

# SOAR


**RISING HIGHER IN EDUCATION  
2024 EDITION**

**8,157 Reasons to Celebrate**  
Awarding More Degrees and  
Certificates Than Ever Before



**CERRITOS  
COLLEGE**  
A Proud  
Hispanic-Serving  
Institution



 **First  
Generation  
Graduate**

**CLASS  
OF  
2024**



# SOAR

THE CERRITOS COLLEGE MAGAZINE

## CERRITOS COLLEGE BOARD OF TRUSTEES



Dr. Sandra Salazar, President



Mariana Pacheco, Vice President



Dr. Dawn Green, Clerk



James Cody Birkey



Zurich Lewis



Dr. Shin Liu



Marisa Perez



Cathy Le, Student Trustee

## CERRITOS COLLEGE ADMINISTRATORS

Dr. Jose Fierro, President/Superintendent

Felipe Lopez, Executive Vice President of Business Services/Assistant Superintendent

Dr. Frank Mixson, Vice President of Academic Affairs/Assistant Superintendent

Dr. Mercedes Gutierrez, Vice President of Human Resources/Assistant Superintendent

Dr. Robyn Brammer, Vice President of Student Services/Assistant Superintendent

### Editors

Chelsea Van Doornum, Director of Public Relations and Communications

Aya Aoki, Media Relations Coordinator (PIO)

### Designer

Kelly Kwan, Graphic Designer

### Photographers

Kelly Kwan, Graphic Designer

Sarah Pirtle, Multimedia Production Specialist I

Thank you to all Cerritos College faculty and staff for their contributions to this magazine.



Whether you want more money or a better job, earning a college degree or certificate guarantees a higher chance of success. This is why Cerritos College is here – to help you achieve your goals, increase your income, and attain upward social and economic mobility.

Your time and investment in education are important, and that is why we are transforming Cerritos College so that you can graduate faster and advance to your dream job sooner. This transformation is already showing results: this year, we awarded a record 8,157 degrees and certificates to our graduates, compared to 2,499 in 2015. We are ranked one of the top Hispanic-Serving Institutions in the nation. We could not do this without the support of our Board of Trustees, our faculty and staff, and our community.

Cerritos College is transforming lives and making a significant impact on our community. Our Falcon family, including alumni, contribute over half a billion dollars to our local economy each year. As soon as they graduate, Cerritos College alumni see an average salary increase of \$11,000 per year, and those who go on to earn a bachelor's degree make \$30,000 more per year. That is only the beginning, as they continue to advance in their careers and earn higher wages.

We're grateful for the support from our community. I hope you enjoy our 2024 edition of *SOAR* as we celebrate the incredible achievements of the past year and continue building our community together.

Jose L. Fierro, D.V.M., Ph.D.  
President/Superintendent



@DrJfierro\_



@cerritoscollegepres

## TABLE OF CONTENTS



2-3	Culinary Arts Spotlight
4-5	Notes & Notables
6	Students First
7	Our Students
8-9	2024 Commencement
10-11	Dedicated Employees
12	Our Financials & New Construction
13	Making an Impact
14	From Challenge to Victory
15	Level Up
16	Cerritos College Foundation
17	Slice of Life



# Culinary Arts Celebrates 50 Years of Excellence



**Happy 50th anniversary to our culinary arts program!** For half a century, our program has been preparing students for careers in the professional food service industry. The culinary arts department offers certificates and associate of science degrees in professional cooking, professional baking and pastry, and culinary arts management, as well as two associate of science for transfer (AS-T) degrees in food service management and hospitality management. Students who earn an AS-T degree are ready to transfer to California State University Long Beach (CSULB) or Cal Poly Pomona to complete their bachelor's degree in hospitality management. Nearly 1,000 students have graduated from our program, many of whom achieved success in the food and hospitality industry.



**Kat Vacharabul**



2024

Culinary Arts celebrates 50 years of excellence

2022  
Culinary Arts was named  
6th best culinary school  
in the nation



2016  
Inaugural Marukan  
Cup Competition/Food  
Show was held



## Chef Kat Vacharabul is Hungry for Teaching Culinary Excellence

After graduating high school in 2006, Long Beach native Kat Vacharabul took a few years off and worked at Disneyland. Although she always loved cooking, the 2008 recession and a societal push towards stable healthcare careers led her to pharmacy technician training. In 2012, she enrolled in the Cerritos College Pharmacy Technician Program while continuing to work at Disneyland in the kitchen.

During her pharmacy internship, Kat realized she genuinely enjoyed working in the kitchen and did not want to give that up. In 2015, she made the decision to change her major to culinary arts. Learning from Culinary Arts Associate Professor Michael Pierini reignited her passion and set her on a clear career path.

