

'BC in the Vineyards' recruits farmworkers on the job

- By EMMA GALLEGOS The Record
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Roberto Vieyra Navarro, student support specialist at Bakersfield College, takes down information from farmworkers interested in continuing their education. This outreach effort into Kern County is called Bakersfield College in the Vineyards.

- Photo provided by the California Farmworker Foundation



Bakersfield College in the Vineyards, a program that reaches farmworkers on the job, is in its third year. Farmworkers interested in continuing their education learn about the college's offerings. A group of farmworkers pose with masks handed out by the college.

- Photo provided by Bakersfield College

Hernan Hernandez started noticing something worrisome about the crews that were coming out to work the fields and vineyards.

"I was starting to see a lot of young faces," said the executive director of the California Farmworker Foundation. "My concern was that we would see the second and third generation of farmworkers."

When he would ask if farmworkers wanted to be there, not a single hand would go up, he said. He found out they were often there because they had dropped out of high school, sometimes just a few credits shy of a diploma.

“The institutions were, in my opinion, failing them,” Hernandez said. “No one was telling them that college was possible.”

That’s how BC in the Vineyards, now an annual program, began three years ago. Bakersfield College brings counselors and advisers right into the vineyards where workers are to give them the extra support and advice workers and their families need to continue their education. And it’s all done on company time.

“I think going out there is helpful for them because they see different possibilities,” said Roberto Vieyra Navarro, student support specialist at Bakersfield College. “I worked in the fields. I know how difficult it is to get out of it.”

The college works with farmworkers to make sure they know about everything the college offers. That includes financial aid and assurance they’ll have help with a laptop or scrubs for a nursing program. They also offer assurances that undocumented citizens have a place at the college, too.

“You have to think about the average farmworker,” Hernandez said. “They don’t have the time to seek out that information.”

Because of the pandemic, the college wasn’t able to reach quite as many crews as it had in previous years. But Vieyra Navarro said during last week’s efforts he was able to find 45 prospective students in Arvin and Delano who wanted to enroll in spring courses.

Next Tuesday he’ll be following up with them to help them complete their matriculation process. The college goes that extra mile to make sure that workers are able to log on and enroll.

"We try to take the extra step and make a phone call," Viejra Navarro said.

Jaime Lopez, program manager for Bakersfield College Rural Initiatives, notes that the outreach effort works on many levels. Some farmworkers might immediately enroll in ESL programs, vocational programs or college courses that allow them to earn an associate's degree.

But he said it's also valuable to do outreach in that community so that they are aware of what's available for other family members if they're not interested. This is especially true of BC's early college programs available at local high schools.

Hernandez said at one of the events last week, a woman called her grandkids during the workshop to let them know about some of the courses available to them. He said he's helped an undocumented woman, who thought college was impossible for her, enroll. And there's a man in his 50s who started taking ESL classes because of a previous BC in the Vineyards recruitment effort, who is now ready to start college courses and get his associates degree.

"It makes us want to continue to do this," he said.

Hernandez said what's happening in Kern County isn't happening anywhere else in the state, but he hopes to see that change.

"This is unique to the state," Hernandez said. "We want to expand to other counties."