The Early Years of South Puget Sound Community College

by Lois J. Fenske

Technical Beginnings

The roots of South Puget Sound Community College are in technical education. Although Olympia Vocational Technical Institute, as it was originally called, was officially established in 1962, its roots go back to at least 1957 with the Olympia School Board's desire to expand adult education opportunities in the Olympia area. The program was housed at the old Olympia High School on Capitol Way in downtown Olympia. When classes began in 1957, 370 students had registered by the first two nights. By 1958, 816 adults were taking classes. The need was apparent.

In the spring of 1961, a group of Olympia citizens surveyed the area that was served educationally by the Olympia School District. The results indicated a need for a more structured form of adult technical education to support State government offices as well as local businesses. The outgrowth of the survey was the decision to establish the Olympia Vocational Institute in 1962.

The old Montgomery Ward Building on 4th Avenue housed the Olympia Vocational Technical Institute in the 1960s. *Courtesy Lois Fenske.*

This school was housed in the old Montgomery Ward Building on 4th Avenue in downtown Olympia. It responded over time to the community, adding and changing programs as needed. In 1962, there were 95 students in office/clerical, secretarial and a new field, electronic data processing. By September 1966, technical training expanded to 14 fields, including stenography, cashier-checker retail and horticulture which was offered through Briggs Nursery.

The mascot for the Voc-Tech was a turtle named "OVIE" and the school motto was "Plodding wins the race." The students called themselves "Techites" and the yearbooks during those early years, the Turtle Tales, indicate that there was tremendous school spirit and pride. Although the facilities were somewhat lacking, the camaraderie among the administrators, faculty and students was considerable. Lunch at the Spar Restaurant down the street was a common occurrence among them.

Centralia College

But the history of Olympia Voc-Tech cannot be told without also considering the history of Centralia College. In 1967, with the passage of the Community College Act, District 12, encompassing Lewis and Thurston counties, was created.

Until 1963 local communities in Washington State supported their junior colleges (as they were then called) through local school districts. Certainly in the case of Centralia College, there was a financial commitment by the community—in particular the business community—

to support its college, even during the hard financial times of the Great Depression of the 1930s. Centralia College has been and is today the intellectual and cultural center of the Centralia/Chehalis area. Its importance in that community cannot be overemphasized.

The Community College Act

One of the provisions of the Community College Act authorized the merging of vocational-technical schools in a service area with the newly established community colleges. (Olympia Voc-Tech and Centralia College were in the same service area.) The other option for the vocational schools was to remain under the control of their local school districts. The latter option was taken by the Olympia School District, and Olympia Voc-Tech remained under its control. However by November 1968, the Olympia School Board was having second thoughts about the voc-tech and some board members thought that Centralia College (District 12) should take over its administration.

Other people had different views. Olympia Voc-Tech Director, Robert Boyden, as well as the faculty and students, indicated that they wanted the school to remain with the Olympia School District. Students marched in the streets of Olympia with large banners that proclaimed "Keep OVTI in Olympia." It was assumed that the school would be moved to the Centralia area.

The Olympia School Board members knew that if they opted to keep Olympia Voc-Tech, there would be less funding available for other District expansion than if the vocational school came under the control of the community college system. And under either jurisdiction, Olympia Voc-Tech desperately needed to expand, in space, equipment and new technical programs to meet the needs of the community. As a temporary solution, an agreement was reached for District 12 to have interim control of the school from July 1, 1970 to June 30, 1971.

Olympia Vocational Technical Institute's sign on Highway 101. *Courtesy Lois Fenske.*

District 12 and Technical Education

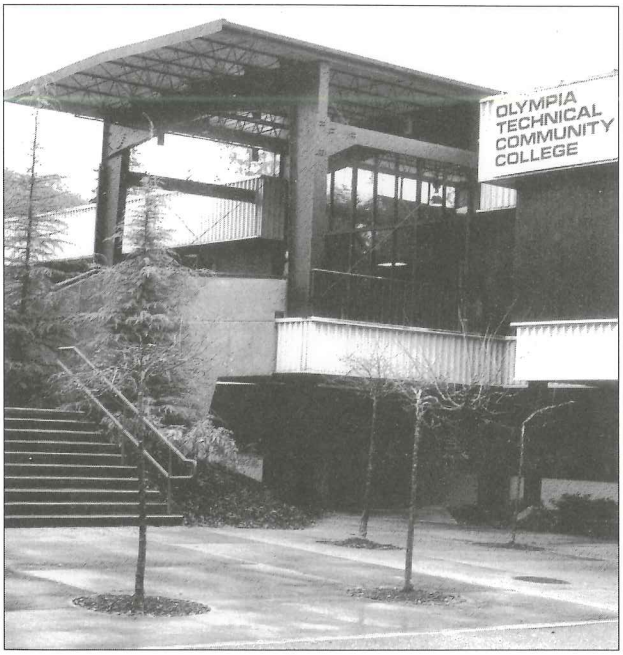
In the meantime, District 12's Board of Trustees, representing the citizens of the entire two-county area, in 1969 adopted a Master Plan for the 70s, that recognized the need for the District to provide technical education opportunities for adults in Lewis and Thurston counties.

