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Studies urge education investment

BYLINE: Jim Steinberg The Fresno Bee

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California, and particularly the San Joaquin Valley and Inland Empire areas, need to plan now for more efficient and adequately financed higher education, a bipartisan statewide group of business, labor and education leaders said Wednesday.

The Campaign for College Opportunity presented two studies in Sacramento to education leaders in the state Legislature.

Abdi Soltani, director of the Campaign for College Opportunity, and Nancy Shulock, director of the Institute for Higher Education Leadership & Policy in Sacramento, warned that California's economy is in trouble unless major educational changes take place soon. The institute is located at California State University, Sacramento, and affiliated with the Center for California Studies, also at Sacramento State.

Soltani and Shulock pointed to the pivotal influence of inland valley areas on the state's future. Unfortunately, they said, those regions' importance is linked to the educational shortcomings of their population ages 18 to 24.

The agricultural regions will account for much of the state's population growth in coming decades, yet they lag in the percentage of young residents who attend, much less complete, college. Combine those two factors, Shulock and Soltani said, and you have a state population decreasingly competitive in national and global economies.

The opening of the University of California at Merced this fall will help but won't come close to addressing the two valleys' shortage of well-educated workers, Shulock and Soltani said.

UC's 10th campus is a good thing but cannot by itself solve the valleys' or the state's looming problems, said Shulock, a professor of public policy and administration at Sacramento State.

"It is unwise to pin a lot of hopes on that," she said of UC Merced, because the campus will open with only 1,000 students, a tiny share of the college-age population.

Nor is Gov. Schwarzenegger's "compact" with the UC and CSU systems an adequate long-term answer, the two speakers said. Under the compact, the university systems agreed to make cuts and increase fees in exchange for future years of assured state funding increases.

"It is a useful starting point, but it doesn't require any planning on a shared solution," said Shulock, who wrote the two studies discussed Wednesday.

The first shows that California student performance, especially in the inland valleys, lags behind competing regions and states. The second study shows that increased tuition and greater state funding will not, by themselves, allow for broader access to college.

So California must devise a more expansive solution that links grade schools, high schools, community colleges and universities.

"We need to build a level of awareness among the public," Soltani said, "especially parents and business owners who need an educated work force. There is a real warning in this study. If there is decreased educational funding, this problem will be difficult to solve."

Soltani said that the inland valleys' growing Hispanic population now tends to include more children and grandchildren of people born in the state. So a growing number will be eligible to attend the state's colleges and universities.

"We need to prepare for them," Soltani said. "They are our future work force. We need to communicate with their families. We need a comprehensive college opportunity plan with a commitment for greater efficiency."

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