

Opinion: Fiscal good news from Sierra Nevada College

By Lynn Gillette

Since Sierra Nevada College's 2013 fiscal year just ended on June 30, I wanted to share some of the highlights of what we have accomplished during the past year.

At a time of significant change in higher education, I am proud to lead a nonprofit institution committed to academic excellence and student achievement. We have benefited enormously from a dedicated board of trustees composed of 30 community-based individuals, who have worked diligently under the leadership of our board Chair Wayne Prim and our Vice-Chair Atam Lalchandani.

Academic Excellence – A key strategic priority is to continue to increase academic rigor.

We received exceptional reports from our accreditor, the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities, and were granted permission to expand our academic offerings, including a master of fine arts in creative writing.

The cutting-edge Holman Arts & Media Center is on track to open in fall 2013 and will transform how we teach critical thinking and analysis to our students, shape the future of the arts at SNC, and connect with the community.

We successfully launched our low-residency MFA in creative writing; this brings renowned authors such as Kelle Groom, Téa Obreht, Brian Turner, Patricia Smith, and Colum McCann to our campus and our community.

We launched a master of education with a Ron Clark Academy specialization. This program educates teachers in the approach

and techniques utilized by the Ron Clark Academy, which has received national and international accolades for its impressive results in teaching middle school students in Atlanta.

We redesigned our Core 101 class to introduce all incoming students to active learning and our culture of learning in order to ensure that they are fully prepared for a rigorous learning environment based on complete student engagement and advance preparation.

Capstone courses have been implemented in every major; a capstone course is a senior-level requirement that integrates and pulls together all prior coursework.

Fifteen student research projects were given at four research fairs and competitions across the country, including the National Conference on Undergraduate Research, which promotes undergraduate student research and creative activity undertaken in partnership with faculty and other mentors.

We have re-engineered our curriculum to require demonstrated proficiency in four critical skills viewed as essential for success: written communication, oral communication, critical thinking, and visual literacy. These initiatives cut across and are common to every discipline and major at SNC.

Our women and men's alpine ski teams once again won the U.S. Collegiate Ski and Snowboard Association team national championships, bringing the women's championships to 18 over the past 24 years and the men's to 17 over the past 24 years. The men's snowboard team has won all seven national championships since they were formed in 2006. The cumulative grade point average for all members of the ski and snowboard teams is 3.6 and this year, the highest overall GPA was held by the men's alpine ski team with an average of 3.9. English Chair June Saraceno received the Nevada Humanities Outstanding Teaching of the Humanities Award; Business Department Chair

Kendra Wong was selected Nevada's Center for Entrepreneurship and Technology 2013 Faculty Adviser of the Year.

We continue to place our graduates in top graduate schools. For example: Logan Lape at Parsons The New School For Design; Lauren Upton at University College London; Jason Paladino at UC Berkeley School of Journalism; and 2012 Valedictorian, Zaira Perez at the Elliot School of International Affairs, George Washington University.

One of SNC's 2012 valedictorian candidates, Andrew Gauthier, was recognized as the Valedictorian for his graduating class in the postgraduate diploma in hospitality management program at the Glion Institute of Higher Learning. Located in Switzerland, Glion Institute is ranked No. 2 among schools for international hospitality management in the world.

An SNC student team, Pure Ski Experience, placed second in the undergraduate division of the Donald W. Reynolds Tri-State Business Plan competition, beating teams from Nevada, Arkansas and Oklahoma, and was the only Nevada team to place. In addition, SNC had three of the six team finalists for the Nevada statewide competition. The team's cumulative winnings were \$39,500. Pure Ski Experience's three team members are all Olympic athletes majoring in global business management and ski business and resort management.

We have approved the expansion of our athletic program; men and women's lacrosse launches in fall 2014, to be followed by cross country running and soccer.

New initiatives in alumni and parent programming, including our first major homecoming weekend in spring 2013, have transformed the way we reach out to these constituencies. By strengthening the connection between alumni, parents and SNC and expanding networking, we are increasing opportunities for both current students and graduates.

Strategic Partnerships – A key priority is to leverage our

core strengths to increase program opportunities through strategic partnerships and to expand our national and international reach.

We partnered with Middlebury College to bring their innovative MiddCORE Immersion program to Sierra Nevada College. Thirty-six students from colleges around the U.S., including schools such as Middlebury, SNC, Brown, and Stanford, convened on our campus for the intensive four-week program which also brought together an impressive array of mentors from around the country, as well as from here in Incline Village.

We partnered with Vail Resorts to enhance the talents and opportunities of Vail staff and SNC students, including a speaker series featuring Vail leadership on our campus, training from our faculty for Vail's staff, and internship and career opportunities for SNC students and graduates. It will take our ski business and resort management program to a new level.

We partnered with ChinaCast to bring students from Chinese universities to SNC. Four full-time students came in the spring and we expect eight to ten more full-time students in fall 2013. The program is a 1+3 program where the students will study their first year at a Chinese university, and complete their remaining three years at SNC. In addition, 25 senior level students from China will be here for two weeks in late July.

We developed new relationships with local businesses to place both interns and recent graduates. IT Convergence, a firm with worldwide offices, has hired six members of the class of 2013 and wants to employ twenty student interns in the coming academic year.

We have expanded our relationship with SummerFest and once again world-renowned artists will perform classical music on our campus, benefiting both the community and the region.

Financial Stability – A fundamental tenet of our financial policy is that operating revenues will exceed operating expenses.

For FY 2013, we will have a positive operating margin with operating revenues exceeding operating expenses. It will exceed the FY 2012 operating margin by approximately \$1 million and exceed the average operating margins of FY 2007-FY 2011 by \$4 million.

We hit our \$2 million FY 2013 goal for fundraising, and this does not include the Holman Arts & Media Center that was booked in FY 2012.

In the fall, we had the highest undergraduate enrollment in our history with a student headcount of 553.

The most recent data shows our default rate on student loans is 4.1 percent, compared to 9.1 percent nationally and 9.5 percent in Nevada. This is a result of our work with our students to ensure that they borrow responsibly and also reflects their post-graduation employment success.

For the first time, our freshmen retention rate rose above the national average to 78 percent.

We continue to increase undergraduate enrollment during the summer. For the summer of 2013, undergraduate credit hours have more than doubled, increasing by 120 percent. Moreover, undergraduate credit hours have increased 449 percent since the summer of 2008.

We have strengthened the senior leadership team with two extraordinary hires in finance (Sue Johnson) and development (Dino Hernandez).

Although this list is far from exhaustive, it is an impressive array of accomplishments. More than anything, it is a testament to what we have all done together – Board, faculty,

staff, students, alumni, parents, donors, and community members. I look forward to providing you with an equally impressive list of our successes in FY 2014 and I invite you to continue to be a vital and integral part of our unrelenting quest for greatness.

Lynn G. Gillette is president of Sierra Nevada College.