

## Energy &amp; Technology

# Growing Kern County's talent pipeline: An economic development priority

By Richard Chapman

In the economic development world, workforce quality continues to be the leading site selection factor for companies considering relocating to or expanding in Kern County.

The Bakersfield metropolitan statistical area has a significant competitive advantage in that the area provides an extremely favorable cost of living for all generations of the workforce and an advantageous cost-of-doing business that is lower than the U.S. average.



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## Cost-of-Living Factors as a Catalyst

Interestingly enough, the regions that have been highly successful in attracting a skilled workforce — two- and four-year degree graduates — are also facing significant issues in retaining talent as the cost of living has

skyrocketed in conjunction with the influx of new residents. Unlike Kern County, a majority of these metro areas have not embraced policies that have expanded housing supplies, while protecting industrial-zoned land, to meet the demands of first-time homebuyers.

In 2018, the Brookings Institution cited our region as a top performer in terms of in-migration population trends. These demographic shifts are in line with Kern County's recent No. 1 ranking for housing affordability in California and No. 3 position in the U.S. for millennial home ownership.

The most striking evidence came in the form of a Trulia survey that found that 77 percent of teachers were able to purchase a home in Kern County versus only 0.4 percent in the Bay Area. (Currently, \$105,000 a year qualifies as "low income" for a family of four in San Francisco.)

## Best Practices in Talent Attraction and Retention

The Fox Cities (Wisconsin) Regional Partnership's award-winning "Talent Upload" program seeks to recruit upcoming bachelor candidates from Midwestern universities with degrees in computer science, engineering, finance, and logistics or supply chain management. The organization sponsors an annual competitive application process that pairs 200 upcoming graduates with local employers that are seeking new employees.

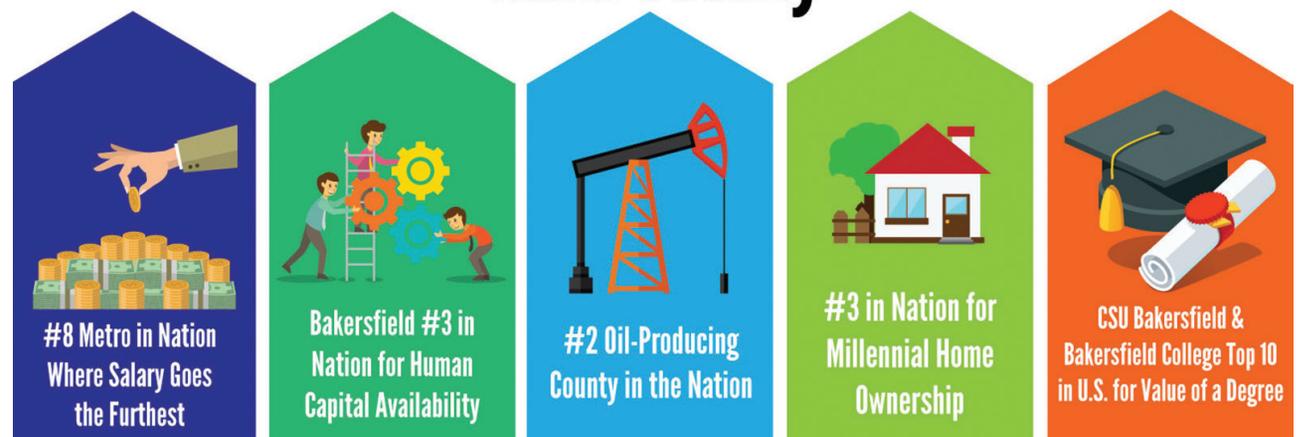
The most striking observation about this innovative program is the young professionals' fundamental positive shift in their perceptions of the Fox Cities region. On average, the students were more than 50 percent likely to pursue an internship/career in the region after visiting the area. Furthermore, their positive perceptions of the community increased by a similar factor.

The St. Clair Community Foundation's "reverse scholarship" program addresses the brain drain crisis from the rural Michigan county, by providing financial



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incentives for former natives to return home to pursue a STEM-related opportunity. The organization invests "back-end" funding to assist in paying off college-related student loans. This program is designed to provide the return on investment for the foundation's monies and community as a whole in that it encourages the retention of up-and-coming talent.

## Kern County Rises to the Challenge

In Kern County, myriad innovative career and technical education programs have emerged to enhance the region's talent pipeline. Examples include workforce development curriculum offered at Bakersfield College (BA in industrial automation), Taft College (energy tech), Cerro Coso College (cybersecurity) and CSUB (engineering sciences).

In April, the Kern County STEMposium attracted

over 2,500 students from throughout the county. The overarching goal of the event was to showcase the abundance of local STEM-related opportunities for students and for businesses to get a sense of the incredible potential of the region's upcoming talent pool. Local educators are a critical part of the coalition that presents the annual event.

Finally, the recently adopted Advance Kern incentive policy will also help attract business investment opportunities and create additional jobs in the region.

Indeed, Kern County is well-positioned to win the talent "war." Our region's economic vitality and diversity will serve as a strong magnet to attract and retain the workforce of the future.

*Richard Chapman is president and CEO of Kern Economic Development Corporation.*