

SIERRA REGIONAL Economic News

VOLUME 31

THE PEAKS, HILLS AND VALLEYS OF THE FRONT RANGE OF THE SIERRA NEVADA

FEBRUARY 6, 2011

WHERE THE CLIMATE FOR BUSINESS IS PERFECT

What You Should Know About Your College

Committed to providing a high-quality, low-cost path to a college education

By Dr. Carol Lucey

President of Western Nevada College

Western Nevada College (WNC) is celebrating its 40th anniversary this year. This public community college belongs to the people of Nevada and is charged with providing a wide range of higher education programs and services to a seven-county area consisting of Carson City, Churchill, Douglas, Lyon, Mineral, Pershing and Storey counties. These services include assisting our communities and businesses with economic and workforce development; providing skills-retraining and technical education to people looking to move forward or change their careers and, most importantly, for the future of Nevada offering a route to a college education to a broad majority of the young people in our service area who have recently graduated from high school.

To be effective, this small college depends on the development of strong partnerships with many local groups, which include county governments, school districts, hospitals, regional economic development agencies like Northern Nevada Development Authority, Nevada Industry Excellence, business organizations like the Builders Association of Western Nevada, chambers of commerce, Carson Valley Manufacturers' Forum, and state agencies such as the Nevada departments of prisons and agriculture, and the University of Nevada Cooperative Extension.

These partnerships allow us to multiply the capacity of our limited college resources many-fold and provide services to our area residents we could not otherwise afford. For example, the Specialty Crop Institute provides education to area farmers and communities interested in diversifying their agricultural operations to high-value crops such as wine grapes, lavender, cut flowers, fruits and vegetables—which are marketed directly to the consumer. This valuable program has developed partnerships with the University of Nevada Cooperative Extension, the Nevada Department of Agriculture and others.

Likewise, other programs dependent on local partnerships provide skilled workforce to local manufacturers, hospitals and emergency-

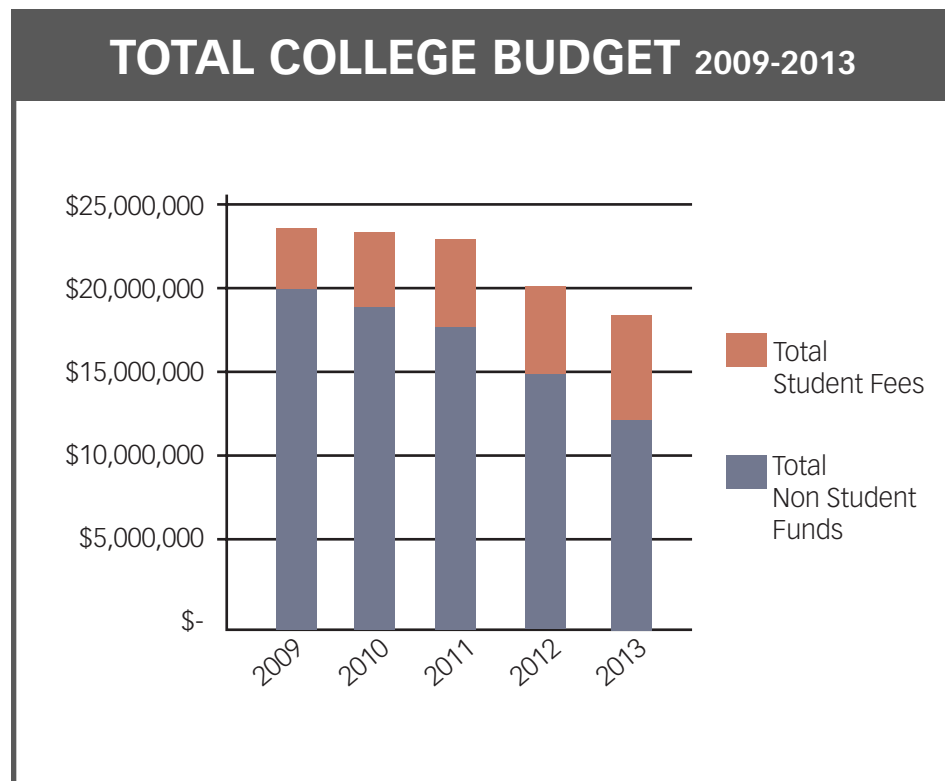
response and law enforcement agencies. For example, WNC's prestigious nursing program enjoys one of the highest student retention and success rates and national nurse licensing exam pass rates in the state.

