Improving access to higher education is one of the most significant challenges we face. Nationally some 27 percent of adult Americans hold a bachelor's degree or higher, but here in Imperial Valley the figure is little more than 10 percent. Moreover, data suggest that students currently in the educational pipeline will earn the bachelor's degree at an almost identical rate, meaning there will be little improvement as additional cohorts move through the system and take their place in the workforce.

The need for improvement, and for action, is apparent.

Over the past six months a team from Imperial Valley College and San Diego State University's Imperial Valley campus, in collaboration with the Imperial County Office of Education, has been working on ways to address this issue. The result is an agreement to create an Imperial Valley University Partnership between IVC and SDSU-IV.

The Partnership will build on the successes of SDSU-IV's existing Freshman Program, a pilot program with a proven record of success in academic performance, student retention, and graduation rates. The Partnership will by design retain the Freshman Program's most desirable features, among them a cohort structure, guaranteed access to classes, an introductory seminar, student and parent orientations, and a powerful emphasis on student advising and mentoring.

The initiative involves joint admission of students to both IVC and SDSU-IV. This is not a traditional "2+2" relationship between a community college and a university, but rather a program where students are initially admitted to both institutions, allowing for an absolutely seamless transition between the first two years of their undergraduate education and the final two years.

The Partnership will offer students not only accessible, affordable, high quality education, but an enriched educational experience. All participating students will have full access to the facilities, the faculty and staff, the libraries, the scholarship opportunities, the cultural events and student activities, and all the other resources of both institutions.

Finally and most important as we look toward the future, the Partnership will more than double the number of students currently participating in the Freshman Program, directly and purposively addressing our need for expanded access to higher education. And with more college graduates among us, the way is clear for the economic development the Imperial Valley urgently needs, and an improved quality of life for all its citizens.

We are working very hard to assure the Imperial Valley University Partnership will be available to students beginning fall 2012. We will be seeking scholarship support to be certain all eligible students, regardless of their financial circumstances, will be able to benefit from this innovative program, and we hope that the support of the community will follow us in making this important educational initiative a reality.

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