

THESE L.A.-AREA COMMUNITY COLLEGES ARE THE BEST RETURN ON INVESTMENT

Feb. 20, 2025

(Allen J. Schaben / Los Angeles Times)

The campus of Cerritos College, which recently ranked No. 10 on a study that assesses return-on-investment at California community and career colleges.

Kathy Bui graduated from Cal State Fullerton in 2020 with a bachelor's degree in health science, yet did not have a solid career path. But she did always seemed to fixate on people's teeth.

"Whenever I meet people, I'm someone who looks at their teeth," said Bui, 27. "It was just a weird little thing that I noticed, and I was like, 'Hey, I can actually get a career out of this.'"

She enrolled in Cerritos College's dental assisting program, graduating with a certificate in 2023.



Cerritos College campus.

Bui, 27, who grew up in South L.A., said that obtaining the certificate led to her job at a private dental practice in Lakewood, where she specialized in orthodontics, adjusting braces and handling other tasks. She has since returned to Cerritos, which offers a bachelor's degree to help her achieve her goal of becoming a dental hygienist.

"I just felt like I could do more," said Bui. "I just took it upon myself to challenge myself ... to be at a higher level in dentistry."

Her experience at Cerritos College in Norwalk exemplifies the findings of a new study that looks at an increasingly important metric in higher education: price-to-earnings. The Golden Returns study, created by the HEA Group and College Futures Foundation, ranks California community and career colleges based on how quickly students who invest in an education recoup its cost.

No. 1? Skyline College in San Bruno, Calif.

Two Los Angeles-area schools cracked the top 10 on the list of 327 schools.

They were Moorpark College (No. 7) and Cerritos College (No. 10).



Moorpark College campus.

TOP 10 CALIFORNIA COMMUNITY AND CAREER COLLEGES RANKED FOR RETURN ON INVESTMENT

1. Skyline College - San Bruno
2. San Diego Miramar College - San Diego
3. San Diego Mesa College - San Diego
4. San Diego City College - San Diego
5. Canada College - Redwood City
6. College of the Sequoias - Visalia
7. Moorpark College - Moorpark
8. College of San Mateo - San Mateo
9. Oxnard College - Oxnard
10. Cerritos College - Norwalk

Source: Golden Returns study

TOP 10 L.A. COUNTY COMMUNITY AND CAREER COLLEGES RANKED FOR RETURN ON INVESTMENT

1. Cerritos College - Norwalk
2. College of the Canyons - Santa Clarita
3. Mt. San Antonio College - Walnut
4. Pasadena City College - Pasadena
5. Homestead Schools - Torrance
6. Career Development Institute - Los Angeles
7. Santa Monica College - Santa Monica
8. Citrus College - Glendora
9. Angeles Institute - Artesia
10. Marian Health Careers Center - Los Angeles

Source: Golden Returns study

HOW COLLEGES REACH THE TOP

Eloy Ortiz Oakley, president of College Futures Foundation, which commissioned the study, said that its aim is to help community colleges “better understand how the promise of economic mobility ... is panning out or not.”

“Part of the story is the college itself — is it aligning programs with the workforce? Is it communicating with students in a way that helps them navigate toward that career outcome as quickly as possible?” he asked.

According to the study, when factoring in the net price of two years of school at Moorpark College and the median income of attendees 10 years after enrollment, the typical student there is able to recoup his or her investment in a little more than a month.

Using the same parameters, the typical Cerritos College student is able to recoup it in a little less than two months. The quick time frames partly reflect the cost of an education at these institutions: It was less than \$1,500 on average for two years of schooling at Moorpark and Cerritos.

Julius O. Sokenu, president of Moorpark College — which is located in Ventura County but partly serves northern L.A. County — said his school’s strong ranking shows it is working to make sure graduates’ degrees “not only have high value, but that they ladder into something for the individual.”

WHAT THE STUDY SHOWS

The Golden Returns study, created using U.S. Department of Education data, looks at three key metrics: the net price of a degree or certificate at both public and private community and career colleges; the median earnings of former students 10 years after enrollment; and how much higher those earnings are above those of a typical high school graduate in California.

Public schools fared much better than private ones: 40% of them allow students to recoup costs within one year, the study shows, whereas just 5% of private ones do so. Only two private institutions cracked the top 25, and both were branches of the same Bay Area nursing and medical assisting school, Unitek College. The study also grouped schools into 12 economic regions spanning the state. Cerritos College was No.1 on the L.A. County list, College of the Canyons ranked second and Mt. San Antonio College third. The county had only three schools in the statewide top 25. None were from the Los Angeles Community College District.

Michael Itzkowitz, founder and president of HEA Group, said some of the issues in Los Angeles County region can be linked to the high number of private, for-profit schools — 62 out of 87 institutions in all — which typically cost much more than public colleges.

Nearly one-third of the state's 87 institutions showed no return on investment, which means that a vast number of students are "actually earning less than the typical high school graduate in California," said Itzkowitz, whose research and policy organization focuses on college value and economic mobility.

CERRITOS STANDS OUT

Cerritos College President Jose Fierro said that he has long believed that "everything that you learn is a good investment." But it's important, he said, to ask, "How can we monetize that learning?"

One way that community colleges can be effective, he said, is by working with the local industries.

"Part of our job and responsibility as a community college is to be engaged in continuous conversations with our local community so we can get their support, and in return, connect them with our students," Fierro said.

That approach helped Bui. While pursuing her dental assisting certificate, she was able to secure — with the help of the school — internships with two area dental practices. Eventually, both companies offered her jobs, and she opted for the one in Lakewood.



Jose Fierro, president of Cerritos College, is seen on campus.

"You see they are generally there for you and that is something I grew to appreciate," Bui said of Cerritos College.

Years earlier, Bryan Valdez, 37, had a similar experience. After high school, he enrolled at Cerritos College in 2006, attracted in part by the low tuition. "I was still trying to figure out my direction," he said. "Cerritos felt like it was like a good starting point."

He knew he was interested in a career in education, but wasn't sure, initially, what direction he might take. He eventually realized he wanted to become a teacher.

"I had professors who really took the time to guide me with my writing and ... public speaking," said Valdez. "They pushed me to become a more effective communicator."

He graduated with an associate's degree in elementary education 2009, and enrolled at Cal State Long Beach, where he earned a bachelor's degree in liberal studies. Now he's a teacher with the ABC Unified School District, which serves part of Cerritos. He has spent the last nine years as a kindergarten teacher.

More than 15 years after graduating from Cerritos College, he's trying to pay it forward — by hosting the college's education students in his classroom so that they can earn their fieldwork hours.

"Ever since I left Cerritos College," he said, "I told myself that I would never, ever turn my back on them."

