Community Voices

BC’s new four-year degree a great opportunity for students

Mark your calendars now for May 18, 2018, when Memorial Stadium will see the first graduating class with a baccalaureate degree from Bakersfield College. This will be a historic moment for California, Kern County and Bakersfield College, 103 years after our very first graduates completed their two-year degrees.

On Sept. 28, 2014, Gov. Jerry Brown signed SB 850, a state bill that allowed a select few of California’s community colleges to offer pilot baccalaureate, or bachelor’s degrees. Long before the bill was signed, Bakersfield College was working with more than 80 representatives of local businesses, educational institutions and government to identify a bachelor’s program that would best serve the city’s needs. The result was a proposed four-year degree program in industrial automation.

BC’s proposal was one of the 15 that were accepted and approved by the Board of Governors on Jan. 20. Because the Bachelor of Applied Science (BAS) is a pilot program, it has a sunset date of July 2023, unless it is renewed by the legislature.

This new program provides a unique opportunity for students to train for jobs in the technology-driven businesses of the 21st century. In today’s industry, engineers involved in developing new products or processes work closely with technologists, who aid them in the design, manufacture and repair of automation systems. The BAS will give students the skillset to work as technologists for major companies in agriculture, distribution and manufacturing. Graduates will be eligible for a variety of job titles in areas such as operations management, facilities planning, automation, industrial design and safety.

The lower Central Valley has a large number of production and logistics facilities for agricultural processing, manufacturing, aerospace, energy, warehousing and utilities. Each of these sectors has a need for employees who can provide technical management in industrial safety, quality control and other areas. Local industry leaders say there is a shortage of qualified mid-management technologists, which has led many of them to hire from out of state. It’s estimated that annually as many as 200 jobs in greater Bakersfield could be staffed by BAS graduates.

BC’s BAS program will combine existing lower division (freshmen and sophomore) General Education coursework with upper division (junior and senior) specialized training. The lower division coursework will include pre-calculus, physics, economics, English composition, communications and American government. In addition, students will need to take existing courses in electronics such as computer integration and instrumentation and process control. The upper division courses that are being developed include industrial automation networks, industrial design graphics, project management and budgeting, and quality assurance, as well as broader education in leadership and entrepreneurship. CSUB has been a great partner with BC and we will continue to strengthen this collaboration through the BAS program.

The program includes a heavy emphasis on project-based learning coupled with operations management topics to prepare students to manage real-world industrial problems. Students will participate in internships with area businesses in applied learning opportunities. For the 2015-16 academic year, enrollment in the program will be for both incoming freshmen as well as continuing sophomores. Junior level course work will be available the next academic year. Senior level coursework will begin in 2017, and the first graduating class will be in May 2018.

In 1959, it was one of Kern County’s very own political leaders, Dorothy Donohoe, who initiated the work on the California Higher Education Master Plan. In 1960, this was signed into law by Gov. Pat Brown, father of our current governor. Now, 55 years later, Jerry Brown makes history by shifting the boundaries set by the plan to let community colleges offer a baccalaureate.

Bakersfield College’s Baccalaureate in Applied Science for Industrial Automation is a landmark opportunity for local students and businesses. It is the most exciting new development of its kind at BC in many years. And because the community and BC partnered closely in the program’s proposal and will continue to work together in its evolution, it’s a program about which everyone involved can be justifiably proud.

Sonya Christian is the president of Bakersfield College.