

Community reaps benefits from investment in 2-year colleges

By **Charles H. Mitchell**

Special to The Times

Every 10 years, the Seattle Community Colleges educate the entire city of Seattle. This is one way that I often describe the substantial effect of the more than 50,000 students who enroll at our colleges every year.

Even if you have never set foot on one of our college campuses, you are benefiting from the education and training we provide. At a time when community leaders and individual taxpayers are calling for wiser investments of public resources, one of the best investments will be improved funding for higher education.

The socio-economic benefits provided by our colleges and other two-year colleges across the state are underscored in a series of recently released reports by CCbenefits, Inc., sponsored by the Association of Community College Trustees.

According to the reports, every \$1 of public investment in the Seattle Community Colleges will generate cumulative benefits of more than \$33 in the next 30 years resulting from higher earnings and social benefits. In other words, community and technical colleges are an economic engine for our region.

The Seattle Community Colleges contribute \$1.6 billion annually to the local economy when you include increased earnings of graduates as well as our own operations as one of the largest organizations in Seattle. This is equivalent to almost 27,000 jobs contributed by our community colleges to the local economy, according to the research.

For students who invest in higher education, gains in long-term earnings far outweigh the costs of lost earnings while they are enrolled in college. Students with an associate of arts degree will earn, on average, 35 percent more than a high-school graduate — a family wage of \$45,500 per year.

The investment is promising for the many college students and workers who are struggling in lower-paying jobs. These individuals could make a tremendous contribution to our economy, if we give them a chance.

Of course, the real impact of our colleges is much more complex than simple numbers, and it reaches into workplaces, neighborhoods and homes throughout Seattle. Individual lives are improved and taxpayers benefit from a healthier economy and lower social costs.

Two-year colleges reflect their communities and their local economies. Seattle is nationally known as a center of health care and medical research and our colleges offer the area's largest selection of health-care-training programs. We are recognized for a groundbreaking curriculum that combines medical instruction along with English-language skills for non-English-speaking students. This is critical in Seattle, where one in six of our residents was born in another country.

Recognizing this, the U.S. Department of Labor awarded the Seattle Community Colleges a \$2.8 million grant to prepare new workers for the region's health-care industry.



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Instructor David Mullens helps Max Gordon at the Wood Construction Center of Seattle Community College.

In addition to health care, the future of our region includes the emerging industries of biotechnology and nanotechnology, whose labs are staffed by community-college graduates from our pioneering programs. These are just a few of more than 100 professional-technical programs at our colleges and in the pipeline.

More than 40 percent of students who earn bachelor's degrees in Washington state started their education at community colleges and we expect this number to increase. And, we are developing innovative approaches to increase the number of community-college students who go on to complete their bachelor's degrees on our campuses in areas ranging from hospitality management to elementary education, engineering and science.

It is important for citizens to realize the valuable asset we have in our state's 34 community and technical colleges, which are strategically placed to create new opportunities for students and their communities.

Community-college presidents from across the state recently met and discussed factors that will affect the economic future of Washington state. We know that our future work force will be much more diverse and that we need to prepare more highly skilled workers as our economy rebounds. Employers are gearing up and they need our graduates.

Our investment in community and technical colleges will ensure that we continue to play a leading role in meeting the region's economic, social and educational needs.



Dr. Charles H. Mitchell is chancellor of the Seattle Community Colleges, which serve more than 50,000 students every year at North Seattle Community College, South Seattle Community College, Seattle Central Community College and the Seattle Vocational Institute.