

ECONOMY

Emory & Henry College going through ‘creative reinvention’

The school’s growth comes as many small colleges struggle.



by **Susan Cameron**

March 30, 2022



Emory & Henry College. Courtesy of the school.

EMORY – In the coming years, motorists at Interstate 81’s Exit 26 in Southwest Virginia will seemingly travel through the campus of Emory & Henry College.

One side of the interstate exit will be a “first-class” equestrian center that will be home to the storied program that boasts national championships. The other side near the main campus will be anchored by a multi-sport athletic complex.

E&H owns the “four corners” of the interstate exit and college officials want to capitalize on the 1.4 million cars that drive through each month. They hope to tie it all together by splashing the blue and gold E&H banner across the interstate overpass.

The new equestrian center and sports complex were announced Feb. 4. Ten days earlier, college officials announced construction of a 36-apartment housing unit for upperclass students. The three projects are expected to total \$35 million to \$40 million, depending on materials costs and whether there are supply chain issues.

E&H, a 186-year-old private, liberal arts college in rural Washington County, is in the middle of a growth spurt that includes record enrollment numbers, new programs and a host of capital projects.

And the success comes at a time when many colleges are struggling financially and scrambling for answers to the looming “enrollment cliff,” a significant decrease in enrollments for traditional college-age students resulting from a decline in birth rates that began with the recession of 2008. Though the cliff was expected in 2025, education officials say it has been hastened by the COVID-19 pandemic.

All the improvements at E&H are the result of years of planning and foresight, according to President John Wells.

The additions and projects are occurring “at a moment when a lot of higher education is in disruption. Instead of sitting around and thinking about how it’s all going to play out or dreading it, we’re trying to be proactive,” said Wells.

By the numbers

\$35 million to \$40 million – Estimated cost of housing unit, sports complex and equestrian center

\$5 million – Expected cost of renovation for College of Business

1,356 – Total number of students enrolled in fall 2021

90 – The number of majors, minors and tracks

186 – Age of the college

In addition to the three construction projects, there have been a number of other changes and additions made recently or in the works, including:

300 – Number of students at the School of Health Sciences in Marion

- A \$5 million renovation of Carriger Hall, which will house the college's new School of Business.
- Acceptance as a provisional member of Division II by the National Collegiate Athletic Association and joining the South Atlantic Conference for the 2022-23 academic year.
- Opening in April of the Powell Student Success Center in the former Wiley Hall Auditorium.
- A new bachelor of science in nursing degree, which earned accreditation from the Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education.

Generally speaking, such growth is not common these days among small, private colleges, said Lee Gardner, a senior writer who covers college sustainability and business models for The Chronicle of Higher Education, a Washington, D.C.-based newsroom that covers colleges and universities.

“A lot of small, private colleges have been struggling lately, already before the pandemic because of demographic pressures. There are a lot fewer high school graduates likely to go to college in many parts of the country and that trend is expected to increase in coming years. So a lot of institutions likely already are having to compete for more serious students than they have in the past.”

Amenities are a big part of the current recruiting process, Gardner said.

He added that most small colleges also aren't experiencing record enrollment. Last fall, E&H had its largest class of students, a total of 1,356, according to the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia.

Projects and improvements

Equestrian Center

Multi-sport athletic complex

Housing building

Addition of School of Business for which a \$5 million renovation is underway

New Student Success Center

Provisional member of Division II by National Collegiate Athletic Association

Joining the South Atlantic Conference

New bachelor of science in nursing degree

So, why is E&H thriving?

Wells said the school has a long history of going through flexible periods of “creative reinvention,” when it updates and makes itself more relevant. And the current growth is near the top of those times of growth, he said.

Though Wells is not an E&H graduate, his father was and his grandmother was a dorm mother at Hillman Hall on campus. As a child, he spent his summers in Southwest Virginia.

