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An educational best buy

Community colleges serve the region in a number of ways

The economic development and broad-based worker education values are undeniable, but there is considerably more value than is obvious with the Blue Ridge Region's community colleges

BY DEBORAH NASON

As the region's educational engine gears up for the 2004-2005 school year, it is good to remember that our community colleges are a giant economic development octopus, reaching out to multiple segments of current and future economic players.

Its various arms serve students seeking "traditional" academic degrees; those entering industrial trades; professionals pursuing high-level technical certifications; workers in required workplace training programs; adults, employed or not, upgrading their education to advance their careers; children in elementary, middle and high schools, learning about careers; and retired leisure learners.

Companies are customers too, relying on the community college to es-



Virginia Western Community College's Robert Sandel

entially find, then train, new workers, thus enabling businesses to start or expand operations in a locality, or fill vacancies in high-demand occupations.

Robert Sandel, president of Virginia Western Community College (VWCC) in Roanoke, describes his college's key areas of service:

- **Industry and business training (20 percent).** This may be for new or expanding companies, upgrading of employee skills, and special workshops and seminars.

- **Dual enrollment programs in high schools (30 percent).** These programs allow high school students to earn college credits, at community college rates, concurrent with their regular high school studies.

- **Academic programs**

(50 percent). These include college transfer programs, as well as non-transfer programs leading to associate degrees and certificates.

One might argue that without a community college serving the educational needs of thousands, a local economy would eventually implode (VWCC has 15,000 students). A 2003 study by the Virginia Community College System found that "if there were no community colleges, Virginia would need \$396 million in additional tax dollars to accommodate the students at a four-year institution."

In spite of their importance, Virginia community colleges are caught in a squeeze between declining state funding and mushrooming enrollments. According to a report by the Education

Commission of the States, in 2000, Virginia community colleges received only about 31 percent of their funding from tuition and fees, with the rest coming mainly from state (58 percent) and federal sources (eight percent). Continued state funding does not look rosy, however. The Virginia Community College System's Winter 2004 magazine reports, "This year our [state] shortfall totals \$129 million."

Fundraising

Against this backdrop, VWCC has embarked on its first community fundraising effort in its 38-year history. The campaign began in 2002, with the goal of raising \$5.4 million for expansion in four key areas: health care career programs, technology training programs, scholarships and unrestricted

funds (to be used wherever needed most). To date, \$4 million has been raised.

Dabney Lancaster Community College in Clifton Forge already conducted a successful community fundraising campaign between 1998 and 2002, says College President Richard Teaff. The local business community in this rural area supported the effort, bringing in over \$2 million for an endowment that funded lab equipment, classrooms and over 60 scholarships. "We have a good story on what we do," he says. "Our scholarships go to local students, we're responsive to businesses' needs, and we're here after the training ends."

While community fundraising campaigns are relatively new to community colleges, Teaff points out that the four-year colleges have been doing it for decades. "It's something community colleges need to do," he says.

Community colleges are young, compared to most four-year colleges. Virginia's 23 community colleges were all established between 1966 and 1973. Accordingly, "community colleges don't have the luxury of a large alumni support group or big athletic programs to bring in big donors," says Jim Thweatt, CEO of Lewis-Gale

See COLLEGES, P.2

Colleges

From Page 1

Medical Center and president of the Virginia Western Community College Educational Foundation.

Alumni connection

Mark Rowh is vice president for planning and advancement for New River Community College in Dublin (he is also an occasional freelance writer for the Business Journal). He says that emphasis on alumni programs is a trend in community college development. "Now we realize that—over time—[the number of alumni] has become significant," he says, "and we're expanding our efforts to tap into it."

Rowh's school has been developing a Web site for the alumni association, with such features as an online donation form. Other initiatives include a quarterly newsletter, an electronic mailing list, and alumni-focused programs and activities.