After completing the program, Kat was promoted to sous chef at Disneyland and began venturing into entrepreneurship, running a meal prep business and working at a small restaurant handling back-end operations. In 2019, she returned to Cerritos College to study business management, and a year later, she opened her gourmet burger restaurant, Hangry Belly. Kat expanded in 2022 to include a food truck for catering events, and Hangry Belly continues to thrive, receiving positive reviews from food critics and magazines.

In addition to her entrepreneurial endeavors, Kat returned to the place that jumpstarted her career last fall, teaching at Cerritos College. "My ultimate goal is to become the program director, a role that will allow me to share my passion and expertise for the food industry with future chefs, just like Chef Pierini did for me and hundreds of other students," she said.



**SCAN ME**

to learn more about Culinary Arts:  
[www.cerritos.edu/culinary-arts](http://www.cerritos.edu/culinary-arts)

2015-2020

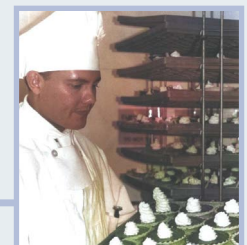
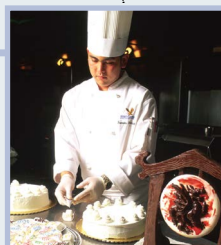
Culinary Arts students and faculty assisted with the Golden Globe Awards dinner at the Beverly Hilton



2013

The Falcon Room Restaurant opened as the only table-service restaurant on campus

1990's  
Food Court was renovated



1974

Food Service (now Culinary Arts) major was established



### Cerritos College Recognized Nationally for Excellence in Supporting Student Needs

We are honored to be named a national finalist for the 2024 Bellwether Award, recognizing innovative programs in community colleges. Our project, It Takes a Village: Supporting Student Housing and Basic Needs, ranked in the top 10 for instructional programs and serves as a model for other colleges. Our Falcon’s Nest provides students with a free food market, clothing and hygiene assistance, emergency aid, transportation support, and housing resources. We also plan to expand our housing program with a new development in 2026. **1**



**1**

### Dental Hygiene and Mental Health Worker Programs Honored with Excellence Award

Our dental hygiene and mental health worker programs received the 2024 League for Innovation in Community Colleges Excellence Award. The dental hygiene team will introduce the first bachelor’s degree program at Cerritos College in fall 2025. Additionally, our mental health worker program prepares students for roles in community-based behavioral health programs and offers a streamlined dual enrollment pipeline that allows high school students to begin taking college courses early. **2**



**2**

### Rep. Linda Sánchez and Asm. Blanca Pacheco Support Expansion of Cerritos College Child Development Center

Congresswoman Linda T. Sánchez secured \$1 million in federal funding to support the expansion of our Child Development Center (CDC). This federal support complements the \$782,000 in state funding secured by California Assemblymember Blanca Pacheco in 2023. This funding will help our CDC expand, allowing us to meet community needs by providing more child development services and giving our students greater opportunities to learn about early childhood education. **3**



**3**



**3**



## Rep. Michelle Steel Secures \$1 Million to Boost Student Veteran Employment

Congresswoman Michelle Steel secured \$1 million in congressional funding to expand student veteran employment opportunities on campus. This funding will establish the Cerritos College Career Command Center, providing student veterans with on-campus job opportunities to earn income. Our goal is to empower them to develop and apply valuable work and life skills while navigating their reintegration into civilian life, and in turn, our community will benefit from the insights and experiences that our student veterans bring to the learning environment. **4**

## Transfer Agreement with National University Provides Affordable Bachelor's Degree Pathway

We extended our partnership with National University to offer Cerritos College students significant savings on more than 190 online bachelor's degree programs. Originally established in 2018, the partnership now provides current and recent Cerritos College students with up to a 46% tuition discount at National University. **5**

## Student Team Rocks NASA's Gateways to Blue Skies Competition

Our student team, Project F.I.R.E. (Fire Intervention Retardant Expeller), won the Future Game-Changer Award at NASA's 2024 Gateways to Blue Skies Competition. Among eight teams selected from across the country, Project F.I.R.E. emerged as the sole community college winner, outshining competitors from renowned four-year universities. The team's innovative solution integrates an advanced alert system, AI detection, and recycled drones equipped with thermal cameras to revolutionize early fire detection and containment. **6**



### SCAN ME

for more information about National University programs at Cerritos College:  
[\(www.nu.edu/our-university/the-university/partnerships/cerritos/\)](http://www.nu.edu/our-university/the-university/partnerships/cerritos/)





# Students First Framework



## Cerritos College Puts Students First

Cerritos College introduced a new framework to help more students graduate faster. The longer it takes our students to complete their academic goals, the more potential earnings they miss out on. That’s why we are committed to ensuring that our students graduate in five years or less. To achieve this, we are enhancing the support we provide. Our efforts are outlined in a homegrown ten-year plan developed by those who know our community and students best—our entire campus. We call this plan the Students First Framework.

