

# Connect The Dots

By BusinessWest Staff October 7, 2014 22 No Comment

## Greenfield Community College Emphasizes Collaboration



*Robert Pura touts a number of GCC's notable academic departments, from art to nursing to a unique program in renewable energy.*

They're called 'studios.'

While they vary slightly in design across the Greenfield Community College campus, they all have some features in common, most importantly tables and couches at which students work and talk, in a space surrounded by that department's faculty offices.

"About 13 or 14 years ago, the math department convinced us they wanted to have a space near the faculty offices for students to come, to ensure there wasn't a long wait to see a faculty member," said GCC President Robert Pura. Since then, virtually every department has followed suit in creating a common study area surrounded by those office doors.

"It's a space with tables and chairs, where students can learn from each other and support each other, and the faculty are right there," he explained, recalling a time when a maintenance worker questioned a mass of students sharing pizza and studying in one of the studios late at night.

"They didn't want to leave. I laughed and said, 'that isn't a problem.' That's the spirit we want to see — a community where people are encouraged to work together and learn independently, but also from each other. That's the kind of attribute that will serve them well, whether they transfer to another school or head into a career right away."

The studios are one of the more notable examples of a culture of connectivity fostered at GCC, Pura told BusinessWest — one further enhanced by an extensive renovation of the campus's core building three years ago, which better connected each department and brought in much more natural light to boot.

"You can see our commitment to community in the design of the building, our commitment to interconnectivity," he said. "You're always feeling like you're connected to people as you're walking around — you feel those relationships and sense of community among students and faculty and staff."

"I've talked to a lot of alumni over time," Pura added. "It's not a lecture they remember; it's not a formula or that one piece of poetry. It's the relationships they had with people that makes a long-term impact. As a smaller college, we have an opportunity to make that the strength of the institution."

### Hand in Hand

The main role of an institution like GCC, of course, is to prepare people — both young learners and older career transitioners — for jobs in a still-difficult economy.

To that end, and perhaps more than ever before, the state's community colleges are working closely with area economic-development bodies and local businesses to bridge the gap between education and career opportunities, to ensure that their graduates have the skills and training required to meet companies' needs.

That's especially important for GCC, Pura said, because of its position as the only community college in Franklin County — or neighboring Hampshire County, for that matter.



*Robert Pura says GCC's recently remodeled core building is designed with both access and connectivity in mind.*

"It is essential, especially up here in Franklin County, that we collaborate with regional employee boards, the Literacy Project, the Center for New Americans, Franklin County Technical School, Smith Vocational School ... the more we're able to collaborate, the more we're able to do collectively."

One notable collaboration involves Steve Capshaw, the owner of Greenfield-based Valley Steel Stamp, who raised \$250,000 from private industry for new manufacturing tools for Franklin Technical School, then got legislators to match it. The result was an effort involving both Franklin Technical School and GCC to boost opportunity in the manufacturing sector.

"With Steve's commitment, we developed a state-of-the-art lab. The technical school developed a curriculum for their students, and we developed curriculum to reach the worker in transition," Pura said. "Steve Capshaw is really the reason that happened; he's certainly a local hero."

Noting that the Franklin Hampshire Regional Employment Board was involved as well, Pura said he is "proud of the way folks in Franklin County and Hampshire County understand collaboration. We really do more with less."

"Collaboration happens to be the way of life up here," he added. "I don't know if it's because we have an agricultural base, and farmers collaborate as a way of life. But the same is true of the industrial base here, the banks and healthcare, the education folks up here — we really know how to collaborate well."

Having those ties, he went on, helps the college in terms of program and curriculum development. "We listen to business leaders, healthcare leaders, agricultural leaders of the community. They want people who can communicate effectively, think critically, and work well with others — and these are the outcomes of a GCC education."

Those are skills, of course, that translate to a multitude of fields, which is important at a time when many graduates wind up shifting gears into fields they didn't major in, or return to school later in life to learn a new career.

"Coming here gives folks the opportunity to change direction without significant cost to their family or themselves," Pura said. "Changing careers is a hard decision because of the investment they've already made. It shouldn't cost another \$200,000 to figure out what they want to do."

### **Signature Programs**

Like most colleges, Greenfield has differentiated itself in several academic areas, including its programs in renewable energy and energy efficiency. Those caught the eye of Congress, which invited Pura and associate professor Teresa Jones to speak at a subcommittee hearing last spring titled "American Energy Jobs: Opportunities for Education." Lawmakers in Washington were interested in hearing how to link education with the growing need for a solar-energy workforce.

"There is a great deal of opportunity for economic growth, job creation, and job attainment in the sustainable-energy field," Jones said at the time. "There is a huge potential for domestic jobs in the area of energy-efficiency upgrades, but people need knowledge and advanced skills to do those jobs."

The field, she added, is already much different than it was only five years ago, "so businesses and workers need to be able to adapt. The key piece for us is figuring out where the best job opportunities are and what people need to know to succeed in getting those jobs or starting businesses. We look to our business and other community partners to help guide that process."

On a related note, Pura also touted the college's farm-to-food program. "What it's really about is how to get local farming into the restaurants and refrigerators of the community and make that a more mutually beneficial system," he said. Meanwhile, the American Assoc. of Community Colleges recently gave GCC an award for its sustainable systems on campus, including an energy-neutral greenhouse built two years ago, which supplies produce to both the school's dining service and local food pantries.

"That comes from our commitment to not wanting to see the work being done in the classroom and the work we're doing on campus being too far apart," Pura said. "We learn from students, and we all learn from each other. These are powerful programs."

As is the college's well-regarded graphic arts program, which decorates campus buildings with paintings, sculptures, and other installations, and attracts some of the top art schools in the country to an annual 'portfolio day,' Pura said. "The combination of our students' life stories with the strength of their fundamentals makes them highly sought-after artists."

He also talked up GCC's nursing program, noting that its graduates are typically among the top scorers in their licensure exams and snatch up jobs quickly in a market that's starting to ramp up demand for quality nurses again.

But other programs that don't get as much press are just as key to the college's success, Pura added.

"At the core of our institution, two departments that are not as recognized as many are English and math. But these two departments teach the communication skills and critical-thinking skills that are so sought after. For all the wonderful acknowledgement of some of our signature programs, it is really the English and math departments that are fundamental to our school's success."

### **Room to Grow**

GCC is helping its students succeed in other ways as well, including a new child-care center currently being built, which will be staffed by Community Action's Head Start program.

"It's hard to focus fully on academics with a child in your hands," Pura said with a laugh. "So having child care on campus will help our students succeed, and it is a great start for kids; the data about the number of children who start in college-based child care and go on to college is pretty strong."

It's just one more way Greenfield Community College is forging connections and giving students the foundation to succeed, no matter their stage of life.

"There's no distance here between students, and the teaching space embraces that philosophy," Pura said, referring not only to those studios but to the classrooms, where students typically sit together in groups, not at separate desks.

"Those students come in with dreams of what they want to do with their lives," he added. "We give them an opportunity, and if they work hard, they can be successful in their career aspirations."

*Joseph Bednar can be reached at [bednar@businesswest.com](mailto:bednar@businesswest.com)*