“It’s very personal to me, making certain that I’m honoring this legacy,” he said. “But I’m also committed to making sure Southwest Virginia has one of the best comprehensive institutions it can possibly have.”

The current administration is building on the leadership of past college officials, including former President Rosalind Reichard, whose vision led to the School of Health Sciences in Marion, which now has 300 students and four graduate programs, the president said. It was the decision of former President Jake Schrum to acquire the equestrian program of Virginia Intermont College when it closed.

“There’s been some really smart planning and we’re sort of standing on the shoulders of bright, innovative leaders who have been here,” he said, also crediting the board of trustees.

Emory & Henry College President John Wells. Courtesy of the school.

Ann Sluder, chair of the board of trustees, said the planning process began five years ago.

“That process was informed in part by the anticipated enrollment cliff, but also guided by the college’s established strengths, by opportunities for flexible instruction models

Total student enrollment

enabled by 21st century technology, and by areas of emerging opportunity and need in the world our graduates are entering. For the past 3+ years the college, under President Wells' leadership, has been implementing the multiple parallel elements of resulting strategic plan, underpinning the growth we are now observing," said Sluder, a 1981 E&H graduate who is associate director of the Vaccine & Immunotherapy Center at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston.

College officials also say E&H has always been an integral part of Southwest Virginia in its nearly 200 years and its current growth and success will be important for the region's future.

The school's economic impact analysis is being updated and will be released soon. When it was last updated 10 years ago, it revealed that there was a \$60 million annual economic impact on the region, according to Mark Graham, E&H's vice president for administration and general counsel. That number is expected to significantly increase.

The formula takes into account the payroll and budget but doesn't include intangibles such as how much students spend in the region, he added.

Graham is an E&H graduate as was his father and sister. Next fall, his son will be a student there.

He said he recently stayed at The Bristol Hotel, which has a rooftop bar with a sweeping view of the Twin City's downtown. From this perch, he said he was struck by sadness at the sight of the vacant Virginia Intermont College campus in one direction and the property that once housed Sullins College in the other.

Sullins, a two-year liberal arts college for women, closed in 1976. Virginia Intermont closed in 2014 amid financial struggles and declining enrollment.

2021 – 1,356

2020 – 1,232

2019 – 1,298

2018 – 1,241

2017 – 1,228

2016 – 1,152

2015 – 1,114

2014 – 1,040

2013 – 960

2012 – 944

2011 – 974

Source: State Council of Higher Education for Virginia

“You see what happens if you’re not supporting these education institutions – they go away,” Graham said.

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The equestrian center

The recently announced equestrian center will replace the current facility at Exit 10, which the college inherited when it took over the Virginia Intermont program in 2014.

The center will include indoor and outdoor competition areas, a warm-up facility, stalls for as many as 100 horses, offices, conference rooms, high-tech classrooms and multiple paddocks.

There is also room for growth on the property owned by the college.

College officials believe the new facilities will draw more students to the program, especially considering they had to cap enrollment last year due to the current space limitations.

It will also be less burdensome for equestrian students, who many days travel between the college and the current facility two or three times a day.

In addition, the center will allow the college to host more regional and possibly national competitions, according to college officials. A possible partnership for a therapeutic riding center is also being considered.

Graham said the new facility will be more fitting for a program that, between the two schools, has won 21 national championships, which he added is “extraordinary in any sport.”

The equestrian center is now in the design phase, which is expected to take about a year. Construction should start around March 1, 2023, with a completion date of 14-16 months. It is expected to be in use by the fall of 2024.

Rendering of the planned sports complex at Emory & Henry. Courtesy of the school.

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Athletic complex

The multi-sport athletic complex will be home to the college’s new track and field team, provide a second turf field with lighting to accommodate soccer and rugby, and possibly lacrosse in the future. The hope is the design will also attract more student athletes.

The announced project is the first phase, which will include seating for 800, parking for 300 vehicles, bathrooms, concessions and game day locker space. The estimated cost is \$9 million.

