

BC awarded \$1.3 million to address rural teacher shortage

- By EMMA GALLEGOS egallegos@bakersfield.com
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The U.S. Department of Education has awarded Bakersfield College \$1.3 million to support students preparing to be teachers as California continues facing a rising teacher shortage — a shortage that is especially dire in Kern County.

The grant will support 140 students every year over five years. Altogether 700 students will be a part of the college's Teacher Preparation Program, and the first cohort of students will be chosen in December this year, according to Dr. Kimberly Bligh, the faculty director and chair of BC's Education Department.

The award is targeted at first-time college students and first-generation college students who want to be teachers but may need some extra academic support over their two years at BC.

"The idea is to get more diversity in the teaching field so that it better reflects our population," Bligh said.

Many rural counties in California, like Kern and Tulare, don't have teaching ranks that reflect the communities they work in. But Bligh says that students who come into community colleges do, and this program allows Bakersfield College to support students who are uniquely qualified to educate the population they grew up in.

"They understand the community's needs; they understand the culture," Bligh said.

The program will ensure these students are on the right with their pre-credential coursework, and that they are able to get into all the classes they need to, Bligh said. There will be networking events and college visits so students can figure out where they want to go when they finish their coursework at BC. There will be help preparing for CBEST and CSET tests, which are required for teaching credentials.

They will get a lot of advising and mentoring along the way, too, Bligh said. Those students will receive extra support not just from the college's Education Department but from counselors, librarians, academic support and financial aid staff. Financial support is particularly important for these students, since many of them come from high-poverty backgrounds; the program wants to make sure that these students graduate without going into debt.

"This is going to take the whole village," Bligh said. "That's what's exciting about this sort of program, it's not a silo."

The program may also help address the shortage of STEM teachers in Kern County. Many students interested in a single-subject credential to teach in junior high or high school aren't flagged by 2-year or even 4-year colleges, since they are more focused on their majors and usually don't need to focus on their credential until later. STEM majors with an interest in teaching can join the program, too, to make sure they're on the right track to become a teacher.

For more information on the Teacher Preparation Pathway at BC, visit www.bakersfieldcollege.edu/teacherpathways.