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# CC: Job Seekers Current Workers University Aspirants: Conversations on Community Co

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# CC: Job Seekers Current Workers University Aspirants

## Conversations on Community Colleges & Jobs

Interview and photographs by Mateusz Perkowski

**W**hile idealists might view the value of higher learning purely as the opportunity to pursue knowledge, the reality is that most students see education as a way of improving chances of finding meaningful work that provides livable income. For many people, community colleges represent the most viable option – economically and practically – of expanding their employment-oriented skills. The local impact cannot be underemphasized. In the Portland region, over 50,000 students attend four major community colleges full-time. MetroScape interviewed representatives from each of these schools to obtain a better perspective on the institution's role as a mentor for the workforce as well as a channel to the university system.

Mt. Hood is unique in that roughly one-third of its \$67 million budget is devoted to federal grant programs concentrating on displaced workers and others working toward employment and self-sufficiency. Students in Workforce Connections may focus on creating effective resumes, preparing for interviews, and learning how to expand their job search resources. Steps to Success, created as part of the welfare reform effort, offers courses in Adult Basic Education and English as a Second Language, as well as coaching for the high school-equivalency exam. Mt. Hood also assists small business with the general management of their companies, while larger employers rely on the college to train their employees – the campus even features a sterile “clean-room” where microelectronics students can learn in the actual workplace environment. Dr. Dan Walleri, Director of Research and Planning at Mt. Hood, speaks about the realities of the college's various programs.

**DW:** Overall, the primary value that we provide is access. A lot of the people that we serve don't have other options. We have everything from the recent immigrant trying to learn English to students from high school preparing for careers or to transfer to four-year schools. Another program we have is training and employee development.

**M:** *And that involves working closely with employers?*

**DW:** Right. That's where we do contract training for business and industry, such as LSI Logic, Boeing, and other firms and municipalities. What we do is design and deliver customized training programs for their worker. We design a two-year associate degree program specific to their industry, like RR Donnelley, the publishing company, so their workers can enroll and we'll deliver content – the specific courses – right on site. The workers can come here or we can go there to offer the general education component.

**M:** *How has the downturn in the economy affected local employers?*

**DW:** When Fujitsu closed down, anywhere from 600 – 900 people lost their jobs. LSI has laid off people, Boeing has laid off people. They appear to be on the rebound now, but it's slow. So, that obviously had a negative impact on us in terms of enrollment, and it's also hurt our funding because of statewide economic problems and a downturn in state funding. We can't make up all of our losses through raising tuition, but we've still had to raise tuition. That, in turn, affects

our primary value, which is access. An important part of access is low cost. Well, it's not so low anymore. The cost has gone up.

**M:** *Are people more likely to start a small business if they get laid off?*

**DW:** I'm sure that's something people probably look at. Generally speaking, small business is the big driver. People tend to focus on the large corporations, but what really creates jobs is small business. So that's a real important consideration for us. I would say



working with small businesses is probably the area where we're not as effective as we could be. Part of the problem is that because of their size, they don't always seek help. They're so busy trying to survive as a business that they don't think they have the time to work on improving their operations, their skills, and their employees. It's much easier because of the economy of the scale for large businesses to do that. That's a big challenge for small businesses, and it's a challenge for us. We do make an effort in the form of programs and services targeted to the small businesses, but the dilemma is their ability to take advantage of these opportunities. The paradox is that, in many cases, the less education people have, the less they feel they need it. A big part of any effort is the outreach.

**M:** *What else could improve?*

**DW:** Education is just one component. There's been a lot of discussion about the business climate, which government has a lot to do with in terms of rules and regulations and permitting. So there's been a big effort to identify a plan that is developable for businesses. For example, we have about 40 acres on the east side of our campus that we're seeking to develop.

The idea is having a business locate there that would not only generate revenue to help the college through the lease of land, but also to work with our programs so that our students would be able to intern. It would be mutually beneficial.

**M:** *What kind of company are you thinking about?*

**DW:** There's no specific identification of firms at this point. You know, probably the most profitable use of the land would be to put in self-storage units. (Laughs.)

**M:** *That wouldn't involve too much learning experience, though, would it?*

**DW:** It doesn't match up well with the mission of the college.



Dan Walleri, Mt. Hood Community College

## CLARK COLLEGE

In the late 1990's, information and computer technology appeared to be inexhaustible sources of jobs and revenue. However, the nationwide recession has proved that even the most cutting-edge career fields are not immune from the ill humor of the economy. In fact, technology has been one of the areas hit hardest in recent years. Clark College, located across the Columbia River in Vancouver, Washington, offers degrees and certificates from a range of hi-tech subjects, such as computer network administration, software solutions development, web-page design, and telecommunications training. Robert Hughes, who is in charge of the computer science and graphic communications departments at the college, talks about the changes taking place in technology-based education.

