

Two-year colleges welcome more aid

Virginia Western Community College says enrollment could top 10,000 this year.

By [David Harrison](#) – Roanoke Times – July 15, 2009

Robert Sandel has seen enrollment at Virginia Western Community College shoot through the roof while his budget is getting cut. Space has gotten so tight that the president of the Roanoke school has had to dig up green space to provide more parking spots.

"It's almost silly," he said. "I'm a green-space guy, and here I am cutting out my green space, but I don't have any more room to go."

On Tuesday, Sandel and other community college leaders welcomed a proposal from President Obama to pump an additional \$12 billion into two-year schools to help them deal with higher enrollments and shrinking state budgets.

"He's trying to get a lot more people into higher education," Sandel said.

At Virginia Western, enrollment could top 10,000 for the first time in the fall, he said. That's a 7 percent to 10 percent increase.

That's partly a reflection of the price of four-year colleges encouraging more students to seek out cheaper community colleges for their first two years. New partnerships with public school systems are sending hundreds of graduating seniors to Virginia Western for free.

At the same time, the recession is driving more unemployed workers back to school.

Recently, however, Virginia's community colleges have seen their budgets axed by state lawmakers struggling to control costs. State funding of community colleges is down about 10 percent, said Glenn DuBois, chancellor of the Virginia Community College System. The Obama administration's stimulus package, which is directing almost \$40 million to community colleges over the next two years, helped prevent the cuts from being even more severe, he said.

State officials have also requested that community college leaders prepare for another round of cuts in the coming year.

Community colleges have raised tuition about 7 percent this year, but DuBois rejected capping the number of students admitted.

"That's not good public policy," he said. "If we can't let people in, who will? In some respects this is a good problem because we really have to start putting more degrees in this economy."

At New River Community College, enrollment grew 7.8 percent last year and a record 13 percent the year before that, said Mark Rowh, vice president for planning and advancement.

For now, it appears enrollment there will grow another 2 percent this fall, although it's too early for exact figures.

Meanwhile, in Clifton Forge, Dabney S. Lancaster Community College is predicting a 5 percent to 8 percent increase this year, according to President Richard Teaff.

The average age of students is also going down, suggesting that more people are enrolling straight out of high school.

"I've been in this business 38 years and I've never seen this kind of enrollment surge in my career," DuBois said.

On Tuesday, Obama flew to Michigan, the state with the worst unemployment rate in the country, at 14.1 percent, to announce his proposal at Macomb Community College in hard-hit Warren.

The president called the \$12 billion in spending over the next decade "the most significant down payment" yet toward achieving his goal that the U.S. have the highest college graduation rate of any nation.

Speaking outdoors in his shirt sleeves, Obama said jobs requiring at least an associate degree are expected to grow twice as fast as those where college education is not required.

"We will not fill those jobs, or keep those jobs on our shores, without the training offered by community colleges," Obama said.

"Community colleges are an undervalued asset in our country," he said.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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