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Editorial: Good, bad in valley college trend

Not enough valley students are going to college to acquire the expertise to help their communities develop a skilled and educated workforce.

A new study shows Hispanic students taking advantage of San Joaquin Valley community colleges in great numbers — with some of the greatest numbers coming from Bakersfield College.

The study, from the Central Valley Higher Education Consortium, which encompasses 24 colleges from Bakersfield to Stockton, placed the growth of Hispanic students at 2.1 percent in the region.

"Why Access Matters" examined the demographics of students receiving associate degrees from 2001 to 2006.

The leader? Bakersfield College, which saw a 125 percent increase in Hispanic graduates, representing a leap from 237 grads to 534 over that five-year span.

It's good news that a historically underserved segment of the local population is claiming a bigger share of the education pie. But the bad news — or at least the cautionary news — is that **not enough students are taking courses in medicine or engineering-related fields, and there's a significant shortage of students studying to become math and science teachers.**

This may be why: More than 40 percent of incoming freshmen take remedial course work.

Remedial education is an important role for community colleges, and while those courses help students find better jobs than they would land otherwise, having large numbers of students on that academic track does not reflect a population geared toward attracting the highest-paying industries.

Although Hispanic students make up 43 percent of graduating seniors in the San Joaquin Valley, according to the study, they make up just 36 percent of incoming freshmen at California State Bakersfield, Fresno State and CSU Stanislaus, and 33 percent of those at **UC Merced.**

All things considered, however, the study reveals an encouraging trend. Central Valley Hispanics have the lowest college-going rate in California (and valley residents in general are much less likely to hold bachelor's degrees).

Things are starting to turn around, if this five-year trend holds true. To improve further, colleges — community colleges in particular — must be focused on attracting students from low-income families with no history of post-secondary education, including those from migrant backgrounds.

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