

va. community colleges

CVCC implementing new plan to increase equity

Rodney Robinson
May 24, 2022



An outdoor common space at Central Virginia Community College in Lynchburg on July 30, 2020.
Kendall Warner, The News & Advance file

Lynchburg's Central Virginia Community College has been localizing a plan that focuses on equity across all of the state's community colleges.

In the past five years, Black student enrollment in Virginia community colleges declined by more than 12,000, with only one out of five first-time Black students completing a community college credential or degree of any type in three years.

Despite increasing graduation rates for all other racial and ethnic minority groups across colleges, fewer Black students are graduating today from the state's community colleges compared to just five years ago.

Statistics such as these caused Virginia Community College Chancellor Glenn DuBois to call for a new six-year strategic plan focused on eliminating equity gaps.

Cynthia Deutsch — psychology professor and interim dean of institutional effectiveness and strategic planning at Central Virginia Community College — worked with the task force, consisting of faculty members and professors of Virginia's community colleges, to help create the new plan.

“Members of this task force were asked to readjust, broaden their focus and look at the creation of a new strategic plan with an equity focus ... to make sure we’re addressing the needs of all of our students,” Deutsch said.

Deutsch said that, at the start, officials did not know how long the pandemic would be around.

“At that point in time, nobody knew that we were looking at two-plus years of the impact of COVID,” Deutsch said. “We were trying to put together a plan thinking we would be back on the campuses within four to six months.”

The six-year plan was approved by the State Board for Community Colleges on March 18, 2021. The systemwide plan referenced two examples of inequities that plagued the nation in 2020 — the economic fallout that came as a result of COVID-19, and the “pandemic” of racial injustice that pushed systemic racism to the forefront of national dialogue with the killing of George Floyd. Floyd died May 25, 2020, at the hands of Minneapolis police after Officer Derek Chauvin kneeled on his neck for over nine minutes.

Deutsch worked specifically with teaching strategies to affect all students across the VCCS. A goal for her is to create a system-level sharing space where faculty can communicate teaching strategies across the VCCS.

Following the statewide meeting and deliberations, members of the task force went back to their respective schools and created a localized plan to help their students.

At CVCC’s most recent board meeting on April 27, the board discussed the plan and its mission statement.

CVCC implemented four goals and strategies to carry this new plan forward — teaching and learning, student support, workforce credentials and affordability. Deutsch said there is some carryover from the previous plan.

“There certainly is a carryover and then some expansion and change in ... this equity focus, making sure that we are really doing the best that we can to address the needs of all of our students,” Deutsch said.

Deutsch mentioned CVCC took into account students working, the cost of attending the college and scheduling when creating its plan.

According to Deutsch, a survey showed 75% of CVCC students are working. Of that percentage of employed students, 37% of them are working full-time jobs.

The average cost for a student annually at CVCC, prior to financial aid assistance, is \$4,620. Although it’s significantly less than an average four-year school, it’s still something the school considered for students.

To help students find more resources, CVCC expanded Single Stop, which Deutsch said is a part of a class where students take a survey and get help finding any needed resources including food pantries, job assistance and housing programs.

“When you have that kind of a weight on your mind, not only can it dissuade students from coming to school, but it can also make it difficult for them to be successful,” Deutsch said.

Three Lynchburg-area private colleges seek to counter rising tuition costs

Rodney Robinson

Jun 11, 2022



Graduates head to the stage during commencement at the University of Lynchburg on May 19. The University of Lynchburg, Randolph College and Sweet Briar have all instituted tuition resets and programs to help students pay for school.

Kendall Warner, The News & Advance

With tuition increases prevalent over the past 20 years for both private and public colleges, Randolph College, Sweet Briar and the University of Lynchburg have instituted tuition resets and programs to help students pay for school.

The average cost of tuition and fees at private national universities jumped 144% from 2002 to 2022, according to a study by the U.S. News and World Report.

Randolph College Dean of Admissions Travis Carter said those numbers are staggering.

“I would say I’m probably in the same boat as the rest of the public,” Carter said. “I hear that number and it’s staggering, and it’s sobering.”

For comparison, the cumulative inflation rate in the U.S. over the past 20 years has been about 60%, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Randolph College tuition and fees have increased about 41% during that 20-year span. The college saw its largest annual tuition price during fall 2019 at \$41,131.