The second phase, which will include sport specific locker rooms, coaches offices, a practice field and possibly baseball and softball fields, will be done later.

The sports complex will be in the design phase until mid-November and construction is expected to begin in January 2023. Completion is expected in March 2024 and it will be available for limited use that spring.

NCAA Division II

E&H officials are excited about the positives of being accepted as a provisional member of Division II by the NCAA and joining the South Atlantic Conference.

One benefit expected to boost enrollment is the ability to offer partial scholarships to athletes, which wasn't allowed in Division III, Graham said.

It also places it in a medium market and opens up new areas like Knoxville, Tennessee; Winston-Salem, Asheville and Charlotte in North Carolina; and Greenville, South Carolina, for recruitment of students, college officials say.

The move means E&H will play schools like the University of Virginia's College at Wise, which school officials believe will draw more interest and attendance at games.

And rather than traveling up to six hours to games, teams will travel one to three hours, which will cut down on expenses and be easier for the athletes, Graham said.

Emory & Henry began the first of three provisional years last August and will be eligible for full membership in August 2024 if all requirements are met.

College officials believe moving up to Division II is one of the initiatives that helped produce record enrollment for the fall 2021 semester, according to a news release.

Planned student apartments at Emory & Henry. Courtesy of the school.

Housing unit

To meet the needs of the increasing number of students, the college is building a housing unit for upperclass students that will have 36 apartments that will house 144.

The three-story building will be constructed on 10 acres the college owns off College Drive and Hillman Highway, where there is space for more housing in the future.

The apartments will have two bedrooms and accommodate four students. Each unit will be 1,200 square feet and feature two bathrooms, walk-in closets, and a private balcony or patio. As more housing is added, plans call for a clubhouse and outdoor pool.

Construction is expected to begin in April with substantial completion in December. It will be ready for occupancy in January 2023.

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Paying for the projects

Ask E&H officials how they plan to pay for the improvements, and they say “philanthropy.” Because it isn’t a state institution, the school doesn’t get tax money for buildings, so the college depends on its alumni, supporters and friends to step up.

“As a private college, we have to ask a lot of our donors, our alumni, folks in the region that understand the impact the college has on the region,” Graham said. “It’s the oldest college in Southwest Virginia. There are a lot of friends of Emory & Henry out there.”

Of the capital projects, only the \$5 million needed for the renovation of Carriager Hall for the School of Business has been raised.

President Wells said coming up with the money will be a “work in progress from a number of different approaches ... philanthropy and managed debt.”

He added that although fundraising is already underway, a campaign will be announced and launched in October.

Beyond the current projects, Wells said E&H will continue evolving and adapting to meet the needs of students, the community and region. In addition to more housing, he said there will be improvements to the basketball facilities and some academic spaces.

“If students are going to choose to be in person and part of an academic community for four years, you’ve really got to give them a very good reason for that,” Wells said. “So, you have to really layer the excellence so they have excellence on every layer. Our motto is ‘Increase in Excellence’ and that’s what we’re trying to do so our students can increase in excellence as well.”

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ECONOMY

Why Southwest Virginia Community College is adding housing

The Tazewell County school will be the first community college in Virginia to offer housing. Some of the reasons why are unique to the region.



by **Susan Cameron**
June 7, 2022



Construction is underway on housing at Southwest Virginia Community College. Courtesy of the school.

It seems appropriate that Tommy Wright would be the first community college president in Virginia to build housing for students.

He has 25 years of experience in student housing, first as an undergraduate at Middle Tennessee State University, where Wright was a resident adviser responsible for a floor of students.

Through graduate school, he worked his way up to hall director and coordinator roles responsible for an increasing number of students.

