Community, tech colleges face perils

There's no question about my support of, and advocacy for, the 34 community and technical colleges in this state. I am a graduate of Clark College, and served six years as a member of the Centralia College board of trustees. Currently, I am in my third four-year term as a member of the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges.

The two-year college system is in trouble because of the dismal economy. It's the worst predicament I have seen since I entered Clark more than 50 years ago.

This network of local colleges serves nearly half a million students each year. At Clark, second largest (to Bellevue) in the state, that translates to 13,000 people or 7,000 full-time equivalent students. One FTE equals 15 credit hours of study.

Bob Knight, Clark's president, told the state community college board last week that 58 percent of the college's enrollment is academic. Another 26 percent of the students are taking vocational courses including agriculture, business administration, culinary arts, computer-related classes, nursing, dental hygiene and welding. Students can learn automotive skills and many other technologies.

Sixteen percent of the student body receives basic skills training such as adult basic skills, GED and study for adult high school diplomas, English as a second language, worker retraining and developmental education.

The learning found at Clark is typical of education offered at the state's 34 community and technical colleges. Technical colleges concentrate on specialized skills learning. Skills training is one of many specialties. If a special study need surfaces, the colleges will put a class together. That speaks to the "turn-on-a-dime" flexibility of these community institutions.

Of all those who receive bachelor's degrees, 41 percent start at community colleges, said Loretta Seppanen, research and analysis director for the state board.

Enrollment boom

When times are tough, young people and adults flock to two-year colleges to brush up on their skills, or to learn new skills to make themselves employable. In a Nov. 6 state board news release, it was reported fall enrollment at the state's community and technical colleges (CTCs) exceeded 133,000 full-time equivalents, compared with 125,000 at the fall count last year. "We haven't seen enrollment growth like this since the 1970s," noted Seppanen.

Now comes the rub: At a time when community and technical colleges can help put the state on the road to economic recovery, there are fewer state dollars. The financial tires are flat, and the current state budget deficit is $5.1 billion. The CTC system was asked to cut expenditures by almost $31 million, or 4.1 percent through June 30, 2009. Reductions for the 2009-011 biennium budget could be 20 percent, inflicting excruciating pain on the system.

At that point of funding crisis, the state board might have the authority to declare a "financial emergency," which could lead to layoffs and cap enrollment. Many learning programs would be trimmed by the colleges. The "open door" to enrollment — decreed by law in 1967 — would be shut tight.

There is no doubt K-12 education leaders are desperately seeking funds just like their higher education brethren. The difference is that some funding of basic education is mandated by the state constitution. All higher education funds are vulnerable to redistribution to critical areas.

Playing the "blame game" is not appropriate. Gov. Chris Gregoire, expected to release her budget by Christmas, has been a strong backer of education, the present and future of Washington. Raising tuition — a deplorable action that would block many from a college education — might be necessary.

Community college officials and educators, a dedicated bunch, are scrambling to help students. Still, I worry, along with hundreds of others, about the fate of higher education under extreme economic stress.

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