

Today's article includes a message from Jim Hamilton. Jim's name will be familiar to many in the Vernon area as a former OUC Board of Governors member, a faculty member, an administrator; and also as a K-12 Administrator. Jim has watched the evolution of education and training in the Vernon area for over 25 years. Today, Jim speaks to us as the first President of your new Okanagan College.

As we prepare to welcome students to the four campuses of Okanagan College this fall for the first full academic year of our operation, we do so with a greater than ever appreciation of the significant role quality post-secondary education plays in the lives and careers of the people we serve.

Four years ago, the federal government predicted that our province would create 695,000 new jobs by 2011. Given the more robust economy today, that number may prove to be a conservative estimate. However, one other estimate from the same federal study will remain constant; the largest proportion of the new jobs will require exactly the kind of education and training we're offering at Okanagan College.

We all know the demographics of this region, with its aging population and the looming retirement of the baby boomers. We're facing a near-crisis in developing the skilled labour force our economy requires. We also know what happens when people move to this area – they tend to stay, raising families, enjoying the lifestyle and building their careers. As they become established, they look for more and more education and training close to home. That's where Okanagan College comes in, providing the wide array of education that promotes the social, economic and cultural growth our region needs.

We are off to a good start. Even before our July 1 official start date, we began implementing some 20 new and expanded programs that address specific skills shortages. Examples include additional capacity in electrical apprenticeship training, residential construction programs in partnership with industry and a school district, new diploma programs in Early Childhood Education, Human Service Worker and Rehab Assistant, a two-year diploma linking our renowned Culinary Arts and Business Administration Programs, a doubling of the Vernon Aerospace Maintenance Engineer program, additional offerings for adult upgrading, and a new program that will help produce the next generation of our high schools' trades and technology teachers. This is just the beginning of how Okanagan College intends to deploy its 1000 new student spaces over the next five years.

Consider this also: 69 per cent of parents think their children are going to go to university but just 16 per cent of them complete a degree. We shall continue to provide high-quality first and second-year university courses and our complete degrees in Business Administration and Computer Information Systems for those heading toward a degree. However, we are also working with agencies such as the Business Council of B.C. to drive home the message that parents and students should look as well at the labour force situation and realize the career opportunities that can unfold at an institution such as ours.

The good news is that our work is bearing fruit. Here's some information most probably didn't know:

- In the Okanagan, 34 per cent of high school students are thinking about post-secondary options at the diploma, trades or technical level - something other than university.
- In Greater Vancouver, only 14 per cent of students are considering those other options. In the Kootenays, only 12 per cent are thinking about college level training vs. university.

The message is getting across. For these reasons and more, it is extremely important that institutions such as Okanagan College continue to develop opportunities and access to higher education and training close to home.

To find out just what we're doing these days, and how we are answering the needs of the region, I would like to join Tony Sellar, the College's Regional Dean of the North Okanagan, to invite you to a College-Community Breakfast on Sept. 7 at the Kalamalka campus, from 7 a.m. to 9 a.m. It's a chance to come up, visit and see what makes us your Community College. There's no charge for the breakfast, just a request that you bring your curiosity.

Watch for us in two weeks time as we share with you the exciting plans we have made to welcome our first ever intake of students to your new Okanagan College at our Kalamalka Campus. Enjoy the summer!

Tony Sellar
Regional Dean, North Okanagan, Okanagan College