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Commentary: Valley will reap infinite rewards from UC Merced

by Richard C. Atkinson
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The recent founding celebration at the University of California's 10th campus, UC Merced, was a milestone for higher education and research in California. It was also a powerful signal that California remains committed to providing access for students from all regions and demographic groups to the nation's premier public university system.

UC Merced will serve the 3.5 million residents of the San Joaquin Valley, including students from Stockton to Bakersfield, who have not had a University of California campus in their region. Access to a local UC campus is expected to substantially increase the number of Valley students who pursue higher education and receive a college degree. The nation's first new research university to be built in the 21st century also will serve as an engine for economic and employment growth in the state's fastest growing region.

Regular classes won't begin at the new campus until 2004, but already UC Merced outreach staff have been working with 144 high schools and 11 community colleges in the region to encourage students to pursue higher education and become eligible for the UC system. At three local community colleges--Fresno City College, Modesto Junior College and Merced College--20 students are concurrently enrolled at UC Merced through a program that is helping community college students pursue four-year degrees at UC.

Due in part to outreach efforts, the number of San Joaquin Valley students enrolling at the University of California has doubled since 1985. This is an important development because students from the Valley traditionally have been underrepresented at the university, and fewer students from the region have graduated from college than in major urban areas of the state.

The opening of UC Merced, combined with several other state initiatives enacted in the past four years with the support and leadership of Gov. Gray Davis, will bring even more new opportunities for higher education to the students of the Valley.

The expansion of the Cal Grant program, guaranteeing full payment of university fees to qualified students with financial need, and the enactment

of the Governor's Scholarship Program, providing annual scholarships of \$1,000 to the top 10 percent of students at every high school, have sent a message to students that higher education is possible and affordable.

Meanwhile, the Eligibility in the Local Context program, which admits the top 4 percent of students in every California high school to a UC campus, has extended UC access to more high-achieving students, 18 percent of them rural students.

Strong efforts by the university and the California community colleges to increase transfer rates are also moving more students to a four-year higher education path. Over the last two years, the number of transfer students admitted to UC from the community colleges has increased 12.6 percent. The number of African-American, Hispanic and Native American students admitted to UC from the two-year colleges has increased 20.5 percent over the two years.

In addition, we are working to increase access to higher education beginning well before students graduate from high school. Despite the state's budget shortfall, California is continuing to provide grants to high schools across the state to ensure that students have access to Advanced Placement courses.

California has a proud tradition of top-quality, affordable higher education accessible to all of its citizens. This commitment remains firmly in place today--in the San Joaquin Valley and throughout the state.