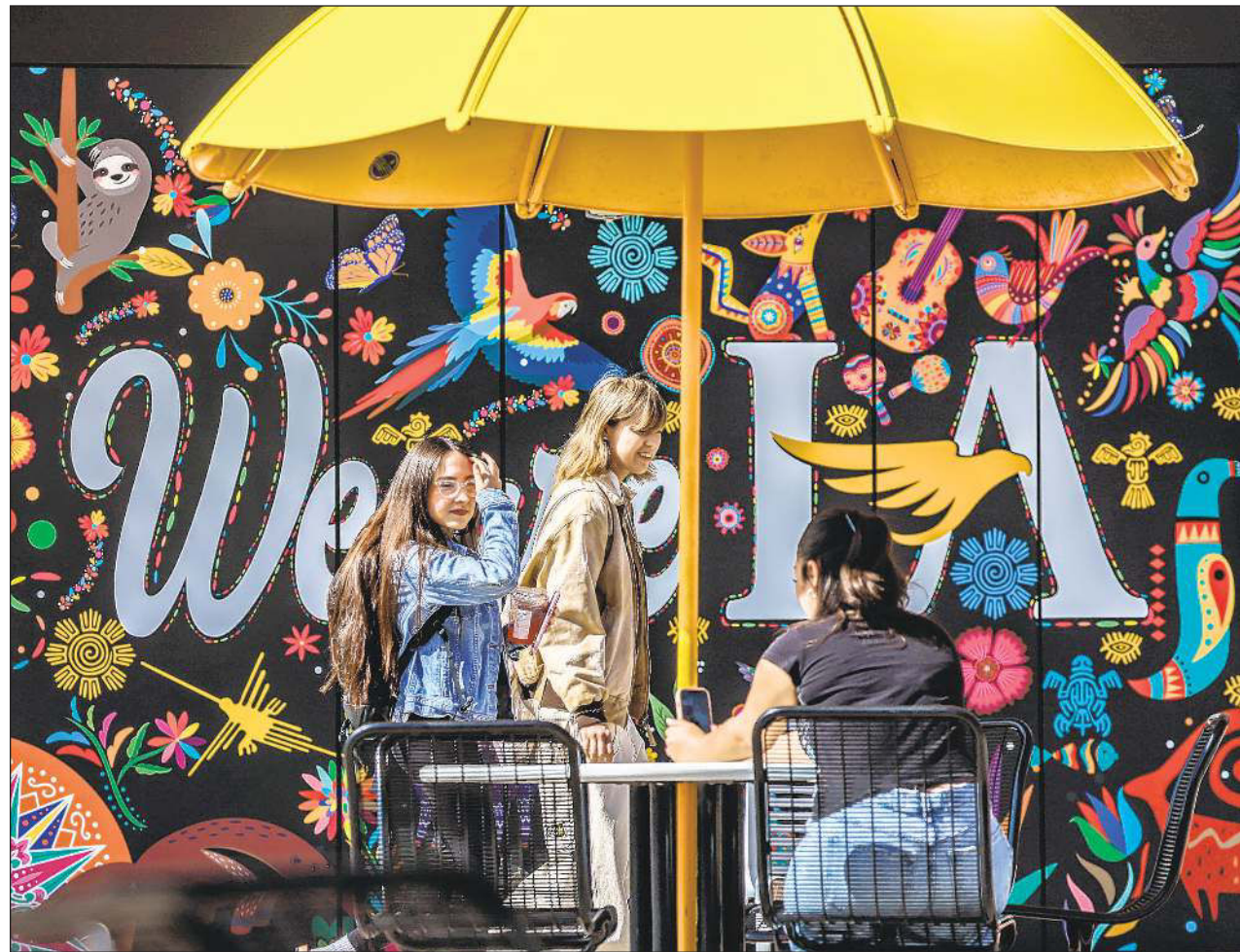


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ROBERT GAUTHIER Los Angeles Times

DATA FROM the California Mobility Index list show that it takes former low- and moderate-income students from top-ranked Cal State L.A., above, less than nine months on average to recoup their educational costs.

CSUs rank at top for upward mobility

UCLA, Stanford do not make the best 10 list in state for raising socioeconomic status.

By DANIEL MILLER

Marco Florez knows the value of his California State University education because it changed his family's trajectory.

His mother, Suehey Florez, immigrated to the U.S. from Mexico "not knowing a lick of English," he said, but was able to attend Fresno State, where she earned bachelor's and master's degrees. She is now a special education teacher for the Tulare County Office of Education.

