

CONNECTING WITH LOCAL COMMUNITIES

THE EVERGREEN STATE COLLEGE

Joye Hardiman, Barbara Leigh Smith, Kim Washington, and Ed Brewster

Many students who enter higher education never graduate. This is especially true of Hispanic/Latino, African-American, and Native American students whose graduation rates are improving but are still far too low (Ortiz and Heavy Runner 2003). Numerous reports indicate that this problem lies deep in the educational pipeline, and the contributing factors are numerous. This article highlights issues facing African-American and American Indian students. A recent “report card” study by the Schott Foundation for Public Education suggests that there is a “widespread, deep, systemic failure to educate African-American males as efficiently as their White counterparts” (Holzman 2004, 4). The Indian Nations at Risk Task force attributes poor educational attainment to unfriendly school climates that fail to promote academic, social, cultural and spiritual development; low expectations; loss of Native language ability and the wisdom of older generations; teachers with inadequate skills and training; lack of Native educators as role models; lack of opportunity for parents and communities to develop a real sense of participation; and overt and subtle racism in schools along with a lack of multicultural focus (Indian Nations at Risk 1991). Many of these same factors are also obstacles for African-American students.

Solutions to the problem of graduating more Native American and African-American students from both high school and college must be complex, long-term, and more specific to their target audience than many past efforts. For example, addressing the needs of rural Native American and inner-city African-American working adults may require different solutions than educating traditional-aged youth. Higher education partnerships between two-year and four-year institutions are a crucial component of any solution since these students often begin higher education in two-year colleges, and transfer and baccalaureate completion rates are low.

In Washington state, The Evergreen State College has developed deep partnerships with several community colleges to address this pressing issue. The involvement of student affairs is especially critical

in this complex and fluid environment. These innovative learning community programs contain many transferable lessons. Their stories, and the ways they've addressed the needs of African-American and American Indian students, are the focus of this article.

Founding Visions and Current Realities

Since its inception in 1971, The Evergreen State College has had an interest in being a diverse institution and serving students from underrepresented populations. As a nontraditional college, Evergreen had a unique opportunity to design itself around new educational approaches. The people hired by this new college made an important difference. A number of the founding faculty and staff were long-time community activists who came with a strong commitment to building educational pathways for African-American and Native American students. The larger context also made a difference. Evergreen's formative years were coincident with the civil rights movement and with the rising activism among Native Americans to exert their treaty rights and move toward self-governance. The college sat on the traditional lands of the Squaxin Island tribe and had people in its midst who reminded them of their obligation to help serve the educational needs of Indian people.

Stories of community histories and early linkages with Evergreen could also be told about the emergence of Evergreen's efforts to serve African-Americans in the multicultural "Hilltop" area of Tacoma, Washington. This program began around the kitchen table of founding Evergreen faculty member Maxine Mimms who was determined to bring education to working adults in her community. The current director continues to refine and perpetuate the program's unique accomplishments and successes.

The Evergreen State College/Tacoma Community College Bridge Program

The Evergreen State College's Tacoma campus (Evergreen-Tacoma) sits in an urban community that is rich in its diversity, yet often maligned and negatively characterized. It hosts many cultures, languages, restaurants, churches, and views, as well as people of all classes and incomes. From the inception of the Evergreen-Tacoma program at the behest of the African-American community, the college's commitment has been to provide educational access, academic excellence, and equity to place-

bound working adults and to their host Hilltop community through its geographic location, its curriculum, and its community service/social justice/ public educational pedagogy and outreach programs. Hence the campus's motto: "Enter to Learn, Depart to Serve." Originally the program was open to all students regardless of divisional status. In 1982, the program was institutionalized within the divisional norms of prevailing educational service areas for two- and four-year institutions and became an upper-division program designed for students wishing to earn a Bachelor's degree.

In 1985, in order to ensure that African-American adult learners who had less than ninety credits could reap the benefits of the Tacoma Program, Evergreen formed a partnership with Tacoma Community College (TCC) to offer an interdisciplinary freshman/sophomore program, the "TCC-Evergreen-Tacoma Bridge Program," during the same evening times and at the same location as the upper-division program. The Bridge Program's curriculum and pedagogy is informed by Evergreen's program values, philosophy, design, and learning outcomes. Intergenerational participation is stressed. Families are included in assignments and in presentational events. Evergreen-Tacoma serves approximately 260 students each year; about 35 of them are enrolled in the Bridge Program.

