

OKANAGAN **Life**

2010 edition

# progress

A SPECIAL PROMOTIONAL ISSUE

VALLEY BUSINESS  
STORIES TOLD  
BY THE PEOPLE  
BEHIND THEM

OKANAGAN COLLEGE'S  
PRIZED **SEAT OF POWER:**

# {Jim Hamilton}

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OKANAGAN UNIVERSITY COLLEGE  
DIANE POWLES  
PUBLIC AFFAIRS  
1000 KLO RD  
KELOWNA BC V1Y 4X8



PHOTO BY KYLE PERISON



# excellence

# expectations

# excellence

by  
Dawn  
Renaud

**jim hamilton**

Despite a history of giving up comfortable careers in favour of new adventures,

just signed on for a second term as president of Okanagan College. Time for him to quit moving forward?

Not a chance...

“There’s  
a lot of  
shared  
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shared  
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around  
this  
place”



Since the transition from Okanagan University College (OUC) back to a community college in 2005, Okanagan College has consistently exceeded expectations. Along with planned increases in enrolment in both trades and health, its arts department has grown dramatically; the business program, which was expected to decline somewhat after the advent of UBC Okanagan, has strengthened instead. Remarkably, the full time equivalent (FTE) student enrolment figures have consistently been higher than projected—currently some 1,500 above target.

When people ask what’s behind this stellar track record, OC president Jim Hamilton tells them it’s due to the superb leadership of the president. “Then,” he says, “they all laugh.” He attributes the college’s success to the corroboration and hard work of many good people. “It was careful planning, flexibility, willingness to seize opportunities we weren’t aware of when they come along.”

A few minutes into our conversation, I realize “flexibility and a willingness to seize opportunity” sums up the way Jim has lived his own life. He has always, he says,

JIM HAMILTON HAS LED OKANAGAN COLLEGE TO UNEXPECTED SUCCESS SINCE ITS TRANSITION FROM UNIVERSITY COLLEGE BACK TO COMMUNITY COLLEGE

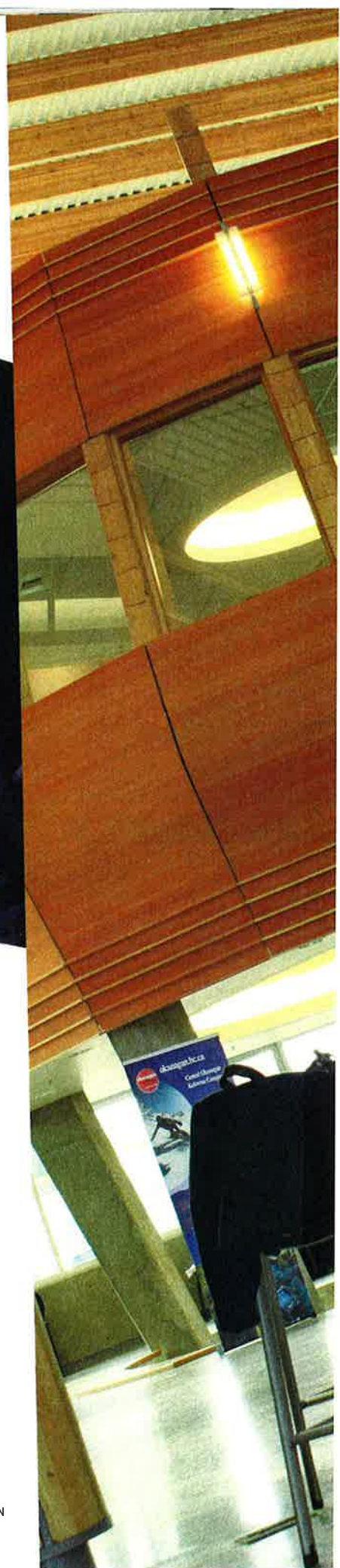


PHOTO OF JIM HAMILTON BY KYLE PERISON

IN SPITE OF COMPETITION FROM UBC OKANAGAN, FULL TIME EQUIVALENT ENROLMENT FIGURES FOR OKANAGAN COLLEGE CONSISTENTLY EXCEED EXPECTATIONS

done a number of different things; through university and most of his working life, he usually had a business or two on the side. And even with these diversions he has always been open to new adventures, routinely leaving secure and rewarding employment for a change.

It's not that his day jobs have been dull — quite the contrary, they've offered daunting challenges and plenty of involvement with groundbreaking change — but after a few years, even the most interesting jobs become a little too comfortable. Perhaps variety is the spice of his life.

