

# PortlandTribune

## Enrollment jumps at community colleges

*Life's changes, recession send older students back for training and new careers*

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JAIME VALDEZ / TRIBUNE PHOTO

*Once he completes his schooling, Robert Straker's ultimate goal is to work for a Fortune 500 company. Straker enrolled at PCC after being laid off from a computer retailer.*

Chris Balfour was about to turn 27 last year when his mother posed a haunting question.

"She said, 'Chris, do you want to be 31 without a degree or 31 with a degree?' " he recalled. "It really made me think."

At the time, the Tigard resident was married, with one child, and on unemployment insurance. Across the nation, banks were shuddering and the housing market was on a downward spiral. A lot of other people were also losing their jobs left and right.

When Balfour received a General Educational Development degree nearly 20 years ago, he did not think college was necessary. A hard worker, he entered the work force and went from job to job, doing everything from delivering pizzas to pouring concrete.

"When you have a GED, you jump around to the highest bidder," Balfour observed.

But when he was 23 and his wife, Kara, became pregnant, everything changed.

"I realized that it wasn't just me I had to watch out for," Balfour said. "I was going to have a family to take care of."

At the time, in 2005, he was working at an auto wholesaler, selling cars for a living. Business was brisk, but not for long.

"I didn't know it at the time, but I had jumped on a sinking ship," he said. "I was used to working 65 hours a week and selling 300 cars a month. Then things took a huge turn for the worse."

The economic slowdown was doing a number on the automobile industry, and by late 2007, Balfour was only selling about 50 cars a week.

"My income dropped like crazy," he said. "I knew it was time to make a change."

"People had always told me I was smart and that I could do a lot on a little education," he said. "Community college started to seem like a viable option for me."

So last September, Balfour enrolled in his first marketing course at Portland Community College. He chose the Sylvania Campus because it's close to the Tigard home he shares with Kara and their 3-year-old daughter, Mariah. He secured a grant for his tuition and is maintaining a 3.8 grade point average.

"I chose marketing because I'm pretty gregarious, and I'd marketed myself dozens of times," Balfour noted. Initially, he was "really nervous" to return to school, but he soon saw that his age wasn't an anomaly on the Sylvania campus. "There are a lot of students who go here who are younger than me, but even more who are older."

Although Balfour plans to transfer to Portland State University, he's a believer in PCC's ability to provide a bridge for people in transition.

"I'm sick of bouncing around," Balfour said. "I know I'm not going to be able to pay my bills and support my family on a GED. I want something real and stable."

### **Enrollment rises dramatically**

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

During the past 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 PCC, Mount Hood Community College, **Clackamas Community College** and 15 other schools scattered across the state.

"We're up (in enrollment) year-over-year, 18 percent," said Dana Haynes, public affairs manager at PCC's Sylvania campus. "The economy is definitely pushing this. The other 17 community colleges have seen enrollment skyrocket as well. ... This always happens during a recession."

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," said PCC President Preston Pulliams.

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

Some colleges are offering courses related to green jobs to help their students find employment in the growing sustainability field. One is **Clackamas Community College** in Oregon City, which received a \$374,000 grant from the Oregon governor's office last September to develop courses in renewable energy and clean manufacturing.

### **At midlife, it's now or never**

When Robert Straker, 49, lost his last job a couple years back, he hit bottom. The West Linn resident has bounced around from job to job practically since high school. 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 he couldn't keep anything steady.

When he lost his last job, Straker had no money for rent, little money for food and no car to help him look for work. The recent economic downturn made his situation look even worse, and he sank into a mild depression.

The only way to dig himself out of the hole, Straker figured, was to finally get a college degree and move forward with his life.

Doing research on the Internet, Straker compared the cost of attending community college — roughly \$74 per credit hour — to that of public universities, about \$300 a credit hour. For Straker, the savings were manna from heaven.

"I walked onto the (Sylvania) campus in April 2007 and immediately felt at home," Straker said. "It was already two weeks into the term, but I registered for a couple of classes anyway."

Straker admits he'd been a mediocre student at Oregon City High School. Because of a minor learning disability, he had a hard time comprehending and retaining what he read.

At PCC he got his post-secondary feet wet with a career guidance class and a pre-algebra course. He also has taken sociology and alpine skiing "for the social aspect." Now Straker insists his future is bright. He spends most days on campus, usually not leaving until 7 p.m.

His rhythm seems to be working: After four terms, he boasts a 3.8 cumulative GPA. Straker figures that by the time he graduates with an associate's degree and goes on to get his master's, he'll be in his mid-50s — but that doesn't deter him.

"When I went to my 30th high school reunion, almost everyone there had a house, a nice car and a steady job," Straker said. "I want to get my MBA and a doctorate in business administration, with minors in investments and finance. Getting an education will give me confidence and add meaning to my life.

"I'm going to be 50 soon. For me, it's now or never."

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