

STOKING SOLUTIONS

Clark College's surging enrollment reflects an effective strategy for battling recession

Few private-sector business leaders would expect a 45 percent increase in customers after increasing prices 14.5 percent. In the world of public education, though, a devastating national recession exerts a whole different set of forces. When the unemployment rate climbs — as it has locally to almost 15 percent — jobless people start pursuing new careers. And even those who are still employed will look at the long-term futures of their jobs and alter their career goals by attending classes as part-time students.

In both cases, the tenacity to survive financially often will trump the rising cost of tuition. And that's exactly what has been happening at Clark College in recent years.

We have no way of knowing if Clark

College students are happier these days (chances are, the recession has stoked their gloom and frustration levels). But we do know there are more of them. This is a positive development, not only for them but for the community at large. A higher level of education, collectively, is one of the quickest and smartest strategies for lifting Clark County out of this excruciating economic downturn.

It's good to know that thousands of jobless and underemployed people are not going to surrender to this recession and have chosen to fight back. Bootstraps have been yanked upward and paths are being beaten to the local community college. As Howard Buck reported in Monday's *Columbian*, 14,844 students were enrolled Thursday at Clark College and, even more striking, almost 10,000 of them are full-time students (15 credit hours or more). That's a jump of 20 percent in full-time students from spring 2009 and 45 percent from spring 2008.

And all of this has occurred with student tuition rates rising

an intimidating 14.5 percent over this school year and the 2010-2011 school year. The Legislature decided last year that huge tuition increases, although painful, can help expand the user-pay principle in higher education. Somehow, these Clark College students are finding ways to pay the soaring tuition rates. In many cases, future earnings are seen as the antidote to training-related debt. That's why enrollment is soaring in Clark's professional certification programs such as optometry, dental, physical therapy and cardiology assistant programs.

A second factor in this stampede toward classrooms has been the visionary strategy that Clark College leaders adopted a few years ago. As if the recession was being prophesied, college trustees and administrators knew that



STEVEN LANE/Columbian files

Fall quarter starts at Clark College in September 2009.

the outreach to potential students in the eastern portion of the county had to be increased. And now the Clark College satellite campus at Columbia Tech is open and buzzing with learning activities. If you haven't noticed the new building, it's the beautiful new structure in an attractive setting at 18700 S.E. Mill Plain Blvd. Drive by, if only to admire the appearance of the campus, but perhaps also to check out and enroll in a course that could have you marching in the recession-fighting parade.

Another part of Clark College's growth has not required bricks and mortar. About 10 percent of students are taking e-learning (online) courses.

Of course, this burgeoning enrollment represents only a foundation; until local job markets open back up, there will be no cause to celebrate. But when the recovery kicks in and accelerates, thousands of ambitious and industrious local residents will have positioned themselves to take advantage of new careers. Good for them, and good for Clark College.