

Finding a way forward

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For Brianna Simons, coming back wasn't the hardest part. Starting was.

After leaving high school and struggling to stay engaged with online courses, Simons spent time searching for a path that worked, trying different options but finding it difficult to stay motivated without structure or direct support. That changed when she enrolled in the Adult Education program at Doña Ana Community College where she found the guidance, she said, that had been missing.

“The hardest part was starting,” Simons said. “Once you start, DACC helps you and guides you through everything you need.”

Her experience reflects a broader shift at the college, where enrollment has increased alongside a rise in completion rates tied to changes in how students are assessed and supported. Tricia Brainard said the program took a closer look at student progress.

“We realized students were more prepared than we thought,” Brainard said. “Once they saw that for themselves, it changed how they approached the process.”

The program began using practice testing at the start of enrollment to give students a clearer sense of their readiness. At the same time, enrollment grew as more students found their way into the program, often through word of mouth and community connections that highlighted those successes. For Simons, the difference came from having direct support rather than navigating coursework alone—something she said made it easier to stay consistent and focused.

“I needed actual teachers, not just computers,” she said.

That support extended beyond the classroom, with resources available to help students manage challenges that can interrupt their education, including food assistance and basic supplies that ease day-to-day pressure.

“They welcome you with open arms,” Simons said. “They’ve helped me with everything from food to family events.”

Brainard said those services are part of a broader effort to remove barriers that can prevent students from completing their education, noting that many participants balance work, family responsibilities and financial pressure while trying to stay on track.

“There’s a lot that students are carrying when they come to us,” Brainard said. “Our role is to make sure they have what they need to keep going.”

Simons completed her GED in December and walked in the program’s graduation ceremony. A milestone she said shifted how she views her future and what she wants to pursue next.

“It pushed me to want to go to college,” she said, adding that she now plans to pursue a degree in business after not previously considering that path.

As enrollment continues to grow, program leaders point to evolving needs in the community, including interest in short-term training and pathways that lead more directly into the workforce. For students like Simons, the impact is immediate and personal, shaping both confidence and direction moving forward.

“It’s never too late,” she said. “Your background doesn’t matter.”