

# Bad Economy has been a Boon for 2-year Colleges

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Businesses and schools across the state are shutting their doors, and people are living in fear that their jobs and savings will disappear.

But community and technical colleges across the country are thriving, with record enrollment.

"It's ironic," said Bellingham Technical College President Tom Eckert. "When the budget gets reduced and the economy shows signs of not being as robust as it was, we get busier."

Since fall 2007, the 34 community and technical colleges across Washington state have seen enrollment increase the equivalent of 8,000 full-time students. This translates into even more individuals, since many community and technical college students attend part time.

In Whatcom County, BTC set an enrollment record this fall, with the equivalent of about 2,100 full-time students, or about 3,800 individuals. This is an 8.5 percent increase over fall 2007.

It was a similar situation at Whatcom Community College this fall, with the number full-time equivalent students jumping by about 300 to 3,731.

"We're in the process of enrolling for winter quarter, and we're seeing a tremendous increase of foot traffic," said Kathi Hiyane-Brown, president of WCC. "And already before new students have an opportunity to enroll, we have continuing students coming (back) at a rate greater than an 8 percent increase."

## ENROLLMENT NUMBERS

Enrollment at technical and community colleges is increasing. "FTE" means the equivalent number of full-time students. "HC" means headcount, or the actual number of students, regardless of full-time or part-time status.

### STATEWIDE ENROLLMENT

Fall 2006	Fall 2007	Fall 2008
NA	125,000 FTE	133,000 FTE

### BELLINGHAM TECHNICAL COLLEGE

Fall 2006	Fall 2007	Fall 2008
1958 FTE	2144 FTE	2314 FTE
3459 HC	3502 HC	3827 HC

### WHATCOM COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Fall 2006	Fall 2007	Fall 2008
3177 FTE	3418 FTE	3731 FTE
6135 HC	6562 HC	6814 HC

Some of the enrollment increases at both schools can be tied to increased marketing to high school students seeking an alternative to a four-year university, but the economy is definitely playing a part, Eckert said.

Historically, enrollment increases at two-year colleges during economic trouble. According to the State Board of Community and Technical Colleges, the last time enrollment increased like this was during the 1970s, another era of economic uncertainty.

But why does this happen?

**Cost:** "We are far more economical in our tuition rates than a four-year institution," Hiyane-Brown said.

Many high school students are looking at two-year colleges as a way of cutting the cost of higher education. For example, the standard load of 15 credits at WCC costs about \$1,000 per quarter, including the assessment fee. At Western Washington University, tuition for a 15 credit load is about \$1,600, not including numerous fees.

And tuition may increase at all higher education institutions, in an effort to offset some of the looming budget cuts. This may increase the number of students turning to two-year colleges for transfer degrees, Eckert said. But it may also cause some two-year college students to be priced out of the market.

**Retraining:** Two-year colleges also get a boost during a recession from people who have been laid off and are looking for a way to make themselves more marketable in a competitive job market.

At BTC, the number of people in the worker retraining program has more than doubled since fall 2007, with about 190 people enrolled this fall. The program helps people who have been laid off from places like Alcoa Intalco Works and Georgia Pacific learn new skills or improve their skills so they can find a new job.

**Job placement:** Many of the programs that two-year colleges offer are in professions that are still in demand during a recession.

For example, at Whatcom Community College the nursing program is still popular, with graduates easily finding jobs. For the on-line physical therapist assistant program, every student who graduated in the spring was hired somewhere.

At BTC, officials have seen a job placement slowdown, but many graduates are still getting hired, especially those with skills that can be used in refineries and other industrial settings.

"People are still hiring, especially in areas where repairs are a big part of the industry because people are choosing to fix rather than buy new," Eckert said. "There is a certain sector of the economy where things are still going on, like process technology and instrumentation."

### LOOMING BUDGET CUTS

Even with the increased popularity of two-year colleges, they're facing the same 20 percent budget reduction as other state agencies.

But college presidents argue that colleges have a significant positive impact on the economy because people can get a degree or get trained quickly, making them more likely to find a job and therefore spend money.

"Community colleges are the answer to a lot of the problems in the recession and the critical player in the economic recovery as well," said Linda Maier, dean of workforce education at WCC. "We pride ourselves on being very responsive to community and industry needs."

College presidents are lobbying legislators who will work on the 2009-11 biennium state budget to reduce the cuts their institutions may have to take. Many are worried that tuition will increase beyond affordability and programs will be eliminated.

Nothing is definite at this point, but both Eckert and Hiyane-Brown said their staffs are looking at every option and hope to keep as many programs as possible, especially the ones with high wages and a secure job outlook.

"Recessions tend to end, and one of the things we need to keep in mind is out there ahead of us still looms the demographic and education challenges that we were talking about three or four months ago before the economy swept in," Eckert said. "We're still facing a skilled workforce shortage. We're still facing baby boomer retirement."

"One of the things about two-year colleges is we not only provide short-term solutions, whether it be workforce retraining ... or preparing people," Hiyane-Brown said. "(We also provide) long-term solutions in building the economy and the workforce."

"This is the time we're needed the most and then we're facing these significant budget cuts," Eckert said. "We need to get students out there and employed to help the economy."