

2009 STATE OF THE COLLEGE ADDRESS
CLARK COLLEGE PRESIDENT ROBERT K. KNIGHT
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GAISER STUDENT CENTER

INTRODUCTION

October 1, 1933 was a Sunday. On that day, the tiny faculty of Vancouver Junior College—numbering about half a dozen -- held their first formal meeting at the Hidden House in downtown Vancouver.

Imagine what that discussion must have been like. The nation was in the midst of the Great Depression – some of the toughest times that our country has ever seen.

Enrollment was low. According to historical records, faculty members questioned whether the college should open. But jobs were scarce – especially teaching jobs.

And one student – Larry Rakestraw – a graduate of Washougal High School – had signed up on the first day of registration. And he had paid his tuition in full.

That support – that belief in a bright future for the little junior college – carried the day. Today, 75 years later, we are here because of that belief in a bright future for Clark College.

As we observe our 75th anniversary, it's ironic that we find ourselves again in tough economic times – the most challenging since the college was founded.

But tough times eventually pass. And our anniversary provides an important reminder that we need to stay focused on our students and continue to build for the future.

THEN AND NOW: YOUR COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Clark College opened in one building in downtown Vancouver with half a dozen faculty members and fewer than 20 students.

Today, we serve more than 13,000 students each quarter on our main campus, at Clark College at Town Plaza, and at Clark College at WSU Vancouver. They are taught by nearly 600 full-time and part-time faculty members. Starting this fall, we will welcome students at our newest location – Clark College at Columbia Tech Center.

But one important thing hasn't changed. We are still your community college.

THEN AND NOW: IT'S ALL ABOUT THE STUDENT

There's something else that hasn't changed since 1933. At Clark College, it's all about the student.

Everyone who works at Clark College supports our students – from our groundskeepers to our student affairs staff to our faculty. We are here to support our students and help them succeed.

Our faculty and staff are outstanding. That continues a tradition that goes back to our earliest years – familiar names like Robert Oliver, Dean Lewis Cannell (our library is named in his honor), and Dr. Paul Gaiser. This building was named in his honor.

Scarpelli Hall is named in honor of Dr. Antonio “Chick” Scarpelli. He made so many contributions to the college – as a faculty member and chair of our business division – and, after his retirement, serving on the board of the Clark College Foundation. With Chick's passing in December, we lost a lifelong supporter of our college and our students. But his legacy lives on every day at our college and in our community.

Our students study English, music, history, science and math. They enroll in health-related programs such as nursing, dental hygiene, medical radiography. They take part in career and technical programs including diesel, welding, computer technology and power utilities. Others come to Clark College as adults to learn to read and write – or to learn English as a Second Language.

Some earn certificates that help them advance at work. Some earn associate degrees and continue their education – many at our co-admission partners -- Concordia University, Marylhurst University, Portland State University, and our long-time partner WSU Vancouver.

We also have a strong partnership with Eastern Washington University. Eastern Washington offers Bachelor of Science degrees in Technology and Dental Hygiene at Clark College. Students can now earn a bachelor's degree in social work through the Clark-EWU partnership. EWU also offers a three-year, two-night per week Master of Social Work program at Clark College.

All of these programs and co-admissions agreements support our mission: it's all about the student.

PRESERVING THE PAST AND HONORING THE PRESENT: ACCREDITATION

We have a lot to be proud of at Clark College. This year, we marked some important milestones.

We welcomed educators from the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities for our ten-year accreditation visit. Accreditation demonstrates that colleges and universities have been recognized for their performance, integrity and quality.

Clark earned its first accreditation back in 1937 – from a group of professors from the University of Washington. The professors came to the Hidden House that spring. They inspected the library, visited classes and talked to instructors and students. They also had lunch with members of the Board and talked to members of the community. In their report, they noted that, while the facilities were meager, the quality of the work and the competence of the faculty justified the encouragement that accreditation would provide. So Clark Junior College was accredited for one year. Since that day, we have never lost our accreditation.

