

Olympian April 16, 2014

# Community colleges need state support

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Special to *The Olympian*

**K**ristina Lawley experienced a parent's worst nightmare. Her firstborn daughter, Abigail, passed away after only five days of life. From those dark days, Kristina decided to become a neonatal nurse.

"The nurses and respiratory therapists were amazing, never taking us out of the care loop for our daughter," Lawley said. "Now, I feel it's time to give back to other neonatal intensive care unit families and their babies."

During winter quarter, Kristina transferred from Centralia College to South Puget Sound Community College to finish her associate degree. She plans to pursue a bachelor's in nursing from a four-year university.

I heard Kristina's story while preparing a keynote address for the 2014 All-Washington Academic Team ceremony held at South Puget Sound Community College a few weeks ago. The event honored 68 of the state's finest students from community and technical colleges.

Inspiring and humbling, each story represented a chapter in the narrative of the two-year college system – a narrative vital to our quality of life here in Washington.

Our state's economy is directly tied to the rise and fall of our higher education system. The higher the skills and education of our residents, the more prosperous and productive they become. Georgetown University predicts that by 2020, 70 percent of all jobs in Washington will require some level of college education. This past session, the Legislature embraced the Washington Student Achievement Council's parallel goal of having 70 percent of all Washingtonians equipped with postsecondary education.

President Barack Obama and



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Gov. Jay Inslee have rightfully called college education an economic imperative every family should be able to afford.

Which brings us to our community and technical college system.

Nationally, policymakers are turning to community and technical colleges to answer the need for more college-educated employees and a more affordable cost for students. Here in Washington, about 400,000 residents, or almost 6 percent of

our total population, each year take advantage of community and technical colleges. Students train or retrain for careers, update their professional skills or start work on their bachelor's degrees.

I chair a legislative study committee on economic development issues. We have held committee meetings at community colleges over the years, so I have seen firsthand how community and technical colleges are the driving force behind the economy.

Many of the state's great-paying jobs did not even exist 10 years ago. Those that did exist are changing rapidly with advances in technology. Community and technical colleges train students for jobs that are available right now in clean energy, manufacturing, composites, health care and other industries.

Of course, four-year universities are also vital to Washington's well-being. Our state enjoys a strong partnership between two-year and four-year colleges and universities. Direct transfer agreements make it easy

for associate degree holders to enter four-year institutions at the junior level. Many community and technical colleges also have campus-based partnerships with four-year universities.

As she sets her sights on a bachelor's degree in nursing, Lawley stands to benefit from our unified higher education system. Last month, two- and four-year colleges and universities reached a transfer agreement that will create a shorter, smoother process for students to achieve a bachelor's degree in nursing.

Lawley is among the hundreds of thousands of Washingtonians who are moving up in this world thanks to community and technical colleges. Combined, these students create a wave of productivity and purchasing power that washes through the economy and benefits us all. As the Legislature reconvenes next session to face tough choices, her story and countless others make a compelling case for higher education.

*Brad Owen is serving his fifth term as Washington's lieutenant governor.*