

Date: Jun 25, 2011; Section: Front Page; Page: A1

Nine years at SVC

Tollefson's contributions: Improved facilities, better teacher pay, skills center, good relationships

By AARON BURKHALTER

Staff Writer

M O U N T V E R N O N — Skagit Valley College President Gary Tollefson still keeps a yellow sheet of paper from a legal pad he used just after he was hired by the college nine years ago.

Despite a few creases in the corners and some staple holes on the top, the lined paper is still intact. On the top, Tollefson wrote his initials and the word “emphasis.” Under that he scrawled in thick, black felt-pen ink 10 things he wanted to work on once he was hired.

“I checked it every year at the end of the year to see how relevant it continued to be and how well I thought we were doing on these things,” Tollefson, 62, said.

This is the last year Tollefson will check that list, following his May announcement that he will retire Dec. 31. He ends his 30-year career of teaching and administration at the secondary and post-secondary level in six months, but still has his eye on how to improve the system for students.

Goals mostly met

Tollefson's list of goals reflects where the college was nine years ago and points to what it has become today. The top item said “continued healing,” referring to the prior president, Lydia Ledesma-Reese, resigning from her position after a vote of no confidence from the faculty union. The third item said “facilities development,” referring to his hope to build up the college with new buildings and infrastructure.

Mary Alice Grobins, vice president of administrative services, said the college looked like a run-down high school when Tollefson came on.

“Overall, this campus looks very different physically than when he walked in the door,” Grobins said.

During his time, Tollefson oversaw the remodeling of the Gary Knutzen Cardinal Center, the construction of Laura Angst Hall and a handful of other building and remodeling projects across the college system.

He helped local schools build the Northwest Career and Technical Academy, which serves high school and college students. The academy's main building is located Skagit Valley College's Mount Vernon campus.

“That's a unique model,” said Mount Vernon School District Superintendent Carl Bruner. “Most skill centers don't have a connection with a community college.”

Grobins said he also brought about a different administrative environment, bringing faculty pay up from among the lowest in the state in 2003. Today, full-time faculty are well above the average.

Neta Simpkins Cahill, who has taught at the college for 20 years and headed the faculty union at one time, said Tollefson maintained amicable relationships with the teachers throughout salary negotiations. Even in the last year, Tollefson met with every faculty member slated to be laid off.

“Even when other colleges were having a pretty rough time internally, we were pretty steady at Skagit,” she said. There was a lot of trust between faculty and administration that a lot of schools weren't really experiencing.”

More work to do

As Tollefson leaves, there's still more work to be done. While full-time faculty teachers at the college have better pay, parttime teachers — representing half of the school's faculty — are still among the lowest paid.

Following austere budget cuts due to diminishing state support, Tollefson said the school's real challenge will be

improving student achievement at the schools.

He said he's happy to leave budgetary concerns behind and work on student learning. Three years in a row of significant budget cuts took their toll, he said.

Earlier this year, Tollefson closed a \$5.5 million budget gap by laying off 38 employees and reducing other positions.

"That's hard work year after year, and it's a lot of work to carry," Tollefson said. "It has consumed so much of our mental energy."

Tollefson said he hopes with six more months of working on student achievement, he won't end his term on such a sour note.

Grobins said, "I don't think he'll be viewed as the architect of the deconstruction of the college," she said. "(The school staff members) feel he gave good leadership during a very difficult time, had respect for people, did the very best he could."

Cahill agreed.

"I know that he would have liked to go out riding on the crest of a wave, not in the trough of a financial crisis," she said. "(But) I know he has a long resume to look back on and be proud of. I'm sorry it was such a difficult year for him to finish up with."

His last commencement

Tollefson said one thing hasn't changed year after year at the college — the joy of attending a commencement ceremony.

In 30 years of teaching, Tollefson has attended 27 graduations. He convened his last June 19, recognizing 439 students receiving transfer degrees, 49 receiving diplomas and 785 receiving professional degrees and certificates.

"It seems like these should get old, it seems like work," Tollefson said. "Every time, including this time, you get there, and the students are there and their families are there and it is absolutely the best. It's like going through your own, the sense of satisfaction there is."

Aaron Burkhalter can be reached at 360-416-2141 or aburkhalter@skagitpub.lishing.com. Follow him on Twitter at http://twitter.com/schools_svh.



Outgoing Skagit Valley College President Gary Tollefson holds a list of 10 priorities he wrote down when he came to the college nine years ago. The recently constructed Laura Angst Hall meets his goal to develop the school's facilities.

Scott Terrell /

Skagit Valley Herald