

## The Oregonian

### Mt. Hood Community tackles its image

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Jamie Francis/The Oregonian

*One reason fewer students have attended Mt. Hood might be its outdated buildings. Though Portland and **Clackamas** community colleges have passed bonds, Mt. Hood's voters have shot them down. The result? Many of the school's 40-year-old buildings look old and dingy.*

If business is getting worse — and can anybody claim otherwise? — someone forgot to tell most community colleges.

Take, for example, Portland Community College. Despite the faltering economy, school leaders persuaded voters in November to pass a \$374 million construction bond, and enrollment — which has increased consistently the past few years — is up 11.4 percent this term.

But at Mt. Hood Community College, enrollment has remained stagnant. The east county school routinely loses potential students to the spiffier campuses at PCC and **Clackamas Community College**.

Now, that could be changing: Mt. Hood has a new president, and people say he is about to make a big difference.

It's not that Mt. Hood doesn't offer good programs. Representatives from Harvard have trained at Mt. Hood's nursing program because the facilities are so advanced, and no other school in Oregon offers a mortuary services program.



Ross William Hamilton/The Oregonian

Mt. Hood Community College offers several notable programs, including the Northwest's only funeral services degree. Instructor Doug Ferrin (left) prepares a lab session with a donated body for students Doug Hutter and Devin Hillebrand.

What happened at Mt. Hood is mostly an image problem. Buildings — most of them built decades ago — need repairs, and east county voters have historically shot down bond issues.

And the college hasn't marketed itself well. Community leaders say the school's previous president didn't build relationships outside of a small insider base.

The result of those missteps: In 2001, 25 percent of high school graduates from Mt. Hood's district — an area that stretches from east Portland to Sandy and Cascade Locks — attended the college. This year, 12 percent do.

But this school year, with new leadership and the failing economy, the school has an opportunity for change. President John Sygielski is cleaning house. He spent the first six months of his presidency listening to what's gone wrong. Now he's setting out to make things right.

"We haven't done basic block-and-tackling over the years," Sygielski says. "We have to hear what the community needs. We have to adjust to those needs, and then we have to get the word out."

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### **Strong first steps**

In the 1960s, when Mt. Hood was built, the college was the community. East county residents, wanting higher education opportunities in their own backyard, created the school. The state Legislature wanted community colleges to become a significant part of higher education, so money flowed freely. The college was the center of everything. It hosted the nationally lauded Mt. Hood Jazz Festival. Enrollment in its 60 courses tripled after only one year.

In the past decade, the role and image of community colleges have changed, says George Boggs, president of the American Association of Community Colleges.



Ross William Hamilton/The Oregonian

To firm up Mt. Hood Community College's role in the east county community, new President John Sygielski spent six months meeting with community leaders in what he calls "listening tours" to find out what they need the college to be.

Today, 46 percent of students in higher education attend community colleges. Even top-notch students attend, and just as four-year institutions have done, community colleges have to work to recruit them. Students in urban areas can be picky, choosing which school to attend based on its reputation and courses.

Campus leaders at Portland and **Clackamas** have capitalized on that. They've upgraded buildings and marketing strategies. They've expanded recruitment. While Mt. Hood focused exclusively on east county students, **Clackamas** and Portland moved in to take a share. In 2004, Portland opened the Southeast Center on Southeast 82nd Avenue. That campus — only about 20 blocks from Mt. Hood's Maywood Park campus — now has long waiting lists. More than 100 students each are waiting for math and writing classes.

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## Shadow of PCC

What did Portland Community College do right? In short, college leaders put a lot of energy into marketing the school. President Preston Pulliams says the college became what the community needed it to be. Early on, college leaders latched on to a promise of economic vitality. Then they started repeating its message. Pulliams and other college executives became fixtures in the community.

"That helped us with the bond campaign, but it's something we've worked on for years," Pulliams says. "We communicated what we are about. We connected in as many ways possible."



Fredrick D. Joe/The Oregonian

Portland Community College President Preston Pulliams says his college was able to pass a \$374 million bond because he and other leaders became fixtures in the community.

With 50 locations, from large campuses to small programs in high schools, Portland is ever-present. And with money from last fall's bond issue coming in, college leaders have big plans for new buildings. Their nursing program will expand. Cascade — its Northeast Portland campus — will get three new buildings.

**Clackamas**, too, has used bond money to build six new buildings in the past five years.

In contrast to that success, Mt. Hood has lost three bond campaigns since 1974, perhaps the sharpest indicator of the college's declining influence or relevance.