The first students who entered the Bridge Program did so with about forty-five credits. Many were retired military males. Their average length of enrollment was three academic quarters. Around 1989, the population started to shift. Most current students, many of whom are under-employed, enter the Bridge with little or no college credit. Today, students remain in the Bridge an average of five to six quarters. The ethnic makeup has stayed the same, about 90% African-American. The gender makeup has shifted to 85% female and the age average has dropped from 45 to 33. This shift has necessitated an increase in academic advising, student support services, financial aid issues, and attention to skill development and mastery.

Retention and four-year transfer rates in the Bridge Program have usually been above the state's as well as TCC's general population averages. In fact, in 1992 the Bridge Program received national recognition for being a model of minority retention and successful four-year transfer. For the last five to seven years, 76% of students entering the Bridge have transferred into the Evergreen-Tacoma upper-division program which has an 89% to 91% graduation rate. The leadership skills and community commitments many students have developed in the Bridge Program have propelled them into upper-division and Evergreen-

Tacoma alumni leadership positions. Bridge students have continued their academic careers, completing masters and doctoral programs in education, law, social work, public policy, organizational development and administration. Many others have gone on to engage in significant community and public service activities—working with students with disabilities, advocating for homeless and indigent populations, assisting hospice and AIDS patients, serving on the Human Rights commission, and conducting forums to help felons learn how to expunge their records in order to regain their civil and human rights.

The Bridge Program has gone through a series of changes in the last few years. An Option B Associate's degree was implemented, allowing students attending the Bridge Program to receive an AA degree and use their veterans' benefits. Another change limited admittance to college-ready applicants. These adjustments, in addition to leadership transitions and staffing challenges, resulted in a temporary drop in enrollment and retention. However, the Bridge Program has weathered many challenges associated with evolving and institutionalizing an inter-institutional learning community designed for African-Americans but open to all. It's a program that has always been led by urban community needs and African-American women, a program that has weathered stereotypes, generalizations and accusations of reverse racism. It has survived because of consistent inter-institutional commitment, community support, and graduate testimonials.

Five years ago, actions were taken to restore the Bridge Program to its original purpose and prominence and to better reach its audience which included students who need basic education courses. A coordinator was hired with an extensive student affairs background, providing a perspective on students and community involvement that improved the focus of the program. TCC's supervision of the program was elevated to the senior administration level. The program's developmental course component was re-instated and extensive work was done identifying and reclaiming the program's best practices.

The advantages of having a coordinator in a student affairs position who plays a key role in recruitment and administration as well as instruction and advisory services are many. The coordinator in this program serves as an advocate, not only reaching out to the community for recruitment purposes, but also interacting and building relationships with the various services within Tacoma Community College and Evergreen. The coordinator insures inter-institutional alignment, course credentialing, and achievement of learning outcome goals. Inter-institutional articulation and program effectiveness are

accomplished through interfaces with the Evergreen-Tacoma campus director, the faculty and staff, the TCC Associate Vice President, the Bridge Advisory Board, and TCC departments and divisions.

Particular attention is now being paid to foregrounding the student entrance and exit experiences. A jump-start Orientation to College Success course for first-year students, taught by the coordinator, introduces the program mission, pedagogy, and learning outcomes. A Cultural Competency jump-start course designed for second-year students is now taught by the upper-division program's director. This two-week class emphasizes the skills necessary for success at Evergreen-Tacoma: willingness to work with diverse cultural groups, world views, and value systems; recognition of diverse work styles; ability to communicate orally and in writing; and familiarity with conflict resolution strategies. The quarter before graduation, students take a course, taught by the coordinator, in which they develop a capstone e-portfolio that demonstrates their mastery of the program learning outcomes.

Retention services—including college assessment and evaluation, advising, academic counseling, job assistance and college and community support services—are now integrated into the curriculum. All students receive one-to-one advising, provided by the program coordinator, from the time they enter the program until they graduate.

Opportunities for a variety of integrated curricular activities have also been enhanced. All Bridge and upper-division students now attend an All-Campus Lyceum lecture and seminar series. Lyceums are explorations of the current program theme. All themes arise from urban community needs and student realities. Sample themes include *Leadership for Urban Sustainability* (2003-2004), *Transformational Literacies* (2004-2005), *Cycle Makers and Cycle Breakers* (2005-2006), and *Liberty and Justice for Whom?* (2006-2007). Bridge and upper-division students now share research and participate in collaborative projects that encourage relationship building, peer mentoring, skill development, and community service. Bridge students participate in the spring All-Campus Research Showcase and Resource Fair; in 2006 over 250 youths, family members and community residents attended this event.

