



Studying Spokane's Higher Education

by Blythe Thimsen

FORGET COUGARS versus Huskies, there are more fish in the sea, and a lot of those fish are found right here in Spokane. Pull your car into any parking lot and you are bound to see an assortment of license plate frames touting the names of schools far and wide. Take a stroll on a casual Saturday afternoon and you'll see numerous college sweatshirt-

bedecked people pass you by. Mingle at a party and you are sure to hear people say, "I went there, too! I'm the class of ..."

School pride is something that lingers long after the last book closes, final exam has been taken and diploma is handed out. It is something that sticks with you and creates a bond, a point of pride. While educational pride pulses through the veins of many an-alumni, Spokane has a fair amount of its own educational pride

flowing through its veins as well. That is because higher education opportunities abound in our area.

The idea used to be that you went away for college, boarding trains, planes or buses and setting off long distances to a good school. With so many excellent educational institutions right here in the Spokane area, though, going to school might be less about heading across country and more about heading across town.



Photo by Amy Sinisterra



Photo by Amy Sinisterra



Photos Courtesy of Whitworth College

Evening falls on St. Aloysius church on the Gonzaga Campus.
Photo by Amy Sinisterra

With Whitworth University, Gonzaga University, Spokane Falls Community College, Spokane Community College, Eastern Washington University, North Idaho College, and an extension campus for Washington State University, Spokane is rich in higher educational opportunities.

“I’ve always been amazed at what a great community this is for higher education,” says Fred Pfursich, dean of Enrollment

Services at Whitworth University. “I think it’s very unique to have a city this size have so much energy focused on education. I think that says a lot about Spokane to be able to support and draw students and resources.”

He is not alone in his thinking. “I think we are so lucky in Spokane because we have such great schools,” says Gonzaga University Dean of Admissions, Julie McCullough. “What we all hope for is

good success, good community; it all plays off each other. How great is it that we have so many higher education institutions here? Really, we’re all benefiting from opportunities provided by both the city and the institutions in our area.”

McCullough, a Gonzaga graduate herself, understands why students are drawn to Gonzaga and Spokane. “We’re attractive because it is a place to be challenged, but it is a safe place,” she says of Spokane, which offers a nice balance of big city appeal with small town support for the schools that are here. An example of that is demonstrated by the huge numbers of community fans that come out to support local college athletics.

“The basketball team lets us cast a wider net than we used to,” says McCullough. As a result of the national attention the team has brought, combined with the quality of the school, Gonzaga’s admissions office received 40,000 senior inquiries last year, and 80,000 freshmen through junior inquiries. Of the applications they received for the 2006-2007 school year, only 67 percent of the application pool was accepted – that means that 33 percent of the students who applied did not get in.

While some of the students may be drawn to Gonzaga because of the fame of the basketball team, McCullough says that is not the only reason that draws students. “There’s a group out there looking for a Jesuit, Catholic experience,” she says. “Others are looking for a good reputation. Gonzaga seems like a place you could do well and succeed.”

For some students, a school with religious affiliation is an important part of their decision. While Gonzaga is a Catholic university, Whitworth University, on Spokane’s north side is a Presbyterian affiliated school. While both schools are religious institutions, they are also both open to students of any faith.

“I love this about Whitworth; we have maintained our mission to be a Christian college,” says Pfursich. “We hire only Christian faculty, but we don’t require students to be Christians. What we try to do is create an environment where students are nurtured in an academic environment but given support by people. It’s important to provide moral and ethical meaning to students. We create an environment where students make good decisions rather than be rule followers. First and foremost, we’re committed to being a very open environment intellectually, but at the same time it has the tradition of being faith-based.”

Religious affiliation, academic programs and school reputation are all important factors in selecting a school, but the location can also play a role. Let’s be honest, there’s a reason all of those pretty pictures go into

the schools' marketing brochures. On top of offering a quality education, Spokane schools have the added benefit of offering students four seasons, beautiful surroundings, plenty of outdoor recreation opportunities, shopping and entertainment. It is a metropolitan city on a manageable scale.

"We concentrate so much on having them visit," says Pfursich, who knows potential students visiting the campus and Spokane for the first time enjoy what they see. "For students outside of the state - of which 48 percent were this past year - they look at it a little differently than students from around here. They're more clued into Whitworth, what it has to offer them. Then when they visit they get a good feel for Spokane."