"One of the biggest things that transformed her life was getting that education," Florez said.

For Florez, 22, Fresno State was an easy choice because it is "really, really affordable," and it sets up immigrant and second-generation students for success, he said. Florez will graduate debt-free this year because of a Reserve Officers' Training Corps scholarship he received from the U.S. Army.

"A lot of people like to think of Fresno State as a stepping stone," he said. "But I think of it as a skyrocket."

The Florez family's experience [See **Mobility**, A6]

Industry ties, fires add to pressure on Lara

Blazes raise issue of whether insurance chief and state have done enough to protect homeowners

By Laurence Darmiento

It has been more than a month since the harrowing wildfire swept through Pacific Palisades, and Marc Hara knows he should be grateful.

After all, he and his fiancée managed to escape the blaze that leveled their condominium complex. But Hara, who is living at a relative's house, is far from sanguine about his future.

Not only were all his possessions destroyed, but Hara also figures the couple is out \$170,000 after State Farm dropped him as a policyholder — something he learned only later, he said, after realizing the insurer mailed a nonrenewal notice for his interior coverage to an old address.

"My home is completely gone. We have absolutely nothing left," said the 58-year-old physical therapist, who had recently remodeled his condominium and is now

seeking FEMA disaster assistance. "I'm so screwed."

Citing privacy policies, State Farm declined to discuss Hara's situation, other than noting that it sends nonrenewal notices in advance to the address it has on record for policyholders.

The frustrations voiced by Hara echo those of many other homeowners in the Pacific Palisades and Eaton fire neighborhoods who were dropped by their insurers as companies retreated from fire-prone areas. Some homeowners enrolled in the state's insurer of last resort with more limited coverage. Others, such as Hara, might have had no coverage at all or couldn't afford to pay higher premiums.

The devastation caused by the twin blazes has [See **Lara**, A10]



ALISHA JUCEVIC CalMatters

INSURANCE Commissioner Ricardo Lara is shown in 2022. Damage from the L.A.-area fires is expected to cost insurers as much as \$45 billion.

Trump gearing up to wage war against cartels

Drone flights and terrorist designations are part of militaristic stance toward Mexico.

By MICHAEL WILNER, KATE LINTHICUM AND PATRICK J. McDONNELL

WASHINGTON — In recent days, the Trump administration has ramped up CIA surveillance drone flights over Mexico, formally designated drug cartels as "foreign terrorist" groups and floated the possibility of deploying troops there to fight organized crime.

Mexico is "essentially run by the cartels," President Trump has said, insisting that the United States should "wage war" against them.

No administration in modern times has taken such a militaristic approach to Mexico, a U.S. ally that

Trump blames for producing the fentanyl that has killed hundreds of thousands of Americans. His stance upends recent U.S. policy, which emphasized beefing up the rule of law in Mexico, and stands at odds with Mexico's security strategy, which has veered away from the sort of fierce cartel confrontations that drove record levels of bloodshed.

Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum said Thursday that she will propose a constitutional reform aimed at protecting her nation's sovereignty — a move that comes amid growing fears of a U.S. incursion that many believe would only spark more violence.

"The Mexican people under no circumstances will accept interventions, meddling or whatever other act from abroad that would be harmful to the integrity, independence and sovereignty of the nation," she [See **Mexico**, A8]



CARLOS MORENO NurPhoto

MARINE CORPS forces patrol a U.S.-Mexico border area on Feb. 7 in San Diego during a deployment.

Bass says Crowley failed to warn her

L.A. mayor's criticism of fire chief appears certain to renew their tensions after disaster.

By DAKOTA SMITH

In the weeks since the Palisades fire, Los Angeles Mayor Karen Bass has faced repeated questions about why she left for Ghana as warnings about dangerous winds grew increasingly worrisome.

This week, Bass and her office spoke out for the first time about her decision, putting the blame on Los Angeles Fire Department Chief Kristin Crowley and others for not warning her about the highly concerning weather forecasts.

"Before other major weather emergencies, the mayor — or at minimum, the mayor's chief of staff — has received a direct call from

the fire chief, flagging the severity of the situation. This time, that call never came," Bass spokesperson Zach Seidl said in a statement.

Crowley did not reach out to the mayor's chief deputy until Tuesday morning, Jan. 7, after the Palisades was already burning, Seidl said.