Jim's no frazzled multi-tasker, though. Despite the hum of activity in his office area, he's serenely focused on our conversation. There's never a sign of him glancing toward a timepiece or a day planner. When I check my own watch, I express surprise that a full hour has passed; he just smiles calmly and says we can still tour the new Centre for Learning before his next appointment.

He has, it appears, learned to master time — and timing, too. It seems whenever he's ready for change, a new and exciting opportunity awaits. Jim has an incredible knack for being in the right place at the right time, bringing with him the right skills and the right attitude.

## HEMCOMING

Jim was born in Vernon while his father was serving in the military. "I lived in Vernon for a few months in 1951, and then we took off on a journey that led all over the country and then over to Germany and back again," he says. But his family is well established here, with roots going back to the turn of the last century, and they would return every summer that they could.

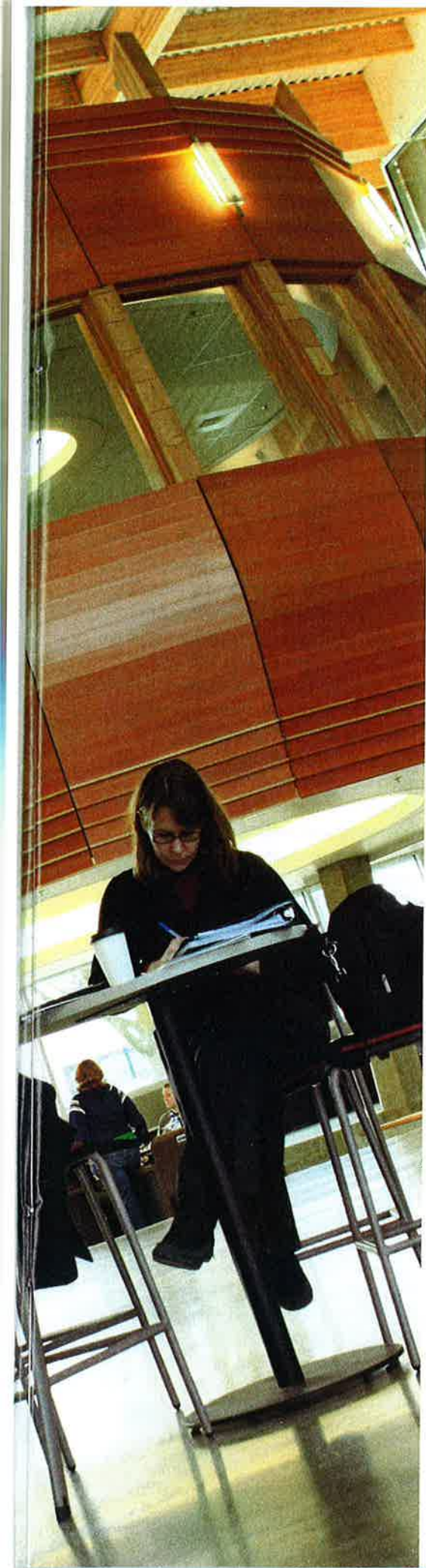
He went to high school in Kingston, Ontario, before the family moved on to Victoria, where he attended university. "I spent two years there, then worked for a year doing labour on a variety of jobs, primarily for the municipality of Esquimalt, and got married," he says. Returning to Kingston, Jim spent the next several years at Queen's University. At the same time, he and a friend secured the contract for garbage removal and building maintenance for about 20 of the university's apartment buildings; he designed and built custom furniture; and he was active on the political front, organizing, consulting and doing market research.

At Queen's, Jim's graduate work involved participation in the Disraeli Project — preparing the voluminous correspondence of former British prime minister Benjamin Disraeli for publication. The historical aspect of the research made the project a little unusual for an English major, and the work itself was groundbreaking in its use of technology. "It was the first major publishing project in Canada to use computers all the way through," he says, cutting edge stuff in the early 1980s. "Computers were so new to those kinds of projects that we actually hired a PhD student in computing science whose thesis was to write a word processing program."

Jim returned to work in the Okanagan almost by accident. Moving west for a job prospect at the University of Victoria that didn't materialize, he arrived back in Vernon with his wife, their children, and all their

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PHOTO BY LYDIA ROSS



worldly possessions. Within a couple of weeks, he was offered a job with the English department at the original Okanagan College. "I've been involved with the place off and on ever since," he says. "This will be my 29th year."

