

Getting Schooled in Business

JASON HAGEY

Soon after he took over last year as executive director of the AWB Institute, Grant Gilmore set off on a tour of the state's colleges. The mission: Encourage businesses to tell colleges what they need from tomorrow's workforce and spread the word about what colleges already offer.

For Grant Gilmore, the new executive director of the AWB Institute, the new job meant going back to school. Over and over again.

Soon after Gilmore began work last summer, he embarked on a nearly year-long tour of the state's community and technical college campuses. So far, he has visited approximately a dozen schools throughout the state from Bellingham to Vancouver, meeting with workforce development deans and other faculty members.

By the end of the year, he expects to meet with officials from about a dozen more schools, including Western Washington University, where he will work with officials to analyze data about the state's various industry sectors.

It's all part of the Institute's aim to promote closer ties between the business community and the state's colleges.

"One of the biggest challenges for everyone, from the business community to education, is finding the time to connect."—Linda Maier, dean of workforce education, Whatcom Community College

In some cases, that means finding out what the colleges already are doing that can assist the business community and then spreading the word. In other cases, that means finding out what kind of programs businesses need that aren't already offered and making the schools aware of it.

"These are the kinds of connections that I think need to be continually cultivated," said Earl Hale, the retired head of the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges.

STRONG TIES

AWB Institute has worked closely with Washington colleges for years, partly as a result of a

contract with it has with the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges. There is a natural connection between AWB and the colleges, said Carol Melby, economic development program administrator for the board.

One of the ways it's realized is through the website WorkForceCollege.com. AWB is a partner on the site, which, unlike the student-focused main websites at most colleges, is targeted at employers.

"It allows us to speak directly to business," said Melby.

Industry sectors and student demographics vary from region to region. But they share a common mission: To better equip students to meet the demands of the local workforce.

In Yakima, that means looking into the feasibility of bringing a manufacturing certification program to the area, either at a community or technical college.

Dennis Flabetich, an area human resources manager for Del Monte Foods, is also chairman of the South Central Workforce Council. He learned about something called the Manufacturing Skills Standards Council and asked the council staff to look into it.

It could potentially offer a wide range of benefits for manufacturing companies, including a certification program.

The AWB Institute was already working on a pilot project related to the council, so Gilmore met with Flabetich. "They're going to help us analyze whether we want to go forward with it or not," he said.

AT A GLANCE

AWB Institute has worked closely with Washington colleges for years.

There are 34 state community colleges and technical schools in Washington.

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Manufacturing is one sector that could benefit from sending employees back to school to receive specialized training and certification.



At South Puget Sound Community College in Olympia, maintaining ties with business means keeping a strong connection with state government, said Margaret Hoyer, associate dean for leadership and management development.

The school, which typically has somewhere between 5,000 and 8,000 students, also has a large information technology program and classes in so-called “soft skills” development, which is unusual for a college. Soft skills

include one’s ability to relate to others, traits that can be particularly important to managers and leaders.

Hoyer said she spent part of her meeting with Gilmore discussing ways to get businesses more closely connected to the programs that South Puget Sound Community College offers.

In addition to state government, the school also wants to

strengthen ties with the local manufacturing community. “I don’t think the community colleges are a resource that businesses automatically look to,” Hoyer said.

Todd Oldham, executive director for corporate and continuing education at Clark College in Vancouver, said he sees potential for more collaboration between his school and the AWB Institute.

For example, when the school has an idea for a project, it generally needs a local business to work with, he said. AWB Institute, through its association with AWB, could help make that connection. The Institute also could help suggest people to serve on advisory boards, he said.

“We definitely have relationships, but there are gaps, no doubt,” Oldham said.

One such gap is small business. The school enjoys close ties with health-care providers and large industrial manufacturers, but it needs to work to make some programs accessible to smaller businesses, Oldham said.

BRIDGING THE GAP

One of the biggest challenges for everyone, from the business community to education, is finding the time to connect, said Linda Maier, dean of workforce education at Whatcom Community College. People get busy with their jobs, Maier said. One way her school is working to raise awareness is to be part of the community.

Gilmore met with officials from her school as well as Bellingham Technical College to discuss strategies that could include co-sponsoring an event such as a manufacturing round-table.

Health care and information technology are important industry sectors in Whatcom County, and sustainability is beginning to emerge as an important field, as well, Maier said.

Another way to share information like this will be through the online dashboards that the Institute is installing on its website. The dashboards will provide users with real-time data on specific industry sectors throughout Washington.

AWB Institute:
www.awbinstitute.org

South Central Workforce Council:
www.yakimacounty.us

Workforce College:
www.WorkForceCollege.com

Maier said she was encouraged to hear about the dashboard concept during Gilmore's visit. It will help the businesses in the community make better connections, she said.

For Gilmore, the on-going college tour has proved to be an eye-opening experience, particularly seeing the different scenarios that face each school. There's nothing like face-to-face meetings to help the AWB

Institute underscore its role as the bridge between Washington's business and education communities, he said.

The information collected during these visits will not only bring companies and colleges closer together, but it will enable the AWB Institute to educate state government about the needs of both communities, Gilmore said.

"It's really a complex system," Gilmore said. "Companies, whether they know it or not, have options. Businesses still are not fully aware of the capabilities these colleges can offer. We hope to make it easier and be a resource for them." ^{WS}

"I need to see every college. It's a great opportunity to speak to people at the schools and speak to the companies within those regions ... Folks will have a better understanding of the types of programs we need to be developing to bring about economic development."

—Grant Gilmore, executive director, AWB Institute

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