On Jan. 2, the National Weather Service warned on its X feed of the potential for "extreme fire weather conditions" beginning Jan. 7.

The agency's forecast escalated Jan. 3 to "major risk — take action" and "critical fire conditions." The next day, Bass left for Ghana as part of a presidential delegation.

By Jan. 6, the agency was blaring on X: "HEADS UP!!! A LIFE-THREATENING, DESTRUCTIVE, Widespread Windstorm is expected Tue afternoon-Weds morning."

The frightening wind forecasts, in a winter when [See **Blame**, A6]

Senate confirms Patel to lead FBI

Democrats had pointed to his lack of management experience and questioned his judgment. **NATION**, A4

Eviction shield for fire victims

L.A. County proposes temporary protections for affected renters. **CALIFORNIA**, B1

Weather
Sunny and warm.
L.A. Basin: 81/53. **B6**

For the latest news, go to **latimes.com**.

Can the Lakers regain footing?

Coach JJ Redick must make up for the team's flaws, Dylan Hernández writes. **SPORTS**, B10

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Inmate-ordered crimes and punishment

Will convictions of Aryan Brotherhood trio help if federal 'supermax' site won't?

By MATTHEW ORMSETH

As witness after witness testified that three Aryan Brotherhood members directed drug deals, shake-downs and murders from their California prison cells,

the question was not whether prosecutors would convict them — but whether doing so would prevent future crimes.

Kenneth Johnson, Francis Clement and John Stinson were already serving life sentences in the state system when a federal jury in Fresno convicted them last week of racketeering and other offenses.

During the trial, prosecutors made clear that California prisons are flooded

with contraband cellphones, which gang leaders use to control rackets inside and outside their lockups.

Witnesses testified to enjoying the use of phones and drugs smuggled in using drones or by corrupt staff. Authorities seized 4,109 phones across the California prison system in 2023, the most recent year for which data were available, according to a prison spokeswoman.

The U.S. Bureau of Pris-

ons offers stricter conditions. High-risk inmates are held in a so-called super-maximum security facility in Colorado where they have virtually no access to one another or the outside world.

Despite the convictions of Johnson, Clement and Stinson, it remains unclear whether they will leave California. They are currently held at the Fresno County Jail.

Stinson's attorney, Ken- [See **Prisons**, A5]



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CSUs top rankings for economic mobility

[**Mobility**, from A1] rience exemplifies the findings of a new study that looks at an increasingly important metric in higher education: economic mobility. The California Mobility Index, created by the HEA Group and College Futures Foundation, ranks four-year California colleges based on how much low- and moderate-income students — those whose annual household income is \$75,000 or less — have improved their socioeconomic standing.

No. 1? Cal State L.A. Fresno State, meanwhile, is No. 5 on the list of 82 schools, which was released Thursday.

What's more, nine out of the top 10 colleges in the ranking, which takes into account educational costs and former students' earnings a decade after enrollment, are CSU campuses.

That strong showing is a sign of the system's commitment to upward social and economic mobility at a time when many are questioning the value of a college education, said Berenecea Johnson Eanes, president of Cal State L.A.

The institutions topping the list, she said, are "intentional about social mobility and the impact they have on the community."

Education is key to boosting earnings

Social mobility — sometimes referred to as economic mobility — is the movement of people between classes. A college education is widely seen as a key to an upward socioeconomic trajectory.

Indeed, nearly all of the top 50 schools on the CMI boosted the earnings of their low- and moderate-income students by at least \$20,000 over what someone with only a high school degree would make. HEA's analysis uses tax records from the Treasury Department to measure the earnings of former students 10 years after their enrollment.

Student debt can be a major roadblock. The CMI, which was created using U.S. Department of Education data, takes this into account, measuring the cost of education after scholarships and grants are deducted.

This is part of the reason why the top 15 colleges on the CMI are all less costly CSU campuses, save for UC Merced at No. 10 and UC Irvine at No. 12. UC Berkeley placed 24th and UCLA was 27th. Those institutions cost low- and moderate-income students less than almost every private school on the list.

Michael Itzkowitz, founder and president of HEA Group, a research and consulting company focused on college value, said that schools atop the CMI "are effective in bringing in a



CAL STATE L.A., above, is No. 1 in the California Mobility Index, a list rating four-year California colleges based on how much low- and moderate-income students have improved their socioeconomic standing.

