

COMMUNITY VOICES:

Reflections on Early College

- By Romeo Agbalog
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Before she even graduated high school, Celeste Galvan graduated with an associate's degree alongside thousands of other Bakersfield College students at the commencement ceremony in Memorial Stadium. She still remembers the fireworks from that night as a culmination of all her hard work paying off.

For Celeste, though, it wasn't enough just to get an associate's degree at 17. Two years later, she has since transferred to Fresno State and is on track to get her bachelor's degree at 19.

Celeste was part of a pilot program by BC and the Wonderful College Prep that aimed to provide students with the opportunity to complete an associate of science in agriculture business from BC by the time they graduated from high school. The pilot program proved successful when Celeste, along with a third of her 2018 graduating class, received an associate's degree.

I started serving as a trustee for the Kern Community College District back in 2015, and recently, I've been reflecting on the stories of students like Celeste. I continue to be proud and amazed of how the BC Early College program has expanded over the course of the last six years, bringing the Renegade spirit of commitment into all of our local high schools.

The success of Celeste and other students prepared Bakersfield College to scale up their model by launching the Early College program in 2019, with the vision of providing a pathway for every high school student in Kern County to earn between 12 and 60 units of college credit before graduation. Every incoming freshman at McFarland High School is enrolled in college-level courses alongside their regular classwork, developing

the tools for college and career readiness. Today, over 23,000 students have completed a total of approximately 90,000 college credits at 36 high schools across the county.

However, the success of the program extends beyond just the sheer number of students served, but also in closing equity gaps. Early College has had a 93 percent student success rate across all high school campuses in the last academic year, consistently exceeding BC's own institution-set standard for student success by 15 to 20 percent. Most importantly, more than 85 percent of students from rural areas who were in an associate degree completion pathway went to college after high school.

Early College, like all of us, has not been exempt from the impacts of COVID-19 over the last year. Online classes have been tough for both instructors and students, and many career and technical education programs can't be offered fully online.

Nevertheless, the program has persisted, and BC continues to see more and more interest from high school students wanting associate degrees while they are in high school. The existing Early College pathways launched prior to the pandemic have remained on track by offering online courses and support. BC also added four new pathways that are available to the entire Kern High School District in Fall 2020. All recruitment and registration steps for these new pathways have taken place virtually, and all available courses are online with virtual class meetings each week.

Bakersfield College hopes to keep scaling up through COVID and beyond, so that we can hear more success stories similar to Celeste Galvan in our future. I will continue to advocate for the Early College program and students like Celeste to help Kern County build a better, brighter, more prosperous future we all aspire for and that we deserve.

Romeo Agbalog is the president of the Kern Community College District Board of Trustees.