

ECONOMY

# Virginia Racing College keeps Martinsville's motor-sports economy on track

*The program at Patrick & Henry Community College is now 20 years old.*



by **Ralph Berrier Jr.**  
May 4, 2022



Justin Houck of Chesterfield County pulls new bung tips out of a box that will be attached to the traction bars he plans to install into a drag-racing car he is building at the Virginia Racing College in Martinsville. Photo by Ralph Berrier Jr.

**MARTINSVILLE — Justin Houck is on the fast track through college.**

The race track, that is.

Houck, 20, leaned into the hull of a 1988 Fox Body Mustang, which he has welded, cut and bolted together almost from scratch, turning a metal shell into a car he hopes to drag-race someday.

“A lot of sweat and hours have been put into this,” he said.

That sweat and time will also earn college credits. Houck is a student at the Racing College of Virginia, which is the entirety of the motorsports program at Patrick & Henry Community College. The 20-year-old program teaches nearly 40 college and high school students racing industry skills, from working on cars to custom-machining parts to even working on a pit crew.

Students work in a large “flexspace” inside nearly 100,000 square feet of an industrial complex that once housed a high-performance race-car-building company. The buildings are part garage, part laboratory, part computer-science classroom. Skeletons of automobiles sit silently on lifts like Frankenstein’s race cars waiting to be brought to life. Instead of shelves of books, rows of tires line the walls. Instead of desks, students work at drill presses and welding machines.

The goal is to provide hands-on motorpsorts experience from sheet-metal fabrication to engine building to marketing. Students also have time to work on projects, such as Houck’s drag car, which is sort of like an independent study.

“I always dreaded school, but this isn’t school to me,” said Houck, who actually lives in Chesterfield County near Richmond, but spends four days a week living in a mobile home near Smith Mountain Lake in order to attend the Racing College.

Students who reach PHCC’s checkered flag with 67 credit hours – which include 14 hours of academic general studies courses — receive an Associate in Applied Science in Motorsports Technology degree.

The program isn’t just a glorified, highfaluting auto shop for gearheads. Students learn high-tech skills that are useful in industries outside of stock-car racing, such as welding, engineering, machining and even heating, ventilation and air cooling.

“Everybody who comes through here gets a job,” said Talmage Thomas, one of the program’s two full-time instructors.

Thomas and fellow motorsports instructor Denver Smith started working in the program after it had existed for a couple of years, but was still sputtering at the starting line.

“I used to joke that, when we started, we had a hammer and a screwdriver and the screwdriver was broken,” Thomas said.

Now, the Racing College is filled with machinery that could support a track-full of winning race teams.

“A lot of [NASCAR] Cup teams have the same equipment we use,” Thomas said.

The place is also the cleanest garage you’ll ever see.

Housing the Racing College of Virginia seems a natural fit for P&H. Motorsports hauls tons of cash into Martinsville and Henry County every year thanks to Martinsville International Speedway, which supports more than 2,900 jobs in the region and generates \$170 million in economic impact, according to a 12-year-old economic impact report compiled for the Martinsville-Henry County Economic Development Corporation. That’s the most recent data that measures the power of the speedway’s economic engine.

Not all those jobs are at the race track, as much of the economic impact comes in the form of tourism spending at hotels, restaurants and stores. The jobs perhaps offset some of the staggering losses the region endured in the 1990s and 2000s, when the furniture and textile industries — the economic bedrock of Martinsville for generations — sent those jobs overseas. Martinsville’s unemployment rate, once as high as 22% in 2010, sits at 5.9% as of February. That’s much improved, obviously, but still the third-highest jobless rate in Virginia.

In fact, the Virginia Racing College has made an economic impact on its own. The college was instrumental in bringing British-based race car manufacturer Radical Sportscars to Martinsville last year. The company plans to open a sales office and a fabrication facility adjacent to the college’s workspace. The wrench-ready workforce of college graduates steered the company to Martinsville, where 30 workers might be needed.