### The Students First Framework is centered around four key areas:

-  Becoming a student-ready institution;
-  Helping more students graduate faster;
-  Increasing economic opportunities for students and the community; and,
-  Making sure the college is healthy.

We will rely on data to track student progress, identify areas needing improvement, and ensure our support services effectively meet student needs. The plan also encourages teamwork among faculty, staff, and students to build a robust support system. As we implement the Students First Framework and work toward our goal, Cerritos College aspires to lead in student-centered education and drive regional economic growth.





## Our Falcons

In 2023-24, Cerritos College welcomed **20,971 students**, creating a diverse and inclusive community that supports a wide range of student demographics, emphasizing accessibility and success for all learners.



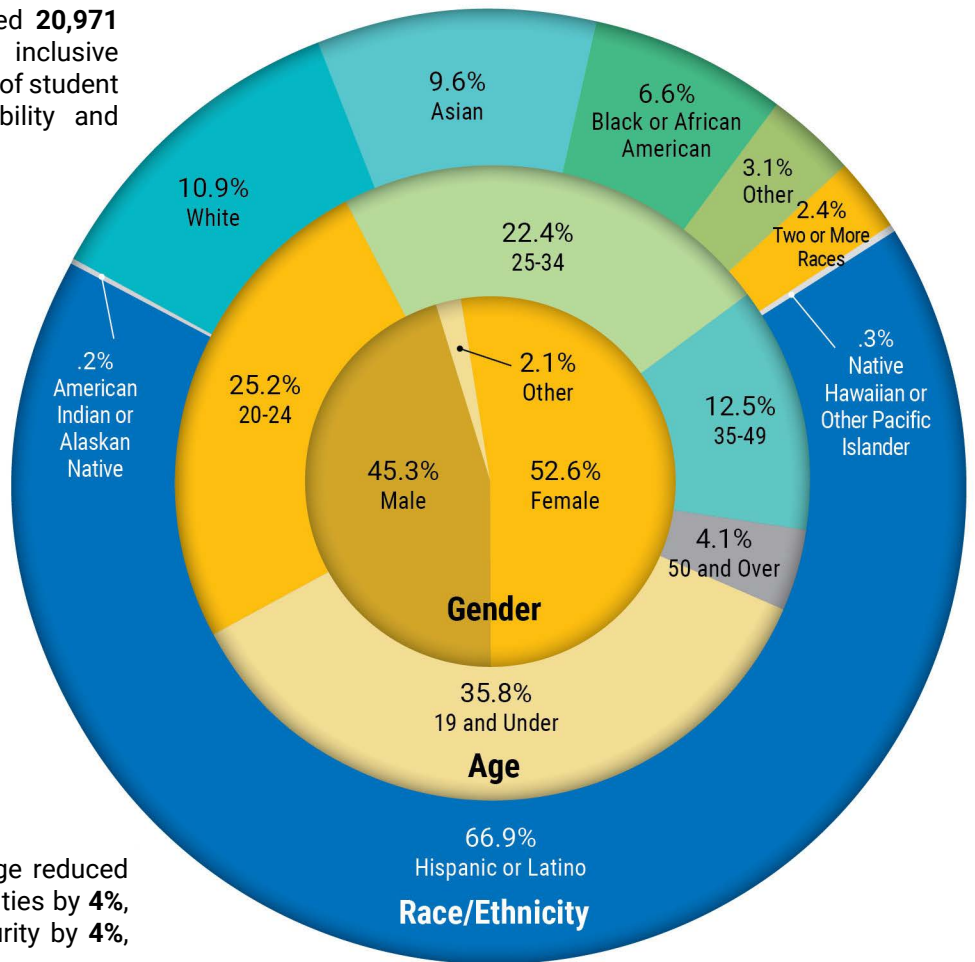
### Financial Aid

Approximately **57%** of our students receive financial aid.



### Addressing Basic Needs

In less than five years, Cerritos College reduced the prevalence of basic needs insecurities by **4%**, food insecurity by **4%**, housing insecurity by **4%**, and homelessness by **2%**.



## It Takes a Village: Supporting Student Basic Needs and Housing

During the 2023-24 academic year, nearly **1,250 students** requested basic needs support through the Falcon's Nest, allowing them to focus on their studies instead of worrying about their next meal or place to sleep. We know that when we remove financial barriers and meet students' basic needs, they are more likely to succeed in college.