When the accreditation team – which included educators from throughout the Pacific Northwest -- visited us last October, they reviewed binder after binder – filled with the results of nearly two years of a self-study done by faculty and staff from across the college.

When we began the accreditation process, we made it clear that we wanted the self-study to be transparent and honest. Accreditation commissioner Dr. Carol Lucey told me that our self-study was just that – transparent and honest. I'm very proud of that.

The accreditation team shared five “commendations” – areas in which they believe we shine.

One is our Teaching & Learning Center. Through workshops and speakers and Conversation Cafes and online – our Teaching & Learning Center has led our efforts to truly become a learning-centered college. The team also cited our support for learning through employee and professional development, our library services, our beautiful facilities, and our strong relationship with our partners in the Clark College Foundation.

We also received five “recommendations” which echoed what we said in our self-study. We want to do a better job in terms of planning and evaluation – and reviewing our educational programs. We want to place even more emphasis on a protecting student records and providing advising and counseling services for our students. We also want to do a better job of defining and communicating what we mean by shared governance at the college.

Everyone who worked on our self-study deserves thanks.

I met with the accreditors last week to discuss their findings.

I promised them that we will continue to support the areas that they recognized with commendations – and we will continue to work to improve the five areas where the team provided recommendations.

We should receive their final report in another week or two. But I am confident that Clark College will receive full accreditation for the next ten years.

PRESERVING THE PAST AND HONORING THE PRESENT: STRATEGIC PLANNING

We'll stay focused on all these goals – and many more -- through strategic planning. Our institutional goals for the 2009-2010 academic year come from our self-study and the recommendations in it.

At the same time, we're finalizing our new five-year strategic plan. The plan encompasses feedback that we received from the community with an eye toward helping our students meet their educational goals. The new five-year plan will be in place on July 1st.

PRESERVING THE PAST AND HONORING THE PRESENT: OUR 75TH ANNIVERSARY

I hope that many of you were able to join us when we launched our 75th anniversary with events spanning 75 hours from October 1st through the 4th.

We received anniversary wishes from throughout the community...and the state.

During those special 75 hours:

- ♦ We gathered at the Chime Tower to sing "Happy Birthday."
- ♦ We hosted a Penguin Oktoberfest for the community.
- ♦ We welcomed runners (and walkers) for our annual K-ROD Walk/Run.
- ♦ We unveiled a beautiful commemorative book about the history of the college (which you can find in our bookstore).
- ♦ And we threw a switch to light the Chime Tower for generations to come.

We also welcomed back a legendary figure at Clark College as we dedicated our community room in honor of faculty emeritus, dean, vice president and interim president Ellis F. Dunn.

The members of our 75th anniversary planning committee worked tirelessly to make all of that happen. I want to thank them all.

And it was only possible because of donor support – friends of the college who gave dollars for this special event even though they were facing their own tight economic times this year. That says a lot about them – and the way that people in our community feel about Clark College. With their support – we have brought our anniversary by truly preserving the past, honoring the present and embracing the future.

Speaking of embracing the future: In May, we will open a time capsule created during the college's 50th anniversary. We will also dedicate a new one -- to be opened during the college's 100th anniversary celebration. You'll be hearing more about that in the weeks to come and I hope that you'll join us.

PRESERVING THE PAST AND HONORING THE PRESENT: CLARK COLLEGE TODAY

At the young age of 75, we're not resting on our laurels. Clark College is a top-notch institution. We offer excellent classes taught by outstanding faculty members. We have exceptional staff. We have stabilized our leadership over the past few years and our college climate continues to improve. Our Board of Trustees has been meeting regularly with board members from our K-12 partners.

I asked our leadership team to share some of the college's most recent accomplishments for this address. They reached out across their areas. Here are just some of the exciting things they proudly reported.

