

BTC to Build New Student Center



The student center was designed with several “visual connections,” which will allow passersby a glimpse into classrooms to see students at work. Graphic courtesy of HKP Architects.

By Lance Henderson

Bellingham Technical College (BTC) is preparing for the construction of a new three-story, 70,000-square-foot campus student center, which will replace four outdated college buildings located at the heart of the college’s 32-acre campus.

“BTC is a growing institution with our enrollment at an all-time high, so we are very much looking forward to the completion of our new campus center,” said BTC President Thomas Eckert. “Not only will it provide much needed classroom space, but will also greatly enhance student life outside the classroom by way of expanding and improving programs and student services.”

Marni Saling Mayer, BTC’s director of marketing and communication, said the new building will add a lot to campus.

On the first floor, new teaching kitchens will expand the college’s culinary arts program and a new conference center will provide a venue for large events, such as BTC’s annual LinuxFest Northwest. The campus bookstore, which currently resides in a portable building, will also be located on the first floor.

“Our culinary arts program is extremely popular and this new building will give them the equipment and facilities they need to continue to be the best,” Saling Mayer said.

The building’s second floor will have 12 classrooms and 12 offices for some of the college’s business computer programs. This entire floor will center around an open studio space, which will double as an academic support and social gathering place.

The top floor will house a new library and student center and will boast “stunning views.” The library will contain a technology-driven “Learning Commons” and multiple group study rooms.

“Our new library will finally be of adequate size for our students and will make us more competitive in the tech sense,” Saling Mayer said.

Julie Blazek, a partner at Mount Vernon-based HKP Architects, which designed the student center, said her firm has worked with BTC since 1997 on two master plans.

“It’s been wonderful to work with a client for so long and see some of these projects come to life,” Blazek said.

She said the project’s two biggest challenges are its location in the center of campus, which presents problems for phasing, staging and safety, and housing several programs in one building.

“We worked hard on how to feather all those programs together in a way that is cohesive and not too hodge-podge,” Blazek said.

The architects also worked to create “visual connections” into classrooms, which became large windows that resemble transparent garage doors and allow passersby a peak into ongoing classes.

“Anytime you have a college campus, there is a need and desire for it to be open and inviting and that was the direction we wanted to go,” Saling Mayer said.

Blazek said when colleges get funds for these building, which are supposed to last for no less than 50 years, the college and its contractors take the process very seriously.

“These need to be 50-year buildings but we would like them to be 100-year buildings,” Blazek said.

BTC hopes to begin construction in late fall of 2009 and to complete the building by summer 2012 with classes hopefully starting the following fall.

Saling Mayer said even though the college is replacing four of its buildings, they are actively rescheduling classes before next fall to avoid any negative effects.

“We are basically trying to minimize any impact on classes at all,” Saling Mayer said.