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COMMUNITY VOICES: BC making strides in the lives of students

BY Jean Fuller Oct 17, 2019



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“Afraid to fail”.

That was the anonymous Post-It note that an incoming freshman student shared at Bakersfield College’s summer Bridge to BC, an intensive daylong orientation program that equips incoming students with a series of tips, resources and a blueprint for success in college.

Holding that Post-It in her hand, one professor told the group of approximately 50 students that she, too, remembered feeling the same way during her early college years — except, in her case, the worry turned into reality: she had failed a class. An easy choice would have been to give up and walk away, the professor told the nervous, quiet freshmen class. Instead, she accepted her failure, picked herself up, reassessed what she needed to do and re-enrolled in the class. Learning from her mistakes, this time, she passed.

The lesson? More often than not, we need failure in life to find our strength within and to carve out our own path to success.

A professor who participated in that Bridge session shared this story with me, and I was reminded of it after reading a recent op-ed column featured in The Bakersfield Californian that weighed concerns over the future of college students today (“Colleges must do more to serve advantaged and disadvantaged students,” Aug. 22).

Barry Glassner and Morton Schapiro, the column’s authors and university educators, rightly questioned whether colleges across the nation today were equally preparing low-income and higher-income students to thrive in a higher educational setting. Their answer was no.

“When colleges admit low-income students but provide insufficient financial support and mentoring, they set them up for failure,” they wrote. “And when colleges allow well-off students to sail through to graduation without experiencing any setbacks, they do them a disservice by leaving them unprepared to cope with failure in the world beyond college.”

Both authors felt colleges were not putting strategies and resources in place to help students of all backgrounds flourish.

They are right in raising those points. However, I could not help but nod my head at the list of services and resources recommended by the authors because such innovation and effort is already happening at Bakersfield College.

As one of the nation’s oldest continually operating community colleges, BC continues to guide students in ways that counter the dismal lack of support services and absent challenges for academic achievement raised by Glassner and Schapiro.

For one, the authors argued for the need for a pre-college bridge program. I could not agree more. A few years ago, Bakersfield College launched Bridge to BC to prepare students for the transition to college. It was in this Bridge session that the faculty member shared her own story of inspiration with incoming students. Students also meet with financial aid advisers and counselors and are paired up with professors throughout the day.

According to a June 13 article written by Californian reporter Ema Sasic, research provided to her by Kimberly Bligh, Bridge to BC director, “shows that students who attend Bridge to BC are twice as likely to persist fall to fall, succeed in the courses they are taking, take and complete their college-level math and English classes their first year and complete 30 credits their first year in college.”

Even more innovative is BC’s Early College program, which BC launched to provide high school students with a path to earn an associate’s degree or certificate by the time they walk across the stage to receive their high school diploma. The program starts at freshman year and follows the student through senior year. Seven high schools from the rural communities of McFarland, Delano, Wasco and Arvin are among the leading campuses in the county to collaborate with the college on this initiative.

What’s even more phenomenal is that this program is an attempt to counter the low college attendance rates in rural communities. The BC Early College is cutting edge in higher education; very few models such as this – earning an associate’s degree or certificate as the same time of high school completion – exist on a national scale.

The campus has also launched Kern Promise: Finish in 4, which targets students who are following an Associate Degree for Transfer path by ensuring they complete their required 60 units in two years. Doing so grants them a guaranteed acceptance at Cal State Bakersfield with a two-year, 60-unit plan mapped out for baccalaureate degree completion. And, to ensure that students are focused on their academic goals and not worrying about food on the table, the program also provides qualifying students priority registration and financial assistance.

The health and well-being of students is of the highest importance to BC. This value is enacted through programs such as the Renegade Pantry, which provides food, hygiene items and attire that can be used for interviews or job opportunities.

Last, the authors are right in demanding that colleges do more to challenge students. Agreed.

According to an article, “Community College Transfers Outperform High Schools at the Top Colleges, so Why Do We Ignore Them?” published on Jan. 30, Nancy Lee Sanchez writes, “new research from the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation makes it clear: community college students who transfer to selective four-year schools perform as well as – or even better than – their peers who come directly from high school.”

Community colleges are the often forgotten golden gem of higher education; they work diligently to build well-prepared, challenged students who can succeed in whatever option they choose. It is a great time to be a community college student. Just look toward BC.

Jean Fuller is a retired state senate and minority leader emeritus.