Further connections have been made to the community through a Girls and Boys Math, Science, and Technology Outreach Program. This program gives college students the opportunity to practice the campus values of 'Each one, Teach one' and "reciprocity, hospitality, and inclusivity" by serving as mentors, coaches and caregivers to young

people in the community. Campus sponsorship of annual Black History and Founders Day celebrations inform the students and their community of the campus' cultural origins and history. Student-sponsored Women's Empowerment Conferences, food drives, and self-help forums offer further opportunities for students to participate in and experience community asset-building.

"Give backs" are foundational rituals for the Tacoma Campus. Students are given the opportunity to stand up and 'give back' to visiting speakers by publicly sharing what they learned from their presentations. They also 'give back' to their peers during portfolio presentations in the Bridge and senior synthesis presentations in the upper-division program, and 'give back' to their families and communities at the graduation ceremony. These public ceremonies give life to the campus values of reciprocity, collaboration, hospitality, and respect.

TCC and Evergreen-Tacoma faculty teach collaboratively in the program. Both Evergreen and Bridge faculty participate as presenters in the Lyceum. The Evergreen-Tacoma director leads the Bridge Lyceum seminar, upper-division faculty teach as adjuncts in the Bridge Program, and the Bridge coordinator and core faculty participate in upper-division faculty seminars and summer planning institutes. This collaborative approach provides enhanced curriculum synchronization between the upper-division and lower-division programs, faculty development opportunities, and seamless pathways for students.

The TCC-Evergreen-Tacoma partnership, which now serves more than 250 lower- and upper-division students, has been sustained through inter-institutional commitment, integrated learning outcomes, curricular design, support services, shared pedagogy, co-curricular activities, rituals and ceremonies. Forging positive links with student affairs has been paramount to sustainability and integral to program success.

Fitting the institution to needs by placing a program in the community was a fundamental and necessary condition of serving the African-American population in the Hilltop area. By doing so, Evergreen acted on its diversity commitment in a new way and became an integral part of the community's efforts to empower itself. The vision that began around the kitchen table of its founding faculty member now sits in a new campus building covered with glorious murals painted by Ndbele artists from South Africa who worked with people from Hilltop to give their college vivid portraits of their roots.

The development of the Bridge Program and the extensive partnership with Tacoma Community College was the second major step taken to fit the institution, in this case two institutions, to the

community's needs. As is appropriate, the program continues to evolve in its effort to serve urban underrepresented communities.

The Grays Harbor College/Evergreen State College Reservation-Based Program

Providing higher education to Native Americans on the widely dispersed, rural Indian reservations in Washington state has long been a challenge. The tribes vary greatly in size, often making it difficult to sustain classes with minimal enrollment levels. Reservations are often located a great distance from any college campus, and the cultural distances can be even greater. As William Tierney points out in one of the most extensive studies of the Native experience in higher education, "going" to college is often problematic because it can mean losing one's community ties and cultural identity—two things Native people have been struggling to retain in the face of years of forced assimilation (Tierney 2005).