### Food and Hygiene

- Products Distributed: **110,252 items**
- Financial Assistance: **\$503,797** in grocery and laundry cards for qualified students



### Housing

- Referrals: **444**



### Transportation

- Transit Access: **1,278 Metro GoPasses**
- Financial Assistance: **\$108,700** in gas cards for qualified students



### Childcare

- The Child Development Center enrolled:
- **56 students**
  - **22 families** from the community
  - **15 college employees**

**Did you know?** 1 in 5 California community college students experience homelessness. That's why we opened California's first community college housing development exclusively for students facing housing insecurity. Located just a few blocks from campus, The Village features seven modern townhomes, offering free and affordable housing for up to **28 students**.



# 8,157 Reasons to Celebrate: Awarding More Degrees and Certificates Than Ever Before

**Proud Falcon moment!** For the third consecutive year, we celebrated our largest graduating class in the campus's history. The college conferred more than 8,000 degrees and certificates, a significant increase of 1,800 awards compared to last year's record-breaking numbers. We have set an ambitious goal to graduate more students in less time, and this rise in graduation numbers indicates that our efforts and strategies are on the right track. More importantly, by equipping our graduates with valuable degrees and certificates, we are increasing their opportunities for upward mobility and long-term success.



## Degrees and Certificates Awarded

4x more awards in just 9 years!



2,496

2015-16



4,662

2020-21



6,318

2022-23



8,157

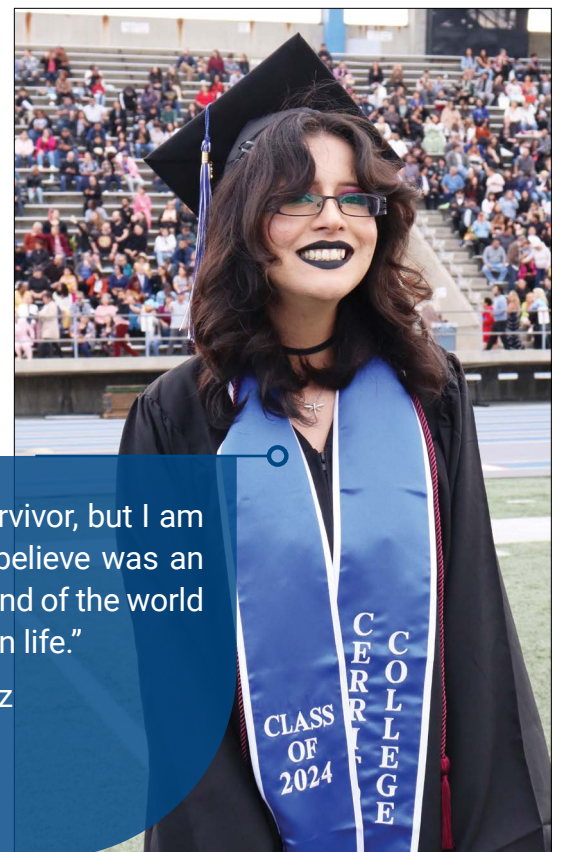
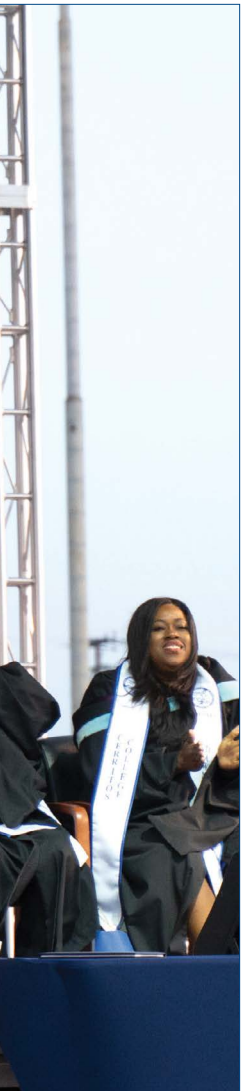
2023-24

## Annie Gutierrez Overcomes Life's Obstacles to Inspire Others

After graduating from Lynwood High School in 2016, Annie Gutierrez began studying animation and graphic design at Cerritos College. However, in 2019, she was diagnosed with ovarian cancer and had to take a break from her studies. Despite the challenges posed by the pandemic, she returned to Cerritos College in 2020 to resume her coursework.

In 2021, a brain tumor was discovered, forcing Annie to put her education on hold again. After two years of treatment and recovery, supported by excellent doctors and nurses, she developed an interest in the medical field.

Annie returned to Cerritos College in 2023 with renewed determination, shifting her focus to a career in dental assisting and earning her associate degree in just three semesters. She also completed a summer internship at a dental office, gaining hands-on experience working with patients. Annie's resiliency and perseverance serve as an inspiration to us all.



