

Bellingham Technical College turns 50 College Fits Courses to Needs of Industries

BELLINGHAM — Over the last 50 years, Bellingham Technical College has grown up, moving from a single building with a handful of programs to a state-of-the-art campus that makes instructors from other schools jealous.

But one constant remains: the school's dedication to preparing people for employment.

"Bellingham Technical College has been remarkably true to its mission forever," said Desmond McArdle, who was director and president of the school from 1982 to 2001.

BTC is celebrating its 50th anniversary this school year. Over the decades, some program offerings have changed as demand for them declined: Custodial, commercial fishing and fashion merchandising programs are no longer offered. But other programs have withstood the test of time, producing employees for local companies.

Jeffrey Callendar, spokesman for ConocoPhillips, said Bellingham Technical College has not only produced quality students over the years for the local oil refineries, but has kept up with changing technology by working with local industry employers. For example, the school partnered with local businesses to develop the process technology program, which trains people for jobs that turn raw materials into products.

"BTC has been very responsive to ConocoPhillips, as well as our industry peers, in terms of continuing to develop and evolve the curriculum. ... That makes it even more effective and more valuable to the students and helps them prepare and evolve the skills they need to come work in our industry," Callendar said. "They also keep up with industry trends and automation. ... It's really sort of a leading-edge school when it comes to technical education."

THE HISTORY

Vocational education has been offered in Bellingham since 1912, when the first "Industrial School" opened near Whatcom Middle School, under the supervision of the Bellingham School District. Over the decades, vocational classes made their way into the high schools, and by the 1950s, district officials decided a technical school was needed.

Bellingham Technical School opened in 1957 with 16 programs, including the long-standing welding, automotive and culinary programs.

Throughout the years, the school's enrollment flourished. The school was so well-respected in the community and the state that it survived two attempts by the state to change it: in the 1960s, when all but five technical schools in the state rolled over into the community college system; and again in the 1980s, when some officials tried to merge Whatcom Community College and BTC.



Instructor Lowell Webster and students in one of Bellingham Technical College's science labs.

By the 1970s, busloads of Whatcom County high school students arrived on campus daily, McArdle said. The school, which was renamed the Bellingham Vocational-Technical Institute, was still run by the Bellingham School District, and classes were filled with teens and adults.

Then the federal government called for education reform in the 1980s, and the culture of the technical school changed.

"When 'A Nation at Risk' came out ... it resulted in higher standards and more classes in English, more classes in math, more classes in science, so we had fewer buses coming in," McArdle said. "That was a bad time."



MARK MALJAN THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

Bellingham Technical College student Casey Reynolds, right, goes over his exam on amplifiers with Instrumentation Instructor Dave Starkovich, on May 9, 2008. "It's all hands on, I like hands on," Reynolds said about Bellingham Technical College.

When Bellingham Vocational- Technical Institute separated from the school district and was rolled into the community and technical college system in 1991, the name was changed to Bellingham Technical College, but the school wasn't as popular as it had been in the 1970s.

"The culture remained that a four-year college is where you go," McArdle said. "Vocational education was a second-class education for many years."

In recent years, the school has taken strides to keep up with changing technology, the economy and industry demands. The school has added more academic and remedial programs, increased the number of specialties available within established programs and upgraded facilities to make sure graduates are highly skilled. It now serves more than 12,000 students.

"The trades in earlier days were just trades," McArdle said. "You could do anything if you had a tool box. ... Now you can't."

INDUSTRY RELATIONSHIP

From the beginning, BTC has had advisory panels to help school officials keep a finger on the pulse of the various industries their graduates joined. If an advisory panel said the job outlook for a certain skill was diminishing, school officials listened.

"Our mission was preparing people for work for jobs that exist," McArdle said. "If the (jobs) don't exist, then we close the program. ... There's no point in educating people for unemployment."

On the other end, if advisory committees reported a need for a new program, then the college worked with them to figure out how to implement one.

For example, St. Joseph Hospital has worked with the school to develop courses and programs for nurses and radiologic and surgery technicians.

"We have found BTC to be an incredibly valuable community resource, not only for helping people prepare for successful careers but also for addressing gaps in the work force," said Judith Smith, the director of public relations and marketing at the hospital.

Currently, more than 300 people are on advisory committees for the college, which offers 34 degree programs and 57 certificate programs.

"We're very responsive to employers," said McArdle, who also served as the interim president in 2006-07.

