



UNIVERSITY DISTRICT AT CHULA VISTA TASK FORCE BACKGROUND BRIEF

April 21, 2026

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The City of Chula Vista, in collaboration with the State of California and other key partners, is exploring the development of a new higher-education model designed to expand access, strengthen workforce pathways, stimulate economic development, and reflect the unique binational character of the San Diego South County region.

With a population approaching half a million residents — including many families with school-aged children — South County is a prime location for a four-year university. The higher-education desert that currently exists in this region creates barriers to degree attainment for many residents, particularly first-generation, working, and place-bound learners. Establishing a four-year university in Chula Vista would directly address the region’s educational needs and expand access to opportunity for generations to come.

The proposed University District at Chula Vista (UDCV) builds on a multi-decade civic vision first articulated in the 1993 Otay Ranch General Development Plan. This vision moves decisively beyond traditional approaches to expanding higher education. Rather than replicating a single-institution model, the UDCV is intentionally conceived as a multi-institution university designed from the ground up to serve today’s learners and future generations. Its structure and delivery model would respond directly to a rapidly evolving workforce, economy, and binational regional context, prioritizing access, flexibility, and alignment with emerging economic opportunity.

The South County Higher Education Planning Task Force, established through Assembly Bill 662 (D. Alvarez, Chapter 700, Statutes of 2025), has been charged with evaluating the feasibility of this model and developing recommendations for the California Legislature. The Task Force will focus on three core areas essential to the university’s long-term viability: land use, governance, and financing.

The vision for UDCV reflects an opportunity to reimagine higher education to better serve modern learners and a dynamic regional economy. Designed as a collaborative, multi-institution model grounded in access, workforce alignment, and binational engagement, it is positioned at the forefront of higher education innovation. If realized, UDCV can expand opportunity for South County residents while serving as a national model for strengthening economic mobility, competitiveness, and shared prosperity.

ENVISIONING A NEW CHULA VISTA UNIVERSITY ECOSYSTEM

At its core, the UDCV is grounded in a student-centered approach that rethinks how public higher education is organized, delivered, and experienced. Building on the foundational work of Southwestern College and regional university partners, the initiative moves beyond incremental expansion to create something fundamentally new: a learner-centered, multi-institution university that is flexible, adaptive, and deeply connected to the region it serves.

Located within the Otay Ranch area of the city, the UDCV is envisioned as a shared-infrastructure university ecosystem where public, private, and binational institutions collaborate across traditional boundaries. This co-located shared-infrastructure model enables multiple institutions to operate within a unified campus while maintaining their distinct academic identities. This model enables institutions to deliver high-quality, affordable, and workforce-aligned education while leveraging shared facilities, coordinated services, and regional partnerships.

The City of Chula Vista has enabled this vision through its long-standing leadership in land use planning, including assembling approximately 383 acres and securing the necessary environmental clearances. While deeply invested in the vision, the City will not deliver education at the University District—a role that resides with higher education institutions. Instead, it will serve as steward of the land and a key civic partner—enabling the University District to take shape and succeed over time.

WHY A UNIVERSITY, WHY CHULA VISTA, WHY NOW?

Several forces are converging to create a rare opportunity to reimagine how higher education can serve communities, learners, and regional economies in the decades ahead.

A GROWING REGION WITHOUT A FOUR-YEAR UNIVERSITY

Across South San Diego County, educational attainment lags behind the broader region, underscoring a structural access gap. According to recent 2024 American Community Survey data by the U.S. Census, approximately one-third of adults in South County communities hold a bachelor's degree or higher—well below the countywide rate of roughly 45 percent. San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG) data further show that South County is one of the fastest-growing areas in the region, yet a significant share of residents must travel outside the area for higher education and employment—reinforcing geographic and economic barriers to degree attainment.

These disparities are closely tied to the region’s demographic composition. According to a 2024 San Diego Foundation report produced in partnership with the San Diego Regional Policy & Innovation Center, Latino residents in San Diego County earn bachelor’s degrees at less than half the rate of non-Latino residents (24% compared to significantly higher rates among non-Latinos). South County communities—including Chula Vista, National City, and surrounding areas—are majority Latino and notably younger, with a median age nearly a decade below that of non-Latino populations.¹ Taken together, these data points highlight a clear regional equity challenge: the populations with the greatest proximity to the future University District at Chula Vista are also those historically underserved by traditional higher education pathways. Expanding access in South County is therefore not only a local priority—it is a regional and binational economic imperative tied to workforce growth across the broader CaliBaja economy.