During those years, Jim has seen the institution from the perspective of an employee, as the parent of students attending the facility and as a board member. (He can even claim to have been a student himself, having taken a fly-typing course through continuing education.) And over the years, he has liked what he has seen. "The people who work here have a tremendous sense of commitment to what it is that the college stands for and does," he says. "There's a lot of shared values and shared vision in and around this place."

For the first decade Jim worked as a teacher in OC's English department. "The nature of employment here was contractual—short term contracts to start with—and we did have to feed the family," he says, so he also pursued some business interests: he owned part of a market research and communications company for a little while, and was involved with concert promotions.

Eventually he secured a continuing contract with the English department. Not content to drift along with a sure thing, he decided he wanted to gain some administrative experience; an opportunity arose with the Vernon School District.

"They hired me initially because they wanted somebody to take responsibility for strategic planning and communications, public relations, that sort of thing," he says—a good fit with the skills he'd acquired through his business endeavours. Hiring on for what he thought would be two years, he stayed for eight. During that time, he was also appointed to a six-year term on the board of Okanagan University College.

Jim says he thoroughly enjoyed cutting his administrative teeth with the school district. "Just about the time I was becoming tired of that, an opportunity came up at the college in Vernon, to be what was then called the centre director—we call them the regional deans, now," he says. He felt like he had come home.

## BACK TO THE FUTURE

When the transition from OUC back to Okanagan College was announced in 2004, Jim was asked to lead the college's transition team. "Our job was to work with UBC Okanagan and Okanagan University College, and effect an orderly transition and get the college up and running," he says.

Jim is particularly proud of the work his team has accomplished. "Mainly we ran on volunteer labour from people who were not only working on start-up of the college, but also continuing to work full time at Okanagan University College," he says. "Draining though it was on their time and their energies, I don't think many of them thought twice about it—it was just the right thing to do. And as a consequence of all that hard work, when we first opened the doors on the first of July 2005, and started welcoming our first students into the new Okanagan College, we were ready to go."

Mission accomplished, Jim's position evolved into his initial five-year appointment as president. Those five

years, he says, have been a bit of a rocket ship trip. "We had a pretty clear idea of where we were going, in terms of the values that we espoused, the vision that we had, and what we perceived to be our mission—which quite simply is transforming lives and communities by educating and training people."

Rather than merely going back to the way things were before OUC, or simply opening with standard college programs and practices, the college has taken full advantage of the rare opportunity to create something new. Embracing what is loosely termed "the learning college movement," they researched what's happening in other like-minded colleges, adopting and adapting with their own vision firmly in mind. "We're doing things that others aren't doing, and we've learned a lot from others as well," he says.

Jim says the outstanding Centre for Learning at the Kelowna campus is a good example of what they're trying to achieve. "We recognized we had a deficit, particularly on this campus, of informal student study and gathering space," he says. His experience at the school district had made clear to him that people learn at different rates and in different ways. "In this building we tried to accommodate that truth about learning. We've put in spaces that are round, spaces that are funny shapes, big spaces, little spaces, formal spaces that look like a conventional classroom, informal spaces... Part of the library looks like a living room. That's intentional.

"It comes back to us trying to remind ourselves constantly of what our core values are. It is all about learning—our learning, student learning," he adds. "We don't differentiate, when we talk about learners, between staff and students, and we have to create the spaces to promote and accommodate that. This building does it beautifully."

The Centre of Learning will also be one of the first buildings

THE CENTRE FOR LEARNING AT THE KELOWNA KLO CAMPUS IS A STUDENT-CENTRED FACILITY ENCOMPASSING LIBRARY, CLASSROOM, STUDY, PEER TUTORING, INFORMAL GATHERING, OFFICE AND FOOD SERVICE SPACES IN ONE OF THE CITY'S FIRST BUILDINGS TO ACHIEVE THE LEEDS GOLD STANDARD. THE SAME STANDARD FOR ENVIRONMENTALLY SUSTAINABLE CONSTRUCTION IS ALSO THE GOAL FOR OC'S NEW CENTRE FOR EXCELLENCE IN PENTICTON



# “We obviously made some right decisions & that didn't happen by accident”


in Kelowna to achieve the LEEDS gold standard—a designation also being sought by the recently announced Centre for Excellence in Penticton, which will research, train and showcase cutting edge advances in the building trades.