**M:** *Is it fair to say certification is essential to getting a job in a computer-related field?*

**RH:** Students don't necessarily have to have a Microsoft certification, or even have our degree, to get a job. But it certainly helps. In fact, it seems the industry is moving away from certifications a little bit more.

**M:** *Why is that?*

**RH:** Because there's so many of them out there. Especially the Microsoft Certified Expert Exam. That was supposed to be this really helpful, wonderful thing to get you a job. But what you have is a lot of



Robert Hughes, Clark College

people who are cookie-cuttered out. One of the things I hope that we could do – that we're looking at in terms of adapting our programs – is to give students a lot of different options so they can come out with more unique skill sets. So if we have somebody who really understands networking and they also have a really good concept of web tools – that could be a unique individual in the marketplace. Or somebody that really has web skills who also can write scripts and codes, or knows how to set up a database – that's what the industry needs right now.

**M:** *How has the burst of the so-called "internet bubble" affected technology education at Clark College?*

**RH:** It's hurt us because our program was set up primarily to assist people who were getting work re-training. They were getting state funding to support them to come to school, but they're now denied that funding because technology is no longer considered

an in-demand field. Maybe we don't have that many fewer students as we did before, but the viability to get a job is definitely more in question than it was prior.

**M:** *Do you have any partnerships with industry?*

**RH:** Any vocational program has to have those connections. We have an advisory council of industry experts we meet with every quarter. We check with them all the time and have them look at what we do to see if it's headed in the right direction. And then we have other units on campus that are involved with organizations like the Columbia River Economic Development Council and the Workforce Council. We have representatives from the campus who deal with those organizations, and so they keep us apprised of what's happening, and in some cases we have opportunities to develop curriculums for them.

**M:** *How do you envision the future of the programs you administer?*

**RH:** Web multimedia is going to have more and more overlap with the programming component. We're going to have more diversity in our computer networking area – I see a lot of convergence happening between data networks and telecommunication. Convergence, change, and giving our students a lot more options – that's where we're headed. I see us having a lot more small certificates and awards that can be combined to create two-year degrees. And, I want to look at how we as a community college can address what industry needs to help people maintain their jobs.

#### CLACKAMAS COMMUNITY COLLEGE

**F**resh out of high school, many people turn to the local community college as their entry point into the university system. Not only is this option cheaper and closer to home, it provides students with a sense of transition into college life. Unfortunately, in the past, community college credits would often not transfer, or would prove to be unnecessary. In recent years, however, articulation and co-enrollment agreements between four-year



institutions and community colleges have alleviated the problems of lost credits and unusable courses. A major part of the solution is informing students. Clackamas, for example, offers an online eTransfer Center where students can easily check the course requirements for four-year schools and find their counterparts at the community college. Baldwin van der Bijl, Associate Dean of Instruction, and Glenda Tepper, Associate Dean of Students Services, illustrate the growing collaboration with other Oregon colleges and universities, as well as the obstacles encountered along the way.

**M:** *How does Clackamas cooperate with other Oregon schools?*

**GT:** We have a co-admission agreement with Portland State University. Right now, PCC, Mt. Hood, Chemeketa and Clackamas all have formal agreements with Portland State, and we're working on a sort of Metro agreement, so a student can apply for admission to one and be admitted to all. That should really ease their transferability.



Glenda Tepper and Baldwin van der Bijl,  
Clackamas Community College

**BvdB:** Horticulture is one of the departments I'm responsible for – that's both a one-year certificate and a two-year Associate of Applied Science. We have an articulation agreement that about five of our courses are equivalent to their courses down at OSU. So, that's a situation where a student can go through our program and end up going right out and working, or if they want to, then they can transfer to Oregon State, and then they wouldn't have to take those five courses.

**GT:** Other agreements we're working on aside from Portland State is having co-admission with Oregon State University; Oregon Institute of Technology, we're working on an agreement; George Fox, Marylhurst, Eastern Oregon University. I'm sure I left out a few, but we have a lot of discussions in progress.

**M:** *What is the biggest problem in establishing these kinds of partnerships?*

**BvdB:** I would say time.

**GT:** It takes a lot of time, and administering all the different requirements... Not everybody's requirements are the same.

**BvdB:** If you think of a matrix, we have 17 community colleges and seven universities – just the public ones. If you consider the interaction between every university and every community college, it's 17 times seven; it's overwhelming. That's why the co-admittance is a real step forward. From PSU's point of view, instead of having to work with each college separately, you work with them as a group.

**M:** *What could be done to better coordinate this process?*

**GT:** The most important thing to me is to make sure that we're meeting the needs of the students. We probably need to spend more time talking with students about what would ease their transition, because we can do all the processing and get all the nuts and bolts in place, but if it doesn't serve the students well, then we really haven't reached our goal. Having more focus groups, paying more attention to what students need to transfer, sitting down as a group and looking at what the students reported, would make their transfer process easier or more successful, and then working together to make it happen – that would certainly be a high priority for me.