"Some people tend to have a narrow view of what community colleges provide," says Rowh. "For example, companies in heavy industries that think of us for welding or drafting classes would be surprised at our high-tech offerings. Many still think of us as the old vocational school. In fact, we provide IT training to Virginia Tech staff.

"We want to get [businesses] to think of us



Richard Teaff: 'We have a good story on what we do'



James Thweatt: 'Community colleges don't have the luxury of a large alumni support group or big athletic programs to bring in big donors'

more as a partner, rather than just a provider of services," he adds.

Playing a role

John Williamson is chairman of the VWCC fundraising campaign, CEO of RGC Resources, and a graduate of VWCC. He explains the roles a community college plays in the local economy:

- **New business attraction.** "Would all the manufacturers in the last 20 to 30 years have come here without the community college training programs?" He explains that new employers to the area get start-up training for employees, at a subsidized rate.

- **Savings in training budgets.** For example, Virginia Western provided IT training to 160 employees of a local business, saving the company over \$145,000 over privately delivered training.

- **Expanded options.** He says that if there were no avenue to educate "non-traditional," low-income and/or average students, "the workforce would degrade because all they would be able to do is work in "old economy" jobs. Williamson speaks from experience, as "a poor boy from Bedford, who never took SATs."

- **Workforce planning.** He suggests some dire scenarios if there were no community college to plan for and train needed workers. "If the nursing shortage got severe enough, would you have to take your mom to Charlottesville to get adequate nursing care? Or if they couldn't get employees with the right kind of IT skills, would local businesses become non-competitive, go out

of business or leave?"

Saving

money

In an example of workforce planning, the Lewis-Gale Medical Center has expanded its relationship with Virginia Western in several ways in the last few years, by furnishing instructors, creating a mock operating room for a program for operating room techs, and donating \$1 million (over five years) to the Educational Foundation.

C E O Thweatt says it was a good investment: "We did a business plan of the cost of our recruiting, looking at expenses like advertising, recruiting agency fees, bringing in personnel from out of the area (or the country), moving expenses and sign-on bonuses." He says the million-dollar investment was estimated to pay for itself over the next three to eight years, by providing a ready source of health care professionals.

Big business is also investing in Central Virginia Community College (CVCC) in Lynchburg. According to president Darrel Staat, the college is just wrapping up the \$4 million major gifts campaign, culminating in the soon-to-be-opened Areva building, which will house a machine shop and HVAC and electronics labs. Framatome (now called Areva) pledged \$1 million to this campaign.

CVCC has been building up to this success over the last five years. "In 1999, we did a survey of area businesses to ask if the college was meeting their needs," says Staat. "The results showed that their needs were way beyond what we were doing. Since then, we've instituted 16 technical de-



Staat



Rowh



Williamson

grees, up from zero five years ago."

Stan Shoun, vice president of workforce development for CVCC, explains how small businesses also profit from community college services.

"Small companies don't have the resources for training, let alone the time," he says. "CVCC communicates through the professional networks" to set up courses which are made available for multiple small businesses at a time. "This has had a big effect [especially] on the building trades, which are made up of hundreds of small contractors."

Rosie Gantt is one of those small contractors. She is vice-president of R.M. Gantt Construction, a custom home builder located in Lynchburg. Three years ago, she and her husband approached CVCC to initiate a building trades program. "Construction was becoming a dying trade," she says. "Now we have an applied science degree that includes courses like blueprint reading, estimating and project management."



Gantt

Since the inception of the program, she has seen "a tremendous difference" in several areas, including:

- **Work ethic.** "When we hire twenty-year-old laborers, they know there is a future for themselves. We push the classes and pay 100 percent [of the tuition]."

- **Status.** "The status of the construction industry has been raised noticeably" in people's minds.

- **Profitability.** "Now we don't need to take the time to train employees. We can spend our time more focused on clients."

- **Recruiting.** "It has become easier to find people. They're coming to us."

She said that 24 people recently applied for summer positions, up from only one applicant several years ago.

(Deborah Nason is a Roanoke County-based freelance writer.)