“Colleges ought to be at the forefront of change,” he says. “The whole sustainability agenda—we have so much to contribute to that.” Colleges not only teach the ideas, they also teach a lot about how to bring those ideas to life. “We ought to be modelling in our buildings what we're teaching about. That's what's so exciting about both this building and the Penticton building: we're actually going to have a building that is what we teach and is capable of change.”

## COMMUNITY CENTRAL.

These projects have invited both national and international attention. Add that to the local buzz generated by OC's many achievements and it's not surprising people see the facility as more than “just” a community college.

“It still needs to be that little local college, though, in people's minds, in some ways,” says Jim. While teaching at OC, he came to understand that his students were coming from a different place than those he studied with at Queen's. There, he says, “you get kids whose families have gone to the university, and there's an expectation that they'll go there; you're looking at the third or fourth generation...by and large a pretty privileged bunch of relatively high achievers.



OKANAGAN COLLEGE FACILITIES ARE DESIGNED TO ACCOMMODATE DIFFERENT LEARNING STYLES AND WIDELY DIVERSE PROGRAMS

"It's a very different profile than I encountered when I first came here — not to say we don't have students who fit that profile; we do. Our students are much less homogenous. We have such diversity. And for many of our students, it's an act of courage to walk through the door." These students may be the first in their family to attend post secondary; they may be coming from a background where school is not equated with success or anything remotely pleasurable; or they may be returning from a long absence from formal education — some without having finished Grade 12.

"We like to say we have multiple levels of entry and exit and re-entry," he says. "We can accommodate the person who is a star student in high school, coming in with a straight-A average. We can also accommodate that person who can't read and write. We can accommodate the single parent, and the person who needs to undergo a career change and is a little apprehensive about coming through."

This is why what happens in the classroom is paramount. "Students value the relationships in smaller classes," he says. "We have a really outstanding faculty," he adds, crediting a genuine interest in students with everything from the business students' consistently high performance at international competitions to the evolution of new programs. At the Kalamalka campus, for example, a passionate English department developed and implemented a creative writing and publishing program.

When it comes to good ideas, Jim says the college is blessed with an embarrassment of riches. "My job is to remove the barriers between the people with the good ideas and the realization of those ideas," he says. "We've done that as much as possible, creating the conditions that allow that good idea to have a chance." These faculty-driven successes help spread the wealth. OC doesn't

automatically place all its programs centrally. In Salmon Arm, an overhaul of the mobile trades program allows students to learn without relocating to Kelowna.

Enrolling locally is not only more convenient; students attend OC to acquire a high-quality education in a range of diverse fields. Small surprise the enrolment numbers are up. Yet impressive though it is, the huge number of full time equivalents illustrates only a partial picture of what the college does.

"That captures what you might call our regular academic programs and vocational programs," says Jim. "But then there's this whole host of programming that we do outside of that, primarily through continuing studies."

He recently asked his number crunchers how many individuals were served in a year. The number staggered him: last year, they served over 19,000 through short-term vocational programs—upgrading and continuing studies like viticulture, horticulture, creative writing, photography and interior design.

"Continuing studies is really another doorway into the institution for the community. Or, to look at it the other way around, it's another way in which we serve some of the needs of our community that would not otherwise be met." These needs may not be addressed through the usual college or university programs, but that doesn't mean they aren't real or important. "If somebody comes to us and says, 'We really need a program for these 20 people to learn this,' we can do it," he says. "Although we don't call ourselves Okanagan Community College, we never lose sight of that word."

## TERM TWO

While Jim's first term as president was focused on charting the course for the new OC, he's been busy with other things as well—sitting on several related provincial committees and spending, he says, too much time "in the air." Through it

all, his wife Liz and his now-grown children have been very supportive.

Jim sees his second five-year term kicking off with a thorough review, including plenty of good conversations about the current vision for the college and what, if anything, should be changed. "We always have to find better ways to serve our communities," he says. "You know the old cliché: if you're not moving ahead you really are falling behind."

So what does he say about staying put? "I'm a builder, not a maintainer," he concedes, so naturally he thought about stepping out, perhaps taking a less challenging job and spending a little more



OKANAGAN COLLEGE HAS MADE TREMENDOUS STRIDES DURING JIM HAMILTON'S FIRST TERM AS PRESIDENT AND HE LOOKS FORWARD TO CONTINUED PROGRESS IN THE NEXT FIVE YEARS

time involved in other aspects of the community, maybe even going home and relaxing in the evening.

"Then I thought, you know what? We've exceeded every expectation for the first five years of operations, including our own...but we're not where we'd like to be yet," he says. "I want to be there for the next phase." 🍌