

Attorney says higher education needs citizen leadership

By Ann Strosnider

Higher education faces a crisis in Washington state, and the state Legislature refuses to show any leadership, internationally known trial lawyer Bill Marler told a luncheon gathering of Olympic College supporters Monday.

"The stakes are enormous," the Bainbridge Island resident said, and that's why it's so important that citizens take matters into their own hands.

Marler spoke at the annual community luncheon, kicking off the campaign to raise funds for the Olympic College Foundation. The goal for the 2004-05 school year is to raise \$150,000 for scholarships, programs and capital projects.

More than 300 people lunched on shrimp salad, grilled chicken and chocolate mousse at Bremer Student Center.

Joan Hanten, the foundation's executive director, announced several new gifts Monday, including a \$50,000 endowment for student excellence from John and Terri Hern, owners of Courtesy Auto Group in Poulsbo; \$15,000 from Tim and Shirley Ryan of Tim Ryan Construction for the nursing laboratory at OC Poulsbo; and a \$40,000 faculty excellence award created through a state match of privately donated funds.

Best known for his representation of victims in the Jack in the Box and Odwalla E. coli cases, Marler was born at Harrison Hospital, and both his parents taught at Olympic College. He attended the college in 1976 and went on to graduate from Washington State University and Seattle University School of Law.

While the University of Washington and WSU are proud of the high grade-point averages of incoming freshmen, they are actually a barrier for many students, said Marler, a former WSU regent and a member of the state Higher Education Coordinating Board.

"This year you had to have a 3.6 gpa to get into WSU or the UW," he said. "If that had been the requirement when I went to WSU, I would not be standing here today. ... College can't be just for the rich and those with a 4.0."

State schools are facing a crisis in the need for more capacity and for increased funding, he said.

By the year 2010 we'll need 35,000 more spaces in state colleges than we have now, Marler said, and by 2020 we'll need 100,000 more.

In 1977, a student in the state system paid just 25 percent of the cost of his or her education, he said; today the students pay 46 percent.

It's in everyone's interest to support higher education, he said, because a college graduate earns an average of \$50,000 a year compared to \$29,000 for a high school graduate. Those earning more pay more in taxes and have more buying power, which supports the whole economy.

He's a strong supporter of Initiative 884, which would raise state sales tax by 1 cent to create a \$1 billion education trust fund for preschool, kindergarten through high school education and higher education. It would fund an additional 25,000 college and technical school enrollments and extend state Promise Scholarships to the top 30 percent of graduating high school classes.

"We've been pandered to for so long with the story that it's better to keep our money for ourselves," Marler told the gathering. "Now I have to ask, what are you doing to help? Will you show leadership?"

Reach reporter Ann Strosnider at (360) 792-9219 or astrosnider@kitsapsun.com.