ROBERT GAUTHIER Los Angeles Times

The top 15 universities on the California Mobility Index

1. Cal State Los Angeles
2. Cal State Dominguez Hills
3. Cal State Stanislaus
4. Cal State Bakersfield
5. Cal State Fresno
6. Cal State San Bernardino
7. Cal State Fullerton
8. Cal State Long Beach
9. Cal State Northridge
10. UC Merced
11. Cal Poly Pomona
12. UC Irvine
13. Cal State East Bay
14. Cal State Sacramento
15. Cal State San Marcos

broad group of students, lifting them up the socioeconomic ladder and leaving them better off than the previous generation."

All of the institutions in the CMI's top 15 had a net cost of less than \$45,000 for four years of education. Private colleges were found to be much more expensive for low- and moderate-income attendees. At No. 44 USC, the four-year net price was about \$62,000; at No. 59 Pepperdine it was about \$131,000, according to the study.

In part because of higher costs, schools on the lower half of the list were almost

entirely private ones where it took longer for students to recoup the total costs of their education. In contrast, the CMI shows that students of the top-performing CSU schools quickly recover the costs.

Consider Cal State L.A. Data from the list show that it takes former low- and moderate-income students from the school, on average, less than nine months to recoup their educational costs. The typical price of a four-year undergraduate education for those students is a little more than \$18,000, after scholarships and grants are deducted. And, 10 years

after enrollment, former students from those income levels had median annual earnings of a little more than \$59,000.

Unlike many other college rankings, the CMI does not consider standardized test scores or prestige — factors that might boost private schools.

"I think there is a real angst and concern among all Americans about the cost of higher education," said Eloy Ortiz Oakley, president of College Futures Foundation, which commissioned the CMI. "That is a real thing that policymakers and higher education leaders are going to have to contend with, and our hope is that presenting data like this will help drive that conversation."

Cal State system faces funding cut

The CSU is the country's largest four-year public higher education system, with 23 campuses that graduate about 125,000 students annually.

The system is roiled by financial stress: It faces a \$375-million funding cut in Gov. Gavin Newsom's proposed 2025-26 budget. Cuts of that size would

have "heartbreaking" consequences, CSU Chancellor Mildred Garcia said.

Oakley, a former California Community Colleges chancellor and University of California regent, acknowledged the CSU system faces challenges, but said its strong showing in the CMI indicated that "investments that California has made in the Cal State University have been paying off."

"We can see that the CSU has been carrying the largest load in terms of percentage of low-income learners and helping them get into the workforce, and doing it in a way that helps them recover the cost of their education," he said.

Erin Pruitt, a graduate student at Cal State Bakersfield — No. 4 on the CMI — is counting on that being true.

Born and raised in Bakersfield, she got her bachelor's degree from the university in 2023 and began working toward her master's in business administration later that year. Multiple scholarships have helped defray the cost of her education: Pruitt, who is scheduled to graduate with her MBA in the summer, has about \$21,000 in student debt. According to the research group Education

Data Initiative, the average debt for an MBA graduate is about \$81,000.

Pruitt, 24, said that she is pursuing some public relations jobs outside Kern County, where "salaries are significantly higher." That, coupled with the relatively low cost of her education, has positioned her for success, she said.

"It puts me on a pathway to pay off my [student] debt, if I want to, within the first year, which is huge," said Pruitt, Cal State Bakersfield's student body president.

The schools atop the CMI, among them Cal State Bakersfield, do not merely provide an "extremely affordable education" to low- and moderate-income students, Itzkowitz said. "They're also allowing them to enter the workforce and succeed economically within just a few years."

College rankings aren't all the same

College rankings are big business. One survey has shown that nearly 60% of high school seniors bound for college consider them, and a drop in position on one of the prominent lists can be costly, due to a decline in applications.

But rankings aren't all the same. Alongside questions about the value of higher education are ones that probe the value of the lists.

Oakley said mainstream college rankings have been "extremely damaging."

"They've created this perception that individuals that graduate from the most selective, wealthiest institutions ... have a leg up on everybody else," he said. "And so there's this arms race to be more selective, more wealthy. What it does to ... the rest of Americans that go to anything from community colleges to four-year regionals to public [schools] like the UC, it skews the perception of those institutions. And so the whole ranking system is upside down."

Although the CMI may take a different approach, other rankings also look at social mobility: U.S. News & World Report has had one since 2018 and puts out a national list as well as others by region.

Cal State L.A. is tied for No. 5 on U.S. News' social mobility ranking of universities in the West. But that analysis is focused on two factors related to Pell Grants and does not take into account economic data such as earnings.

