

# The Rootstock: How WWCC's Center for Enology and Viticulture came to be

Gwendolyn Elliott, Special to the Walla Walla Union-Bulletin  
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The Center for Enology and Viticulture at 3020 E. Issacs Ave under construction in 2002 or 2003.  
Courtesy of Walla Walla Community College

## Editor's Note

In this second installment of our three-part series, we continue our exploration of the history and impact of the Walla Walla Community College's Enology and Viticulture program, turning 25 this year. For part one, [click here](#).

## MORE INFORMATION



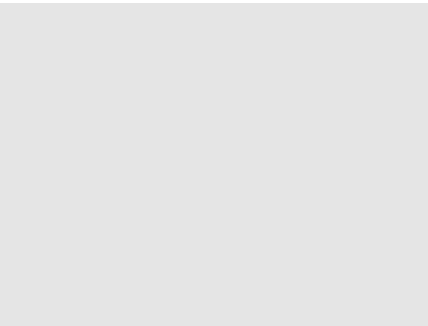
Myles Ahead: 25 years of Enology and Viticulture at WWCC

From 1984 until his retirement in 2016, Dr. Steven VanAusdle was the president of Walla Walla Community College where he focused on developing academic and training programs through an economic lens.

After NAFTA went into effect in 1994 and over 1,200 local workers lost their jobs, “next thing we knew, we had nearly 100 students showing up to the college for training and retraining,” VanAusdle remembers. But with regional products and services now cheaper elsewhere, and area lumber and food processing industries tanking, he recalls thinking, “retraining for what?”

“What we were looking for was a value-added commodity that could be raised in this area that would drive economic growth.”

— Dr. Steve VanAusdle, former WWCC president



**Lift off: The graduates pushing Washington wine to new heights**

With a background in agricultural economics, VanAusdle recognized a silver lining. “We started to identify things we could do. We needed to realign our programs to what could be emerging opportunities.

“What we were looking for was a value-added commodity that could be raised in this area that would drive economic growth. The wine industry was small at the time. I knew all of [the local winemakers] personally. I had Gary Figgins and Rick Small do a wine tasting out there my very first year as president for a welcome back to the faculty. Everyone really enjoyed it. Well, we were drinking some of the best cabernet in the world,” VanAusdle says.

Seeing potential in local viticulture, and in partnership with Dr. Myles Anderson, founding director (profiled in part one), the Center for Enology and Viticulture started to take root.

Figgins, founding winemaker of Leonetti Cellars, was an early booster, helping to raise funds for the construction of the center's main building, some from his own pocket, as many founding Walla Walla winemakers did at the time.

Figgins says VanAusdle was persuasive when asking for support. “He commands attention when he talks. When he was talking about this whole enology and viticulture thing, you think, ‘Geez, I need to donate some money to that.’”

(In 2019, with his wife Nancy, Figgins was inducted into the Washington Wine Hall of Fame, partially for his role helping to establish the Institute for Enology and Viticulture.)

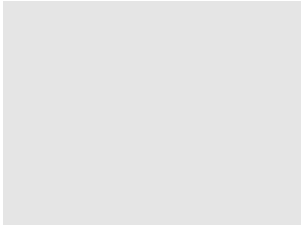
Figgins is also credited for coining what could be thought of as the unofficial charter for the institute — and maybe even the collaborative spirit of the Walla Walla wine industry itself, says Tim Donahue, who served in various roles at the college from 2010 until 2021, including enology instructor and director of winemaking.

“I had a wine press that broke and I was like, who do I know that knows anything about machines that also knows about the wine industry? I called Gary and he got the press running in a couple of hours. [Figgins graduated from the college with an associate’s degree in mechanical engineering and worked for years as a machinist.] It would have cost us thousands of dollars and all sorts of work and he just stepped in,” Donahue says.

“The quote that I always use is something Figgins used to say, and that’s ‘in Walla Walla you push the person in front of you and pull the person behind you.’ I viewed the whole purpose of my job was to pull up the students and then push the industry forward, and to try to innovate new things that the industry could use to become better.”

Rick Small, of Woodward Canyon, did his part, too. He helped convince the Washington State Wine Commission, where he served, that the program was viable in Walla Walla.

“I remember one of the comments at the time was, ‘Do we need it?’”

