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Olympic Peninsula Higher Education Centers

Although 60 percent of the 400,000 people on the Olympic peninsula reside in or near population centers in Kitsap County, the rest are broadly distributed across a 5,000-square-mile web of mountains, dense rainforest, and coastlines, which are crosscut by numerous waterways. Timely travel to and from population centers on a regular basis is very difficult for most of these citizens, who have long lacked access to higher education programs and services.

Olympic College in Bremerton and Peninsula College in Port Angeles are well-established public education providers for the region. Both have collaborated with other public and private institutions to deliver a limited number of upper-division and graduate programs, but this effort has not been sufficient to meet the region's need for a sustained array of baccalaureate and graduate degree programs.

In recent years, several initiatives conducted by these institutions have attempted to expand educational offerings for Olympic peninsula residents. In August 1999, the Higher Education Coordinating Board (HECB) funded a demonstration project with Peninsula College to establish the Jefferson County Higher Education Center in Port Hadlock, Washington.

The Center has developed partnerships with public and private institutions to deliver baccalaureate and graduate degree programs and numerous certificate or vocational programs, as well as additional continuing education through individual courses. The Center also provides professional academic and vocational counseling services for individuals.

The majority of the center's programs are conducted via distance education, which has proven to be an effective and efficient means to reach place-bound and time-bound students in the region. However, state budget cuts have taken a toll the center's funding in recent years. From a pre-recession level of \$175,000 per year, its budget has been reduced to \$100,000. Beginning in July 2012 funding will be shifted to the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC).

In 2005, Peninsula and Olympic colleges were selected as two of the first four institutions to participate in a pilot project authorizing applied baccalaureate degrees at the state's community and technical colleges. By 2007, Peninsula was enrolling students in a BAS in Applied Management program, while Olympic was offering a Bachelor of Science in Nursing. Since then the BAS programs have been removed from pilot status and expanded in other parts of the state.

In 2008, the Legislature directed the HECB to develop a program and operating plan for a higher education center in the Kitsap area of Washington, and report findings and recommendations to the Governor and the Legislature by December 1, 2008.

Subsequently, the HECB engaged the services of the Northwest Education Research Center (NORED) to assess regional needs and make recommendations. In addition, HECB staff and NORED consulted with a local advisory committee that included representation from Clallam, Jefferson, Kitsap and Mason counties. The report, like other past studies of regional needs, found that baccalaureate participation rates were well below the state average and that students had limited access to baccalaureate institutions and programs.

Despite these limitations, the report noted that nearly 1,000 students in the region were accessing a wide variety of bachelor's and graduate degree programs from 10 public and private providers. Only about a third of these students were enrolled at public colleges and universities. Furthermore, of these students, all except for those in enrolled in the applied baccalaureate programs were in non-state funded (self-sustaining) programs.

The report, which analyzed a number of university center models, recommended leveraging existing community college facilities as the most effective way to increase baccalaureate access. Developing two similar-sized centers designed to work collaboratively, one at each college campus, would build on the existing public and private programs already serving students in the area, the report concluded.

In November 2008, the HECB adopted the report and recommended additional planning as part of the statewide system design process. The summary of the recommendations and complete report are available at www.hecb.wa.gov/sites/default/files/Kitsap_final_FULL_REPORT_0.pdf.

Following those recommendations the legislature authorized the centers in the 2009-11 budget and provided for 30 full time equivalent (FTE) students Olympic College and 10 FTE students at Peninsula College. In the 2011-13 budget, the legislature directed Washington State University to offer its mechanical engineering degree program at Olympic College for 15 FTE students.

Higher education budgets have been cut, on average, more than 25 percent since 2008-09. Consequently, the centers have not been able to garner the resources necessary to meet the growth expectations laid out in the 2008 plan.

Panelists will discuss recent developments in the effort to increase higher education capacity on the Olympic Peninsula.