"Yes, I have a neurological disability, and I'm a cancer survivor, but I am also a dental assistant. I have much more than what I believe was an unexpected setback in my life. What you may see as the end of the world does not define who you are and what you choose to do in life."

— Annie Gutierrez



**SCAN ME**

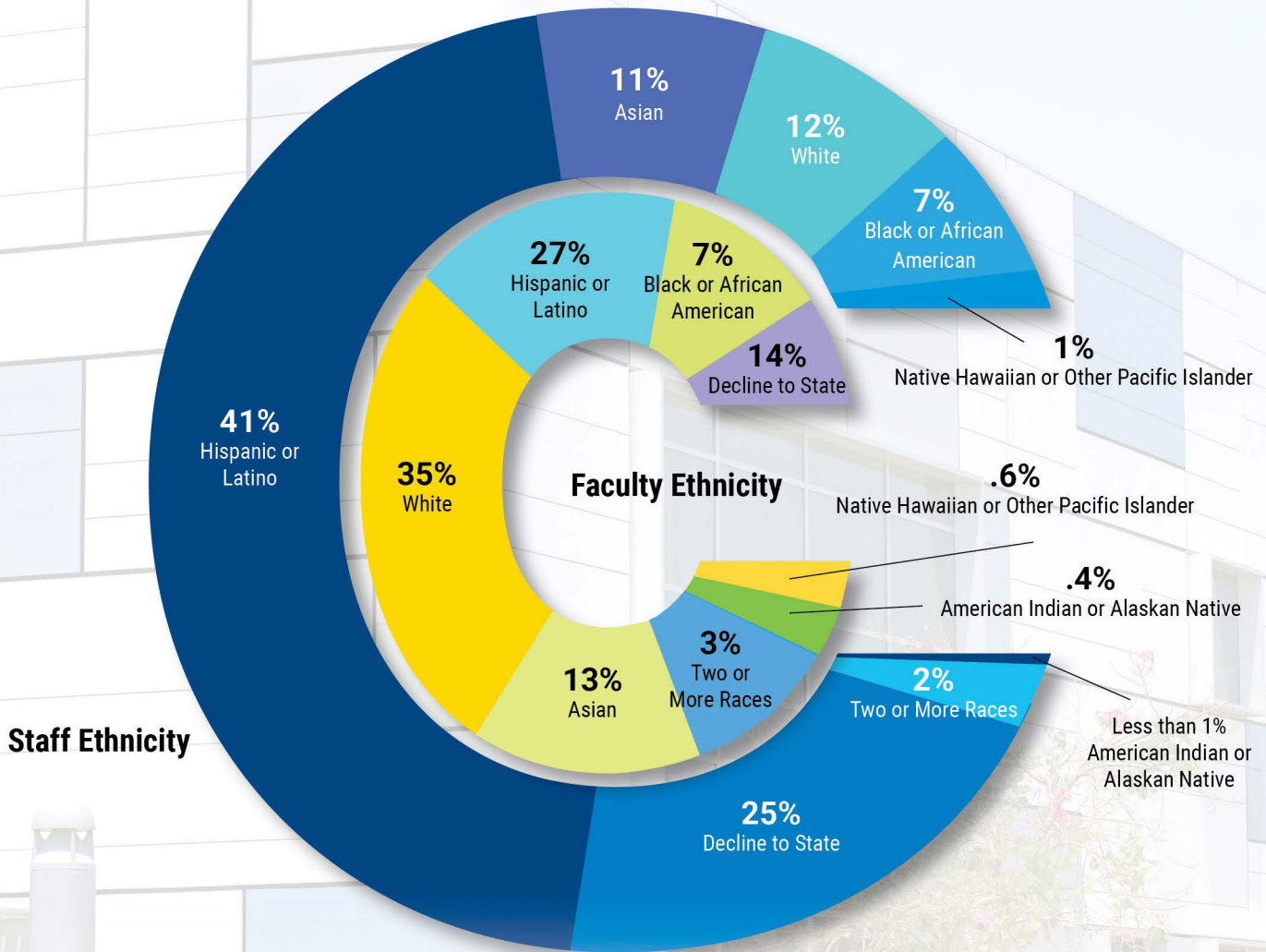
to read more about Annie:  
([www.cerritos.edu/falcons-in-flight/](http://www.cerritos.edu/falcons-in-flight/))



Cerritos College employs **1,452 dedicated faculty and staff** who make a meaningful impact on our students and community. We focus on student needs, which helps us attract and retain qualified employees.

Since 2021, we've retained **92.5%** of our staff, demonstrating our commitment to engagement and stability. By investing in our Falcon family, we promote student success and upward social and economic mobility for our community.

