

College board: ‘College has a lot of work ahead of it’

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But opinions are mixed among college board members and board hopefuls about how dire the enrollment situation is and what is needed to address it.

In meetings earlier this year, Lyman voiced his concerns about drops in enrollment that predate the pandemic, what he sees as a lack of a concrete plan to address student recruitment and retention and frustration over the college’s problematic software system, CampusNexus.

The management software, adopted by Clatsop and several other community colleges before the pandemic after a previous system was no longer available, had issues from the beginning. During the pandemic, some of these issues, including ones tied with student registration and financial aid, came to a head. Lyman and others say it further discouraged students, created major headaches for faculty and, they believe, contributed to the decline in enrollment.

At a recent meeting, the college board discussed the drop in enrollment and the pandemic’s role. Chris Breitmeyer, the college president, intends to bring a plan to increase enrollment before the board this spring. The college also plans to ramp up marketing and outreach to attract more students.

Lyman and the candidates he recruited for the May 18 ballot believe more is needed. Meanwhile, Robert Duehmig and other board members have said in meetings this year that though they are concerned about the drop in enrollment, it isn’t something that causes them to panic. They believe the college continues to provide attractive offerings and is moving in the right direction to encourage students to return.

“Our job is not to figure out how to do things,” said Dave Zunkel, who was appointed to the college board in 2019 and is running for election against a former college employee, Suzanne Iverson.

“Our job,” Zunkel said, “is to hold the president, our only employee, accountable for what happens at the college, to support him in his role and what he does, but to hold him accountable.”

Duehmig vs. Van Dusen Citovic

The college board is a policy board. Its main role is budgetary and to hire or fire the president, noted Duehmig, who is running for reelection to a four-year term in his Zone 2, Position 3 seat against challenger Trudy Van Dusen Citovic, the co-owner of Van Dusen Beverages and the daughter of former Astoria Mayor Willis Van Dusen.

It is a challenging and sometimes frustrating position, Duehmig added. There is so much happening at the college — much of it complex — and it can feel like you don’t know everything that’s going on. The pandemic has only exacerbated the challenge.

But, he said, “we’re at an exciting time when it comes to looking at where we’re going in the future. This year has been crazy but it’s going to force a lot of changes in how we do things and that change is going to be uncomfortable in some cases for all involved.”

“From a board perspective, I think it’s going to be a challenge because we’re all going to have different ideas of how we go with that and how it meets the needs of our community.”

Duehmig is the interim director for the Oregon Office of Rural Health. Going forward, he said the college needs to better look at how it can meet students where they are. The college recently opened a community food bank on campus, but the pandemic highlighted numerous social inequities, as well as the challenges many students face when it comes to affording school, finding child care or balancing work and family life with college courses.

Now, with colleges across the country offering even more flexibility and online options, Clatsop must find ways to remain competitive.

“We have to be able to adapt to what (students) are looking for,” Duehmig said.

Van Dusen Citovic is the owner of Fire Station Yoga and co-owner of The Rosebriar, both in Astoria.

She has served on the Friends of the Astoria Column board and Astoria’s traffic safety



Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian

The May election could change the direction of the college board.

committee. In addition to her own business undertakings, she works for the family business, Van Dusen Beverages, and previously worked as a real estate broker, in corporate strategy for PepsiCo and as a management consultant.

For families to stay in the area, she said, they need to be able to support themselves and their families. “And that comes from education,” she said, “That’s your best opportunity.”

“As long as we have a healthy, strong college here, it can provide resources,” Van Dusen Citovic said, adding, “Every aspect of our lives has been impacted by the pandemic, but the college has a lot of work ahead of it as it reimagines programs and services.”

There are three priorities in front of the college now, she believes: enrollment; addressing the management software; and taking a new look at construction proposed at Tongue Point to expand the college’s maritime science programs.

Van Dusen Citovic, who speaks Spanish and has volunteered as a bilingual resource at Astor Elementary School, also sees an opportunity for more outreach and programming aimed at Hispanic communities, as well as increased collaboration with the organizations that serve them.