A CHANGING STUDENT POPULATION

Across California and the nation, the profile of college students is shifting. Increasingly, students are working adults, parents, and mid-career learners seeking new skills or credentials. Even at California’s four-year public universities, which have often served a larger share of students of “traditional” college-going ages, half of all undergraduates worked while enrolled, an increase of nine percentage points between 2018 and 2022.² According to the National Student Clearinghouse, between Fall 2020 and Fall 2025 freshman enrollment among students ages 21 to 24 grew by approximately 33% on a cumulative basis, more than four times the 8% growth among 18-year-old freshmen over the same period. Students 25 and older also saw net freshman enrollment growth of 11%, outpacing traditional-age students.

These trends reflect a structural shift in who is entering higher education and underscore the need for university models designed to serve working-age adults, not only recent high school graduates. Adult learners age 25 and older now compose approximately one-third of all postsecondary students and are far more likely to attend part-time, balance caregiving responsibilities, and need flexible scheduling.³ Traditional campus models designed primarily for full-time, residential students do not always align with the realities of these learners.

AN ECONOMIC AND WORKFORCE IMPERATIVE

UDCV would help close a critical higher education access gap in South County by delivering high-quality, affordable bachelor’s degree programs in alignment with regional workforce needs. A 2023 report by the San Diego Regional Policy & Innovation Center finds that more than 70% of new jobs in South San Diego County over the next decade will require a bachelor’s degree. UDCV will be designed to align academic offerings with workforce demand in high-growth sectors such as healthcare, technology, business, and advanced manufacturing.

This design reflects findings from the San Diego Regional Policy & Innovation Center’s report and the 2023 University Now Initiative workforce assessment, which identified priority academic

¹ United States Census Bureau (2024), *American Community Survey*.

² Public Policy Institute of California (2025), “Half of Students at California’s Public Colleges Work While in School.” <https://www.ppic.org/blog/half-of-students-at-californias-public-colleges-work-while-in-school/>

³ National Student Clearinghouse (2025)

programs aligned with the region’s fastest-growing, high-wage careers. These programs include health sciences, education, engineering, computer science and artificial intelligence, public administration and policy, conservation, marketing analytics, and film and media arts. By expanding access to bachelor’s degrees and aligning education with regional workforce demand, UDCV will strengthen South County’s talent pipeline and drive economic growth, attracting employers and increasing upward mobility for residents.

AN EVOLVING CALIBAJA REGIONAL ECONOMY

The CaliBaja region is home to the most integrated economy the U.S.-Mexico border, with over 54,000 cross-border workers residing in Baja California and 4,700 residents from San Diego or Imperial Counties working in Mexico. Over 12,000 students living in Baja California attend schools on the U.S. side of the border.⁴ At least another 40,000 U.S. born students are estimated to be enrolled in schools across Baja California.⁵ Access to talent across the border yields significant dividends for key industries in the region, including advanced manufacturing of medical devices and semiconductors. These industries benefit from both the knowledge economy in San Diego County and workers in Mexico who can access training to produce highly technical components. As manufacturing demands increase and become more complex, the region will benefit from access to postsecondary education training for students in both South County and Baja California.

A MOMENT TO REIMAGINE HIGHER EDUCATION

In San Diego County, many students continue to be left out of pathways into higher education and growing career fields despite a continued gap of 7,000 additional annual graduates required to meet workforce demands identified by the San Diego Regional Economic Development Corporation.⁶ In the absence of a four-year university in Chula Vista, Southwestern College plays a critical role in providing access to postsecondary educational opportunities for local learners. However, most of these students do not ultimately move on to four-year degree programs. Only 17% of the 2021-22 cohort of students at Southwestern transferred to a four-year institution after four years of enrollment at the college, with an even lower share of Hispanic students (14.9%) attaining transfer.⁷

At the same time, higher education systems across the country are grappling with enrollment shifts, fiscal pressures, and changing public expectations. These conditions are prompting new conversations about how universities can collaborate, share infrastructure, and design more flexible learning pathways for today’s students. A co-located, multi-institution model strengthens transfer pathways and improves degree attainment. This model provides multiple entry and exit

⁴ Ahlers Center for International Business, University of San Diego Knauss School of Business (2022), “The CaliBaja Regional Economy: Production, Employment, Trade & Investment.”