To assure we are properly serving our communities and maintaining an awareness of their needs, the college maintains seven different community advisory boards, in addition to an even larger number of curriculum advisory committees.

In the last 10 years, the college has also strengthened its outreach mission into area high schools. We are committed to providing a high-quality, low-cost path to a college education to every high school student in our service area. We regularly visit all area high schools, as well as churches and parent organizations, carrying the message of the importance of obtaining a college education. In addition to our work with high school students, hundreds of Nevadans across our service area benefit each year from the college's ESL and GED programs and many of them go on to college after addressing their basic academic skills deficiencies.

We test high school students in basic skills and advise them on how best to prepare for college. We run financial aid information nights for students and their parents on how to apply for college financial aid. We host college days for students as young as fifth grade, encouraging young Nevadans to plan on college. We are in the business of building and protecting the hopes and dreams of our area's youth, and then giving them the tools to make those dreams a reality. The walls of our student advisement center profess our message: "Anything is Possible."

Since 2000, the college has doubled the percentage of area students who enter WNC immediately after graduating from high school. During the same period, the percent of full-time students pursuing college degrees at WNC has also doubled. The majority of students at WNC are now under 30 years of age. These students represent the future of our state. The number of minority students at the college now exactly reflects the percent of the minority populations in our communities. Our students today are



younger, more diverse, and yes, more financially needy. The total financial aid (\$11,095,000) awarded to our students in 2009 was nearly six times that (\$1,964,000) awarded in 2000. Of the full-time students who attend WNC, over two-thirds are federal aid eligible, and half of our full-time students are eligible for the maximum federal (Pell) grant. At WNC, the average family income for students receiving the maximum Pell amount is \$14,081.

As the governor referenced in his State of the State speech, the college has a graduation rate, as measured by the national (IPEDS) standard, of about 20 percent. But this rate does not take into account the additional 28 percent of our students who transfer on to the university before completing their associate degrees. By national standards, our graduation rate is respectable, and the sum of our graduation and "transfer out" rates exceeds the average of our national peer group of community colleges. While community colleges do a great deal more for their communities than graduate traditional college students,

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we believe our graduation rate can still improve. Our college community did not wake up one day last week and decide to improve our area's college-going population or our graduation rate. We have been working on improving degree attainment for Western Nevadans over the last 10 years. The number of WNC graduates has increased by 35 percent since 2000. Yet we want to do better than that. Improving our graduation rate further will require more full-time teaching

faculty and more student services counselors. Recently, we have not had the financial resources to hire in these areas.

As our leaders debate how best to strengthen our economy and assure Nevadans are well employed, the contributions of colleges like WNC should be kept firmly in mind. The budget of the college has suffered greatly in the last few years, as can be seen by examining the graph. We have cut programs and essential positions and raised students' fees. Despite these cuts, college enrollment has increased dramatically as more people become aware of the importance of a college education to a successful future. WNC's faculty and staff work to protect its students, taking on extra class sections, extra job duties, extra students in full class sections, and voluntary, as well as mandated, salary cuts to keep the college effective for our students. In addition, 70 percent of all full-time college employees contributed this year to the WNC Foundation, to help the college help our students. Yet many WNC students each semester are still unable to get into classes they need. This situation will only deteriorate further if the current budget proposal for the next biennium is approved by the legislature.

The last two columns in the graph show the impact on the college budget, if the governor's budget proposal is adopted by the legislature. In addition to the cuts shown for the 2010 and 2011 budgets, this proposal reduces state support to the college by a total of 31.7 percent for 2012 and 2013. Even projecting an increase of 12 percent in student fees each year over the current level (potentially devastating for the 50 percent of the full-time student population who are eligible for maximum Pell aid) this budget would still leave the college scrambling to cut additional millions from its operating costs. Claims have been made in many quarters about the importance of economic diversification and improved college graduation rates to the state's economic future. The challenge for our state's leadership is to determine whether the importance of a college like Western Nevada College to achieving these state goals is enough to justify funding its mission properly. ■