Carter arrived at the college in the middle of 2019 as discussions already had begun for a possible reset. He said there was no way to predict a pandemic was coming, but the reset came at a good time. The school lowered tuition to \$25,610 for the fall 2020 semester, a 38% decrease from the previous year.

“For a lot of students ... and families who have found themselves out of work and they’re trying to pay for things, it couldn’t have come at a better time it seems like, from a timing perspective,” Carter said.

To help nearby students, Randolph College added to its LEAP program, also known as the Local Educational Access Program. The original program offered a special tuition rate to Lynchburg City and the five surrounding counties, ensuring they do not pay more than \$14,000 per year in tuition. The new LEAP Plus program adds 17 new counties and cities, including the counties of Augusta, Craig, Roanoke and Rockbridge, and the city of Roanoke. Students in the new LEAP plus program will have to live on campus, but they will not pay more than \$21,000 in tuition, room and board.

Carter said one of the things school officials talk about constantly in the office of admissions and across campus is providing a quality and affordable education to students.

“There are so many schools out there, in my opinion, that price themselves out of the market, and we don’t want to be one of those schools,” Carter said.

From fall 2003 to spring 2022, Sweet Briar College’s tuition cost increased about 16%. The private nonprofit women’s college in Amherst County saw its highest tuition rate for 2017 through 2018 at \$37,155.

In 2018, Sweet Briar enacted a tuition reset, something that current Sweet Briar President Meredith Woo described as “one of the most massive tuition resets ever in the country for a private institution.”

The move came just a few years after previous college leadership unsuccessfully attempted to close the school in 2015. Alumnae, students, faculty and supporters united to save Sweet Briar through legal action, social media and a fundraising campaign.

“There are a lot of colleges over the last few years that have done what is called tuition reset,” Woo said. “But even so, I think that ours was radical in its transparency.”

The reset lowered tuition to \$21,000, a nearly 44% decrease from 2017. Woo explained it was important to lower the price to compete with other public universities.

“I believe part of the reason why we did that is because ... the vast majority of the colleges that we’re competing against are public institutions — like [University of Virginia], like Virginia Tech, like [Virginia Commonwealth University], like Longwood [University]. So at some level, we have to be able to compete with them and so it is very important for us to rein in the price,” Woo said.

Along with the reset, students have access to more than 200 scholarships, according to Woo.

The cost of tuition at the University of Lynchburg has increased approximately 81.5% since 2001. The university saw its highest rate in fall 2020 at \$41,880, a year before their price reset. The price reset lowered the price of tuition and fees to \$33,500, a 20% decrease.

Michael Jones, the university’s vice president for enrollment, marketing and communications, said the reset has helped families.

“The tuition refresh has proven particularly helpful to families who have faced financial hardships as a result of the pandemic,” Jones said in a statement.

Associate Vice President for Enrollment Aaron Basko said in the last three years, the school has made changes to make sure that every incoming student receives some kind of scholarship funding.

“At the University of Lynchburg, we have worked hard to control costs and make sure that families are getting a high value education for their money,” Basko said in a statement.

Lynchburg-area colleges add resources to help first-year students cope with COVID-related challenges

Rodney Robinson

Sep 3, 2022



In this July file photo, Sweet Briar College's Student Commons Courtyard is shown.
Rodney Robinson Jr., The News & Advance

The pandemic has knocked many high school students off their stride as they have dealt with stretches of remote learning, school staffing shortages and COVID-19 surges that periodically closed school buildings.

Having noticed these impacts, Lynchburg-area colleges are expanding resources to help first-year students.

"Last year was a struggle for many just to connect to what was going on," said Kim Sheldon, director of student success at Randolph College.

Teresa Garrett, vice president of academic affairs and the dean of Sweet Briar College, said the school had a lot of problems with students not attending classes last year.

"I actually had a student say to me, 'I lost the habit of going to class,'" Garrett said. "When she said that I was like, 'Whoa.'"

James Coleman, faculty chair at Virginia University of Lynchburg and dean of the LNS School of Religion, said at the very onset of the pandemic students were struggling, but as time moved on, the struggle dissipated.

"I think any of the challenges that we have seen over the last two years have been more in trying to take where the student is and relate to them in a virtual space," Coleman said.

Colleges around the country have expanded summer programs to help improve the success of students, and schools in the area have done the same.

