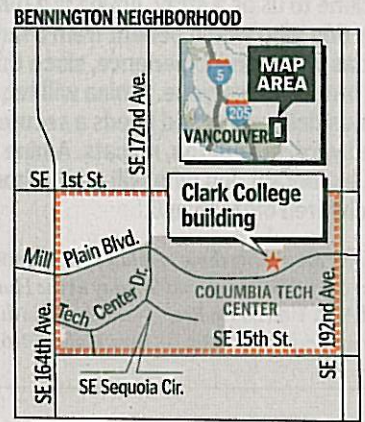


More than 1,400 full- and part-time students are enrolled at the Clark College campus at Columbia Tech Center, which stands out in the evolving commercial core of the Bennington neighborhood.



The Columbian

Satellite settles into orbit



Photos by TROY WAYRYNEN/The Columbian

Student Nikki Patterson talks with Debra Hentz, a student affairs representative at the new Clark College at Columbia Tech Center building in east Vancouver. Students appreciate the proximity — and ample parking — of Clark's new satellite campus, which opened in September.

Clark College's Columbia Tech Center site pleases students, neighbors

By HOWARD BUCK
Columbian staff writer

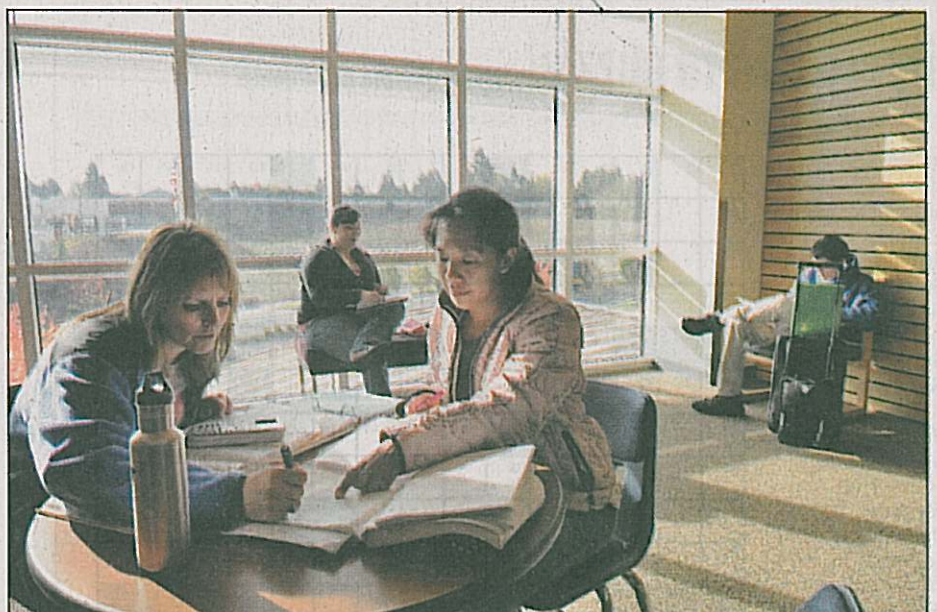
It's not the most likely setting for a college. Three stories of red brick rise from a large bowl of vacant gravel lots, several retail stores hulking in the background.

But just two months in, Clark College at Columbia Tech Center has started to embrace its surroundings while the Bennington neighborhood warms up to its new occupant.

It's small things: students who loiter in nearby Starbucks or Peet's coffee shops, talking or quietly tapping on laptops. A light stream of foot traffic up the hill to Walmart, or fast-food places doing brisk business.

Or, the visitors who appear at the central lobby desk of Debra Hentz, student affairs representative for Clark.

"I am surprised by how many walk-ins I get," Hentz said. There's the retiree who asked about a photography class, others who inquire about degree programs,



Students Tracy Johnson, left, and Cheryl Beatty, along with Kayla Dewey, background, and Maxwell Kyte, far right, study at the new Clark College at Columbia Tech Center building.

College:

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she said.

"What I keep hearing is, we're handy here. People can walk in and talk to someone," she said — and not need to navigate a phone maze or travel 10 miles west to Clark's congested main digs near downtown Vancouver. "We're trying to be the campus connection to the community," she said.

As hoped, the new classroom building is a blessing for east Clark County residents eager to shorten a tough commute. It's eased pressure on the entire college, which enrolled a record 16,000-plus students this term.

Whether for a single class or full credit load of courses, the center boasts more than 1,400 students this fall quarter. That's equal to 505 full-time students, based on a 15-credit load.

Included are 186 Running Start students, high-school aged teens earning college credit.

"In some ways it feels like a

school; in some ways it doesn't," said Hailey Bischoff, 17, a Washougal High School senior now taking all five of her courses in the Columbia Tech building.

The center saves a half-hour trip to the main Clark campus, Bischoff said. She sat next to large windows in one of several study nooks, reading an Introduction to Shakespeare course text.

"I actually kind of find it convenient, if I need something at Walmart," she said of the school's setting. She's popped into the J.C. Penney store across East Mill Plain Boulevard to replace a watch battery. And, each Monday, she shares lunch at Panda Express with her mother who works a few minutes away.

C-Tran's No. 30 Burton bus stops right in front of the campus, handy for several students.

But Bischoff and others who drive take full advantage of the CTC center's most notable feature: Ample parking, in sharp contrast to jam-packed lots and streets around Clark's central campus.

"I can park here! It's nice," laughed Nick Nagle, 22, taking three courses in his third year

of Clark studies. At the main campus, his truck is hard to squeeze even into the rare open parking space, he said.

Nagle doesn't mind the relative isolation or subdued business-type atmosphere of the CTC building, which also hosts corporate training sessions. "It kind of feels the way east Vancouver works. The other campus is kind of pretentious," he said.

The new building offers only a handful of vending machines, one which dispenses coffee, and a microwave oven for common use. A small, built-in coffee stand will someday grace the lobby, but hasn't opened yet.

"That's all right, Peet's makes pretty killer coffee," Nagle said.

Over at Starbucks, employees say the new clientele has been evident since classes began on Sept. 21. "It brings a whole new vibe, which is great," said barista Gordon Hays.

One Clark student complained that study space is already tight inside when the building is busy with classes. But most students, when asked, give the campus a solid thumbs-up.

"It's closer, it's quieter. You can actually get parking," said Don Parker, of Washougal, pursuing nursing studies. He waited outside a classroom with Chris Armstrong, 25, starting classes after completing duty with the U.S. Marine Corps.

"I'm going to try to get all my classes here next (quarter)," Armstrong said.

Parker quipped, "I just hope everybody (on the main campus) doesn't find out how nice it is here, and come over."

For local residents already familiar with east Vancouver's attributes, the arrival of Clark College is just one more plus.

"It adds a lot, because of the educational aspect, the proximity," said Julie Hukee, chairwoman of the Bennington Neighborhood Association. "People were excited, especially the ones who have kids in high school."

A higher education outlet is another big step to rounding out the community, Hukee said.

"We needed something here on the east side, so that everybody didn't have to go all the way downtown," she

said. The news that Southwest Washington Medical Center will construct a satellite clinic a few blocks east builds additional steam, she said. "It's becoming a lot of independent living; we like that."

Hentz, a former Hewlett-Packard employee, also lives near the campus. She slips home for lunch and to let her dogs out, and already looks forward to warm weather again, she said.

"For me, summer commuting will likely be by bicycle," Hentz said.