

## Sen. Cantwell Visits Centralia College

**Senator Sees Fruits of Clean Energy Grant By Christopher Brewer / [cbrewer@chronline.com](mailto:cbrewer@chronline.com)**

The regional energy industry's eyes turned to Centralia Wednesday as a prominent national leader from Washington state received a glimpse at the fruits of a major grant to enhance education in energy creation.

U.S. Sen Maria Cantwell, D-Wash., visited with staff, students and stakeholders in the Pacific Northwest Center of Excellence for Clean Energy in Centralia on Wednesday afternoon. The center, along with two other Centers of Excellence and eight community colleges, received a Department of Labor \$10 million grant in September 2014 to provide students skills for careers in demand, and showcased its work to the senator for about an hour.

The grant's major focus is a program known as WISE, or Washington Integrated Sector Employment, led by Centralia College that offers training in manufacturing, clean energy and construction sectors. The program aims to bridge education with employment, providing a path to family-wage jobs.

Cantwell, the ranking member in the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, received an hour-long orientation of sorts on what the WISE program entails from a clean energy standpoint. Industry stakeholders present, such as Pat McCarty, generation manager at Tacoma Power, and Troy Nutter, operational training manager at Puget Sound Energy, both stated the infrastructure and workforce in the energy sector is aging and jobs will be needed within five years to begin filling vacancies brought about by retirement.

"We need to prepare a new workforce for that time," McCarty, who also chairs the advisory board for the Center of Excellence for Clean Energy, said. "We've got retirees coming out of the workforce that will need to be replaced."

The grant to WISE aims to serve 1,992 program participants through revamping curriculum material and providing enhanced education tailor-made for the sectors students are attending school for. The program focuses on dislocated workers, military veterans and spouses, and women and minorities.

WISE Lead Grant Manager Anthony Valterra said the program is beginning to take in students now. Once complete, students will achieve a variety of credentials from certificates and associate degrees to applied bachelor's degrees.

Several people who went through the energy program at Centralia College shared their stories of success with Cantwell. One student, John Hofman, said his family endured hardship when the economy flatlined, forcing him to seek an alternative career path and start classes at Centralia College. He's on track to graduate from Washington State University Vancouver this year and work for an engineering firm in Vancouver.

A current Centralia College student, Marco Ramirez, shared his goal and vision for working in the field of hydroelectric power. Ramirez said representatives from several utilities such as Seattle City Light and the Lewis County Public Utilities District recently helped with a resume-writing course to assist students.

Rulon Crawford, assistant professor of energy technology at the college, said it's routine to see students come into their first day of classes with zero knowledge of the energy industry and ascend rapidly.

"Most come into it with no electricity background," Crawford said.

Cantwell spoke to the group and praised Centralia College and the way it has tailored education to different energy sectors that aim to focus on sustainability.

“Even as these industries change, you need help with writing the coursework,” Cantwell said. “You are so ready. ... I think you’re making absolutely the right investment here. If you’re on the leading edge, you’re building expertise.”

Bob Guenther, lobbyist for the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 77, sits on the WISE Executive Leadership Team and said the energy program at Centralia College will prove critical to success in the energy field.

“This program has provided an ability for youngsters and incumbent workers to learn the trade,” Guenther said. “Without them, we can’t provide service for our utilities. We’re trying to stay on top of that.”

Cantwell spoke with The Chronicle briefly after touring one of the energy classrooms with students and former students, saying Centralia College and the WISE program have served to set the benchmark for clean energy education.

“As we look into legislation regulating energy efficiency, a critical part is a prepared workforce. You have to have the people to build the capacity and invest in infrastructure,” Cantwell said. “To see the students here and the work they’re doing, it’s paying dividends.”

The senator added she would share the news of the work being done in Centralia with her colleagues in Washington, D.C.

“You have a group with a long focus on how to build a skilled workforce for the 20th century,” Cantwell said. “This shows they’re betting on the right areas of expertise.”