Even though the Racing College does not churn out stadium-sized graduating classes, the graduates do possess skills that are in demand.

“Not only racing, but hands-on technology skills,” said Smith, a Patrick County High School graduate who became an instructor after having been an engineering student at PHCC two decades ago. “Machining, welding ... [students] get the basics of everything.”

As Smith gave a prospective student a tour of the FlexSpace facility, he noted the program's level of training and high expectations for students. “We weld metal that's as thin as Coke cans. When you can weld two Coke cans together, that's precision,” he told the student.

Even though enrollees learn skills that can be used outside of motorsports, automobile racing is the primary driver of student interest. The Racing College of Virginia even sponsors its own late model stock car that races at South Boston Speedway and at Martinsville's big late model race, the ValleyStar Credit Union 300, this September.

Racing College students work in the pit during South Boston races, preparing the car before starts and making repairs afterward. Because late model races are relatively short, they do not require the high-pressure, high-speed pit stops that are familiar in the NASCAR Cup Series big-league races, when cars are refueled and tires changed in a matter of seconds. Late model drivers might make one lengthy pit stop during a race to add gasoline or new tires.

South Boston driver Bruce Anderson steers the No. 73 Chevrolet — inspired by the yet-to-be-built Interstate 73 that Southside has long hoped would bring economic vibrancy to the region — a car he drove to a victory at South Boston in 2014 and a top-5 Martinsville finish.

“That's really good for a part-time team,” Anderson said of the Racing College's success on the track. The No. 73 car participates in only four or five races a year.

Racing College students are responsible for building the car and getting it race-ready, then for making post-race modifications to prepare for the next tour of the track.

“It's a very unique program,” said Anderson, who has driven the 73 car for nine seasons. “Students of all ages develop all kinds of skills. When they set their minds to something, their dedication is second to none.”

Anderson has watched several students work in racing after obtaining their Racing College degrees. Alumni have worked for the likes of NASCAR driver Kyle Busch's team, Michael Waltrip Racing and Jack Roush's team, and others work as NASCAR officials.

“Seeing students come through and learning something to make a living in motorsports makes the program a success in my book,” Anderson said.

Numerous jobs are available in motorsports, even at regional levels of racing. D.J. Jack, who received his Racing College degree in 2016, works as a mechanic and fabricator for Nelson Motorsports in Bassett. He credits the program for helping him get his foot inside the garage door.

“The biggest thing was the relationships you make,” said Jack, a Bath County native who lives in Salem. Even as a teenager, Jack worked in motorsports, traveling with a sports car team and helping his father race at Natural Bridge Speedway and other tracks. Later, he worked with driver Butch Hamlet’s road course team.

“I had a background in racing, and [the Racing College] opened more doors,” he said.

Even the instructors had racing backgrounds. Thomas grew up traveling with his father, Wayne “Speedy” Thomas, a driver from Fieldale and team owner who won more than 200 races.

“When I was 10 years old, I thought everybody had a race car,” said Talmage Thomas, 56. “We didn’t take vacations. We’d go to a race, then come home. Wherever he went, I went with him. Kept me out of trouble.”

Smith, 38, “raced everything with two or four wheels ... skis, too,” he said. A Massachusetts native, his family moved to Patrick County when he was 10. He continued to race before eventually taking engineering classes at the community college.

Thomas and Smith are joined by one assistant and one adjunct instructor who teaches engineering. Although the program’s graduation success rate is high, the college is small and attracts mostly young men, although several women have graduated from the Racing College.

“We’ve had only a few women, but they’ve all been standouts,” Smith said. “They make more money than I do.”

If nothing else, the Racing College provides one of the few opportunities for a student to say they spent the class attaching bung tips to traction bars, as Houck was doing on his Mustang.

“This is an amazing opportunity to be in this complex,” he said. “I want to take advantage of everything they have here. It’s an amazing program.”

## ECONOMY

# Virginia Tech is considering adding more student housing. Town officials support the proposal. Housing developers don't.