Sweet Briar offers a First-Year Student Success Program, now in its second year, designed to help students learn how to navigate college and get adjusted.

Tony Ryals, assistant dean of student success at Sweet Briar College, oversees the program and said it has helped students.

“They kind of create their own sort of community,” Ryals said.

Sophomore Laniya-Ann Hannah participated in the program last year. Hannah said because of the program, she already had a community set up before coming to campus.

She thinks it gave a nice overall structure to the students who participated. Hannah emphasized she had never been away from home, so to have that community of students and mentors was helpful.

“College is about making sure you get your degree and making sure you’re working toward what you want in the future. But it’s also about building connections with people around you. And just taking a second to let yourself breathe,” Hannah said.

Garrett mentioned Sweet Briar has added more resources, such as tutors for calculus courses and an option for group sessions to help students.

Randolph College has two bridge programs it offers first-year students, called STAR and SUPER, Sheldon said.

Sheldon oversees STAR, which stands for Summer Transition at Randolph. Students take a course on the creation of knowledge where they learn how to do research, understand the world and think about putting all the pieces together in papers, discussions and coursework.

There’s also a course on academic strategies, which teaches students the best ways to read for understanding.

This time around, however, Sheldon said she focused more on wellness. She said managing stress, anxiety and wellness was one of the biggest issues last year.

“I think that everybody was feeling the return was more challenging than maybe they thought it would be,” Sheldon said.

Peter Sheldon, professor of physics and engineering at Randolph College, oversees the SUPER program, which is a two-week, three-credit course that begins before first-year students arrive on campus. SUPER stands for Step Up to Physical Science and Engineering at Randolph.

He usually brings in about 24 students but this year has 28 students.

Freshman Brooke Rolocut participated in the SUPER program at Randolph College and said it was a “pretty intense program” when it comes to the classes that students took, such as coding and physics. But, she said, it was a fun experience.

“It definitely helped me get adjusted to the campus. Of course if I had moved in at first I wouldn’t know anything about the campus, so it’s really nice to get a head start and be able to move in and get adjusted to a new way of life,” Rolocut said.

The Randolph College freshman said her high school went into hybrid mode after being virtual for about half a year during the pandemic. Rolocut said transitioning from remote school was hard because you're stuck in one secluded area. It was a big adjustment and it led to a lot of stressors.

"I didn't have Wi-Fi where I was so it was very hard to be able to connect with my classes and very hard to connect with friends even, because we were all stuck at home," Rolocut said.

Generally over the past two years, Peter Sheldon said, students have struggled with basic algebra even though their high school transcripts show they have taken Algebra II and precalculus.

"I really struggled, big time, with the math preparation of our students last year, and it really affected my intro physics classes negatively," Sheldon said.

Sheldon said he noticed more students withdrawing from his intro to physics classes over the past academic year. That course is a two-semester sequence where students typically go on to the second semester. Last year, he lost more than 50% of students, something he hasn't seen before.

"It's surprising. Even though we had a pandemic behind us, I still thought I could motivate them," Sheldon said. "I thought I could excite them about the subject, you know, and I was not able to."

VUL has a Fast Track program for incoming students to give them an opportunity to "get ahead of the game," according to Coleman.

Coleman said VUL has had this program for a couple of years virtually, with it returning to in-person instruction this year, and demand for the program has risen.

"They're very academically focused, but also developmentally focused as well in terms of helping students to prepare themselves for success," Coleman said.

Meanwhile, states have seen more community colleges offer bridge programs to help students, as the name suggests, bridge the gap between high school and college.

CVCC's math department met and identified typically weak areas where students have struggled over the past couple of years.

In its learning management platform, they set up six modules that included videos and practice exercises, followed by an assessment at the end.

This is the first year of this program at CVCC. Currently the prerequisite program is for high school students taking dual enrollment courses at the college, but starting next semester it will be for all students who are enrolling in gateway math.

Cynthia Wallin, associate vice president at Central Virginia Community College, said so far, the program has been successful.

"As you well know, math is always a nemesis for many students," Wallin said. "The last couple of years, it has been even more so."

Garrett, of Sweet Briar College, hopes students who were on campus during this period will look back and be proud of what they were able to overcome.

"So I really hope that the students who have gone through those last couple years are really making a connection to, 'Wow, I did this,'" Garrett said.