- ◆ Last week, we held the first of two information sessions for our Running Start program. We'll be holding another one next week. That program is already breaking records. On December 31st, more than 1,300 Running Start students were enrolled at Clark College. That translates into the equivalent of more than 1,000 full-time students. We are now the largest Running Start program in the state of Washington. And, given the economic climate, we expect to keep breaking records.
- ◆ We're also experiencing record numbers of students who are seeking financial assistance. Again, that's no surprise given the economic situation. We're only halfway through this academic year and we have awarded more than \$25 million dollars to nearly 5,000 Clark students. That's more than we awarded during all of last year. The dollars that we invest in our students are another reason why Clark College is a great investment for our community and our state.
- ◆ More students received Tech Prep credit this year – 637 to be exact. That's up 16 percent from last year. Tech Prep lets high school students earn credits toward degrees or certificates in business, construction, diesel, culinary arts and more.
- ◆ We added a new career path this year through an associate degree in surveying.
- ◆ In the past year, we held our first graduation for students in our medical radiography program.
- ◆ Students in our nursing and dental hygiene programs continued to excel.
- ◆ We've made strides in health and wellness – continuing our commitment from last year's State of the College event, when we launched our Healthy Penguin Nation Initiative. Our Mental Health Mondays series continues our focus on emotional wellness by attracting students and members of our community.
- ◆ We've added new signage and lighting to make our main campus more inviting.
- ◆ And, as you may have heard, a generous donor would like to gift a wonderful gift to the city of Vancouver – a Japanese garden. The city has generously reached out to Clark College as the proposed site. That's just one example of our strong partnerships with our regional governments. The feedback from the college community – and the community as a whole – has been strong and positive. Our beautiful cherry trees came to us as a gift during the Earth Day celebration in 1990. Our predecessors had the vision to embrace that gift and we are all the beneficiaries of that legacy. We now have the chance, during our 75th anniversary year, to do the same for the generations that follow us.
- ◆ During the past year, we dedicated our beautiful new Gaiser Hall, which is home to our student services.
- ◆ We also reopened this room, which was enhanced for our 75th anniversary through a special partnership among the college, our students, and our Foundation.
- ◆ The *Phoenix* – our student literary and art publication – which earns national honors year after year -- was just named the top publication in the country in its category.
- ◆ At Clark College at WSU Vancouver, students can now earn an Associate of Arts degree in two years by taking classes just two days per week.

- ♦ We now have more than 1,000 students taking classes online through our eLearning program. The program has grown so much that Clark students can now earn a degree -- online.
- ♦ Starting this fall, students will be able to earn a degree by taking classes on weekends.
- ♦ As you can see, we're living up to our commitment: it's all about the student.
- ♦ If you've driven on Mill Plain Boulevard near 192nd Street, you've seen how Clark College at Columbia Tech Center has sprung to life. That facility is on track to open this fall with classes for individuals, corporate training and more. Discussion and planning for this facility began more than 10 years ago. It's very exciting to see it coming to life. And mark this date on your calendar: October 1, 2009 – our 76th anniversary – is the date that we will dedicate that exciting new facility.
- ♦ We're also continuing to take The Next Step for our future through planning for a new building for science, math, technology and engineering – we call it STEM. At this point, we're on track to receive design funding for that building during the next biennium. That means that construction would begin in 2011 with the building scheduled to open in 2013 at the corner of Fort Vancouver Way and Fourth Plain Boulevard.
- ♦ Even longer term, we're looking at options for a new site in northern Clark County to better serve the residents in that part of our region.
- ♦ We also take great pride in the classes offered at Clark College at Town Plaza – classes in adult literacy (reading and writing) and English as a second language. We're also offering basic skills classes in our community. We have now expanded services in the Columbia River Gorge at Skamania Work Source and White Salmon Work Source. We offer classes to help offenders at Larch Correctional Center turn their lives around.
- ♦ The learning taking place in all of those sites is just another example of how we are changing lives – and how we are helping our community and our state during tough economic times.

