

CONTACT:

Isabela Veloro
760.674.7791; iveloro@collegeofthedesert.edu

College of the Desert Expands Tuition-Free College

Expanding access, student support, enrollment, community engagement, and new programs to strengthen the region's workforce

PALM SPRINGS, CA (October 31, 2025) At the 2025 State of the College, College of the Desert (COD) Superintendent/President Val Martinez Garcia announced a major expansion of the College's tuition-free program, unveiling a phased roll-out of pLEDGE for All to provide free college education to every Coachella Valley resident, regardless of age, income, or educational background.

"This next phase of pLEDGE for All removes barriers and opens doors," said Superintendent/President Martinez Garcia. "Education is a right that belongs to every member of our community. Whether you are beginning college, returning to finish your degree, or building new skills for your career, College of the Desert will support your success through access and opportunity."

Launching in Fall 2026, the program will extend tuition-free college to the next cohort of learners. The initiative builds on nearly a decade of impact from the original pLEDGE, which has served more than 10,000 local students since 2017.

COD Board of Trustees Chair Dr. Joel L. Kinnamon, who introduced the original pLEDGE while serving as College President, reflected on the milestone. "When we began this program, the goal was to create a pathway to opportunity," Dr. Kinnamon said. "The award-winning pLEDGE program is nationally recognized as a best practice. This expansion continues that vision and aligns with the goal to ensure that every resident of the Coachella Valley can learn, grow, and thrive close to home."

The expansion is expected to strengthen the region's workforce pipeline in key industries, including healthcare, sustainability, hospitality, digital media, and advanced technology. It also aligns with the Board of Trustees visions and goals and supports COD's Vision 2030 goal of increasing access and achievement across all communities.

The event featured special presentations from the COD Board of Trustees, each highlighting major milestones and future developments in their respective service areas.

Vice Chair Ronald Oden showcased COD's new Paramedic and Nursing programs and the forthcoming Palm Springs Campus, emphasizing COD's leadership in healthcare education and innovation across the Valley.

Trustee Mary Jane Sanchez-Fulton celebrated the Desert Hot Springs Wenzlaff Education Center and partnerships in Cathedral City and Palm Desert that expand access to arts, digital media, and creative careers.

Trustee Rubén Arí Aztlán Pérez spotlighted the Indio Campus expansion and Mecca/Thermal campus enhancements, showcasing how new facilities and bilingual student support are transforming opportunities in the East Valley.

Trustee Mark Meyer presented the upcoming Roadrunner Motors facility in Cathedral City, a state-of-the-art automotive training hub preparing students for hybrid, electric, and fuel-cell careers while strengthening partnerships with local dealerships.

Each presentation reinforced the College's message of progress, inclusion, and innovation, demonstrating how COD is delivering on its promise to serve all communities of the Coachella Valley.

The evening also celebrated innovation in education, highlighted by a \$100,000 gift from Wintec Energy President and CEO Fred Noble to launch a new artificial intelligence (AI) work-based certification training starting in Spring 2026 through the college's Partnership and Community Education (PaCE) program, beginning the pipeline for COD's upcoming Palm Springs Campus. The investment supports COD's efforts to prepare students for future careers shaped by technology and creativity.

"At College of the Desert, we are helping lead the next chapter of learning," added Dr. Kinnamon. "Our work with local partners will create clear pathways that connect high schools, college programs, and employers."

The event, held at the Thompson Hotel in Palm Springs and themed "Integrating AI into Education and Beyond," highlighted a contest of student films produced using the latest AI tools, reflecting COD's focus on curiosity, collaboration, and the evolving role of technology in education.

“The Foundation is proud to celebrate the College’s achievements and its vision for the future,” said Tom Minder, Board Chair of the College of the Desert Foundation. “Through the commitment of our donors and community partners, we continue to expand opportunity and strengthen the future of the Coachella Valley.”

“Community colleges remain the foundation of opportunity in California,” said Superintendent/President Martinez Garcia. “College of the Desert continues to honor that promise by ensuring that cost never stands in the way of learning or progress.”

To learn more about COD’s commitment to expanding opportunity across the Coachella Valley, visit collegeofthedesert.edu.

###