"I don't think it helps that Mt. Hood looks dreary," David Douglas Superintendent Barbara Rommel says. "It's just like shopping. If a store is dark and dingy, you aren't going in."

Fred Bruning, a California transplant who developed the Gresham Station mall and now lives in Gresham, says east county voters need to expect more from their community and school.

"That's something that has driven me crazy out here," he says. "I have talked to people who say, 'It's good enough to have 40-year-old classrooms.'"

"Well, look at **Clackamas** College. It's not good enough."

The buildings are important — and Sygielski says he's working on that — but the college has other immediate problems he can fix. Take, for example, night classes.

Many community college students also hold down jobs, so they need more flexibility. Night classes are crucial to recruitment. Because most teachers there prefer to teach between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m., Mt. Hood doesn't offer many night classes. Portland and **Clackamas** do. Sygielski hopes to add more next year.

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### **Sygielski drafts agenda**

Sygielski knows, maybe better than anyone, why Mt. Hood hasn't kept up with the other colleges. For six months, he went on listening tours around the metro area, asking what the college needs to do differently. Before, he says, college leaders thought if they had good programs, people would come.

### **Leader doesn't miss a thing**

Around the college, John Sygielski is known as "Ski," an energetic, hands-on leader. If Sygielski seems particularly adept at understanding the hurdles many community college students faced to get there, it's because he lived it.

Sygielski grew up in a blue-collar, Polish Catholic neighborhood in Cleveland. No one he knew went to college. It just wasn't talked about. At 18, he saw only one way out: join a Roman Catholic monastery.

Now, at 49, Sygielski considers himself spiritual — not religious. After six years, he left the monastery. He would devote his life to what had been missing in his neighborhood: education.

Sygielski spent several years teaching in Chicago's inner city before entering the corporate world, then higher education. The transition to community colleges made sense. He understood the difficult routes some students might have to travel in getting to four-year universities.

He earned three master's degrees and a doctorate before working as vice chancellor of Virginia's community college system and later president of a small community college in Virginia.

An "almost addicted biker," he came to Oregon after spending vacations in Portland for biking trips. "Very few people get to work where they vacation," he said shortly after being hired.

Sygielski — tall and thin with a penchant for making jokes about his baldness — is something of a savant. He remembers nearly every detail of everyone he meets. He researched staff members before arriving, firing off e-mails at 4 a.m. (his only spare hour, he says) congratulating their individual accomplishments. He carries a notebook everywhere, writing facts and quotes.

When he listens, his eyes open wide. He looks at people directly, as if memorizing everything. Later, in public, he'll talk about all the good things he's seen. He passes out Kudos bars — bought in bulk from Costco — to anyone doing good work.

--Casey Parks

Instead, Sygielski plans to do something Pulliams says Portland has done for years. He'll ask what the community needs or wants and tailor the college to that.

Sygielski's plan for change has most everyone excited. Around the college, he's a celebrity. Board members, staff and students call him "a home run," "the area's hope" and "amazing, really." At a presentation to faculty and staff on their first day back to work in September, the audience whooped and hollered throughout his speech as he called for improvements.

"Without a doubt, things are better," says 20-year-old student Mike Smith. "He comes to everything — retreats, sporting events. The college has a face now."

But big changes also mean controversy. In the quest to make the college more efficient, Sygielski fired two vice presidents and the college's longtime communications director. He put interim employees into those positions but plans to launch a national search this spring for some, including a vice president for enrollment. The shake-ups caused some people, including donors, to say he moves too fast.

In September, east county businessman Junki Yoshida said publicly he would no longer support the college. In the past, Yoshida and his wife, Linda, gave money to the Mt. Hood Community College Foundation.

"He feels he has already evaluated things," Yoshida said. "But he just got here. You can't move so fast. This is east county, not L.A."

Sygielski says after surveying the college since last March, he is only reflecting what teachers and students want. In many ways, he says, the college still isn't moving fast enough. Because of years of what he says was either mismanagement or no management, the college faces grave challenges.

"I'm doing what people internally have told me needs to happen," he says. "If the board is asking me to increase enrollment, I have to make decisions."

This winter, the college got its first taste of success: Enrollment increased by 10 percent. It's the college's first boost, and leaders say they will need many more before they can compete.

That means becoming more aggressive. As it turns out, community colleges aren't totally immune to the failing economy. In Oregon, more students mean more money. Yes, more students are entering community colleges. But where will they go?

In a few years, Sygielski says, the answer will be obvious.

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