A strong institution relies on a supportive team. When we invest in our employees, our students succeed—and so do we.



## Diversity Awards

The Cerritos College Diversity Awards celebrate individuals and groups that actively promote diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility, making our campus a more welcoming place for everyone.

Among this year's recipients are Cerritos College Police Department Captain Brian Hill and Officer Donte Green, who received the Bridge to Equity Award for their contributions to the campus community. In addition to their duties as sworn officers, they volunteer their time to mentor students.





through engaging guest speakers, interactive activities, and opportunities for community-building.

As part of their training, academy members present capstone projects focused on specific areas of campus that provide services to students. They identify potential improvements, develop actionable plans, and propose implementation processes. This year, Janet Lambert, the lead Distance Education (DE) coordinator, outlined steps to enhance the DE program at Cerritos College. Additionally, Dean of Business Education Christopher Whiteside conducted an analysis of community college programs in relation to workforce data, occupational demand, and local supply. His findings offer valuable insights for community colleges aiming to align their programs with the evolving job market.

## Falcon Leadership Academy

The Falcon Leadership Academy invests in employee professional development by offering workshops for new and aspiring managers. These sessions focus on community college leadership skills and knowledge

## 2023-24 Employees of the Year



**Faculty of the Year**  
Ken Matsura  
Counselor



**Academic Manager of the Year**  
Colleen McKinley  
Acting Dean, Academic Affairs & Strategic Initiatives



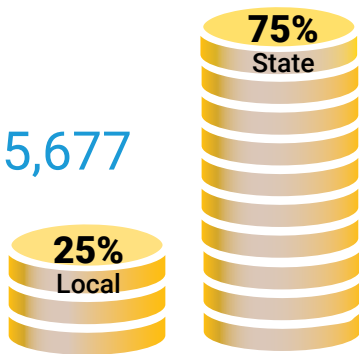
**Classified Manager of the Year**  
Maria Castro  
Athletic Director



**Outstanding Employee of the Year**  
Samuel Chavez  
Web Support Technician



**Revenue**  
\$164,425,677



(Source: 2024-25 Adopted Budget)

**Expenses**  
\$163,267,453

<b>Employee Costs</b> .....	\$	149,024,492
Academic Salaries .....	\$	74,550,211
Classified Salaries .....	\$	31,328,200
Benefits .....	\$	43,146,081
<b>Operations</b> .....	\$	9,019,754
<b>Supplies and Material</b> .....	\$	1,298,614
<b>Capital Outlay</b> .....	\$	1,258,185
<b>Interfund Transfers – Out</b> .....	\$	2,650,308
<b>Student Financial Aid</b> .....	\$	15,000
<b>Other Student Aid</b> .....	\$	1,100



### Student Services and Administration Building Groundbreaking and Beam Signing

We celebrated the upcoming Student Services and Administration Building with a groundbreaking ceremony in February, followed by a beam signing to mark construction progress in July. This \$95-million project, funded by Measure CC Bond dollars and a \$16-million state funding allocation secured by California Assembly Speaker Emeritus Anthony Rendon, will house student services, administration, and bookstore functions.

### Health Science Renovation

Built in 1974, the Health Science Building – home to our cosmetology and health occupations programs – is undergoing a transformative renovation. The project includes seismic retrofitting and updates to modernize the building, enhancing its efficiency, accessibility, and sustainability. Construction began in December 2022 and is expected to be completed by the end of spring 2025.



### Native Vegetation Garden

Created in 2023 through collaboration among faculty, staff, and students, the native vegetation garden serves multiple purposes on campus. It provides habitat and food for local wildlife, helps keep water and nutrients in the soil, and returns the land to its original state of abundance and diversity before colonization. The garden also serves as a learning tool for biology classes.