Mike Abendhoff, spokesman for BP Cherry Point Refinery, said BTC has done a great job in keeping up with the demands of the oil industry, but that to attract more people, the school needs to make sure its name is known to everyone.

"I think they just need to focus on spreading the word about their comprehensive program offerings," he said. "There are many fields of study that people can get into and learn skills that lead to family-wage jobs."

THE FUTURE

More attention is turning to technical and vocational education these days as schools statewide consider reviving some programs dropped in the 1980s and many blue-collar industries start facing a shortage of workers.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, retirements of baby boomers in oil and gas related industries are "expected to create excellent opportunities for welders."

The retiring baby boomers also will affect the health-care field, because more people will require care. The health-care industry "will generate 3 million new jobs between 2006 and 2016, more than any other industry," according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

"We are certainly in that group of companies that has an aging work force and anticipate seeing many retire over the next decade," said Callendar of ConocoPhillips. "We're looking for programs, like BTC, to help provide a larger pool of trained workers ... who have the technological know-how to come to work in our industry."

Officials at BTC hope to fill the work force gap by increasing their presence in local schools and the number of opportunities people have to take courses at BTC.

"There used to be in history a time when a high school diploma was all you needed to walk off the street and into a factory and start working," BTC President Tom Eckert said. "A lot of those jobs were shipped overseas. What remains is highly trained positions."

Over the next five years, Eckert hopes to expand enrollment by 1,000 full-time students, offer 23 complete online programs, create online formats for 100 sections of existing courses, increase the number of weekend and night courses and expand the Adult Basic Education and English as a Second Language programs to help immigrants find work.

Eckert also hopes to open three remote locations around the county that would allow students easier access to BTC courses.

"There's not a shortage of people," Eckert said. "There's a shortage of trained people."

School officials also are trying to stay ahead of the curve and are considering offering courses in potentially high-demand areas such as the "green" industry, marine trades and agricultural technology, Eckert said.

No matter what programs crop up in the future, Eckert hopes the school can attract people to study some of the staple programs — auto mechanics, welding, instrumentation and nursing — because so much of people's everyday lives relies on those fields.

"We're all going to be in a lot of trouble if we don't have those skills," he said. "These are fundamental infrastructure things that we depend on, and all of it can come grinding to a halt."



Bellingham Technical College through the Years

1955: Bellingham School District buys five acres on Lindberg Avenue for a vocational school after running evening classes for years out of the Sehome elementary school on High Street.

SEPT. 4, 1957: Bellingham Technical School opens its doors, after construction costs of \$561,980, almost half of which was provided by the state Legislature.

APRIL 13, 1958: Bellingham Technical School is dedicated with 20 instructors for 16 programs and 336 students. James E. Bowen is director.

1961: Bellingham Technical School is renamed Bellingham Technical Institute. Raymond Smith is named director.

APRIL 1967: The Community College Act passes the Legislature, turning almost all vocational and trade schools and junior colleges into community colleges. Only five vocationaltechnical schools remain in the state, including Bellingham Technical Institute.

1970's: Bellingham Technical Institute is renamed Bellingham Vocational-Technical Institute. Campus expands with 10 new buildings.

1972: Lawrence Belka is named director of Bellingham Vocational-Technical Institute.

1982: Desmond McArdle is named director. 1984: Lengthy discussions about merging Whatcom Community College and Bellingham Vocational-Technical Institute end, to the pleasure of its employees.

1987: Bellingham Vocational-Technical Institute celebrates its 30th birthday, with 40 programs and 17,447 students.

MAY 1991: The governor approves the Community and Technical College Act, putting the five vocational-technical schools under the jurisdiction of the college system, rather than local school districts.

SEPTEMBER 1991: Bellingham Vocational- Technical Institute becomes Bellingham Technical College.

MAY 1996: Bellingham Technical College begins offering associate degrees for graduates in 18 programs.

2001: Gerald Pumphrey is named president of Bellingham Technical College.

2003: Haskell Center, the first of several new state-of-the-art buildings, opens. School receives state Center of Excellence designation for the Process and Control Technology programs.

2004: The Northwest Technology Center opens. The building will be renamed the Desmond P. McArdle Center on Saturday, May 17.

2006: Desmond McArdle is named interim president after Gerald Pumphrey leaves for a job at South Puget Sound Community College.

2007: The Morse Center opens, expanding capacity for students in welding and automotive programs. Tom Eckert is named president of Bellingham Technical College.

2008: BTC celebrates its 50th anniversary.

SOURCES: Bellingham Technical College, Bellingham Herald archives

