We’re proud Brookings ranks Bakersfield College No. 1 in state

Higher education is the key to a better life. This isn’t breaking news. Better education equals better opportunities equals better jobs equals better lives.

Here at Bakersfield College, we like to think we’re pretty good at translating that equation to fit each individual student. We pride ourselves on that fact.

Still, it’s always encouraging when a prestigious outfit like the Brookings Institute wholeheartedly agrees with how well Bakersfield College is fulfilling its mission.

Brookings is one of the nation’s most renowned think tanks, conducting public policy research and education that’s respected worldwide. After an exhaustive study of economic success among U.S. college students, Brookings concluded that no community college student in California has a brighter financial outlook than a BC grad.

Bakersfield College ranked No. 1 in the state and sixth nationally among two-year institutions for alumni mid-career earnings, taking into account each graduate’s salary, career field, and how much debt they’re saddled with after finishing college.

I won’t bore you with all the numbers, although you can read about BC’s amazing showing for yourself here: http://www.brookings.edu/research/reports/2015/04/29-beyond-college-rankings-rothwell-kulkarni.

More importantly, what’s happening at Bakersfield College that puts so many of our graduates in position for career success that’s head and shoulders above their peers from other institutions? It’s all about staying laser focused on each student using high tech, and more importantly, high touch.

Bakersfield College serves a student body that’s nearly 80 percent first-generation college students. I take tremendous pride in the fact that every BC employee engages our 20,000 students on a personal level, working with each student on assessing life and career aspirations, then focusing dreams into very attainable goals.

And it all starts before a student even becomes an official Renegade. Critical activities like orientation, testing, counseling and registration don’t happen just on the BC campus — they’re happening at our 41 feeder high schools.

With our high school partners laying the groundwork, students enter BC far more prepared for college life than ever before.

Throw in a Summer Bridge session — BC’s crash course on best practices and student services — and you’ve got a student ready to hit the ground running.

We have amazing partners in the Kern County business community. Large and small companies in petroleum, agriculture, healthcare and logistics work closely with BC to alert students to opportunities for high-paying careers.

Show a bright, energetic student the potential for a lucrative career, then give them the training and workplace skills needed to succeed in that field. Mix in internship opportunities with our industrial partners and the straight line equation that thousands of BC students have already followed becomes clear. It bolsters our area workforce, while giving grads a leg up on that better life they’ve dreamed of.

Win-win. And state figures confirm what’s happening on the BC campus is working.

Census data puts the annual median income of a Kern County household at about $48,000.

The average nursing grad from BC is now making more than $81,000 annually just three years after graduation. Machining grads? Nearly $74,000 a year. Structural metal, radiology, architecture and plumbing students will all be making north of $60,000 a year by 2018, under current projections. Those are wages that families can actually live and thrive on. Those are jobs that fulfill the needs of our business partners and contribute to healthy communities, both economically and socially.

So with all that in mind, what do the Brookings findings really mean? I think they mean BC students graduate ready to go to work. They’re prepared. They’re creative, critical thinkers.

They are good citizens of our community. Basically, they’re the upper echelon of the available workforce. And as our area’s biggest businesses will attest, a BC grad is infinitely employable.

Sonya Christian is president of Bakersfield College. Community Voices is an expanded commentary of 650 to 700 words.