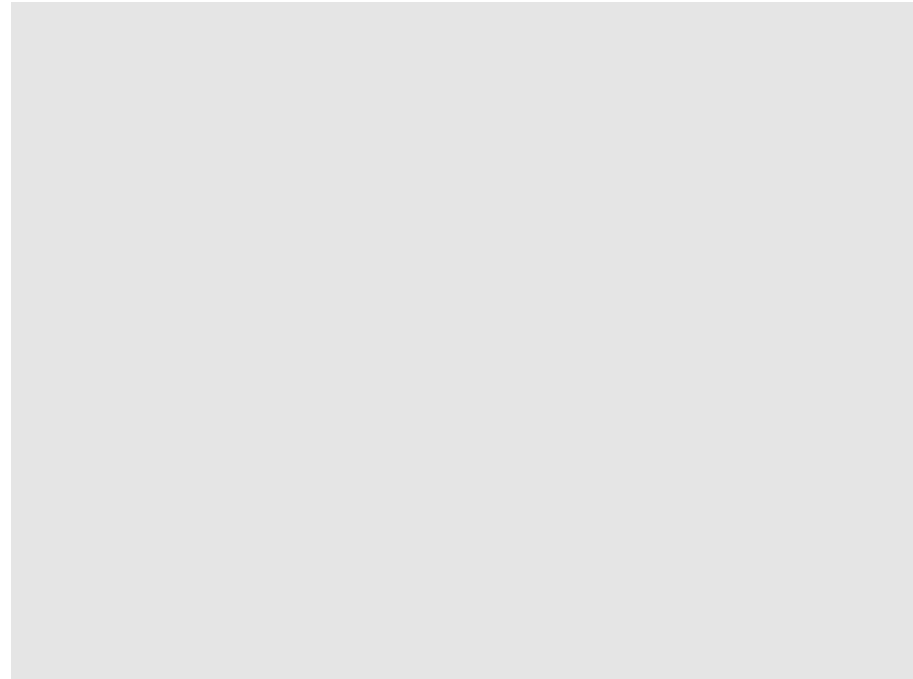


"Our camaraderie, our friendship with each other. All of us got along well together...I think the college's wine program was a result of that," says Rick Small, right, pictured here with Gary Figgins.

Courtesy

Small advocated for it, amplifying the voices of the local wine community and helping to attract needed attention and funding to the project.

“You want to start with really good building blocks,” Small says. “I think we absolutely did that. Our wine quality, our camaraderie, our friendship with each other. All of us got along well together. We worked together and we did stuff together, and I think the college’s wine program was a result of that—most of us were all having success at that time and so we could see the need. I think we all realized it was important.”



Visible from left to right: Rick Small, Garry Figgins, Marty Clubb, Tom Hedges (at podium), Myles Anderson, and Steve VanAusdle, October 17th, 2003 at the dedication of the Institute for Enology and Viticulture.

Courtesy

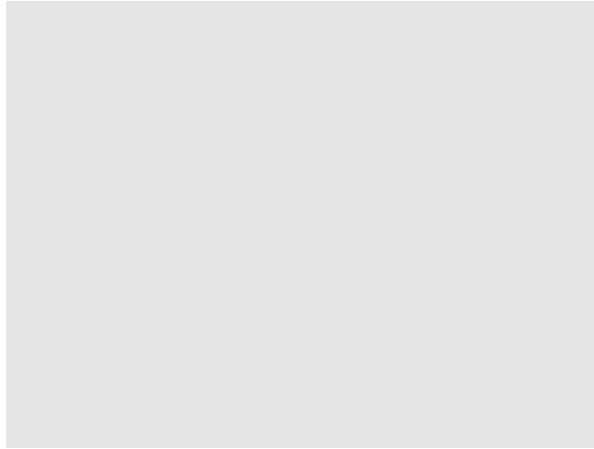
Casey McClellan, founding winemaker of Seven Hills Winery, wore a number of hats for the program over the years.

“As owners of Seven Hills Winery, our shareholders, and my wife Vicky and I were actively engaged with the E and V program from the early days. We contributed some initial funding, and launched a scholarship [the Seven Hills Winery/James E. McClellan Fund] through the WWCC Foundation to help support students in the program,” McClellan says.

Most recently, McClellan brought stability to the program when he stepped in as interim executive director following the abrupt departure of former ED, Stylianos Logothetis, who left “staff and students in a bit of turmoil,” says McClellan, who handed the baton last year to current executive director, Martin Fujishin.