The city itself is a big part of what admissions departments across the region use to sell their schools to perspective students. It's expected they can offer a quality education, but throw in a great place to live and it makes a nice package. "When I talk to prospective students, we're excited as much about the community of Spokane," says Pfursich. "We're thrilled to get prospective students to visit downtown. It's an amazing place we live in. Just the sense if you come here, you're not just coming to Whitworth; you're coming to a community that supports opportunities for employment."

Future employment and earning a decent living is on the mind of many students when they select a school. They want to know that there is a chance to learn from the best, network and then dive into a thriving employment pool that is rich with talented business professionals and highly educated individuals. "There are so many great relationships in town with local businesses," says Shannon Carr, Director of Admissions for Eastern Washington University, of the role she sees Spokane and Cheney businesses playing in the education of students.

"Our students are involved in internships in large and small communication industries in the Spokane area and beyond," says Melissa Lowdon, director of the Bachelor of General Studies program at Gonzaga. "There are a number of professionals in Spokane who were once students in one of our degree programs. The networking opportunities are plentiful."

That networking can be accomplished through some of the unique programs that bring students and community leaders together.

Many Gonzaga students, as well as students at the Spokane Community College, participate in the Hogan Entrepreneurial Leadership program. This competitive business program brings together local



Photos on this page by Eric Galey

businesses and business leaders to teach students business basics in a hands-on format. Students learn how to run a business and bring entrepreneurial talents to a small business. The lessons they learn here are ones that they take into the business world once they are out of school.

Another program supported by the community and involving several area schools also helps students hone their business skills, which hopefully will

be put to use in the Spokane business community once students have graduated. Organized by Eastern Washington University's Center for Entrepreneurial Activities, Gonzaga University's Hogan Entrepreneurial Leadership Program and Whitworth University's School of Global Commerce and Management, the Business Plan Competition allows students to get involved with the business scene of the larger regional community by creating



Spokane's University District at Riverpoint Campus brings much of Spokane's higher educational opportunities together under one roof, with several classes offered here through schools' extension branches.

their own business plans and competing for venture capital funding. "Students are putting together really great business plans," says Carr.

This past spring, two EWU students, Paul Fisher and Lynette Munk, won the \$10,000 first prize in the student-generated category at the annual Business Plan Competition with their idea for recycling leftover grease from local restaurants and turning it into biodiesel.

This isn't the only local program that is preparing students to be leaders and entrepreneurs. According to EWU's College of Business and Public Administration (CBPA) Web site, they strive to "assist the broader community with better prepared entrepreneurs to succeed in business. Over the past decade, the CBPA has increasingly emphasized the importance of students working to improve the communities served by the University...The CEA's

(Center for Entrepreneurial Activities) overall mission is to stimulate, promote and support the systematic practice of innovative entrepreneurial enterprises in the Spokane region as well as in the Inland Northwest."

When a community invests in and supports its educational institutions and students, it is an investment in itself. According to the Community Indicators Initiative of Spokane, "Higher education

Modern facilities, like this common area at Whitworth, help attract students to the school.



Photos Courtesy of Whitworth College



Photos on this page by Eric Galey



Photos on this page by Eric Galey

The Eastern Washington University campus may be crowded (above) but class sizes average around 27 students (left).

attainment is positively related to economic growth and to a community's capacity to provide its citizens with a high standard of living." Students who are nurtured and supported by a community are more likely to give back and become a vested part of the region, investing their time, dollars and lives to the area. "We have an incredible alumni base," says Carr of the Eastern alumni who demonstrate this. "There are huge amounts who give back to the economic health of the city."

Spokane can be proud to say it is taking

an active step in investing in higher education and, therefore, in itself. In February 2006 it was announced that the Spokane Board of County Commissioners approved a \$50,000 grant for the EWU and AHANA (African, American, Hispanic, Asian and Native American) "Incubator Without Walls" program. "This program is historic in its collaborative effort to assist small business entrepreneurs in Spokane County in realizing their goals for economic development and job growth," BOCC Vice-Chair Mark Richard was quoted as saying.

The goal of the program is to "revitalize local business centers resulting in the growth of economic activity in the area, increased revenues and profits and new job opportunities." Many of the EWU students involved with the program stay in the area to continue their work after graduating. This means increased dollars in our economy and involvement in our community.

