

CLARK COLLEGE GETS CREATIVE

Innovative 'Penguin Promise' will connect students with private-sector assistance

To understand the challenge facing Clark College President Bob Knight, connect these dots and try to design a sustainable business plan:

- State support of the college's operating expenses has dropped from about 60 percent a few years ago to a projected 40 percent by the end of 2012.

- In that same time period, enrollment at the college has soared 30 percent.

- Tuition (set by the state) has increased by double-digit percentages in the past two years and will climb another 12 percent next year.

- Gov. Chris Gregoire has recommended another 13 percent cut in higher education. That could reduce state help to Clark College by about \$3 million, with about \$1 million added by the tuition increase.

Like many businesses, Clark has been socked with agonizing financial turmoil in recent years. Accentuating the challenge, the college must grow because it is correctly seen as the part of the solution to the recession; witness the enrollment increase as more people choose new careers.

So Knight confronts this question: How does the college grow and serve more customers (students) while its budget shrinks? Answer: Find money elsewhere, and Knight knows that, if the money isn't coming from the taxpayers, he and other college leaders must find the funds in the private sector.

Numerous private-public partnerships already exist at Clark, and the latest one looks like a real winner. The "Penguin Promise" will offer tuition assistance at Clark College to students who attend the Boys & Girls Club of Southwest Washington if they sign a pledge in the eighth grade and follow the rules through high school. The program is still in development, but it will be paid for by an endowment established and funded by the Clark College Foundation and the Boys & Girls Club.

Together, can they find the money? We think so, because private-sector entities should take great interest in the Penguin Promise's strict guidelines. Math and English classes must be taken and passed in high school, and a 90 percent attendance record must be maintained. Penguin Promise recipients must enter Clark within two years of finishing high school, and maintain a 2.0 grade-point average.

This is not easy money. In fact, it's only considered "topping off" assistance, because students must apply for at least two other sources of tuition assistance.

The college and the Boys & Girls Club are starting small, with no more than 25 students the first year. But the partnership could spread to embrace students in other parts of the community, and our prediction is that abundant private-sector benefactors will step forward as the students keep their pledges. We know this, because it's happened before. PeaceHealth Southwest Medical Center workers receive tuition assistance for the Clark College nursing program, thanks to a private-public partnership. Likewise with early-learning center students, thanks to a program funded by the Oliva family. A new dental hygiene lab is being paid for largely by the Roy and Virginia Andersen Endowment Fund.

The Penguin Promise will target at-risk populations and first-generation college students, although there is no set income limit. Both the college and the club will provide mentors for those who make the Promise connection.

It's a great opportunity for at least three stakeholders: Students who need help paying for higher education; Clark College, which faces the aforementioned budget challenges; and a private sector that is understandably eager to help both groups.