 35 percent Chicano/Latino students, while only 27 percent of admitted students in UCSD programs will be Chicanos/Latinos. This is unacceptable in a region in which over 60 percent of residents is Chicano/Latino.

In addition, CSUSM, SDSU, or UCSD will control the faculty hired for its programs in South County. Thus, those faculty will surely reflect the current composition of tenured and tenure-track faculty in those institutions. A 2024 report by the Campaign for College Opportunity revealed that only 11 percent of tenured and tenure-track faculty at CSUSM is Chicano/Latino, while only 11 percent of such faculty at SDSU and 7 percent at UCSD are Chicano/Latino. This data shows that the likelihood of South County students in four-year degree programs having Chicano/Latino faculty is remote. Subsequently, our Chicano/Latino students in such programs are unlikely to enjoy the culturally sustaining curriculum and pedagogy they deserve. Research shows that Chicano/Latino faculty contribute to the success of Chicano/Latino students (Garcia, 2023).

We reiterate the importance of a four-year, public institution in South County that provides a relevant university education for Chicano/Latino students. We see little interest or commitment from CSUSM, SDSU, or UCSD to facilitate knowledge construction that enables Chicano/Latino students to develop critical thinking skills and the cultural/historical consciousness to become anti-racist change agents. So far, we have only seen discussion of housing academic programs in South County that meet the needs of private corporations for a trained labor force. “Training” is not the type of emancipatory higher education that Chicano/Latinos need in the 21st century (Lam and Hernandez, 2026).

Our SD Concilio has no issue with academic programs that prepare Chicanos/Latinos for jobs in industries for which there is demand. However, public universities do not exist primarily to serve the needs of a corporate sector that has historically imposed racism, included a segmented labor force, against Chicanos/Latinos throughout the U.S. Southwest (Barrera, Torres, and Robinson, 2026; Lam and Hernandez, 2026). The serious lack of Chicanos/Latinos in the leadership of these CSU and UC institutions demonstrates that corporations and public universities often deny Chicanos/Latinos a place at the table where policy decisions are made. Moreover, we question the exaggerated claims of inadequate STEM professionals, as such claims often come from private industry attempts to develop an overabundance of such professionals that enables industry to moderate wages (Hacker, 2016).

Conclusion

Clearly, the working-class Chicano/Latino community in South County deserves its own four-year, public university with the autonomy to determine its own criteria to admit students, its own process to hire faculty, and its own governance structure to develop academic programs that meet the needs of this community. Our SD Concilio unequivocally calls for the establishment of such an institution. Over thirty years ago, when North County San Diego announced its need for accessible higher education, the eventual result was its

own institution, a new campus of the CSU system in 1989. Today, CSUSM has an undergraduate student enrollment that is approximately 50 percent Chicano/Latino.

South County deserves no less. While it may be financially prohibitive to build a new CSU in South County at this time, the necessary intentions and plans to do so should be put in place now. Without the will to establish higher education that truly contributes to the empowerment of South County Chicanos/Latinos, there will only be sparse offerings of classroom space with student enrollments, faculty composition, and instructional programs that do not reflect the population of cities like Chula Vista. There are obvious economic benefits for the entire county in the establishment of a new four-year, public university in South County. However, the present and future of our Chicano/Latino community is also at stake.

References

Barrera, M., R. Torres, and W. Robinson (Eds.). 2026. Race and class in the Southwest and other essays: Studies in political economy. New York: Routledge.

Campaign for College Opportunity. 2024. Still left out: How exclusion in California's colleges and universities continues to hurt our values, students, and democracy.

Garcia, G. 2023. Transforming Hispanic-serving institutions for equity and justice. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Hacker, A. 2016. The math myth and other STEM delusions. New York: The New Press.

Lam, K. and K. Hernandez (Eds). 2026. The selected works of Antonia Darder on theory, politics, and struggle. London: Bloomsbury Academic.