Meyer vs. Preston

In the Zone 2, Position 2 race, incumbent Sara Meyer faces challenger Patrick Preston for a four-year term.

Meyer, who is retired, worked with job corps and community action in New Jersey and Astoria and co-owned The Compleat Photographer in Astoria. She previously served on the Astoria School District board and, in the late 1990s, sat on the college board during a time of transition at the institution.

The digital world was becoming more and more of a reality and the board was being asked to approve significant software purchases that soon became outdated. She feels the college is more intentional now about where it puts its money. Still, she called the college’s CampusNexus a “two-year nightmare.”

She does feel the college is starting to move beyond some of the issues associated with the software. She also supports the expansion of maritime programs, seeing it as another way to create job opportunities for students.

“I am more than impressed with the people that are stepping up at the college, that are doing the work,” Meyer said. “I want to enable them to form that powerful base of education. I think a board that is really supportive of what’s going on enables that to happen. It doesn’t put barriers up.”

Preston, a retired disabled veterans employment representative, said a seat on the college board fits in with what he has done in the community for decades to “connect people, bring resources to bear, planning and development and then being held fiscally responsible.”

“My intent is not to sit up and say, ‘yea’ or ‘nay’ or ‘blah, blah, blah,’” he said. “It’s to be hands-on, out there promoting the college, meeting people, greeting people, getting people interested again.”

Preston has worked with the college and its programs in several capacities. He volunteered to teach the transitional assistance program for the U.S. Coast Guard at the college for four years and was the local veterans employment representative in Astoria. He worked with state senators and representatives to provide services to veterans and helped build the veterans center at the college.

Even before the pandemic, in his work with veterans and community partners, Preston saw how hard it could be getting people registered as students.

His top priorities if elected are to help the college better understand the physical constraints post-pandemic.

“Our environment has changed and how are we working to meet those needs as well as the needs of our students?” he said.

Like Van Dusen Citovic, he also questions the proposed maritime program expansion, wondering if it is the best use of college resources. He believes the college board could do more to boost registration with the creation of speciality programs and by reaching out to partners in the area to discover what sort of skills and training businesses are looking for in workers.

Zunkel vs. Iverson

For the Zone 3, Position 6 seat, incumbent David Zunkel is running against challenger Suzanne Iverson for a two-year unexpired term.

Zunkel, a retired physician, has served

on the board since 2019. When he was appointed, he made a commitment to run for election to complete the two years remaining on the term.

“I just think community college is a great place to put my time to help students of all levels achieve the sort of education they wish to achieve,” he said. “So anything I can do to assist in that process and make it more available or affordable, easier, I’m all for doing it.”

He believes the board must prioritize looking at and understanding the challenges ahead. Community colleges always struggle with funding and there are concerns about the recruitment and retention of students. A number of Clatsop’s students face housing and food insecurity issues, he noted, a discovery that came out of a survey of the college and prompted the creation of the food pantry.

He said it is crucial that the college find a balance between offering in-person and distance learning alternatives for students coming out of the pandemic. The CampusNexus software is a problem, but one he thinks the college’s administration is addressing.

“As a board, we have to hold the president accountable and the president needs to hold the vendor accountable for making the improvement that they know have to be made to get us working well,” he said.

In general, Zunkel feels the board and the college are going in the right direction.

Iverson worked at the college for 18 years in the community education and workforce training department. During her time, she saw the rise in the use of computers and the expansion of the college facilities on the hill.

After she retired in 2003, she came back as a contractor for several years. She decided to run for the college board because of Lyman’s request and ongoing concerns in the community that businesses and individuals were not getting what they needed from the college’s programs, she said.

Her two daughters both obtained associate degrees from the college.

“I guess my heart has always been at the community college,” Iverson said.

Like Preston, she also wants to see training opportunities expanded. Student enrollment is a concern, as well.

Like Van Dusen Citovic, she believes there are more opportunities for the college to work in partnership with groups and organizations to draw students or create new programs and funding mechanisms.

Iverson believes the coronavirus pandemic has offered opportunities to rethink how the college delivers services and reaches students.

But with her background and experience, Iverson said she could “look outside the box and maybe see some opportunity.”

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