*Town officials who want Tech to house more students on campus hailed the proposal for its innovative ideas. Developers worry that the Student Life Village could leave their apartment complexes vacant.*



by **Ralph Berrier Jr.**  
November 11, 2022



The proposed Student Life Village would provide housing for 5,000 Virginia Tech students, restaurants, recreation facilities, a chapel and other amenities when fully completed. Virginia Tech's Board of Visitors considered a resolution to add the project to the university's master plan Monday. In this image, the village sits on property currently occupied by the Virginia Tech Golf Course and is bordered by U.S. 460 at left and Prices Fork Road at the top. Courtesy of Virginia Tech.

The Student Life Village looks like a grand place for Virginia Tech students to live. Space for 5,000 residents. Restaurants and recreation facilities within walking distance. Expansive green spaces and even a chapel for relaxation and quiet reflection. Bike paths and walking trails. Buildings that run on renewable energy. A rescue squad.

All right on campus — if it's ever built, that is.

Virginia Tech's Board of Visitors will consider adding the bold, nearly \$1 billion Student Life Village project to the university's master plan during the board's Sunday meeting in Blacksburg. The project, which is essentially a large student-housing and retail community operated by the university on campus, has been hailed for its innovative ideas and is supported by town officials who want Tech to house more students on campus. Virginia Tech's recent growth to more than 30,000 undergraduate students has strained town services and caused a housing crunch that has pushed families and other residents out of Blacksburg, town leaders say.

However, the project frays the nerves of some local residential developers, who have spent hundreds of millions of dollars in student housing construction in recent years to handle Tech's explosive growth. They worry that the Student Life Village could leave their apartment complexes vacant, especially if that enrollment growth stalls. They think downtown businesses will also suffer because of the amenities the project provides.

"My concern is that if 5,000 beds are added [on campus], and there's not growth, we will have many vacancies," said Joann Craig, chief financial officer for Blacksburg-based CMG Leasing, Inc., which owns housing properties throughout the New River Valley. "It won't be a pretty picture."

The town's support of the project is clear, said longtime Town Manager Marc Verniel.

"Our position is that if Virginia Tech continues to grow its undergraduate enrollment, they need to provide more housing, recreation, dining for their students and other amenities on campus," he said.

Blacksburg Mayor Leslie Hager-Smith reiterated that position in a letter to Tech President Timothy Sands dated Oct. 28.

"Since less than a third of Virginia Tech students live on campus, it is past time for the university to make the same commitment that Blacksburg has by centering students in its long-term plans," Hager-Smith wrote. "If Virginia Tech is going to continue to grow, the Student Life Village is necessary."

Hager-Smith added that Tech's growth outpaced student-housing construction, causing home prices and rents to soar.

"This increased competition drove up rents and housing prices, effectively pricing out local residents and prospective newcomers," Hager-Smith wrote.

Rents and home values in Blacksburg are considerably higher than in other neighboring communities. The median home value in Blacksburg is \$400,000, according to Long & Foster Real Estate, compared to an average of \$138,228 in the rest of Montgomery County. Nest Realty's 2022 mid-year report for the New River Valley lists an even higher average sale price for Blacksburg — \$473,068.

The average monthly rent for a two-bedroom apartment in Blacksburg has risen 41 percent in the past year, according to online rental marketplace tracker Rent.com, up to nearly \$1,500. A one-bedroom apartment averages \$1,080 (up 19 percent) and three-bedrooms go for \$1,780 (a 9 percent increase).

Most of Blacksburg's population of about 50,000 are students. The town's economy relies on the university and student spending, including housing. But town leaders want to ease the burden on infrastructure, such as roads and utilities, and reduce sprawl caused by increased off-campus housing.

"We've added a lot of student housing in town," Verniel said. "If the university continues to grow, the best place for students is to live close to class, close to dining. They will be able to walk or bike or scooter, or whatever transportation they take these days, to class."

Virginia Tech's expansion is no secret to anyone who has tried to navigate busy streets near campus and along Prices Fork Road, which has seen commercial and residential expansion in recent years. The university has added about 5,000 students over the past five years. In 2019, the size of the freshman class exceeded expectations by nearly 1,000 students, which forced the university to house about 500 new students in hotels due to a lack of adequate housing.

