Bakersfield College launches Early College Program, giving rural youth a chance to earn a degree, diploma at same time

Bakersfield College is pleased to announce the launch of its Early College Program, an innovative strategy that gives Kern County high school students an opportunity to earn an associate degree or certificate while in high school.

Bakersfield College is at the forefront of a movement in the state to provide high school students a pathway to earn a college degree by the time they graduate from high school.

Over the past few years, BC has offered dual-enrollment courses to high school students with research showing high school students in BC dual-enrollment courses performing at a 90% or better success rate. The Early College Program expands on the dual-enrollment concept by having freshmen complete a package of college courses throughout their four years so that they earn a college certificate or associate degree by the time they graduate with their high school diploma.

“Bakersfield College’s Early College program gives students a clear, guided pathway to earn college certificates and degrees while earning their high school diploma,” said BC President Sonya Christian. “For students in our rural communities who struggle with transportation to the college, the program opens doors to education and facilitates student success in an unprecedented way.”

Retired State Senator and Bakersfield City School District Superintendent Dr. Jean Fuller has partnered with BC to lead this initiative. A longtime advocate of education, Fuller, who grew up in rural Kern County and has been at the forefront of state issues, knows firsthand how the Early College program can serve as a game changer for Kern.

“The Early College program saves students and taxpayers thousands of dollars,” said Fuller whose leadership earned her recognition as the California Superintendent of the Year by the American Association of School Administrators in 2004-2005. “Students take tuition-free courses while in high school and taxpayers reap the benefits because the outcomes are there. We know students who take college courses are significantly more likely to complete their certificates and degrees and contribute back to our economy earlier.”

According to a 2013 study by the American Institutes for Research, 63% Early College students nationally enroll in college by the end of high school compared to just 23% of their peers.

Already, BC has witnessed its first set of high school graduates who earned a degree last May when the college graduated 38 Wonderful Academy Early College high school seniors with an Associate degree in Agriculture Business. The success of Wonderful Academy students led BC to develop a plan to expand this program.
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As a part of the Early College program, Bakersfield College will work with high schools throughout Kern County to identify opportunities for students to complete certificates and degrees while in high school. Currently, the Wonderful Academy and Wasco High School offer a full package of courses in partnership with BC.

Even more exciting is that McFarland High School will be partnering with Bakersfield College in launching the Early College Program at McFarland for the incoming 2019-2020 academic year. A launch event is planned 5 p.m. Wednesday Feb. 13, 2018 at McFarland High School, 259 W. Sherwood Avenue in McFarland.

“McFarland High is thrilled to partner with Bakersfield College in opening pathways to college certificates and degrees to all incoming 9th grade students in fall 2019,” said Brian Bell, principal of McFarland High School. “We are confident this partnership will lead to increased educational attainment rates as well as provide opportunities and possibilities to the residents of McFarland.”

BC officials say the program is part of the college’s attempt to increase higher education attainment in a new age where the minimum requirement by many industries is a degree over a diploma. The program is initially targeting rural students who often live in communities with higher unemployment rates, increased poverty levels and limited college attainment when compared to urban areas.

The stats are there to prove it. Educationally, Kern County lags behind in college attendance and graduation rates. Less than a 1/4 or 22% of Kern County residents, 25 years of age and older, hold an Associate Degree or higher, compared with California’s average of 39%. One out of 4 Kern County residents live in poverty. Rural communities often face significant challenges that hinder opportunities for social mobility and economic prosperity. Officials say that is why this program is so vital.

“Bakersfield College knows that education is the vehicle for social and economic mobility,” Christian said. “By opening access to college courses earlier in a student’s academic career, we are accelerating his or her pathway to degree or certificate completion. When students earn these credentials, we know their earning power increases and the return on our investment is seen in the health of our community.”

Bakersfield College provides opportunities for students from diverse economic, cultural, and educational backgrounds to attain Associate and Baccalaureate degrees and certificates, workplace skills, and preparation for transfer. Our rigorous and supportive learning environment fosters students’ abilities to think critically, communicate effectively, and demonstrate competencies and skills in order to engage productively in their communities and the world.

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