

As the economy sinks, enrollment rises

Area residents, from high school grads to adults, are flocking to the region's community colleges

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Pamplin Media Group, Jul 28, 2009, Updated 21.7 hours ago



JAIME VALDEZ / CLACKAMAS REVIEW

Robert Straker's ultimate goal is to work for a Fortune 500 company once he completes his schooling. Straker, of West Linn, got laid-off from a computer retailer a few years ago.

Someday, Robert Straker would like to run a Fortune 500 company. So at 49, he's reinventing himself.

The West Linn resident has bounced around from job to job since graduating from Oregon City High School three decades ago. He had one long stint — about 15 years — as a private security contractor, but that ended eight years ago when he was laid off.

Straker worked in the back room at a retail computer store for a couple of years, but that, too, came to an abrupt halt when he was handed a pink slip in the spring of 2003. For four years, he picked up odd jobs lasting anywhere from two days to two months but couldn't keep anything steady.

The recent economic downturn has only worsened his situation.

Two years ago this spring, Straker enrolled in his first class at Portland Community College. He's never looked back.

"Once I graduate from community college, I would like to go on to a major university," he said.

Straker is a diminutive man with a ruddy complexion and curly, close-cropped red hair who spends a lot of time in the student success center on PCC's Sylvania campus in Southwest Portland, making use of the computer terminals there and poring through his homework assignments. He figures that by the time he graduates with an associate degree and goes on to get his master's, he'll be in his mid-50s — but that doesn't deter him.

"I see myself in a nice corner office in a skyscraper," he said. "Deep down I believe I can get there."

Enrollment up

As more and more displaced workers are seeking additional skills to attract employment, enrollment is soaring at Oregon's community colleges.

Over the last couple of years, two-year schools have seen an attendance spike that seems to mirror the financial climate. As the state's unemployment rate goes, so goes the student census at **Clackamas Community College**, Mt. Hood Community College, PCC and 15 other schools scattered across the state.

Joanne Truesdell, president of Clackamas Community College, said total enrollment is up 19 percent over the past year, while full-time equivalency enrollment is up 12 percent.

At CCC, the increase has come across the board. Truesdell said money from the Workforce Investment Act has driven adult students back to school for retraining. But there are more younger students too.

"Right now, also what we're experiencing is an increase in what I would call the first-time freshman," she said.

That increase, she said, is driven by two factors. One is middle class families who have seen their investment portfolio — including conservative college funds — shrink with the market downturn. Many students from those families are taking advantage of dual enrollment that allows them to take core courses at CCC while also being enrolled at another school like Portland State.

Another factor is the dismal job market.

Truesdell said students who may have considered taking a year or two off before school can't find jobs, so they're going straight to college.

The influx of students, many middle-aged and beyond, has caused college officials to rethink programs that cater to out-of-work people who are returning to campus for additional job skills.

"A community college is the first responder for Oregon families during this recession," PCC President Preston Pulliams said. "So many have been laid off. Some have seen their businesses closed. Others are near retirement and are watching their 401(k) accounts evaporate. So they come to us for training, retraining, to get certified to spiff up their resumes.

"We're training people for the jobs that are still out there, like welders, teachers, nurses, machinists."

CCC has a program called Career Pathways that offers accelerated classes and training for a wide variety of careers in health care, business, agriculture and natural resources, arts, communications, human resources, industrial and engineering systems, and other areas.

"We're offering a much shorter time to degree completion," Truesdell said.

Likewise, across town at Mt. Hood Community College, counselors are bumping the needs of laid-off students to the top of the list.

“We’re seeing a huge upswing in the number of displaced students,” said Malcolm McCord, a career counselor on the Gresham campus. “I was here during the last downturn in 2002, and this time around we’re getting people who’ve been laid off from a much wider range of industries.”

Normally, McCord said, about 10 percent to 15 percent of the MHCC student body is made up of second-career folks. “Now 40 percent are in that category,” he said.

To address their needs, the college is putting a number of new programs in place, particularly in the area of “green” careers.

“We have several short-term, non-credit training courses designed to put people back to work quickly, riding the wave of sustainability,” McCord said. One such career is an energy auditor — someone who makes residential calls to help homeowners improve in the area of energy efficiency.

The average age of a student on the Gresham campus is 30, McCord noted.

‘Paycheck to paycheck’

It’s 9:30 a.m. on Wednesday, and Robert Straker has been up for three hours. He spent 40 minutes taking two TriMet buses to get from West Linn to PCC Sylvania, where he checked in for his first class of the day, a health course taught by professor Shannon Carr.

He won’t leave campus until 7 that night, and he repeats that schedule five days a week.

“It pays to be here at the campus a lot of hours,” Straker reasoned. “I can concentrate on my classes, on the tutoring and on my homework assignments.”

His rhythm seems to be working: After four terms, he boasts a 3.8 cumulative GPA.

Life hasn’t been easy for Straker. Even when he’s employed, chronically low wages force him to live “paycheck to paycheck,” he said. During periods of unemployment, he’s had to stay with relatives.

“I graduated from high school right into the recession of the late 1970s,” said Straker, who never married. “Now I find myself caught in the middle of the recession of 2009.”

The most money Straker ever made in a year was \$18,000, back in 1999. Without a mortgage, a retirement plan or savings, he hardly seems a match for his Wall Street aspirations. Still, he believes he brings a lot to the table — and he’s determined to mine those strengths by getting a college degree.

“Three words that describe me are ‘determined,’ ‘focused’ and ‘organized,’” said Straker. “I would bring motivation, inspiration and determination to the workplace, and I also have a willingness to come early in the morning and stay late at night.”

Anthony Roberts contributed to the report.