That prompted town officials and developers to work together to increase student-housing options. Craig estimated that developers have spent nearly \$400 million on new projects and renovations in five years. She worries that those investments could be at risk should Tech's on-campus housing increase and its enrollment stops growing.

"These are huge investments," she said. "Because Tech was growing, the town said we need beds [for students]. People put a lot of money into that. Right now, there's a lot of uncertainty about what will happen" regarding Tech's future growth.



About five years ago, Virginia Tech set a goal of achieving an enrollment of 30,000 by 2023, then hit that mark three years early. Sands has said that future growth would be determined by whether or not the university and town could handle more students.

In 2019, he posted on Twitter that enrollment would be capped at 30,000 “until VT and Blacksburg infrastructure is in place. Will reassess then.”

Virginia Tech’s master plan, adopted in 2018, calls for mixed-use districts on campus, new buildings, better accessibility across campus and possibly expanding housing. During its two-day meeting that begins Sunday, the Board of Visitors will consider adding the Student Life Village project to the master plan.

The village concept was unveiled last spring by former Vice President for Student Affairs Frank Shushok, who is now the president of Roanoke College. According to a Virginia Tech news release from May, Shushok proposed to the Board of Visitors a project that would encompass “residential, well-being, recreation, dining and enrichment spaces for up to 5,000 students on campus. The plan will focus on integrated, high-quality student-life offerings as well as living-learning programs, amenities and public spaces to serve both on- and off-campus students.”

The project would be constructed on the current Virginia Tech Golf Course and Oak Lane student housing property, and will include dormitory-style rooms, as well as 2-and-3-bedroom apartments and suites. A mix of local and national chain restaurants, indoor recreation facilities and other amenities are planned. Students would pay for housing, although prices have not been determined.

Even though the project can house 5,000 students, Tech also plans to raze two dormitories that currently hold about 1,300 people, which means the Student Life Village would add about 3,700 or so new beds to campus.

The project would be built in three phases, with a total price tag of \$935 million, according to documents filed with the Board of Visitors.

However, even if the board adopts the project, it doesn’t mean the village will ever be built. Funding and other approvals await, said Tech spokesman Mark Owczarski.

Owczarski, Tech’s associate vice president for communications and marketing, wrote in an email to Cardinal News that the Student Life Village “is a proposal. An idea. Not set in stone; may or may not ever happen. To be adopted, it needs to go through university governance for approval and adoption.”

In other words, even if the board passes the resolution to include the project in the university's master plan, construction may still be years down the road.

Developers hope to use that time to get a clearer picture of Tech's plans for growth and the town's housing needs. The announcement of the Student Life Village last spring seems to have caught some developers off-guard, and now they want to make sure they stay apprised of the university's plans.

"I think our concerns start with communication," said Patrick McCloud, chief executive officer of the Virginia Apartment Management Association in Richmond. McCloud has worked as a liaison between Tech and the association's New River Valley-based chapter.

He said he wished that apartment-builders "had been brought into the conversation earlier," but he added that communication between developers and the university has improved.

He echoed Craig's concern that if Tech houses more students on campus and growth slows, the town could have many empty apartments in its future.

"We want to avoid overdevelopment," McCloud said. "Vacancies can lead to a decline in overall housing in Blacksburg. We want to make sure that the university doesn't think just within, but about the overall town of Blacksburg."

McCloud noted a recent example in Farmville, where developers built apartments to handle an expected enrollment boom at Longwood University that never materialized. Longwood then mandated that second-year students would live on campus, which exacerbated the local housing overabundance. He said that two apartment companies went bankrupt.

McCloud said that because Virginia Tech has already reached a previously stated goal of enrolling 30,000 undergraduate students, he doesn't know if businesses and town leaders can count on the university's continued growth.

