In May, over 3,600 students graduated from Ventura County Community College District with an associate degree or certificate. While faculty, staff, friends, and family celebrated their great accomplishments, I looked into and reflected on the faces of many students who took a non-traditional path to college graduation. Today, the conversation on higher education has shifted away from access and toward completion, which has become the new definition of student success. Yet, for community colleges, student success has a much broader definition.

As the largest higher education system in the world, the California Community Colleges encompasses 112 colleges, 72 districts, 72 educational centers, and 2.4 million students. Our mission as community colleges involves serving students of all ages, backgrounds, and levels of academic preparation. Every year, California provides instruction to 25 percent of the nation’s community college student population. For many of our students, success cannot be defined just as completion.

Let’s look at one student, whom I will identify as “Brandy.” By the time Brandy was a senior in high school, she had attended 11 high schools and lived in over 35 different homes. In the foster care system most of her life, Brandy did not have an opportunity to learn how to read until third grade. Brandy did not think she could go to college; she did not have the money, grades, or skills. When she entered community college in fall 2007, she read at a sixth-grade level and had to enroll in basic math. Brandy was not the only student facing this challenge. According to the California Community Colleges Student Success Task Force, more than 70 percent of community college students enter the system underprepared for college-level work. A majority of these students are first generation college students, low-income, and/or come from underrepresented groups. These students face the most challenging obstacles for success and, unfortunately, have the lowest completion rates in the system. Community colleges serve as their only access point to postsecondary education. Community colleges facilitate student success one class at a time, along with structured pathways to help students identify programs of study and provide support at all levels, including proper assessment and completing an educational plan.

Student success for community colleges goes beyond graduation. Student success is a system that provides students with enhanced structure and guidance that will encourage them to make better choices and increase their chance of completion. We need to increase the articulation and implementation of best practices and strategies that have proven to be effective in preparing students for college-level work and completion.

Brandy’s story echoes the challenges many of our students face when they enter our community colleges. If student success is defined solely as completion, the community college story goes untold. Community colleges need to be allowed to define student success in alignment with our mission of removing barriers to college education, elevating student preparation, increasing investment in financial aid, and providing flexibility in course and program delivery to all that come to us.
For the recent graduates of Moorpark College, Oxnard College, and Ventura College, and to Brandy who will start at California State University, Northridge, in the fall, I wish you all continued success!

On behalf of the Board of Trustees, I would like to thank the Colleges for the pleasure of attending Moorpark, Oxnard, and Ventura graduations in May. You have our deepest gratitude for your generous support to our students. We value the opportunity to celebrate your success in educating students, and it was truly rewarding to see the graduates and their families experience such life-changing achievements.

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