# Cerritos College Boosts Local Economy

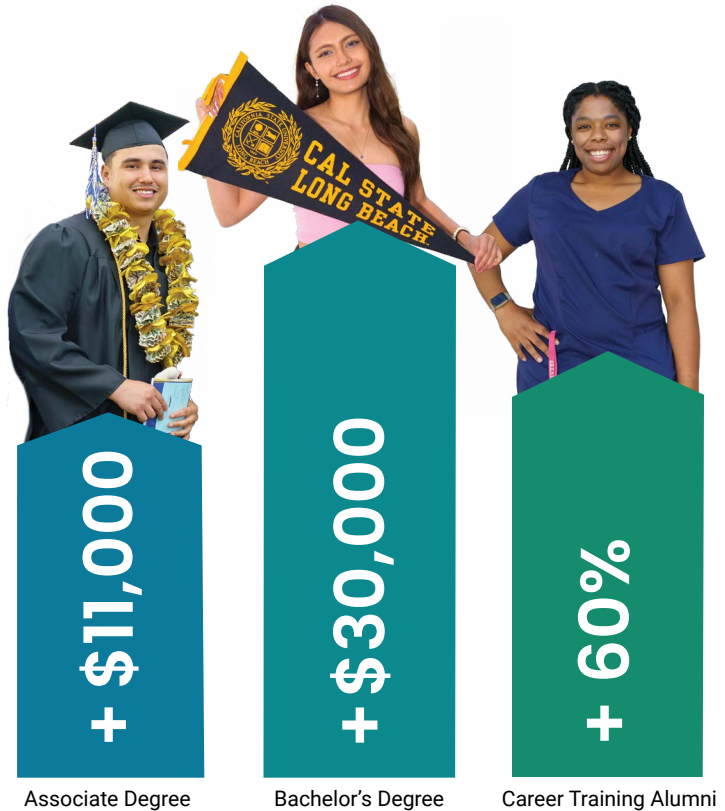
Cerritos College is an economic engine powering Los Angeles County. We contribute over half a billion dollars to the local economy annually. Beyond our financial impact, the college is essential for community building and personal development.

Cerritos College graduates earn considerably more than those with only a high school diploma. On average, those with an associate degree make about \$11,000 more per year, and transfer students earn an additional \$30,000 more per year after obtaining their bachelor's degree. Graduates of our career training programs see wage increases of up to 60%. These alumni will continue to make more money as they advance in their careers.

Investing in a Cerritos College education yields a 23.3% annual return, far exceeding the average stock market return of 9.6%. This translates to earning \$6.40 for every dollar invested in one's education.

Overall, Cerritos College generates \$3.1 billion in benefits to the community, strengthening the local workforce, boosting the economy, and promoting upward social mobility for all.

## Earn more money!



## Automotive Technology and Retail Management Programs Guarantee Student Success with Direct Pathways to Employment

Our automotive technology program continues to grow and more than doubled the number of certificates awarded to students in the past year. This success results from clear pathways and stackable certificates that lead to fast employment. As one of only two community colleges in California offering GM ASEP and Ford ASSET programs, Cerritos College connects students directly to well-paying dealership jobs. Additionally, our three dual enrollment partnerships allow high school students to earn college credit and get a head start on their career goals.

Our retail management program also leads the way by partnering with the Western Association of Food Chains (WAFC) and other business organizations to align the program curriculum with industry trends. This collaboration prepares graduates for high-paying positions at retailers like Albertsons, Bristol Farms, Costco, Food4Less, Northgate Market, Smart & Final, Sprouts, and Stater Bros. Markets. Enhanced support

services help students stay on track and graduate within two years. As a result, the number of retail management degrees and certificates awarded increased by 77% in the last year. Graduates experience a 33% salary increase, are twice as likely to be promoted, and are three times more likely to reach management roles within their organization.





**SCAN ME**

to learn more about Men's Track and Field:  
[www.cerritosfalcons.com/sports/mtrack](http://www.cerritosfalcons.com/sports/mtrack)

## Falcon Hurdler Redefines His Legacy

Juan Ward, a hurdler from Long Beach Polytechnic High School, joined the Cerritos College Track and Field team in January 2015, quickly setting a new college record in his first season. However, internal and external struggles led him to drop out of college and follow a life path that ultimately landed him in prison. While incarcerated, Juan committed himself to change, earning multiple degrees and a ministry license.

After receiving an early release, Juan returned to Cerritos College to study kinesiology and rejoin the track team. Through hard work and determination, he made a remarkable comeback, finishing second at the 2024 State

Championships after nearly a decade away from the sport. To honor his tenacity, Coach Morris Jones, Jr. and the track and field program established The Juan Ward Perseverance Award, of which he was the inaugural recipient.

Maintaining high academic standards, Juan plans to transfer to a four-year university on an athletic scholarship. His ultimate goal is to compete in the 2028 Olympics, representing Belize, his grandfather's homeland. Through his journey of incarceration, redemption, and spiritual growth, Juan overcame the hurdles in his life and showed us that no matter the circumstances, there is always the ability to persevere and change your life for the better.



# TRANSFER SUCCESS

Most students arrive at Cerritos College with the goal of transferring to a university. Knowing your desired major and where you want to apply is essential for creating your transfer plan. From your very first semester, the Transfer Center is here to support you with research, university information, workshops, and counseling services. Cerritos College is the first step toward achieving your academic goals!