"Our message is don't forget about the private housing providers," he said. "Overdevelopment can be a death knell. It can reduce the quality of housing. We don't want to get in a situation where we have more housing than we need, because that can cause serious problems."

*Correction: The original version of the story had a different date for the weekend meeting.*



POLITICS

# Schools await details on Youngkin's plan to boost dual enrollment

*Gov. Youngkin says he wants all high school students to graduate with college-level associate degrees. Right now, less than 3% do.*



by **Ralph Berrier Jr.**

December 8, 2022



Gov. Glenn Youngkin speaks in Bristol at the Cardinal News Speaker Series in October 2022. Photo Credit: Earl Neikirk/Neikirk Image.

Gov. Glenn Youngkin has repeatedly said that he wants all Virginia high school students to graduate with college-level associate degrees that will prepare them for the workforce.

So far, though, he hasn't said how that will be possible or how much it will cost the commonwealth to basically pay for two years' worth of college credits for every student in Virginia. Right now, less than 3% of Virginia's public high school seniors are on track to graduate with a 2-year degree before they leave high school.

Those specifics should be known Dec. 15, when the governor unveils his budget priorities.

"On Dec. 15, in front of the Joint Money committees, I will announce my proposal to move Virginia in the right direction," Youngkin told an audience on Dec. 2 during his remarks at the Virginia Economic Summit and Forum on International Trade in Richmond.

Later, during that same speech, he reiterated his idea to expand opportunities for students to take what are called dual-enrollment courses — classes that fulfill high school graduation requirements and provide college credits, usually offered through a partnership with a local community college. A student who takes enough dual-enrollment classes can earn a two-year associate degree, which could give them a head start on obtaining a bachelor's degree from a four-year college or joining the working world.

"Our upcoming budget will prioritize expanding these career pathways for students," Youngkin told the Richmond gathering, "by launching multiple dual-enrollment acceleration programs in partnership with our community colleges and local schools so that we can get on this path for ... more students to earn an industry-recognized credential ... to make sure that every student in Virginia graduates with an industry-recognized credential."

Youngkin first mentioned his idea for universal associate degrees and credentials for high school graduates in October [during an appearance](#) in Bristol in October as part of the Cardinal News Speaker Series.

Youngkin said at the time that associate degrees or other types of work-related credentials would make students "immediately ... prepared to go right into life."

"I believe that we have both the capabilities to expand that extensively," the governor said. "And there's no reason why it couldn't be incorporated into our graduation requirements."

Doing so will probably be an expensive lift, based on current dual enrollment and community college costs and the overall lack of high school students currently enrolled in college-level classes.

Western Virginia legislators and some regional public-school division leaders contacted for this story deferred comment about the governor's plan until full details are known.

"The Governor's proposal would require an investment that we expect would be in his proposed budget," read a statement from Roanoke City Public Schools sent to Cardinal News, "so the General Assembly session will provide the information needed to inform how RCPS and other school divisions would implement programming to support the requirement."

Virginia's dual enrollment system is actually a collection of local programs where college classes and credits are offered at varied costs. Most courses are taught by college-qualified teachers at students' high schools, and some are taught on campus.

Virginia has no standardized cost per credit hour for dual enrollment classes. Local school divisions negotiate with neighboring community colleges to get reduced tuition for classes taught at high schools, with prices ranging from zero to \$64 per credit hour, according to information provided by Jim Babb, interim assistant vice chancellor for strategic communications for Virginia's Community Colleges.

In Roanoke, tuition for dual-enrollment classes taken at high schools through Virginia Western Community College is \$43 per credit hour. Classes taken on Virginia Western's campus cost the regular tuition rate of \$170.09 per credit hour, according to Elizabeth Wilmer, the college's vice president of academic and student affairs.

In Montgomery County, dual-enrollment tuition is free for the courses taken through New River Community College. The school division covers dual-enrollment costs, said Carl Pauli, Montgomery County's director of secondary education.

Whether taking college courses in their high schools or on a college campus, students must bear the full cost of dual enrollment classes because anyone who has not yet graduated from high school is not eligible

for state and federal financial aid. Pell Grants, student loans and other common means that students use to pay for college are not available to high schoolers.

