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Opinion

Community colleges essential to workforce education

By Brad Owen

Success and productivity in Washington state are established in many ways.

New parents may ponder if their young Jims or Jennifers will grow up to be doctors, lawyers, physicists or the president of the United States, esteemed professions all. While some of our babies of course do go on to careers in high academia or climb far up the professional career ladder, the vast majority of us grow up to be plumbers, mechanics, bookkeepers, electricians and construction workers – all very valuable occupations by themselves.



I, for one, took my sparse training at a community college and went on to a career in small business and politics. This is mainly because my talent as a rock and roll artist did not quite match my passion for becoming one.

Training people in the trades is exactly where our state community college system excels and why we as a state need to continue to show strong support for these programs. The Spokane community college system is doing an excellent job of providing this essential skills training, serving more than 16,000 students a year through its three institutions. A recent study shows some half of the college-bound high school students from the Spokane region enroll in Spokane Community College, Spokane Falls or the Institute for Extended Learning.

The diverse and popular offerings by the three institutions include one of the largest technical education divisions in the state. These schools are turning out thousands of heavy equipment operators, truck drivers, trade apprentices, welders, machinists, aluminum and manufacturing plant trainees, all highly employable because of great workforce training.

As Washington, the country's most trade-dependent state, competes in an increasingly global economy it is essential that we are providing these students with the right mix of skilled training that they will need to help our state succeed. Our continually changing economy means the demands for these skills are also subject to change, as well as the requirements surrounding trade skill development.

A panel I chair, the Legislative Committee on Economic Development and International Relations, is very interested in the issues around workforce education. This 13-member committee of state senators and representatives will be in Spokane July 10 and 11 to learn first-hand from practitioners, business leaders, educators and students themselves about needs and opportunities within their respective environments.

Key to what we will be talking about is the continually evolving partnership between the colleges, labor, industry and government which make vocational education a priority.

Not everyone goes on to get a university degree, but thanks to our incredible community colleges everyone does have the opportunity to succeed in the workplace today.

(Brad Owen has served as the lieutenant governor of Washington since 1996).