The District began to pursue ways to meet this technical education need and started looking at parcels of land located between Centralia and Olympia to house Centralia College in more spacious surroundings and also to accommodate technical education through Olympia Voc-Tech, the logical technical component.

With the approval of the State Board, a site was purchased, the "Mottman Tract." This wooded area was located on Mottman Road near the intersection of Highways 101 and I-5. The groundbreaking ceremony was held July 8, 1970 with Governor Daniel J. Evans as keynote speaker.

Almost instantly, a school emerged from the woods as eleven temporary modular buildings were moved to the site. The first building was occupied on September 10, 1970 and housed all administrative offices, registration and the Board Room. Classes began the next week. By November 1970, all buildings were in place.

By December 1970 the Olympia School Board voted to permanently transfer the operation of Olympia Voc-Tech to Community College District 12 to take effect July 1, 1971. The school became part of



Programs at Olympia Technical Community College changed over time to meet community needs. *Courtesy Lois Fenske.*

the community college system. In the next few years, enrollment increased and new technical programs were added at the college: Auto, Welding, Dental Assisting, Horticulture, Licensed Practical Nursing, Carpentry, Horseshoeing and Business Machine Maintenance.

In 1976 the first permanent structure was built on the campus and the college name was changed to Olympia Technical Community College to reflect its status in the community college system. Technical programs continued to change to meet community needs.

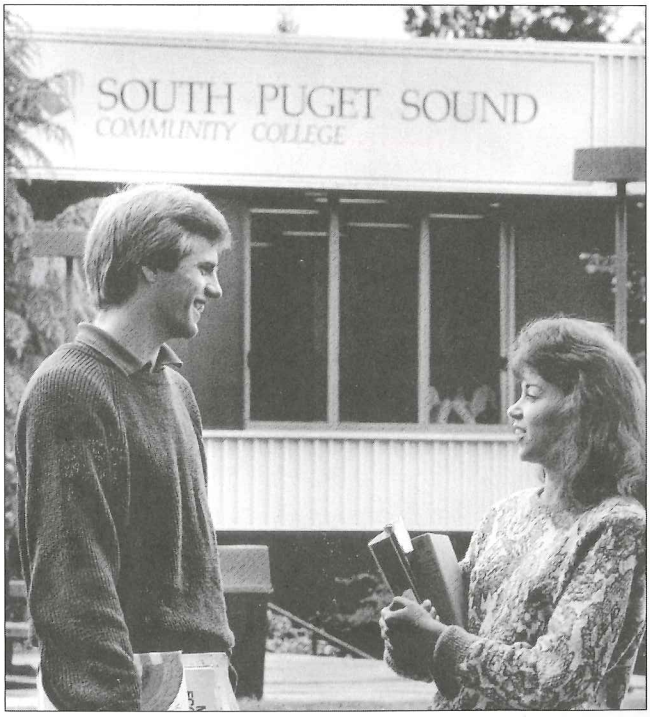
Olympia Technical Community College became a comprehensive community college in February 1982 with the first Associate of Arts degrees awarded in June 1982. The number and breadth of transfer courses exploded, including classes in the humanities, sciences, mathematics, anthropology and the performing arts. Several technical programs also were added in those years. In 1984 the institution's name was changed to South Puget Sound Community College to reflect its comprehensive status.

All was not peaceful in District 12, however. There would be attempts to split the college from District 12, in 1977, 1979, 1985, 1986, and finally, the successful attempt in 1988. The college's "Split" with District 12 would be a more wrenching experience for the faculty, staff, administrators and trustees than the protesting and marching in which Robert Boyden and his loyal band of followers had been involved in so many years before.

It would not be until July 1, 1988, when South Puget Community College split off from Centralia College and became a separate district, that all the early problems in the college would be finally resolved.

In 1995 the college expanded into north Thurston County with an annex at Hawks Prairie which will eventually become a satellite campus. Today, South Puget Sound Community College is a complex comprehensive community college meeting the needs of Thurston County residents. In June 2009, 1400 graduates received degrees and certificates in varied programs.

Lois J. Fenske was a faculty member in Economics and Business Administration at South Puget Sound Community College for over 30 years. She is a genealogist and currently is on the Board of the Olympia Historical Society. She has also served on the Olympia Heritage Commission.



South Puget Sound Community College has become a comprehensive community college. *Courtesy Lois Fenske.*