

In its 100th year, Bakersfield College looks to new future

.....

Dr. Sonya Christian

In 1988, I boarded Singapore Airlines, heading to Los Angeles, to start my graduate studies in math at the University of Southern California. Having never been away from home, that fall was a semester of anguish and discovery. There were homesick days and nights. And the expensive phone calls to mom and dad in India were luxuries. But along with the personal challenges came my discovery of California's vision of higher education: That it was a right available to all Californians. And the way to achieve this vision was through an amazing system called the California Community Colleges.



California's community colleges comprise the largest system of higher education in the nation, serving approximately 2.4 million students at 112 colleges. Bakersfield College, which is celebrating its centennial year, is one of the system's oldest. In 1913, this small, isolated, rural community decided to build a college campus that would make the Central Valley a land of higher education opportunity.

Hundreds of Bakersfield College graduates move each year into the university system, where they earn bachelor's, master's and doctorate degrees. Hundreds more join the workforce as skilled professionals in a wide range of careers. And many thousands of Bakersfield citizens enjoy the performances, athletics and lifelong learning opportunities that the college brings.

No aspect of Bakersfield life and business is untouched by the college and its graduates. The founding visionaries recognized these potential benefits. Bakersfield College now is among the most highly-respected community colleges. Its graduates' net work-life financial return exceeds \$500,000.

No doubt, community colleges are an educational bargain. They cost taxpayers less than four-year universities. Students attending these two-year colleges receive half the financial aid that students enrolled in the California State University system receive, and

about 20 percent of the aid awarded to students in the University of California. Eight out of 10 undergraduate students in public and private California higher education institutions are enrolled in community colleges, while only 1 out of every 17 Cal grant dollars goes to a California community college student.

The late Dorothy Donahue, a pioneering assemblywoman from Bakersfield, led the effort to create a Master Plan for Higher Education in California. Signed into law in 1960 by then-Gov. Pat Brown, the plan opened college doors to all Californians, including many in Bakersfield and Kern County. As a result, the percentage of Californians enrolled in higher education has grown from 2 percent in 1960 to 7 percent in 2010. More than 20 million Californians now are enrolled in colleges and universities.

But a new vision is needed to serve today's students and future generations. And it is heartening to see University of California President Janet Napolitano, California State University Chancellor Tim White and Community Colleges Chancellor Brice Harris encouraging the review and revision of the state's master plan.

This new vision is agile in meeting the new mobility of students, and calls for higher education to collaborate and respond to emerging technologies. College today is viewed less as a starting point for exploration and more as the path to achieving concrete goals.

The boundaries established in the 1960 master plan already are being blurred by such programs as those that allow high school students to earn college credits and by legislation that allows community colleges to complement the CSUs by expanding capacity for bachelor's degrees. Bakersfield College is well positioned to meet this demand, particularly in offering the applied baccalaureate degree in nursing and industrial technology.

Examples of collaboration with industry is Bakersfield College's partnership with the Paramount Academy in Delano to create agriculture pathways for ninth grade students, and the "open educational resources" Bakersfield College makes available to the community. Consider the free web development course, which provides competitive tools for small businesses.

It is now our turn to create an educational master plan that reflects today's realities. This will honor Bakersfield College's founding visionaries, its leaders, and today's and tomorrow's students.

Dr. Sonya Christian is the president of Bakersfield College.