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Opinion

Opinion: Why San Joaquin Valley is overdue for a UC regent

Sunne McPeak says Gov. Brown should appoint a representative from the region of 4 million residents



The UC Merced campus rises out of empty grazing land in Merced on April 8, 2015. The school hopes to expand in a northern direction in the near future.

Less than 20 miles from the small Central Valley town of Livingston — where I was raised on one of the many small dairy farms scattered along Highway 99 between Sacramento and Southern California — lies UC Merced, the newest campus in the University of California system.

As a child growing up in the 1950s and '60s, it would've seemed near-unfathomable that a top research campus from the nation's premier public university system would be constructed in my community. But the school recently commemorated its 10th graduating class and continues to produce groundbreaking work in biological engineering, cognitive science and public health.



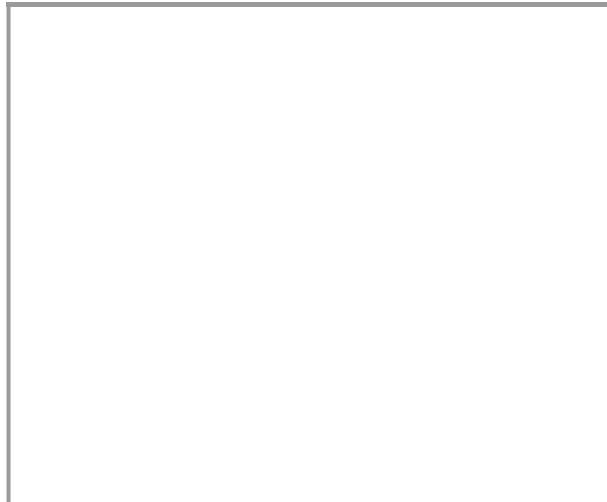
Sunne Wright McPeak

As the character, color and culture of California have changed in the intervening decades — with the growth of an enormously diverse population and a booming tech economy — so too has the San Joaquin Valley. Now 4 million residents strong, the region hosts a rising workforce that will help fuel California's economy in the years to come as well as the UC students to fill these roles. That is why it is critical that the valley is represented on the University of California's Board of Regents.

tuition increases, student affairs and research investments. The panel is well-stocked with members from the Bay Area and Southern California, as well as a handful from the state capital, but none from the multi-county region that supplies one-eighth of the nation's agricultural output and yet remains one of the most underserved communities in the state.

The diverse nature of the 10 University of California schools allows them to serve different populations with different needs and different goals. I attended UC Santa Barbara for my undergraduate degree in international health and UC Berkeley for my master's degree in public health. The disparate set of experiences I gained at these distinct institutions empowered and influenced me. I can only imagine how grateful others with similar humble beginnings must be to have an even greater wealth of options to choose from when launching their academic careers.

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Though I have worked throughout California, over the course of my career in government and the private sector I have fought for numerous causes that have directly and positively impacted residents of the San Joaquin Valley: improving Highway 99, increasing affordable housing in underserved areas, delivering access to broadband internet and securing a sustainable water future. The San Joaquin Valley has its own distinct history, community identity and policy concerns.

from the area who are making their college-selection decisions each year.

One of the remarkable stories from the UC campus down the road from my hometown is that its student population is more than half Latino, and a full 80 percent belong to an ethnic minority. Further, the school is tops among all 10 University of California campuses in accepting students who are the first in their families to attend college — as I was when I first walked through the doors of my alma mater in 1966.

The California of today is quite different from the California of my youth, and it is evident that the UC governing board must reflect these decades of change. With one vacancy remaining on the panel before Gov. Brown concludes the closing chapter in his governorship, I sincerely hope this vital need is reflected in his final appointee.

Sunne Wright McPeak is president and CEO of the California Emerging Technology Fund, a non-profit that advocates for expansion of broadband as a means of closing the digital divide. Previously, she was Secretary of the California Business, Transportation and Housing Agency under Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, and served on the Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors.

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