

Time to invest in California's future: Linda Sánchez

By Linda Sánchez

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California passed a milestone this month, with Latinos becoming the new majority, according to the U.S. Census.

California's transformation has been going on for a generation. Now is the time for the state to prepare for the future education of millions of its citizens. It's the most important investment our state can make in a young person.

I know firsthand.

Growing up in the city of Orange, the sixth of seven siblings, going to college was anything but certain. My parents emigrated from Mexico with very little money and no job waiting for them. My father worked long hours as a mechanic and my mother as a teacher's aide. Yet education was always a priority in my house and somehow, my parents managed to see all seven of their children go on to college and became contributing professionals. Two of us even became members of Congress.

I owe my success to my University of California education. But pursuing a higher degree wasn't always the easy path. I had to take on burdensome loans that I paid well into my adult years. And had it not been for Pell grants, I wouldn't be where I am today. My story is no different than that of millions of young Californians today who aspire to a college degree — but lack the means to get one.

That is why expanding access to higher education is so important to securing the economic future of California, and why, as one major study concluded, "we need to significantly increase the number of Latino students who are prepared for, enroll in and graduate from college."

The Campaign for College Opportunity reports that while educational attainment for Latinos is increasing, Latinos are still less likely to have a college degree than other major ethnic groups and lag far behind in overall college readiness, enrollment and degree completion rates. Coming out of high school, 43 percent of Latinos in California go on to higher education: 65 percent of those go to community colleges, 16 percent go to California State Universities and only 6 percent go — as I did — to UCs, our world-class research institutions.

We must do better.

In that effort, UC Merced deserves special mention. Located in the heart of the San Joaquin Valley, UC's youngest campus serves a student body that is more than 45 percent Latino and 97 percent Californian. More than half of students at Merced are first-generation students, 60 percent come from low-income families, and 55 percent are majoring in science, technology, engineering and math disciplines so critical to our state's economic future. Based on applications submitted for the fall 2015, Merced will continue to be the most diverse campus in the system.

Principals at local high schools describe UC Merced as a "game-changer," making it possible for students from immigrant families such as my own to attend a major research university, while remaining close to the support system of their families.

However, due to space limitations, the Merced campus will be unable to increase enrollment after fall 2016

without a significant financial investment from the UC system in its future growth. The net impact of limiting growth at Merced will be to deny access to the UC system for qualified students across the state, including from the Los Angeles region, which provides one-third of UC Merced's students.

The enrollment plan developed for the Legislature by the University of California calls for increasing system-wide enrollment by 10,000 students within the next five years. A key element of that strategy is growth at the UC Merced campus.

UC Merced understands the demand for a UC-quality education is not slowing down, especially from Latinos. For that reason, UC Merced is pursuing a determined expansion plan to increase its student population to 10,000 by building out its campus with classrooms, research facilities, dorms and more. The campus seeks an alternative development strategy that will allow it to meet growth goals in a way that is more cost-effective and faster than traditional development methods and will ensure that the built facilities will be maintained for decades to come.

It's an approach that deserves the support of all Californians. At UC Merced, students from the most humble origins are becoming engineers, teachers and healthcare professionals — and who knows? Maybe a member of Congress.

Linda Sánchez is the U.S. representative for California's 38th congressional district.