Pfursich thinks about smaller schools, which are just one of many in larger cities. They may not get the opportunity to have such a connection to the community as schools in Spokane do. "In a city the size of Spokane, it feels really connected to us," he says of the business and economic community.

Though the main campus is ten miles outside of Spokane, with a more visible presence at the Riverpoint campus, EWU is also becoming increasingly connected to Spokane's community, both in business and the culture. "Eastern is giving back," says Carr. "We get a lot of support from our community. Support of academics is a part of the spirit. We have amazing student athletes; we even have students that sit on the Spokane Symphony."

Not only are students from local schools involved in all sorts of community organizations, but there are all sorts of students enrolled in school. Young, supported by parents and finished in four years is no longer the name of the game.

According to the most recent U.S. Census Bureau, while 89.1 percent of people aged 25 or older in Spokane County are high school graduates, only 25 percent of that same demographic hold a Bachelor's or higher education degree. Part of it may be due to the cost of funding an education.

With rising education costs, four-year schools are out of reach for many students. "The challenge students have is economic," says Maxine Gish, admissions director at North Idaho College in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho. "It is difficult, a lot of our students work. We have a more diverse student population of people who want to continue education."

When students are working and going to school, the road to graduation is longer. "It's taking students longer to get degrees," says Gish. "Not everyone can get done in two years." One option that is attractive both financially and from a schedule perspective is to attend a community college, either for the first two years before transferring to a four-year school, or to get a two-year Associated Arts degree.

Aside from cost, community colleges are an essential piece of the higher education puzzle because they put an education within reach of many who otherwise would not be able to obtain it.



Students gather on the campus of Whitworth
Photos Courtesy of Whitworth College



A nursing student works with a local patient

Photos on this page by Eric Galey

“The mission is to have education be accessible for everyone,” says Gish. “Community colleges are very accessible and open, serving needs for all people. It’s serving the educational and continuing education needs for a community.” That includes students who need to earn their G.E.D., students taking continuing education classes, or traditional students using a community college as an affordable on-ramp to a four-year institution.

Community colleges meet a need for many non-traditional students who find themselves caught in a tricky spot. They may be too old to go back and finish high school, but they can’t get into a university without having that high school diploma or G.E. D. Without community colleges, this demographic of students would be sentenced to a life of entrapment; wanting to get ahead but unable to find the resources to help them do so.

While there are 38 community colleges available to students in Washington, there are only two in the state of Idaho, including NIC. That means more students are relying on those two schools to serve their educational needs. The community NIC serves reaches far beyond the border of

the city, the county or even the state. For some students, including many from Montana, there aren’t educational opportunities available near their home, so they turn to the NIC.

Community college cost less than public four year schools and are a mere fraction of the cost of private schools. (See box to the right). That does not mean that private schools are only for the wealthy, or are beyond the reach of anyone, though. “Private schools, especially for good students, have scholarships,” says McCullough.

Even with scholarships, it can still be a struggle to afford a private school, but for some students it is worth it. “The average income of a Whitworth family is less than a family at the University of Washington,” says Pffursich. “Ninety-two percent of our students have financial aid. It’s amazing to me how much sacrifice goes on for families who choose to send their children to Whitworth. Students work part-time jobs. They’re doing it because this type of education environment – personal attention, connections, faith-based – these things come with financial sacrifice.”

For students at all of the local schools,



Photos on this page by Eric Galey

Estimate cost of local colleges for the 2007-2008 academic year based on information from their websites:

**Whitworth - \$32,676
(Tuition, room and board)**

**Gonzaga -\$33,340
(Tuition, room and board)**

**EWU - \$12,363 (Resident tuition, room and board)
\$21,207
(Non-resident tuition, room and board)**

**NIC - \$1,055 (Resident tuition)
\$6,662 (Non-resident tuition)**

**SFCC/SCC - \$2,932.20
(Resident tuition),
\$3,308.64 (Non-resident tuition)
Additional fees, books etc can add more**

sacrifice and hard work will help them reach their goal. In the end they may realize it is less about where you go to school, and more about how hard you study that impacts your education. But they’ll probably also realize Spokane is a great place to get an education – regardless of what school is on their license plate frame! **S**