**Guillermo Rodriguez Sotomayor (2024)**

**Associate Degree:**  
Elementary Teacher Education for Transfer with Highest Honors

**Transfer School/Major:**  
CSU Long Beach/Education

**Goal:**  
Become a special education teacher



**Aberer Samawi (2024)**

**Associate Degree:**  
Psychology for Transfer with Highest Honors

**Transfer School/Major:**  
UCI/Psychology

**Goal:**  
Become a professor and a psychotherapist



**Serafina Chun (2024)**

**Associate Degree:**  
Theatre Arts for Transfer with Highest Honors

**Transfer School/Major:**  
UCLA/Theatre with emphasis in Acting

**Goal:**  
Become an actress





# Funding Students' Futures

The Cerritos College Foundation is dedicated to developing bright futures for our students, but we need your support. Join our community of donors, sponsors, alumni, and faculty who are making student dreams a reality through scholarships and program support.



## Paola Mayoral-Jimenez: Cerritos College Graduate and Future Aerospace Engineer

Paola Mayoral-Jimenez, a first-generation college student from La Palma, started studying engineering at Cerritos College in Fall 2022. Her early passion for STEM was inspired by her parents, particularly her dad's work as a Boeing mechanic. "Growing up, my parents encouraged curiosity and hands-on experiences with new technology," Paola recalls.

At Cerritos College, Paola was involved in various groups, including the STEM Club, Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society, and NASA Community College Aerospace Scholars. She also tutored chemistry and interned at the Columbia Memorial Space Center.

By graduation in May 2024, she earned seven scholarships from the Cerritos College Foundation, totaling \$12,450. Now pursuing aerospace engineering at California State University, Long Beach, Paola is grateful for the financial support, sharing, "These scholarships helped cover my tuition and other college needs, relieving my financial worries and allowing me to focus on my studies."



## Supporting Single Parents: Alumna Creates Nursing Endowment

Cerritos College alumna Sharon Reichle established a \$125,000 endowment to fund scholarships for single-parent nursing students. A member of the inaugural nursing class of 1968, Sharon's career spanned roles in healthcare and consulting. Drawing from experience as a single working parent, she aims to inspire others, stating, "I know firsthand that any little bit helps." Dr. Elizabeth Riley, dean of the health occupations division, praised Sharon's generosity, noting that her contribution not only supports current students but also strengthens the program's legacy. As Sharon always says, "It's not where you end up, but where you started."

### 2023-24 Scholarships

**\$138,019**

Disbursed in Scholarship Awards



**148**  
Scholarships  
Awarded



**108**  
Students  
Awarded

**IRA Charitable Rollover Gift:** If you are 70½ or older, you can make a meaningful impact by using your individual retirement account (IRA) to support our mission. Enjoy tax benefits while empowering the next generation to succeed in college.

**DONATE TODAY:**  
([cerritoscf.org](http://cerritoscf.org))





# Get a Glimpse Into Campus Life at Cerritos College!

Cerritos College celebrates diversity, culture, and the arts by providing a platform for emerging and established artists. Our Art Gallery serves as a vibrant hub for creativity, showcasing artistic expressions that reflect the rich cultures of our community.

In August 2023, renowned Los Angeles artist Gronk showcased his work at the Cerritos College Art Gallery with a solo exhibition. In addition to the exhibition, Gronk spent 10 days in the gallery's project space creating a new 32-foot-long multi-panel piece for the Fine Arts Building. Campus visitors had the unique opportunity to watch Gronk in action and engage in conversations with him over coffee.



### SCAN ME

for more information about our Art Gallery:  
([www.cerritos.edu/art-gallery](http://www.cerritos.edu/art-gallery))



## As Seen on Social

Follow us on social media @cerritoscollege and stay connected!





**Cerritos Community College District**  
 11110 Alondra Blvd., Norwalk, CA 90650  
 (562) 860-2451 | [www.cerritos.edu](http://www.cerritos.edu)

Non-Profit  
 Organization  
 U.S. Postage  
**PAID**  
 Cerritos College

ECRWSS  
 Residential Customer, Local

# Santa's Village

Saturday, December 7, 2024 | 11 a.m. - 2 p.m.  
 Fine Arts Building (Free Parking in Lot 10)



- ❄ Photos with Santa and Franco Falcon
- ❄ Face painting, arts and crafts, and fun family activities
- ❄ Taco Bite Food Truck and more



**Enroll now and take the next step toward your future!**



Cerritos College is committed to helping you achieve your educational and career goals. Our comprehensive programs, dedicated faculty and staff, and welcoming campus community offer a supportive environment for every student.  
[www.cerritos.edu/future-students](http://www.cerritos.edu/future-students)



**SAVE THE DATE**

Cerritos College  
 is turning 70!  
 September 17, 2025  
 Free Community Event



Connect with us  
 @cerritoscollege

*Cerritos College is fully accredited by the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges.*