

San Diego & Imperial Counties Leaders Take the Stage at American Association of Community Colleges Workforce Development Institute in Coronado

March 2025

Imagine walking into a room packed with hundreds of educators, workforce leaders and industry partners from all over the country—every seat filled, every conversation buzzing with urgency to share best practices and explore innovative strategies in career education, work-based learning and regional workforce development. At this year’s [American Association of Community Colleges \(AACC\)](#) Workforce Development Institute (WDI), held January 28–31 in Coronado, that energy was unmistakable. And at the heart of it all? The leaders of San Diego & Imperial Counties Community Colleges, showcasing our proven regional efforts to connect students with career opportunities.

Dr. Sunita “Sunny” Cooke, Superintendent/President of MiraCosta College and Chair of the AACC Board, took the stage as a keynote speaker, bringing a national spotlight to the role community colleges play in driving economic mobility and equity.

The conference also featured a standing-room-only session on work-based learning (WBL), led by San Diego & Imperial Counties Regional Consortium (SDI RC)’s Danene Brown and Kevin McMackin. The session drew educators and industry leaders eager to learn about how internships, apprenticeships, and industry partnerships are helping students gain real-world experience before entering the workforce. It also addressed the distinct challenges faced by both rural and urban communities in engaging local businesses and fostering student development.

Danene and Kevin highlighted the region’s collaborative approach to WBL, including the development of a shared WBL definition and glossary, the efforts of the employer engagement team, the framework for tracking student participation, the professional development available for faculty, and the policies supporting WBL initiatives.

Across the region, these efforts are already making an impact— faculty from San Diego Community College District shared how adding WBL into classroom instruction is increasing student employability and employer engagement across multiple sectors. At San Diego Mesa College and MiraCosta College alone, more than 23,000 students participate in WBL annually, and Southwestern College’s integrated approach has doubled student job applications in just one year. With colleges embedding WBL into curriculum design and centralized career centers expanding access to internships and career services, San Diego & Imperial Counties continue to lead the way in aligning education with workforce needs.



Throughout the event, regional voices carried a theme of collaboration and impact. Mark Cafferty, President & CEO of the San Diego Regional Economic Development Corporation, highlighted the county’s work in inclusive economic development. Efrain Silva, Dean of Economic and Workforce Development at Imperial Valley College, contributed to key discussions on workforce adaptation, including a panel exploring the challenges and opportunities of developing environmentally impacted programs in collaboration with employer partners, and a session on advanced manufacturing. Matt Jewett, San Diego Miramar Faculty and President of CA Fire Technology Directors Association, was recognized on behalf of the leadership circle of 40+ directors statewide, who oversee firefighters involved in the management and recovery efforts of communities during the devastating fires in January.



Efrain Silva speaking on a panel at the WDI Conference alongside Timothy Aldinger (Foundation for California Community Colleges), Efram Bycer (LinkedIn), and Andrew Robbins (Northwest-Shoals Community College, Alabama).

For San Diego & Imperial Counties, workforce education isn’t just about jobs—it’s about access, equity and community transformation. The conversations at WDI reinforced a shared commitment to ensuring students have pathways to careers that offer stability, growth and opportunity.

As we celebrate Women's History Month, we recognize the educators, leaders and changemakers who are shaping the future of workforce development—one student, one opportunity, and one bold conversation at a time.