

Evans takes wrong turn on colleges

The telephone did little to mask the agitation in Gene Chase's voice. "I know you are a fellow UW alum. Did you see the article about Dan Evans in the latest Columns magazine? It made me mad as hell."

I received the University of Washington alumni magazine a day later, and quickly understood why Chase, a trustee at Everett Community College, was irritated.

The article was about the career of the three-term governor, who is stepping down after 12 years as a UW regent. But it contained a stunning broadside aimed at the community college system by a man who served as a sort of gubernatorial midwife at its birth.

Evans signed the Community College Act of 1967, creating the modern-day two-year college system by removing it from the school system and making it a state agency.

Now, he has developed signer's remorse.

Evans acknowledged that development of the state community college system was "the most significant thing that happened" in higher education during "12 years that I was governor" (1965-1977).

But he's not pleased: "... in retrospect, looking at where the community college system is today, I think we may have gone too far," he said. "The community college system is so big, so broad, so consuming of tax money. That has really kept back some of the necessary support of four-year institutions and post-graduate work that now is an economic necessity. So priorities have changed in 30 years and we haven't yet responded."

His criticism was tucked into an article written by Neil McReynolds, a UW alum and Evans' press secretary when he was governor. It covered Evans' career as a state legislator, governor and president of The Evergreen State College.

Evans, an engineering graduate of the UW, has a public service record that is exemplary. But his attack on the successful community and technical college program he helped create is appalling. He seems to have focused too much on the UW and lost track of the two-year system that includes 60 percent of higher education students in the state.

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This is a system that educates nearly 500,000 students a year at half the tuition cost of the UW and Washington State University, and provides essential trade and technical training to thousands. During the past 10 years, half the state's adult population has visited the 34 two-year colleges for education and skills training.

Support from the top tier

That record earned the solid support of Gov. Chris Gregoire. Speaking to community college trustees on Feb. 14, she had high praise for the system: "I came to you a year ago to say thanks for all you do. Since then, my enthusiasm (for two-year colleges) has done nothing but grow." She touched on the system's flexibility in training skilled workers, and the educational opportunity it provides.

Those community college funds would not find a more effective home in four-year higher education programs.

Each system is serving its own constituency of learners very well. Forty percent of community college students transfer to four-year schools. Many students could not afford higher learning without a lower cost community college education. Thousands of others are driving the economic engine of the state forward because they have been trained in vocational and occupational skills in the two-year system.

An independent economic study last December concluded the community and technical colleges "are a sound investment from multiple perspectives." The colleges enrich the lives of students, increase their lifetime incomes, benefit taxpayers by generating increased revenue, reduce the need for taxpayer-financed social services and "contribute to the vitality of both local and state economies."

Evans could best serve education right now by encouraging greater cooperation between two-year and four-year schools. The co-admission agreement between Washington State University Vancouver, Clark College and Lower Columbia College is a model for the state. UW Bothell co-located with Cascadia is another achievement.

Collaboration, not contention, will move higher learning forward.

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