

Focused learning

College, others study how to develop economy through education

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Photo/Kelly Wenzel
Jonathan Owens works overhead using argon gas to weld two plates together during class at Gillette College on Thursday afternoon. Welding is a popular course of study at the college, which is studying how best to **expand the institution's** areas of education.

Education and economic development go hand in hand.

That's the belief of the Energy Capital Higher Education Task Force, which is conducting a higher education market analysis to see what direction the college should expand to most benefit the community and local industries.

"We have a responsibility to serve our industries here to supply a workforce and an obligation to be a major player in economic diversity," said Mark Englert, CEO of Gillette College.

Phil Christopherson, CEO of Energy Capital Economic Development, said there were many discussions about what degree programs Gillette College should add, including MBAs and engineering. But the list kept growing.

“We wanted to take a good, hard look at it before we commit a lot of time, resources and money to the effort,” Christopherson said.

Doug Gilbert, who is heading up the study with his firm Lone Tree Academics, spoke with Campbell County Commissioners last week to discuss what the study had found so far. He presented the research of Phil Mccready, a development economist from Colorado who headed up the economic portion of the study with his firm, Innovation Economics.

One thing that surprised Gilbert was that although there was a drop-off from 2012 to 2016 in the number of **energy-related jobs in the area, that wasn't** the case with most of the other sectors, which remained relatively stationary.

“Usually, when you have a big employer downsize like that, you see everything kind of fall out,” he said. **“That says there’s some resiliency in the economy, but what it says for a higher education program is we need to pay attention to those sectors.”**

Mccready also found that there are sectors that are under-represented in Gillette, such as health care, information technology and manufacturing.

That does not mean the college should ignore the mining industry altogether, Gilbert **said. Instead, it means that it shouldn't focus all its attention on one area because there** are others that could benefit from expanded programs.

“We’re not taking anything away from what we do in our tech programs, but we recognize that there is growing demand for some bachelor programs, such as education **and business,” Englert said.**

Although future industries and businesses aren't being ignored, the main focus is supporting and expanding what's already here, he said.

Too often when communities try to diversify their economies, they overlook their biggest **strengths and chase whatever industry is in vogue, regardless if they're able to handle** it, said Commissioner Mark Christensen.

“Sometimes we don't focus as much on our strengths as we should,” he said. **“We have a very qualified blue-collar workforce. Cheap energy is our best asset here.”**

Christopherson said there are a lot of people in senior management positions nearing **retirement age, and their successors** “need better business education and more **technical skills.”**

“Whatever we can do to help the upcoming generation of executive leadership will better serve our economy, our community and our businesses,” he said.

One of the college’s goals is to partner with the University of Wyoming to offer classes in Gillette. Whether that will be courses on site, online or a blend of both is unknown.

The key is not just to convince UW to have a physical presence in Gillette, but that once here, to **“make it difficult for them to leave,” Gilbert said.**

“Put things in a structure that makes it long-lasting and sustainable,” he said. “If they do that, they could offer lots of programs here.”

Cost

Campbell County is paying \$40,000 for the market analysis, while Gillette College, the Board of Cooperative Educational Services and the University of Wyoming are each paying \$10,000.

Once the study is complete and recommendations made, it will be up to the college to decide how and when to implement them.

Now, the college is trying to deal with a \$690,000 shortfall, something that Englert is following closely. He said the institution will have to look at its priorities once the study is finished.

“It would be incumbent on us to step back, look at the recommendations, prioritize, think about how you generate a funding mechanism and leverage partnerships,” he said.

“The current budget issues are very concerning, but it just points out the need to grow and diversify our economy,” Christopherson said. “Long term, we need to develop other industries so that we have a strong economy all the time, not just when coal is good.”

The next phase of the market study begins this week, when Entangled Solutions, the third firm in the study, will interview about 100 local stakeholders in a number of industries to gauge what Gillette needs, going beyond statistics and to the people themselves.

“It’s about community penetration, how many people can you meet with to understand what the needs are,” Englert said.