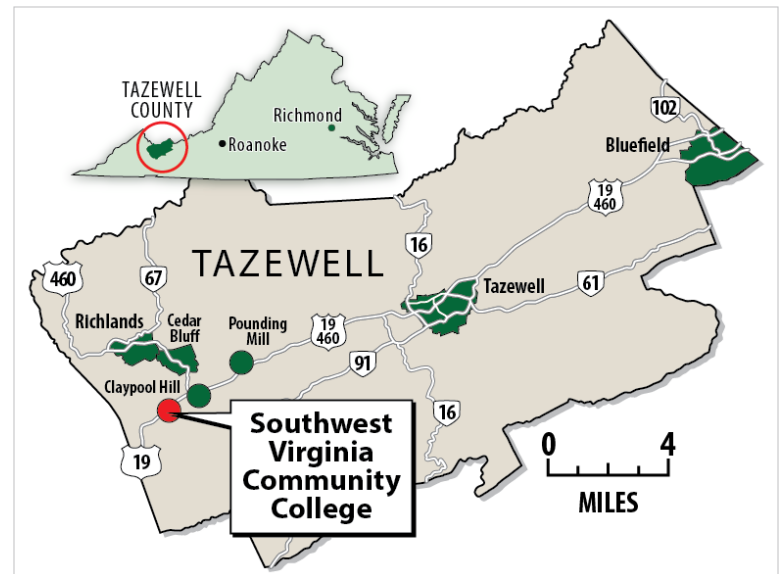
For his doctoral degree, he wrote his dissertation on student housing.

And when he landed a job at Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina, he was assistant director of housing before being promoted to director of housing.

In 2018, Wright was named president of Southwest Virginia Community College in Richlands, where site work is underway for the school's first housing building. The unit is being built across from the main campus on 25 acres of land owned by the college's Educational Foundation, which is its fundraising arm.

The foundation board approved a loan up to \$3.5 million for two buildings, with the option to increase that amount to fund a total of four housing buildings, if needed.

"I think placing the student housing, where they can be among their peers, across the street from the campus, and not having to have additional transportation, allows us to continue to recruit more students and it will reduce their costs,"



Map by Robert Lunsford.

About the project

\$3.5 million loan approved for the first two apartment buildings

Two more housing buildings may be added, if needed

Wright said. “There’s no better predictor of graduating than living on campus and being among your peers. The research is crystal clear on that.”

Glenn DuBois, chancellor of the Virginia Community College System, attended the Feb. 8 groundbreaking ceremony for the housing unit. He said he is a “big supporter with stipulations. One, it really depends upon what goals they’re trying to achieve and also depends upon if they’re really fully aware of ... the risks.”

Those potential risks include student drinking, for which there needs to be a zero-tolerance policy, the chancellor said.

“If we’re recruiting students to stay with us, I think we have to assume responsibility to make sure they’re safe,” he said, adding that he has a lot of confidence in Wright, who used to manage residential halls and understands the risks involved.

He added that community colleges must stay “relevant,” and housing is a solution for Southwest because it has made recruiting athletes, out-of-state and international students a priority.

While there is no other housing at community colleges in Virginia, DuBois noted that it has been done successfully at a number of community colleges across the country.

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The “quandary”

Adding student housing is just one initiative Wright has undertaken to attract students during a time when it has become increasingly difficult for most colleges to do.

Colleges are competing for a shrinking number of high school graduates that go on to college and that is expected to worsen with the coming “enrollment cliff,” a serious decrease in

Site work is underway for first, with construction expected soon

The units are being built across from the main campus

Rent is expected to be \$600, which includes utilities, internet and trash pickup

Enrollment numbers

enrollments for traditional college-age students. The lower numbers are the result of a decline in birth rates that began with the recession of 2008, according to education officials.

In addition, Southwest is impacted by an ongoing population decline in Southwest Virginia.

Like most community colleges in Virginia, the school has seen a steady decrease in enrollment since 2010, when it had a total of 3,755 students, according to the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia. Last fall, Southwest had a total enrollment of 2,135 students.

So, when Wright became president of the college, he was looking for ways to reverse that trend and solve what he called “sort of a quandary.”

