

Report suggests college key economic contributor

By J.P. SQUIRE

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Robert Fine isn't surprised Okanagan College's economic impact on the region is estimated at \$542.6 million.

"Clearly, Okanagan College is a huge contributor, which is why we continue to partner with them to the degree we do," the Central Okanagan economic development commissioner said Wednesday.

"If you look at the international student base, 31 countries represented, they are spending money here."

Through its international department, Okanagan College is creating job opportunities in the Caribbean, he said.

There are retraining opportunities in the host countries, which brings money and workers back to the Okanagan to help the local economy grow, he added.

"Clearly, Okanagan College is a significant operator."

A province-wide study, released by the B.C. College Presidents (BCCP) Wednesday, found that Okanagan College's impact on the region goes far beyond training and educating students.

The independent analysis found the regional economy receives approximately \$542.6 million in annual income from the activities of the college and the cumulative effects of its past students — contributing to roughly 4.4 per cent of the total income of the regional economy.

The study was conducted for B.C. colleges by CCbenefits Inc. and included analysis of 13 colleges and institutes located in more than 50 campuses throughout the province.

The report concluded that the B.C. economy receives about \$7.7 billion in annual income due to the economic impact of the institutions, an amount that equals more than four per cent of the provincial economy.

The report also finds that as a result of attending Okanagan College, students benefit from a 14-per-cent annual return on their investment of time and money in their education due to increased earning potential and future income.

"This report provides clear evidence of the considerable impact that our college, and colleges throughout the province, have on our community and economy," commented Okanagan College president Jim Hamilton.

"We have long known that educating and training our students contributes to the cultural and economic fabric of the Okanagan region and the numbers released (Wednesday) solidly support that view."

After weighing the fiscal cost of the provincial government's investment in Okanagan College over the course of a year, the report finds the financial return far outweighs the cost. The study finds students and alumni of Okanagan College are strong contributors to the economy and use fewer social services than those without a college education.

The avoided costs in improved health, reduced crime, reduced welfare and unemployment, result in an 11-per-cent annual return on regional taxpayers' investments in Okanagan College.

CCbenefits Inc. reports a benefit/cost ratio of 3.8, which means every taxpayer dollar invested in B.C. colleges returns \$3.80 to the provincial and local governments.

Other key findings of the study include:

- Community colleges encourage new business, assist existing business and create long-term economic growth.

- Students generate about \$219.3 million annually in higher earnings due to their B.C. college education, thereby expanding the tax base and reducing the tax burden on taxpayers.