

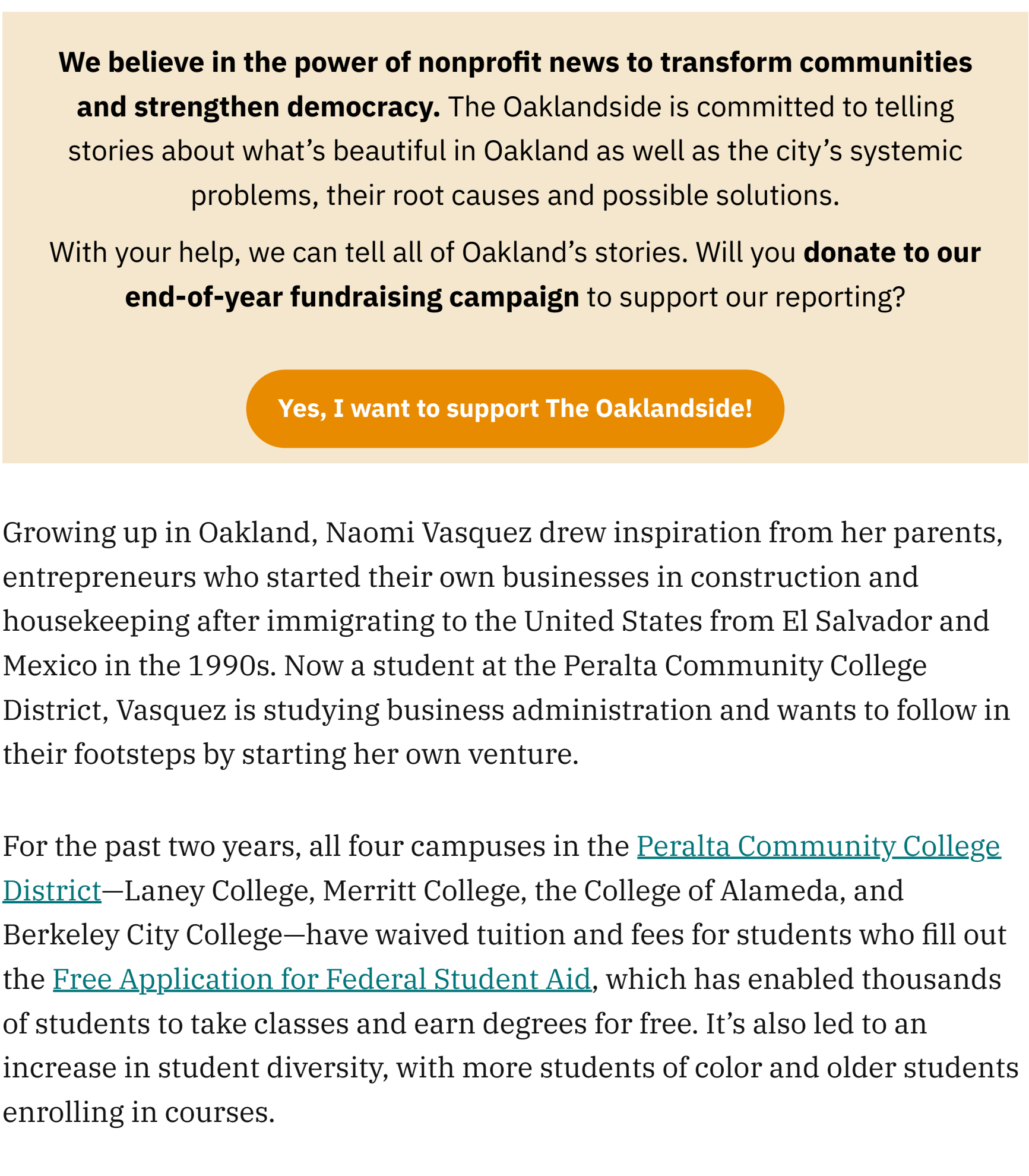
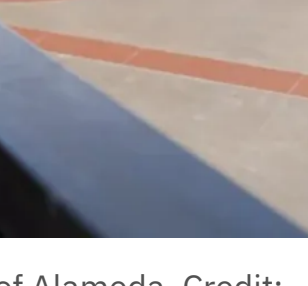


EDUCATION EQUITY

Free tuition at Peralta Colleges sees students returning to school in big numbers

It’s uncertain if classes will remain free much longer without additional federal or state funding, district officials said. But the program has been a big boost to the community college.

by **Ashley McBride**
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Natay Myers, an Oakland native, serves as the president of the student body at the College of Alameda. Credit: Amir Aziz

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Growing up in Oakland, Naomi Vasquez drew inspiration from her parents, entrepreneurs who started their own businesses in construction and housekeeping after immigrating to the United States from El Salvador and Mexico in the 1990s. Now a student at the Peralta Community College District, Vasquez is studying business administration and wants to follow in their footsteps by starting her own venture.

For the past two years, all four campuses in the [Peralta Community College District](#)—Laney College, Merritt College, the College of Alameda, and Berkeley City College—have waived tuition and fees for students who fill out the [Free Application for Federal Student Aid](#), which has enabled thousands of students to take classes and earn degrees for free. It’s also led to an increase in student diversity, with more students of color and older students enrolling in courses.

For Vasquez, 20, it’s helped her save money she can eventually put toward starting her own clothing business.

“In high school, I told myself community college was the best decision for me because I wanted to stay close to home and I needed the time to decide what I wanted to study and what kind of career path would make me the happiest,” said Vasquez, who graduated from Oakland Charter High School in 2021. “I knew taking the community college route was going to allow me to be debt-free and still get that education that I was going to do at the four-year university by taking my prerequisite courses at a cheaper price.”

