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Enrollment spike squeezes resources at RCC

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By MARY DOLAN Staff writer

Following a nationwide trend of enrollment increases at community colleges in the last couple of years, Rockingham Community College is experiencing its highest-ever spring enrollment, with a record 2,500 students taking classes. The increase is bittersweet news for a college excited to cater to more people but wary about making the best use of limited resources.

Spring numbers at Rockingham Community College are up 14 percent from last spring and 34 percent from the one before that. And even though spring figures at RCC are down slightly – 2,626 students attended classes during the fall 2009 semester – the fall semester was also impactful, with a 21 percent increase in enrollment over fall 2008.

The enrollment numbers have skyrocketed in recent semesters, a trend most attribute to the downturn in the economy. According to Norma Kent, senior vice president for communications and advancement with the American Association of Community Colleges, enrollment within community colleges rose 17 percent between 2007 and 2009.

“That really causes a stress on our campus facilities and resources,” RCC President Robert Keys said.

Bob Lowdermilk, vice president for student development at RCC, said community colleges everywhere are seeing similarly heightened enrollments.

“I think most all of us attribute increases to the economic conditions that we live in right now,” Lowdermilk said.

North Carolina, like most of the nation, has seen unemployment figures at record highs. As of January, 11.2 percent of the working population was unemployed in North Carolina. Rockingham County has seen even higher numbers, with a December unemployment rate of 12.6 percent.

Kent and Lowdermilk agree that community college enrollment spikes are caused by people looking to make themselves more employable by obtaining additional or different certifications or credentials and young students who see community college as a more affordable option out of high school.

The number of students looking to transfer after two years is up about 7 percent from last

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year and about 20 percent from 2008, Lowdermilk said. This type of students comprises about one third of the student body at RCC, he said.

Those looking to emerge with a degree from RCC are often turning to computer information technology and criminal justice technology degree programs. Diploma programs for electrical and electric technology, cosmetology, global logistics and horticulture have also seen greater numbers of students.

Based on those burgeoning classroom sizes, the college has had to hire additional instructors, add extra sections and ask instructors to preside over additional classes.

Though some students might not have gotten exactly the schedule they had hoped for, Keys said the school has turned away no one.

That desire to accommodate every student clashes with budget constraints. The school, currently with an operating budget of \$22.3 million, receives the bulk – about 80 percent – of its funding from the state.

However, the state doles out those funds using a delayed funding formula which bases amounts on the previous year's enrollment.

"We're operating with ... about the same level of funding we had two years ago, and right now we're serving a student population that's much larger than we had two years ago," Keys said.

Jennifer Haygood, vice president for business and finance with the North Carolina Community College System, said funding is based on the number of full-time-equivalent students (since students who are essentially receiving a full-time education are more costly than those who are not) the previous year or based on the average of the previous three years' numbers, if that one is higher.

The lag in funding "is a problem for us," Haygood said.

The state system, consisting of 58 schools, has seen an increase of about 27,000 students this year, based on preliminary data, according to Haygood.

Keys said there's an effort among leadership at North Carolina's community colleges to try to change the way the schools are funded from delayed funding to forward funding. In fact, it's one of the items on the legislative agenda put together by the State Board of Community Colleges that is presented to lawmakers.

Justin Guillory, a spokesperson for North Carolina Gov. Bev. Perdue, said the governor has acknowledged the community colleges' current struggles. He noted that last year while she held back five percent of the budget from most state agencies in the thick of the budget crunch, she only held back three percent from the community college system.

"It's a priority to fully fund those enrollment increases for community colleges," he said.

And North Carolina Sen. Phil Berger, R-Guilford and Rockingham, said he is familiar with the funding issue as well and is in favor of reexamining the funding procedures. He noted that state dollars could likely better be matched to where they're needed "if we provided funding for the current year based on the current year's enrollment."

In the meantime, Haygood said the state system will do this year as it has done every year, and ask the state's General Assembly for the money it needs according to the current formula in place. This year, to match growth, that figure will be around \$75 million.

Keys doesn't anticipate any big changes to the funding procedure to occur this year, but, he

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said, "possibly we could make some in-roads and progress slowly towards that."

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