“Knowing what I do of academia, I think it was extremely brave and visionary of Myles Anderson, WWCC, and our, at that time, small but growing industry to launch this project. Success was not guaranteed. It was and is an essential source of new employees, owners, and ancillary businesses that have helped create the highly regarded appellation we are today. I think I can safely say that we would not be where we are now without the E and V program’s contribution to our success as a winemaking and grape growing community.”

Sabrina Lueck, instructor of enology from 2011 to 2021 and interim director of winemaking from 2021 to 2022, shared a memory about a unique orientation Anderson offered to incoming students that exemplified the approachable style of teaching at the college.



Tim Donahue and Sabrina Lueck share a smile after a long day on the crush pad with students.

Gerry A Weber, E&V Class of 2020

“He would welcome the new students with an ‘Introduction to Walla Walla Wine’ lecture, which included a tasting of local classics including Leonetti, L’Ecole, Woodward Canyon, Seven Hills, Cayuse, and Walla Walla Vintners, of course. He would end the lecture with a toast where he would ask

the students to blend the wines together for a taste of the valley. Funny, delicious, and memorable!”

When asked for his memorable moments at the program, Leonard Law, a former student of the program who is now cellar master and vineyard manager at the center, remembered a particularly sparkling scenario.

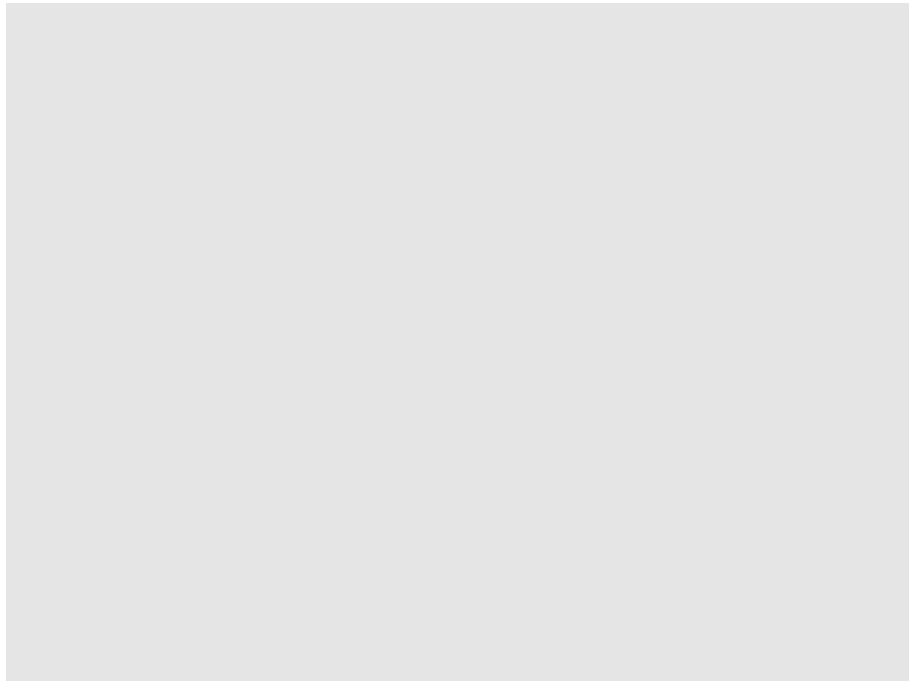
A bubbly wine, he explained, had “started popping the caps off in the cellar. I figured I had to get rid of it, so I put the bin of bottles on the forklift and started to head across campus to the big dumpster. And every time I hit a bump, something would explode flying past my ears. By the time I got to the dumpster, I lifted the bin up over the edge and when it fell in it was like the Fourth of July out there,” Law says, chuckling.

“There’s [been] a lot of explosions in my time here at the college,” says Law, who now also runs his own winery, Lacewing Cellars.

There were explosions for others, too — for 25 years, the program has been a launchpad for the skyrocketing careers of countless graduates, which we’ll explore in the next and final installment.

VanAusdle says it was Anderson, Figgins, and Small who created a foundation “for great things to happen” at the college, and in Walla Walla.

That — and everyone else who stepped in to help along the way.



The Institute for Enology and Viticulture at WWCC and the home of College Cellars.  
Greg Lehman, Walla Walla Union-Bulletin file

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