

Centralia College President to Retire Next Year

Passing the Torch: James Walton to Hand Down Leadership of College in a Better Economic Situation in June 2014

Thursday, May 2, 2013

By Amy Nile

Centralia College President James Walton is retiring in June 2014, with the hope of passing down a more stable, post-recession academic institution.

The 66-year-old told the Board of Trustees he would stay for 10 years when he started at the college in 2002. Walton decided to see the state's oldest continually operating community college through the economic recession so he could pass his leadership role on in a better situation.

"We've got things going really well right now," Walton said. "Things should be in much better shape to hand off to the next president."

Since the recession hit Centralia College in 2008, Walton said, the budget has been reduced by 26 percent. Still, the college took advantage of retirements and attrition to prevent layoffs or the elimination of major programs.

"We figured out ways to take on the extra work without having to lay off anyone," he said. "The college is really about its people. It's not about the brick and mortar."

Under Walton ' s leadership, Centralia College has become the number one comprehensive community college in the state. Over the last eight years, the college has boasted a 41 percent graduation rate, compared to the statewide average of 28 percent, Walton said.

With about 2,500 full-time students and many more part-time students as well as community members taking advantage of educational opportunities, Walton said, the college serves more than 10,000 people each year.

Walton has helped the college implement its first four-degree program to better serve students seeking more advanced education in the area. The bachelor of applied science in management program started accepting students last fall. Of the 34 community colleges in the state, only eight have four-year degree programs.

“And we were the first to do it with no (state) money,” said Larry McGee, the program ' s director.

McGee said because the college has a good relationship with the community, Walton was able to implement the BASM program quickly.

“He built on strength,” McGee said of Walton. “What I saw was a leader using that resource and getting something done.”

Over the last decade, Walton has seen the college through major challenges, including two floods, which devastated the lives of many students and staff, and the shutdown of TransAlta ' s mine, which lead to an increase of 200 students in need of retraining.

Walton responded to the influx of students laid off from TransAlta by implementing worker retraining programs, expanding the college's welding and diesel programs and adding a truck driver training program.

Now, Walton said, he doesn't have any big plans for his retirement other than golfing, spending time with his granddaughter and completing projects around his Centralia home.

"Nothing too heavy or serious," he said. "I need a break."

The former fisheries biologist said he will also return to his roots by enjoying activities such as fishing, hiking and clamming.

"I certainly have a love for the outdoors," said Walton, the recipient of the 2013 Russ Mohney Recreation Resource Stewardship Award, named after the well-known Chronicle outdoors writer.

As for the next president, Walton said, he will be passing on many challenges including figuring out how the college can work with surrounding communities toward economic development. For example, Walton said, the Industrial Park at TransAlta project, which aims to develop 1,000 acres in the area south and east of the TransAlta facility, may lead to new training programs at the college to help staff companies coming in.

"We need to continue to be a major part of the community," Walton said.

Additionally, the next president will take the lead in establishing the college's second four-year degree program in diesel technology, which, Walton said, would be the only such program on the West Coast.

The new president will also have to figure out ways to increase funding and hire people to fill the positions vacated during the recession, Walton said.

Centralia College's Board of Trustees will plan the replacement process over the summer and Walton said they hope to have a candidate selected by next spring.

“We need a person who has a management style that is inclusive,” he said. “This is a good place and people really pull together.”