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LOOKING PAST Graduation Day

Amid a still grim economic climate, local students face tough choices in attending a college or university and how to pay for it

Story by **ERINN UNGER / Skagit Valley Herald**

Skagit Valley College student Elizabeth Hopper is happy to be graduating — and just as happy to be doing so without literally mortgaging her future.

Hopper, who was home-schooled, completed the Running Start program at Skagit Valley College. The program allows students to earn high school and college credits at the same time, and it saved her thousands of dollars she plans to put toward continuing her higher education at Fairhaven College at Western Washington University in Bellingham.

Without those savings and financial aid, it would have been tough to afford a university, she said. And she wants to avoid taking out loans at all costs.

“... I’ve heard all those horror stories about people graduating and not being able to pay,” she said.

More than 1,000 local high school seniors and about 900 Skagit Valley College students will graduate this month amid a still-grim economic outlook.

Tuition keeps climbing

Tuition at state universities has skyrocketed since the start of the recession — by 50 percent since 2008 at the University of Washington and Washington State University. Students are increasingly taking on a higher debt load to pay for their educations, with U.S. student loan debt reaching historic highs of about \$870 billion in March, according to the Federal Reserve Bank of New York.

Even Congress is battling over student loan costs, with the interest rate for the current subsidized Stafford loan set to double July 1. Lawmakers have said they want to keep the interest rate low, but can’t agree on how. Bills meant to preserve the rate at 3.4 percent for another year stalled in the Senate earlier this month.

With the frantic reality that tuition costs will continue to climb sharply in the future, students are weighing options — and sometimes making tough choices — to attend a college or university, said Jennifer Moyer, the career center coordinator at Mount Vernon High School.

“In this economic climate, parents are having to tell their kids that they’re not going to be able to pay as much as they hoped,” she said.

Some students are thinking about forgoing dorms for potentially cheaper housing off campus, while others are “resigned” to the reality that they’ll need to borrow money, Moyer said. Most will be looking for parttime work to help pay living and studying expenses, she said.

“Not working at college is kind of a luxury now,” she said. “Most people have to.”

Some students are choosing private schools because of their sometimes superior financial aid packages.

“The financial aid closes the gap and sometimes makes (private schools) cheaper,” said Brennan Spinnie, a senior at Sedro-Woolley High School.

Finding the money

Spinnie, who plans to study engineering, is heading to the University of Pennsylvania, where his tuition will be covered. He considered Gonzaga University in Spokane, but going to the private college in Washington was twice as expensive as studying thousands of miles away, he said.

Community scholarships also have helped ease the financial burden, Spinnie said.

“There is help for them, but they have to work for it,” Moyer said of the scholarships. Mount Vernon High School students received about \$100,000 in community scholarship aid this year — more than past years, she said.

But applying for these scholarships isn’t easy and is time-consuming, Moyer said.

Spinnie spent 10 hours filling out scholarship applications and writing essays, but it’s paid off, he said. He received four community scholarships.

“Whenever a scholarship comes in the mail, they’re very excited,” he said of his parents.

After all, if he hadn’t received that aid, he wouldn’t have been able to go to Pennsylvania.

“I’d probably go to a community college and try to transfer,” he said.

Considering the options

During tough economic times, Skagit Valley College sees an increase in enrollment, said Arden Ainley, public information officer for the community college. Over 2010-11, nearly 11,000 students had enrolled, according to the State Board Annual Year Reports for the college.

About half of the students applying to graduate this quarter received a transfer degree, and for Hopper, that’s

helped her avoid paying “for a bunch of classes that I’m not going to use later on.”

She said going to Skagit Valley College and then taking some time off was a positive experience. It helped her determine exactly what she wanted to study — psychology as it relates to gender and sexuality. She’d like to do research and work in counseling.

But after a year and a quarter at the school, she’s just excited to graduate.

“I really want to get the show on the road,” Hopper said.

Though many of Priscilla Kelley’s classmates at Mount Vernon High School will go to state schools, she, like Spinnie, is also heading to an Ivy League.

Valedictorian of her senior class, Kelley was accepted to Harvard University. Harvard’s investment in financial aid has increased by more than 78 percent, exceeding tuition increases, since 2007, according to the university’s website.

“Harvard paid for almost everything,” Kelley said.

The 19-year-old, who’s passionate about sports medicine and plans to study to be an orthopedic surgeon, also received multiple scholarships, including one of the top Elks National Foundation scholarships.

Many of Kelley’s peers are nervous about rising tuition and the cost of loans.

“It seems to be a general theme going around,” she said. “How are we going to pay for it?”

Though she doesn’t have to worry about Harvard’s \$54,000-per-year price tag, the excitement of heading to Massachusetts is shaded with nerves and sadness. Kelley said she’s going to miss the help she’s received from the high school staff during her four years there.

Students’ new fears about paying for college still coexist with age-old ones — whether they will fit in at their school and succeed; whether they’ll make friends; and how the transition will go from “kings and queens” of their high school to campus newbies.

Despite the fears and sadness that will accompany graduation, there’s also that exciting moment when students throw their hats into the air and graduate.

Moyer is also hopeful.

“I think it’s getting harder, but I have hope for the future,” Moyer said. “I’m not worried about the kids. I think they can do it.”

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Skagit Valley College graduation ceremonies

Thursday, June 14: 2 p.m., San Juan Center, 221 Weber Way, Friday Harbor

Saturday, June 16: 3:30 p.m., Whidbey Island campus, Oak Harbor High School, 1 Wildcat Way

Sunday, June 17: 3 p.m., Mount Vernon campus, Duvall Pavilion, 2405 E. College Way

Area high school graduation ceremonies

Today, June 3: Skagit Adventist Christian School, 11 a.m., North Cascade Seventh-day Adventist Church, 800 Peacock Lane, Burlington

Thursday, June 7: Emerson High School, 7 p.m., First Baptist Church, 103 Fifth St., Mount Vernon

Thursday, June 7: La Conner High School, 7 p.m., high school gym

Friday, June 8: Burlington-Edison High School, 7 p.m., Kirkby Field, high school

Friday, June 8: Concrete High School, 7 p.m., high school gym

Friday, June 8: Sedro-Woolley High School, 7 p.m., high school gym

Friday, June 15: Mount Vernon Christian School, 7 p.m., high school gym

Wednesday, June 20: Anacortes High School, 7 p.m., high school gym

By the numbers

State Resident Undergraduate Tuition and Fees

	2008-09	2011-12
University of Washington	\$6,697	\$10,223
Washington State University.....	\$6,720	\$9,886
Central Washington University	\$4,918	\$7,125
Eastern Washington University	\$4,701	\$6,794
The Evergreen State College	\$4,797	\$6,909
Western Washington University.....	\$4,839	\$7,048
Community and technical colleges (average).....	\$2,730	\$3,542

■ **Source:** Washington Higher Education Coordinating Board



Skagit Valley College student Elizabeth Hopper

is looking forward to using the money she saved while in Running Start, a program that allows students to earn high school and college credits at the same time, to attend Fairhaven College at Western Washington University in Bellingham.



Sedro-Woolley High School senior Brennan Spinnie

is headed to the University of Pennsylvania to study mechanical engineering. Spinnie said without the community scholarships he's received, he probably would have had to consider attending a local community college instead of Pennsylvania.



Mount Vernon High School senior Priscilla Kelley

is headed to Harvard University, and plans on becoming an orthopedic surgeon. She said she wouldn't be able to afford Harvard if the university wasn't covering her entire tuition.

Photos by Scott Terrell / Skagit Valley Herald