

Feeding the need

Community colleges provide retraining opportunities for workforce development



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The proposed budget of Gov. Chris Gregoire features a 6.5 percent cut for community colleges in each of the next two years. It's a big cut, but it's much better than the 20 percent cut originally discussed.

Gregoire's proposed budget acknowledges the important role community colleges play in our state.

Now our state legislators are crafting their budget. The Clark College trustees, leadership team, faculty, staff and students have been reaching out to legislators and we are gratified that they understand the vitally important role community colleges will play in our region's economic recovery by developing the workforce.

Sixty percent of today's jobs require education or training beyond high school and that percentage is rising. As the economy changes, skills must change. The largest number of future job openings will be in "middle-skilled" occupations that require some significant education and training beyond high school, but less than a bachelor's degree.

These jobs pay well and do not offshore easily. Community and technical colleges

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provide 80 percent of all middle-skilled employment training in Washington. Even now, during times of economic downturn, job announcements across the state show demand substantially outstrips the supply of graduates in many industries, including auto mechanics, health care, transportation and science technology.

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 percent of these workers returned to employment and nearly half of those were hired into jobs that paid higher wages than the jobs they lost.

Historically, new industries emerge at the other end of a deep recession. With high-demand enrollments, community and technical colleges will be prepared to train the workers of tomorrow for emerging clean energy jobs, like wind and solar power and biofuels, as well as those jobs that contribute to a green economy in industries such as construction, manufacturing, and health.

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I hope that our students, alumni, faculty, staff and supporters will all reach out to our legislators.

Please help us remind them that community colleges are the economic engine that drives the state's economy and will drive our recovery, creating opportunities for our citizens and a better future for Washington.

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