“How do we reverse that when we are already number one in our recruitment as a percentage compared to our peers of our high schools (students) and we marry that with a population decline in Southwest? So, from my perspective we had to ... get more people. We had to get a bigger pond to fish in.”

Over the four years of his presidency, Wright started several programs aimed at attracting all prospective students, not just those considered traditional community college pupils.

One of the first was to work with the counties the college serves to offer free tuition to all high school graduates in those counties. The college, which opened in 1968, serves the counties of Buchanan, Russell and Tazewell and a portion of Dickenson County.

2010 – 3,755

2011 – 3,233

2012 – 2,766

2013 — 2,630

2014 – 2,546

2015 – 2,563

2016 – 2,481

2017 — 2,304

2018 – 2,373

2019 – 2,338

2020 – 2,295

2021 – 2,135

Source: State Council of Higher Education for Virginia

Under the program, students fill out federal and state financial aid applications and the counties pick up what's not covered.

Wright also started an honors program designed to help recruit the region's best and brightest students.

And for the first time, the college began offering athletics, with 14 men's and women's programs beginning in the fall of 2019. The school is now a member of the National Junior College Athletics Association.

All athletics were suspended in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, so this school year is the first full year of athletic competition.

The athletics programs allow the school to recruit from a broader area and it's bringing in students from other states and countries that wouldn't have come otherwise, and they need housing, Wright said.

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Great Expectations

Per capita, Southwest Virginia has the highest percentage of students who have been in the foster care system in the state, according to Susan Lowe, Southwest's vice president of institutional advancement and executive director of the Educational Foundation.

She said there is a "staggering population" of these students.

As these students turn 18, they age out of the foster care system and often have nowhere to go, according to Lowe.

Many of these students are members of a statewide program called Great Expectations, which helps them get into a community college and transition to living independently.

One of their greatest needs is housing, Wright said.

Sometimes, the foster parents no longer want to provide the students with housing, "so there's an opportunity for us to assist our foster care participants now with housing options. ...," he said.

Andrea Laney, a 20-year-old student from Tazewell, is a member of the Great Expectations program.

She said student housing will be an “amazing opportunity” for students in the program.

“I think it is needed because many students don’t have a stable home life, and they often seek out apartments/housing on their own,” she said. “Many hurdles come with this for students, such as limited apartments in our rural area and students struggling to balance work with classes. When I started college, I was living on my own and worked the night shift at a nursing home. I missed many classes during the day because it was very hard for me to wake up after working the night before. I think many students at Southwest struggle with similar situations. The student housing will allow students affordable housing that will allow them the opportunity to work less, and they will be able to focus on their classes and homework.”

She pointed to a report by the organization FosterVA, which states that only 3% to 4% of Virginia foster youth who age out will earn a college degree, and 1 in 5 will be homeless after turning 18.

“I think that being able to live close to campus will provide the support and security that Great Expectations students need to achieve their educational goals,” she added.

Laney is doing well, having completed an associate degree in criminal justice last year. She is currently finishing an associate degree in general studies before she transfers to a four-year college this fall. She also works as an administrative assistant at Southwest’s Bluefield Center.

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Location

Southwest Virginia Community College was built in a location that was more central to its service area rather than near any population centers, Wright said, and many of its students must travel an hour or more each day.

Because of the mountainous terrain, they must also travel winding, two-lane roads, he said.

By the numbers

1968 – Year the college opened

710 – Number of students in its first year

“We believe that there are students that live on our perimeters who are currently driving to us, who could rent these units at a price point, particularly now with gas prices, they could rent from us for roughly the same price as they’re paying to be on the dangerous roads and time-consuming roads back and forth.”

Wright also noted that there are few rental properties available in the college’s service area.

2,135 – Total number of students in fall 2021

More than 80 — Programs of study

3 – The number of presidents in its history

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The housing project

Groundwork continues on the construction site and there is work on the new entrance to the property. Construction of the building will begin soon, according to John Dezember, Southwest’s director of strategic communications.