In contrast, Itzkowitz said, the CMI highlights "institutions that not only provide a strong return on investment for low- and moderate-income students, but also enroll a large proportion of them."

Bass blames LAFD chief for failing to warn her

[**Blame**, from A1] the L.A. area had barely seen any rain, were featured in numerous news reports.

In the days after the fire erupted, tensions between Bass and Crowley emerged into public view, with Crowley saying on television that the city of Los Angeles — and by implication, Bass — had failed her and her department by not providing more funding and resources.

A representative for the Fire Department declined Thursday to directly address Seidl's allegation that Crowley didn't call Bass.

"The LAFD followed our standard preparation procedures for the predicted extreme fire weather on January 7th," the Fire Department said in a statement. "Additionally, public notifications and media advisories were made while the LAFD coordinated with other city departments and elected officials."

The department used traditional and social media to notify the public about the fire danger, also doing media interviews, emailing two media advisories and notifying city officials, the statement said.

Separately, the LAFD has defended its decision not to pre-deploy any engines and firefighters to Pacific Palisades — as they had done in the past — despite being warned that some of the most dangerous winds in recent years were headed for the region.

Asked about Bass' statements, Freddy Escobar, president of the firefighters union, said there has been constant speculation and Monday morning quarterbacking since Jan. 7.

"The independent review and after action report needs to be completed before we continue reckless finger pointing," Escobar said. "I can tell you that our rank-and-file firefighters appreciate Chief Crowley's honesty regarding the state of the Fire Department and her fighting for the resources that we need to do our jobs."

Bass, in television interviews this week, suggested she was left in the dark about the seriousness of the wildfire risk.

"It didn't reach that level to me to say something terrible could happen, and maybe you shouldn't have gone on the trip," she told Fox 11 News.

She also suggested that the city was not well-prepared for the fire, which destroyed nearly 7,000 homes and other structures and killed at least 12 people.

"Although there were warnings, I think our preparation wasn't what it typically is," Bass said.

She pointed to last week's rainstorm as an example of the city and county working together to take action.

"When we knew we were going to get into the rains, you saw us come together and us talk about, you know, get your sandbags, bring the



ALLEN J. SCHABEN Los Angeles Times

LOS ANGELES Fire Chief Kristin Crowley, left, and Mayor Karen Bass address the media at a news conference about the city's disastrous wildfires on Jan. 11.

'If I had all of the information that I needed to have, the last thing I would have done was to be out of town.'

— LOS ANGELES MAYOR KAREN BASS, in an interview with KABC-TV Channel 7

K-rails out," she said. "That type of preparation didn't happen."

In the Fox interview and an interview with KABC-TV Channel 7, Bass said she wouldn't have traveled to Ghana if she had received adequate warnings about

the potential for catastrophic wildfires.

"Because, honest and truly, if I had all of the information that I needed to have, the last thing I would have done was to be out of town," she told KABC.

As the fire tore through

the Palisades hills on Jan. 7, Bass was posing for photos at an embassy cocktail party in Ghana after attending the inauguration of Ghanaian President John Dramani Mahama.

Seidl has said that she spent most of the party making calls in a separate room.

Bass has also said that she had phone service on the military plane that flew between Ghana and Washington, D.C. After the fire broke out, Bass was a constant presence on social media, urging Angelenos to flee evacuation zones and announcing her decision to de-

clare an emergency.

After landing at Los Angeles International Airport, Bass stood silently, mostly avoiding eye contact as a reporter pressed her on whether she needed to apologize to Angelenos for being out of the country. A video of the confrontation went viral.

Back home, Bass was initially defensive about her trip, telling reporters that she was focused on the recovery. But she promised a full assessment of the city's actions before and after the fire, including of the Fire Department's actions.

Since then, critics have questioned Bass' judgment and leadership. After an outcry from residents, Bass reversed course on her decision to open the Palisades to the public. She also reversed herself on her initial plan to pay her fire recovery czar, Steve Soboroff, \$500,000 for 90 days of work. Soboroff is now working for free.

One of Bass' sharpest critics has been developer Rick Caruso, who ran against her in 2022 and has not ruled out another campaign against her. He has positioned himself as a leader in the fire recovery by starting a foundation that is convening top engineering and technology companies to speed up rebuilding in both the Palisades and Eaton fire areas.

Times staff writer David Zahniser contributed to this report.