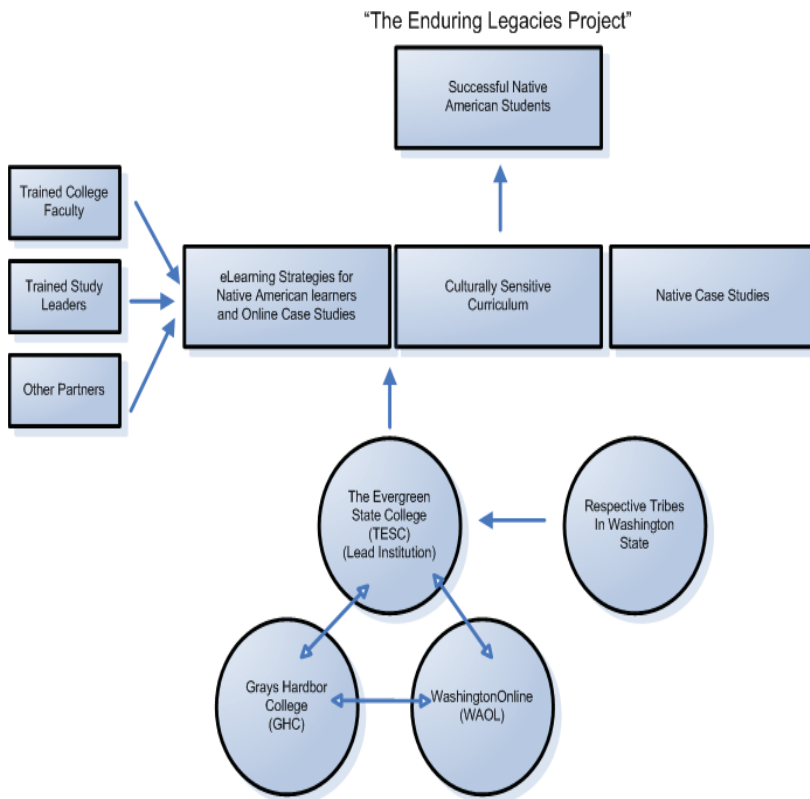
Meanwhile, reservation communities have been going through a period of renewal. Acting under the latitude provided by the Indian Self-Determination Act, many tribes are taking over functions from the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and their economies are improving. At the same time, it has become clear that education is a key factor in successful economic development, and finding better ways to make education available in these remote communities is essential.

In 1989, with the establishment of The Evergreen State College Reservation-Based Community-Determined program on the Quinault Reservation, some solutions started to appear. This small program had many unusual features: it was based in the community and initiated only at the behest of the Tribal Council. It drew on community resources and offered a culturally relevant interdisciplinary curriculum. Led by a highly committed Native faculty member, the Evergreen program made a long-term commitment to stay and build enrollment. This took many years, but over the next fifteen years the Evergreen program grew to serve seven Tribal communities and graduated hundreds of students who went on to graduate school and various positions in Tribal government, social services, education, and other fields. Since 1993 it has had a degree completion rate of 76%, compared to a national degree completion rate for Native American students of 36%.

Despite its success, the program had one major gap: it was an upper-division program, and it did not provide communities with the strong lower-division program that many Tribal members needed. And traditional ways of providing the breadth needed in an Associate's or

Bachelor's degree didn't appear viable. The communities were too far apart and the college providers too driven by expectations about minimum enrollments. Furthermore, most of the students were working adults who needed more flexible approaches to education.

In fall 2005 Evergreen's vision of serving reservation-based students took a big leap forward with the initiation of a deep partnership with a number of the state's community colleges. Both Evergreen and the community colleges recognized that collaboration was essential if the baccalaureate completion rate was to improve. The new "bridge" program, partially supported by the Lumina Foundation for Education, was called "The Enduring Legacies Project." It is depicted below (Hai-Jew 2006). The project involved development of a new lower-division curriculum, faculty training and course redesign, curriculum development, and a complex process of building a sustainable cross-institutional infrastructure.



Working in collaboration, Grays Harbor College (GHC), WashingtonOnline (WAOL), and Evergreen developed a new direct transfer Associate of Arts degree. The new degree program offers the richest array of courses that has ever been available to these remote communities.

It was designed as a hybrid eLearning program, which drew courses from thirteen different community colleges. This was a great advantage because the colleges had different curricular strengths. South Puget Sound Community College, for example, had a strong and unusual program in cultural resource management that it had developed with the tribes, while Seattle Central Community College had an excellent library research course. Some of these courses were college-owned courses while others were already shared within the statewide system. The statewide distance learning consortium, WashingtonOnline, allowed access to hundreds of well-developed online courses and, best of all, WashingtonOnline allowed the pooling of enrollments across sites, making it possible to offer the program even on tiny reservations with just one or two students. Grays Harbor College was the linchpin since it was the college that provided the overall degree, the essential support services, and the leadership to pull all these complexities together.

The program planners believed the online degree program needed to be a “high tech / high touch” program. Strong face-to-face elements were essential for the program to be successful, but the online courses were important since the students were working adults who needed the time flexibility that asynchronous learning provides. It would, nonetheless, be a transition since there was still a “digital divide” in terms of technology on the reservation. Also, distance learning had not previously taken off in these communities when out-of-state providers made it available, even in Native communities that provided substantial support for students interested in attending college. (For further information on the digital divide in Indian Country, see *Falling through the Net: A Survey of the ‘Have Nots’ in Rural and Urban America*, which indicates that the gap is actually increasing.)