**M:** *How do you see university and community college partnerships evolving?*

**GT:** The flexibility and the exchange of data are only going to continue to ease transfer for students, really from K-16. The biggest challenge for all of us is the exchange of data – dealing with the confidentiality laws; dealing with student information systems and administrative software systems that, at this point in time, don't talk to each other. This is critical for students to be able to follow up on their financial aid packages, to follow up on their sending grades back

and forth, to make sure their admissions requirements and other course requirements are satisfied. Electronically, we're going to have to learn to share all that data.

#### PORTLAND COMMUNITY COLLEGE

**T**he largest community college in the area, PCC has three full-service campuses in Portland and its suburbs. Students may pursue a range of curricula, from aviation maintenance technology to criminal justice. But some of the most sought-after programs are in health services, especially nursing and radiography. Each year, only about 10% of people applying to the nurse-training program and 20% applying to the radiographic technology program get accepted. Once students are enrolled, their studies are split into three components: theory, lab, and practicum. Apart from learning the basics of microbiology, pharmacology, and other related sciences, nurses and radiographers-in-training acquire such skills as giving IVs and operating X-ray equipment. Students are also given the opportunity to work with professionals at 15 sites in local hospitals and clinics, including Kaiser, OHSU, Providence, and Legacy. PCC's Division Dean of Health Professions, David Goldberg, explains the incredible demand for health-services training and discussed the prospects of increased community college and health industry cooperation.

**M:** *Why is the nursing program so hard to get into?*

**DG:** Because students will get jobs as soon as they finish the program. There's a great demand for nurses, and that demand should not abate. I spoke to the folks who were selected for the class, and I basically lectured them, saying, "You've got something very precious in your hands, you've got an entrance to a nursing program in Oregon. It's hard to come by, so don't blow it."

**M:** *How do you screen people out?*

**DG:** One of the strong values of Portland Community College is diversity. So, we have been working with how you incorporate a diverse population to get them both educated and get a diverse workforce out there. The way we do it is presently – it's under review now, although it's going to stay similar – is that we set a minimum level of qualifications in terms of grade point average and certain prerequisites that have to be taken, and then anybody who meets those minimums enters a lottery and we literally draw numbers. We have some 900 numbers in a hat on a



David Goldberg, Portland Community College



stage, with a full audience, and we pick out people's futures, basically. It's a little scary.

**M:** *Is the demand so great because of shortages in the workforce?*

**DG:** There's both a nursing and a radiography shortage. Nationwide, it is extreme. In metropolitan Portland at the moment, it is not particularly extreme. But, that said, it's a cyclical thing. It will be. Everything indicates that we have a large number of nurses who are reaching retirement.

**M:** *What are the greatest challenges these health-service programs are facing right now?*

**DG:** There's nothing big enough. I mean, we could quadruple these programs and still have jobs for the

people that graduate. They're very expensive programs. The student to faculty ratio is dictated by accreditation, and it's very, very low. Per faculty member, we have very few students. You can go to a sociology class, have 40-to-60 students in the class, and that works. Well, we can't do that in a nursing program. And so, the costs are very high. Tuition could never cover the costs of actually providing training for a nurse. You need a lot of space and a lot of equipment. With the resources as pinched as they are right now, expansion is going to be tough unless we partner with industry – which we are planning to do.

**M:** *What are those plans?*

**DG:** We are increasingly connecting the training and the job placement. For example, in the radiography program, we have contracted with all of the big healthcare providers in the community, mostly hospitals, and they are paying us to train an additional 12 students each year, totally outside of the state budget. And so now we are able to provide 48 slots rather than 36. That could not happen if that money had not come from our partners in the community. We're going to be looking at the same approach with nursing. The future has to be partnerships with industry... There's no way we can expand these programs without a linkage to the employer.

**I**n the 2001-2002 school year, almost 40% of Oregon's full-time community college students were acquiring lower-division college credits, about 33% were pursuing a professional technical degree or certificate, and 18% were enrolled in developmental programs. For these students, the schools serve a vital role in improving their practical skills – whether it be learning the English language, getting their high-school equivalency, working toward a four-year degree, or preparing for a vocation. Businesses and corporations, conversely, rely on the institutions to supply them with well-trained workers or to advance the abilities of their existing employees. The community college and industry share a common objective: establishing a reliable, educated local workforce in the most financially efficient way possible. The future, as we have seen, lies in developing a more cooperative relationship between educational centers and employers. In the process of benefiting the students and institutions, the community profits from this integration as well. **M**

*Mateusz Perkowski is a local freelance writer and editor.*