Some school divisions offer financial support for low-income students, but otherwise students or their families are on the hook for full amount.

Most Virginia community colleges require around 60 credit hours to earn an associate degree, but that varies depending on the field of study. Engineering and nursing degrees require more credits, Wilmer said.

Considering that most dual-enrollment students take about nine credit hours per semester — about three college classes — most of them won't graduate with an associate degree even if they take dual-enrollment classes for two years, which is the length of their eligibility in most cases. Some schools will make exceptions for younger students depending on circumstances.

Most students already taking dual-enrollment classes won't earn enough credits to earn a degree before high school graduation. Nearly 46,000 Virginia students were enrolled in dual-enrollment courses during the 2021-2022 school year, according to Babb, the community colleges' spokesman. Of those, more than 2,700 — about 6% — earned an associate degree or other credential before they graduated from high school.

Virginia's public high schools enrolled nearly 94,500 seniors in 2021-2022, according to the Department of Education, which means that less than 3% of them earned an associate degree or credential last year.

Raising that figure to 100% is Youngkin's goal.

The current system's varying costs and course offerings are rife with regional and economic inequities, Kristen Westover, president of Mountain Empire Community College in Wise County, wrote in an email to Cardinal News. Students in school divisions in rural areas such as Southwest Virginia might face limited class offerings when compared to more populated and higher-income regions due to lack of qualified teachers.

“Depending on the location, dual-enrollment offerings may be limited to offerings that are supported by the credentials that are held by faculty in each K-12 system, which vary by school and community,” Westover wrote. “Student exposure to dual-enrollment opportunities can often be dependent on what the high school has the capacity to offer the student, not necessarily what the college has to offer the student.”

Community colleges in rural areas, such as Mountain Empire, reimburse local school divisions for dual-enrollment tuition costs at high rates, which strains the colleges' budgets, Westover wrote.

Plus, she said, not every student is ready to take college-level courses when they are a junior in high school, which is when they would have to begin classes to earn an associate degree. She said students must be treated as individuals, with specific skills and learning abilities.

“Not all high school students are college-ready before high school graduation,” she wrote. “Students who attain associate degrees and other post-secondary credentials in high school must demonstrate college readiness often before they begin as juniors in high school. Not every student is capable of or prepared for this, nor should we expect them to be while still in high school.”

Virginia educators also await a report from the General Assembly's Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission later this month, which is expected to address community college budgets, including the lack of standardized dual-enrollment costs across the commonwealth.

JLARC has been “trying to untangle the cost of offering dual enrollment to both the high school and the college,” said Wilmer, Virginia Western's vice president.

A 2017 JLARC audit was somewhat critical of dual-enrollment programs, finding that some four-year universities refused to accept dual-enrollment credits, citing concerns about the quality of the courses. Therefore, students who took dual-enrollment courses generally did not earn a bachelor's degree any faster or more cheaply than students who had not taken dual-enrollment classes. In fact, most dual-enrollment students had to take additional classes while pursuing a four-year degree because their credits earned in high school were not accepted.

“The majority of dual enrollment students accumulate more credits than non-dual enrollment students to attain a degree,” the report read.

Rather than try to pay for 60 hours of community college credits for every Virginia student, a cost which seems enormous, Youngkin could opt for other approaches, some educators have speculated. In 2021, Gov. Ralph Northam's “G3” initiative — “Get Skilled, Get a Job, Give Back” — expanded community college availability for low-income students by covering college costs for those going into targeted fields, such as health care, technology and other trades. As a tradeoff, students performed community service or some other kind of civic engagement to remain eligible for the program. Youngkin could find similar creative ways to help students earn degrees or credentials.

Those details should be known on Dec. 15. Then, for Youngkin, the real work begins when he takes his proposals to the General Assembly.

“We can do this, but more importantly we must do it,” Youngkin told the crowd of business leaders in Richmond, who applauded that statement.

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