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1MD6CkcG8eA90b7OP4RScECG35eT4xHw7/view>

⁵ Programa Binacional de Educacion Migrante (2024)

⁶ San Diego Regional Policy & Innovation Center (2023), “Planning a Thriving Ecosystem of Higher Education in South County: A Workforce & Education Needs Assessment.”

<https://www.chulavistaca.gov/home/showpublisheddocument/27408/638406673892030000>

⁷ Southwestern College (2025), “Graduation and Transfer Rates by Program.”

<https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/southwesterncollege/viz/SWCGraduationTransferRate/GraduationTransferRate>

points, allowing students to begin at a community college or four-year institution and progress toward a certificate, credential or degree.

A COLLECTIVE UNDERSTANDING OF SOUTH COUNTY & THE CALIBAJA REGION

Together, these dynamics create a unique opportunity to rethink how higher education can be designed to serve the needs of South County residents and the evolving CaliBaja economy. The accelerating rate of technological change and its resulting impacts on our economy and workforce require urgent action to position the South County region for inclusive growth. These same trends also suggest that the Task Force will most effectively navigate the questions at the core of its mandate if it comes together around a shared vision, mission, defining characteristics and design principles for the UDCV. As the Task Force navigates questions around how to design the UDCV to position South County and the broader CaliBaja region for the future, a well-developed vision framework will ground the conversation in a shared understanding of community needs.

THE ROLE OF THE TASK FORCE

The South County Higher Education Planning Task Force plays a critical advisory role in advancing this effort from vision to implementation. Its purpose is to develop a set of well-informed, actionable recommendations that reflect the collective insight and consensus of its members.

The Task Force is not charged with designing academic programs. Rather, it will establish a feasible framework to guide future development, with a focus on three core areas:

- Land use considerations for the site
- Governance models to support a multi-institutional ecosystem
- Financing strategies to ensure long-term sustainability

Throughout its work, the Task Force will operate collaboratively, grounded in a shared commitment to expanding opportunity for learners, while thoughtfully balancing institutional realities and regional needs.

The Task Force's recommendations will inform the State Legislature and help shape the next phase of planning and development for the University District at Chula Vista.

WHAT SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE

The work of the South County Higher Education Planning Task Force represents an important step in translating a long-standing civic vision into a clear and actionable path forward. By examining land use, governance, and financing through a thoughtful and collaborative process, the Task Force will help establish the foundational framework needed to guide the future development of the UDCV. If successful, this effort has the potential to expand educational opportunity for South County residents while positioning the CaliBaja region as a national example of how communities can design innovative, multi-institution models of higher education that strengthen workforce pathways, economic mobility, and shared regional prosperity. The UDCV represents an opportunity

to rethink how higher education can better serve communities, learners, and regional economies in the decades ahead.

Success for the Task Force — and the advancement of the UDCV—will be reflected in the final report that delivers clear, actionable recommendations across the three areas specified in legislation: land use, governance, and financing. This work will be anchored in a cohesive vision framework that establishes a clear “north star” to guide the Task Force’s analysis and deliberations. Beyond the report, this framework will provide enduring direction for institutional design, partnership development, and long-term decision-making as the UDCV moves from concept to implementation.

BUILDING ON A STRONG FOUNDATION

This effort builds on the leadership and sustained commitment of those who have advanced this vision over time, including the Chula Vista City Council (past and present), Assemblymember David Alvarez, Senator Steve Padilla, and the region’s education partners. Their work has established a strong foundation for this next phase—one that now calls for focused, collaborative planning to translate vision into action.

Through its work, the Task Force will build on this foundation by developing clear, consensus-driven recommendations to guide the future of the University District at Chula Vista—grounded in expanding opportunity for learners, aligning with regional workforce needs, and establishing a viable path forward for implementation.

The City acknowledges and thanks the College Futures Foundation for providing early analytical support to aid the Task Force in its work.