

Community colleges play important role

By Robert K. Knight

Guest columnist

Clark College was founded in 1933 during the darkest times of the Great Depression. It was created through a partnership between educators and businesspeople and, during those early years, community support was critical to the college's survival.

This year, we are marking our 75th anniversary. None of us could have imagined that our anniversary would come as the country is facing the toughest economic times since the Great Depression.

As part of statewide budget cuts, Clark College is facing 4.3 percent budget reduction during this academic year. Everyone at the college has stepped up to make this happen. 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.

Some of our faculty members volunteered to

add students, above their contractual cap, which added up to nearly 400 additional 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 put in long hours working to ensure that each student got the help he or she needed.

And we've done it all 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 percent savings.

But that's this year. The governor's

proposed budget features a 6.5 percent cut for community colleges over each of the next two years. That's a lot — but it's much better than the 20 percent cut that had originally been discussed. That's because, in the toughest economic situation since our college was founded, Gov. Chris Gregoire proposed a budget that acknowledges the important role that 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 all been reaching out to our legislators. We are gratified to know that they understand the vitally important role that we will play in our region's economic recovery.

We know that that there will be budget cuts during the next biennium, and we are ready to do our part. But we hope that our legislators will follow the governor's lead. We also hope that they will give us flexibility in how we make budget cuts. Thoughtful decisions made at Clark College would likely not be the same decisions made in elsewhere in the state.

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 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.

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.

During the 2008 presidential campaign, then-Sen. 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."

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. That future includes this fall's opening of Clark College at Columbia Tech Center, which will offer general education classes, corporate training, and continuing education classes to enhance our service to residents of eastern Clark County and Skamania and Klickitat counties.

Our founders brought higher education to Southwest Washington during the Great Depression. Today's Clark College is their legacy.

It's up to us to face today's economic challenges while still staying focused on a bright future for our college and our community. That will be our legacy.

Robert K. Knight is the president of Clark College in Vancouver.