The COVID-19 pandemic [decimated community college enrollment in California](#). At the Peralta colleges, enrollment in the fall of 2019 totaled 23,432. By spring 2022, enrollment had dropped by 25%, to 17,405, [according to state data](#).

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During that time, three federal relief bills provided [billions in aid to colleges and universities](#) across the country. The Peralta colleges received more than \$67 million, according to the [Department of Education](#). Starting in the fall of 2022, leadership at the four campuses decided to waive fees or offer stipends or other promotions to entice students to enroll, and use the relief funds to offset those costs, said Mark Johnson, the district’s director of communications. Laney College and Berkeley City College were the first of the four to [waive all the credit and student fees](#) in fall 2022, making college effectively free.

“We thought the best way to bring students back was to waive these fees, and that’s proved true,” Johnson told The Oaklandside.

All four campuses offered free classes starting in spring 2023 and enrollment numbers have rebounded almost to their pre-pandemic levels. Last fall, enrollment reached 21,875.

“It was really important for me to network and build relationships with students from different backgrounds and similar career and educational goals as me,” she said. “I’ve heard from students that were unable to pay for the high cost of books and students who are working full-time and trying to save for their rent or for a future business and they’ve been able to do so faster because of their free tuition.”

Yvette Donelson, 62, has earned two associate degrees from Merritt College and Laney College, respectively, over the last two years. Although she’s currently recovering from a stroke, Donelson plans to put her credential in substance abuse counseling from Merritt when she returns to work. Last year, she also earned a degree in sociology from Laney.

“I’ve always liked to talk to people to try to help them out. That’s how I ended up picking substance abuse counseling,” said Donelson, an Oakland native. “It’s a good opportunity for people that don’t qualify for financial aid to go back to school if they choose to.”

More than 40% of students at the Peralta colleges take classes at more than one campus and 17% take classes at three or more campuses, Johnson said. In a typical year, [fees are \\$46 per unit](#) for California residents, which can mean students taking a full course load can pay between \$500 and \$900 a semester. Adding in parking, transit, healthcare, textbooks, and other fees can cause those costs to balloon.

Vasquez, who also serves as a student trustee on the Peralta Colleges Board of Trustees, takes classes at all four campuses, in part so she can get to know students across the district.

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Vasquez also has goals of studying abroad and buying an investment property in the future, which she’s been able to put money towards from her tuition savings.

Luis Soberanis-Pacheco enrolled at Laney College last year to study business administration and take courses in the brand new [artificial intelligence and data analytics](#) program. Soberanis-Pacheco, 22, enrolled at San Francisco State University after high school, and had brief stints working at various virtual reality companies, but after a few layoffs he decided to re-enroll at Laney.

Growing up in Oakland, Soberanis-Pacheco said he hadn’t really considered Laney as a college option, but the free tuition promotion and artificial intelligence program appealed to him.

“I can finally think about maintaining basic needs, like a car, bills, and groceries. I was thinking that I had to sacrifice in order to maintain school,” he told The Oaklandside. “[Laney] was one of those hidden gems that I completely overlooked growing up. There are so many resources that are just there for the taking.”

Those resources include accessible counselors, leadership positions in student organizations, and opportunities to get involved in community service, he said.

The future of the free tuition programs is uncertain

The federal aid has run out, but the district received a state grant that allowed them to continue for another year, Johnson said.

Paulina Gonzalez-Brito, the president of the Peralta Colleges Board of Trustees, praised the programs for offering opportunities for more students of color and others who have been excluded from higher education in the past. Over the last two years, the number of Latino students has increased by almost 18%, and the number of Black students has increased by nearly 22%. Students 35 and older have also seen an increase of 34%, [according to district data](#).

It would take action from the state or federal government to fund the free tuition programs into the future, Gonzalez-Brito said.

“When I think about it, it’s really a way to abolish poverty and lower crime. It’s a benefit for the overall community to offer these types of programs,” they said. “It’s a benefit for both young people and older workers who are looking to achieve some economic mobility. It would be a shame if the funding dried up and we weren’t able to continue it.”

Natay Myers is the president of the associated student body at the College of Alameda. She’s also pursuing her fifth degree, an associate degree in African American Studies. Myers eventually wants to teach. She first started attending Laney College in 1997 after graduating from Oakland High School, but she soon decided to begin working full-time.

In 2018, Myers returned to school at the College of Alameda, where she currently serves as the student body president.

“Going to a two-year college has really helped me and my family to be successful in starting an education and finishing what I wanted to complete for myself. I don’t want to be another student that is bogged down with a lot of loans over my educational career,” said Myers, a mom of two. “Having [free tuition] the past two years has really helped a lot of students to get to their goals.”

Free tuition has meant that Myers can invest more money in supporting her family and that she won’t have debt when she transfers to a four-year university, which Myers plans to do after this semester.

One student group that has seen a jump has been high schoolers taking dual enrollment courses, said Johnson, the district spokesperson. Myers’ oldest daughter, a student at Coliseum College Prep Academy, is one of those students. Right now, she’s taking a public speaking course at Berkeley City College, and last year took a hip-hop history course at Merritt. Myers is grateful her daughter can get a taste of a college education while she’s still in high school.

“We’re just thrilled that the campuses are full of students in a way that they weren’t just two years ago,” said Johnson. “There’s a lot more energy when you walk through the Laney quad, or up in the hills at Merritt, and that’s a really great thing.”

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Ashley McBride writes about education equity for The Oaklandside. Her work covers Oakland’s public district and charter schools. Before joining The Oaklandside in 2020, Ashley was a reporter for the San Antonio Express-News and the San Francisco Chronicle as a Hearst Journalism Fellow, and has held positions at the Poynter Institute and the Palm Beach Post. Ashley earned her master’s degree in journalism from Syracuse University.

More by Ashley McBride

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