The “high touch” elements incorporated into the program are designed to build a learning community and create a strong attachment to the program as a whole that goes beyond individual teachers and individual courses. These elements include a gathering of all students, staff and faculty at the beginning of each academic year to initiate the new learning community and a weekly face-to-face class at each reservation site with study leaders who are members of the Tribal community. The study leaders convene the weekly site meeting

and generally keep everyone on track, playing a role that combines instruction with student support functions.

Additional face-to-face elements include four Saturday classes at Evergreen each quarter where both the Evergreen State College and Grays Harbor students from all the sites come together. These Saturday classes have numerous Native American cultural elements including an opening blessing or song, a common meal at noontime, and witnessing. In terms of the curriculum at these weekend gatherings, Bridge students take an Integrating Seminar in the morning that is taught by one of the upper-division faculty. On Saturday afternoons, students from all programs come together to work on original Native case studies developed for this purpose. This past fall the afternoon class was called “Intergovernmental Battlegrounds,” with case studies focusing on contemporary Tribal issues in the areas of natural resources, education, and housing. Student responses to the case studies have been overwhelmingly positive. (For further information on the Native Case Study Initiative, see the Evergreen website referred to at the end of this article.)

The Enduring Legacies Project has also done much to create a faculty learning community. It draws on faculty from thirteen different institutions who for the first time are seeing their course as part of a whole program designed for a specific student community. To prepare the faculty and staff to work with reservation-based students, extensive faculty development opportunities were built into the program. All faculty and staff attend workshops each year on teaching Native students. Online instructors also have access to course redesign mini-grants with consultants and bibliographic resources available to make their courses more culturally relevant. And, as mentioned above, open-ended case studies on significant issues relevant to Native Americans are being developed that can be used in the curriculum.

The leadership team for this inter-institutional project includes faculty, administrators, and support people from Grays Harbor College, The Evergreen State College, WashingtonOnline, and the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC). The outreach coordinator, Mark Ramon, plays an especially key role in the leadership team and as academic advisor to the cohort-based lower-division students. A member of the Quinault Tribe, Ramon is well-known in Indian communities and is a graduate of both Grays Harbor and Evergreen.

At the end of each quarter, an internal evaluation process is used. One member of the leadership team interviews all students, study leaders, and faculty. The results of this process are written up and

circulated as a means of sharing ideas and targeting trouble spots. The leadership team then meets to discuss this report, chart student progress, and implement needed changes. This form of just-in-time feedback has been invaluable, allowing faculty and staff to quickly make changes and ensure that lines of communication are strong. This process has also made it possible to rapidly disseminate the many good ideas that come up in this group of highly creative people.

While the Enduring Legacies Program is only in its second year, it has been highly successful thus far. In fall 2006 the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges named the program a “Best Practices/Student Achievement Program.” Interest in the program has spread quickly. In just one year, the number of tribes it serves has gone from three to nine, and the number of students enrolled, now more than fifty, has risen to sustainable levels for funding online classes. The program has successfully faced and dealt with a number of obstacles including the need for additional courses for students with weak skills in English and mathematics.

In his report at the end of the first year, the external evaluator, Peter Ewell from the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS) had the following observations to make about the program and its wider implications:

The first year convincingly verified that the need the project was conceived to meet is real and demanding. It is clear that the Native community target population—which consisted overwhelmingly of women with heavy family and work obligations and limited resources—was reached in a way that no previous program had been able to do.

One way of emphasizing the potential for wider application is to consider the many types of challenges that the project has had to face and overcome in its first year of operation. Some of these challenges are associated with pedagogical innovations of any kind, regardless of the constituency to be served. The combination of distance and face-to-face learning represented by content classes and the Integrating Seminar, combined with the use of on-site mentoring for community-based study groups, is a model that is potentially applicable to any student constituency—including traditional-age residential students. Similarly, most of the modifications made to distance-delivered classes through the redesign component of the project are sufficiently generic that they will benefit all students who take these classes. So, too, will the faculty experience in using

case-based teaching methods fostered by the Native Cases component of the project.