EMBRACING THE FUTURE: FACING OUR ECONOMIC CHALLENGES

Our original budget for this academic year was just over \$51 million dollars. As the state has updated its revenue forecasts – all downward – we’re looking at a 4.3% cut this year.

It has been challenging but our goal has been to trim our budget in a way that has the least impact on our students – in and outside of the classroom.

Everyone at the college has stepped up to make this happen. I especially want to thank our faculty members who voluntarily added nearly 400 seats in their classrooms to meet the needs of the students who came to Clark this quarter to pursue their academic journeys. Members of our student affairs team have put in long hours working to ensure that each student got the help he or she needed and got off to a good start this quarter.

Across the college, everyone area has stepped up to help. We have done it by doing what most people have done – we have tightened our belts. We cut travel. When positions opened up, we reviewed them carefully --one at a time. We’ve filled some positions that we felt were critical to our mission. We’ve left others open or being filled by other staff members at the college. And we’ve done it while still staying focused on quality – the quality of the student experience in everything we do.

As a result, we are close to our goal of achieving those 4.3% savings. But that’s this year.

The governor’s proposed budget features a 6% cut for community colleges over each of the next two years. That’s a lot – but it’s much better than the 20% cut that had originally been discussed.

In the toughest economic situation since our college was founded, Governor Gregoire proposed a budget that acknowledges the important role that we play in our state. That’s a credit to the hard work that everyone does across the college in support of our students. I know it. It’s gratifying to know that the governor does too.

At the peak of the state’s last economic downturn -- in 2002-03 -- 17,000 laid-off workers turned to community and technical colleges for retraining. Within a few months of completing college, 80% of these workers had returned to employment and nearly half of those were hired into jobs that paid higher wages than the jobs they lost.

Employment retraining programs got our citizens back to work in the last recession and community and technical colleges are ready to do it again. That’s an important message that we’ll be taking to our legislators in Olympia.

We want to remind them that colleges and universities are the economic engine that drives the state’s economy and will drive our recovery.

When it comes to the budget, at this point, I am cautiously optimistic.

EMBRACING THE FUTURE: THE NEXT 75 YEARS

When it comes to the long-term future of our college, I am not just optimistic – I’m excited.

I’m excited to think about what the next 75 years will bring – not just for Clark College but for our community.

I know that our college will continue to play a vital role in our region’s growth.

I know one thing more. Seventy-five years from now, we will still be able to proudly say that Clark College is a place where all things are possible because, at Clark College, it’s all about the student.

Next week, America will inaugurate a new president.

During the campaign, President-elect Barack Obama told audiences that, “in a moment when people are finding it harder and harder to get ahead, it’s time to call upon our community colleges once again.”

In an economic address this month, he called for funding “to equip tens of thousands of schools, community colleges and public universities with 21st-century classrooms, labs and libraries” so that, as he put it, “our children have the chance to live out their dreams in a world that’s never been more competitive.”

On Tuesday, during his confirmation hearing, Arne Duncan, who has been nominated to be Secretary of Education, talked about the importance of community colleges in retraining young people and adults for emerging careers in today’s challenging economy. As he put it, community colleges “play a huge role in getting people back to work.”

From Olympia to Washington, D.C., our leaders clearly understand that community colleges play a vital role in the lives of our students and in the economic future of our country.

On November 4, President-elect Obama stood on a stage in a park in Chicago and reminded us that America is a place where all things are possible.

Those of us who work at community colleges know that’s true because we see it every day. We see it in the thousands of men and women of all ages who come to us to earn a degree, get a certificate, or simply take a class to enhance their lives.

A lot has changed since we were founded in 1933, but the mission of Clark College has not.

Our founders brought higher education to Southwest Washington.

They opened a college at a time when few believed it could be done.

They focused on success for each and every student.

They believed passionately in a bright future for Clark College.

So do I.