

# A magnet for students

The College Place finds success with Manchester Mall site

BoNhia Lee – STAFF WRITER

The operators of The College Place didn't know what to expect when they opened up shop on the second floor of the Manchester Mall a year ago.

Perhaps some students from the neighborhood would walk in to use the computers with high-speed Internet connections. Hopefully, they would ask for some coaching on how to fill out college applications and look for financial aid.

The one thing the operators did know was the mall is where students

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Cheri Cruz  
Executive director of the Central Valley Higher Education Consortium

wanted to be, whether they were shopping or just hanging out. It was the perfect spot for a resource center.

In the span of one year, The College Place has served about 600 students from all over the Central Valley, including areas such as Dinuba, Sanger and Madera. That exceeds the expectations the Central Valley Higher Education Consortium (CVHEC) had when it opened the center.

To celebrate a successful year, the City of Fresno provided the center with a \$50,000 donation to continue providing its services for at least another year.

"Since we've opened, we've evolved and found this center is becoming

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Sajeemas Pasakdee and Ganesan Srinivasan (from left) inspect herbs at Fresno State's organically certified greenhouse. The university plans to expand organic farm operations with a \$250,000 government grant.

## The push to go organic

USDA grant to help Fresno State expand farming, education

Gabriel Dillard – STAFF WRITER

A government grant should help California State University, Fresno expand its organic farming operations beyond a small vegetable plot and greenhouse.

School officials said a three-year, \$250,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture will go toward prepping students for jobs in organic agriculture, which has grown from a \$1-billion industry in the U.S. in 1990 to a \$20-billion powerhouse in 2007.

To meet the demands of the fastest growing segment of the food market, the College of Agricultural Sciences and Technology plans to certify more organic acreage, offer more naturally-grown products in its farm market and start a student internship program with local organic growers, said Ganesan Srinivasan, director of the university's farm operations.

Most of all, students should have more opportunities to learn about

the unique technical and economic challenges facing organic farmers. From weed and pest control to recordkeeping and marketing, it's a different world than conventional farming, he said.

"We want to train students to understand what organic farmers need," Srinivasan said.

Fresno State currently operates more than 1,000 acres of farmland, but a 0.8-acre plot northeast of the Save Mart Center is the only land that has been certified organic. By comparison, California State University, Chico has 60 acres of organic land. U.C. Davis has 20 acres and Cal Poly San Luis Obispo maintains 11 acres. The College of the Sequoias in Visalia helps run an organic dairy.

Organic farming has been a point of debate in agricultural circles. Many say it is nothing but a marketing ploy for some farmers to make more money. But Srinivasan said there is a fine line between profit and loss when farmers grow

food without pesticides and synthetic fertilizers.

"Many farmers believe in the altruistic mission, but it has to make economic sense," Srinivasan said.

He added Fresno State's mission is to produce well-rounded students, and not to forge opinions on the organic versus conventional question. "We don't want to be involved in the debate," he said.

The Fresno State farm should increase its organic acreage substantially in the next three or four years, Srinivasan said. Upwards of 20 acres would be located next to the Campus Pointe development. The final number of acres slated for organic certification should be decided by the end of the month, he said.

Workers recently started leveling and grading for Campus Pointe. The development is slated to include 180,000 square feet of retail

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ing a regional resource center," said Cheri Cruz, executive director of the consortium.

The consortium opened the center to provide the community, both students and parents, with a college access center that had the resources to help them prepare for college and achieve success.

"We wanted to fill in a gap," Cruz said. "We realized not every student or parent is comfortable going onto a college or university campus to ask questions. Not every resident in Fresno has Internet access. We wanted to make sure our center had that available."

The State Center Community College District provides the consortium with space at the mall. There are 18 computers available for public use.

Interns from California State

University, Fresno work as college coaches at the center. They help conduct college searches, assist with financial aid applications and college admissions and help students "shop" for colleges.

"The College Place at Manchester Center provides a tremendous service to the community by providing information students need to make wise choices about their future," said Dr. Tom Crow, chancellor of the State Center Community College District. "At The College Place, students and community members have access to a broad range of resources to help them prepare for college. An educated community is a prosperous community and greatly enhances the quality of life for all."

The center is one of the direct ways the consortium is helping to increase the number of minority students entering and attending colleges and universities across the Central Valley.

A study released by the consortium in July found Hispanics have the lowest rate of attending college compared to other ethnic groups. They make up 43 percent of the region's high school graduates in 2006, but only 36 percent of the incoming freshmen at four-year California State University campuses.

The consortium has provided Hispanic students with more opportunities and access to higher education through The College Place as well as partnerships with the Hispanic College Fund, community volunteers and the College Access Foundation.

In July, 115 Hispanic high school students participated in the Central Valley Hispanic Youth Symposium. They received information about applying to college and pursuing professional careers in business, science, technology, engineering and math.

**SCHOLARSHIPS FOR HISPANIC STUDENTS**

Hispanic high school students participating in the Central Valley Hispanic Youth Symposium in July received \$1,000 scholarships to attend colleges and universities across the Valley.

**The total amounts awarded by area community colleges and universities:****Community Colleges**

- Bakersfield College: \$3,000.
- Fresno City College: \$6,000.
- Merced College: \$3,000.
- San Joaquin Delta College, Stockton: \$1,000.
- Taft College: \$1,000.
- West Hills College, Lemoore: \$3,000.

**Universities**

- California State University, Bakersfield: \$14,000.
- California State University, Fresno: \$22,000.
- California State University, Stanislaus: \$3,000.
- Fresno Pacific University: \$4,000.
- University of California, Merced: \$5,000.
- University of the Pacific: \$1,000.



As a result of those partnerships, 66 students at the symposium received \$1,000 scholarships to attend colleges and universities across the Valley.

"It's an effort for the CVHEC to grow our own here in the Valley," Cruz said, "so students will go to college here, gain employment here, and raise their families here, contributing to the economy."

It's also a burden lifted off the shoulders of many parents whose No. 1 question and main concerns are about financial aid, Cruz said. The consortium learned that by asking parents who have attended the center.

The College Place served many Spanish-speaking students and parents in the last year. Organizers hope to extend their reach into the Hmong community this year.

The center has attracted a lot of inter-

est, said Dr. Albert Valencia, coordinator of the school counseling credential program at California State University, Fresno. Valencia also serves as the faculty advisor who oversees the interns who work at the College Place.

"The work being done is appreciated by people who traditionally and historically haven't had access to these resources," Valencia said.

Valencia worked with about a dozen interns on ways to greet people and talk to them about the services offered at the center.

It took some work to get students to come into the center initially. A simple smile and a handshake has helped many of the interns meet people at the mall and talk to them about the services, Valencia said.

Gabriel Dillard | Reporter can be reached at: 490-3467 or e-mail gabriel@thebusinessjournal.com

**AT A GLANCE****The College Place**

Manchester Mall  
901 E. Shields Ave.,  
Suite 250

Fresno

www.collegenext.org

(877) 487-7677

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