A second set of challenges is associated with serving any under-served student population burdened with substantial work and family commitments. Many elements of the Bridge Program that were designed to meet these challenges are transferable to efforts to reach other under-served populations. Among these elements are proactive face-to-face mentoring, community-based study groups, and the use of existing networks of community/family relationships to reinforce student motivation to succeed. Populations that might benefit from such an approach include rural African-American and Hispanic communities, poor white communities in rural settings like Appalachia, and urban ethnic neighborhoods. The only potential limit on wider application is that the approach depends on having an intact social community to build upon.” (Ewell, External Evaluator’s Annual Report, 2006)

Building Inter-Institutional Community-Based Learning Communities

The Tacoma and Reservation-Based programs provide vivid examples of how inter-institutional learning communities can be developed to address the educational needs of under-represented populations. What these two efforts have in common is the emergence of an approach that puts working with communities at its center along with an empowerment-oriented educational philosophy and a radical notion of how institutional roles and boundaries can be reconfigured to achieve better educational results.

A number of assumptions and commitments shape these learning community programs. These are summarized in the table in the appendix. Fitting the institution to the need of the student audience is probably the most critical feature of any effort to reach under-represented populations. At Evergreen we found that as much as we wanted to be a diverse institution, the only way that would happen was by building a community-based program in place and designing it around the needs of that working adult population. Because the Evergreen program was upper-division, Evergreen needed a lower-division partner and a partnership that was much more than a conventional arrangement between a two-year and four-year college. These partnerships required deep integration of roles and services within each institution and between

the colleges, and the development of new inter-institutional processes to support the program. Co-location—having both institutions' programs located on one site—and integrated staff and faculty development provided convenient opportunities for integrating the lower- and upper-division students and faculty. The small size of both of these programs also makes it much easier to retain the direct connection between student needs and institutional responses.

Inter-institutional learning community programs like those between The Evergreen State College, Tacoma Community College and Grays Harbor College provide new ways of thinking about how to build a sense of community, support academic goal commitment, educational coherence, and social and academic integration in nonresidential colleges where students have family and work responsibilities. In both of these programs, student and academic affairs functions have been combined. The leaders from academic and student affairs generally operate as a single team, with a clearly identified coordinating point person who can work the complex issues that arise with off-campus programs. Providing both practical support (through scheduling, day care, computers, and convenient support services) and an educational structure that addresses cultural needs and builds a community of learners committed to common goals and to one another, these efforts are worth emulating.

For further information on these programs go to www.evergreen.edu/tribal and www.evergreen.edu/tacoma and <http://ghc.ctc.edu/distance/reservation/index.htm>.

APPENDIX**What Works in Building Successful Programs**

Central Assumptions of the Programs	Implementation Examples
Fitting the institution to the need	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Placing programs in the community • Scheduling classes to fit the needs of adult working students • Providing support services such as childcare • Involving the whole family • Using technology and a “high touch/high tech” approach • Recognizing and mitigating cultural boundary-crossings • Continuing to assess and address evolving needs such as changing clientele, needed support services, and curriculum changes
Promoting seamless pathways to a four-year degree	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Housing the two and four-year programs together • Overlapping classes and breaks to promote interaction between lower- and upper-division students • Creating purposeful mixing of upper- and lower-division students • Sharing events and faculty • Seamlessly providing student support services
Community-based learning and support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making a long-term commitment to an established community • Locating the program in the local community • Involving community advisory boards • Incorporating student projects that benefit the local community • Developing community-based curricular themes and content • Bringing together participants in face-to-face and online collaborations • Promoting open sharing of relevant programmatic information

Central Assumptions of the Programs	Implementation Examples
Cultural specificity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating cultural specificity in all arenas— curriculum; themes and motto; facility; tone setting; and rites and rituals • Developing and using relevant case studies • Respecting learners’ cultural perceptions and feedback
Empowerment-focused educational philosophy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having a clearly stated, purposed educational philosophy • Faculty development to produce coherent pedagogy across instructors • Active learning; student seminars; student portfolios; individualized learning options that build personal authority • Emphasis on service
Student role models and peer mentoring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hiring diverse faculty and staff • Site co-location of two and four year college programs • Mixing of two-year and four-year college students in some classes • Tribal-based study leaders • Involvement of alumni

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Ed Brewster is President of Grays Harbor College. His past work has included collaboration with Northwest Indian College and Medicine Creek Tribal College.

Joye Hardiman is the Executive Director of The Evergreen State College's urban campus in Tacoma, Washington.

Barbara Leigh Smith, one of the editors of this publication, is profiled at the end of the opening article.

Kim Washington is the Director of Tacoma Community College's Bridge Program located at the Evergreen State College's Tacoma campus.