The building will have six four-bedroom apartments that can house as many as 48 students. Each room will have an attached bathroom and can be double occupancy. Each apartment will have a shared living room, kitchen, laundry and deck. Kitchen appliances, including a washer and dryer, will be included.

The rent is expected to be \$600 a month and that will cover the costs of internet, electricity, water, sewer and trash pickup.

Southwest officials say there is high interest among students in the new housing. They are working on the criteria that will be used to choose the first students who will live in the new apartments, but priority will be given to those who live a distance from the school.

The apartment building is expected to be completed in time for students to move in by August for the fall 2022 semester. The second building is not expected to be completed until at least January, Wright said.

“This is the first community college student housing in Virginia and is just one more example of our commitment to making our students feel welcome, appreciated, respected and supported in their educational journey,” Wright said.



ECONOMY

Lab school focusing on health care planned for Southwest Virginia

Emory & Henry College's School of Health Sciences would be the college partner for the high school program.



by **Susan Cameron**

October 28, 2022



Virginia Secretary of Education Aimee Rogstad Guidera. Photo by Susan Cameron.

Leaders in colleges and school systems along the Interstate 81 corridor between Bristol and Wytheville are working to open a lab school in Southwest Virginia.

The lab school would be launched by Emory & Henry College's School of Health Sciences and would involve school systems in Bristol, Washington County, Smyth County and Wythe County, Smyth County Superintendent Dennis Carter said Friday during a workshop about lab schools in Abingdon. The Southwest Virginia Higher Education Center, Virginia Highlands Community College and Wytheville Community College would also be involved, he said.

Carter, David Matlock, executive director of the Higher Education Center, and Smyth County Community Hospital CEO Dale Clark discussed the project with Virginia Secretary of Education Aimee Rogstad Guidera and Deputy Secretary McKenzie Snow during one of 32 workshops offered during the United Way of Southwest Virginia's 2022 Rural Summit.

A lab school is a public, K-12 school that is meant to be an "innovative, high-quality education experience," according to the state Department of Education. It is a partnership between higher education, employers, school divisions and communities.

The leading partner must be a college, but it need not be a four-year institution, so community colleges and higher education centers now qualify.

The school must focus on academic programs in an in-demand field such as computer science or sports medicine, according to the Department of Education.

State Sen. Todd Pillion, R-Washington County, was the lead sponsor of the legislation authorizing lab schools. Earlier this year, \$100 million was allocated by the General Assembly to pay for the start-up costs of the schools, which are a big part of Gov. Glenn Youngkin's agenda, Guidera said.

And they couldn't be coming at a better time, Guidera said, just days after the release of the 2022 National Assessment of Educational Progress scores on reading and math tests. The "Nation's Report Card" revealed that Virginia fourth-graders recorded the largest declines in reading and math in the nation.

"Our learning loss within math and reading was three times worse than that national average and the national average was not pretty," the education secretary said.

She added that the state's "one-size-fits-all approach to learning" is failing its students.

The governor's plan is to open 20 lab schools within five years. Initially, the plan is to put a lab school in each of the eight Department of Education superintendent regions so the schools are spread across the state, Guidera said.

As of three months ago, Guidera said 37 postsecondary institutions had expressed an interest in launching a lab school.

The state now has six applications, and the hope is that a couple will open in September 2023, Guidera said.

The Southwest Virginia project has not yet submitted an application, but the plan is for it to focus on health care. There is no deadline for applications.

Matlock said the local lab school would provide “pathways and create pipelines to meet the workforce needs of Southwest Virginia.”

Clark, with the Smyth County hospital, said the help is needed. Currently, there are 2,500 open positions in the Ballad Health system, he said.

The Southwest Virginia lab school plan is for about 80 students in ninth through 12th grades, according to Carter. In its second year, the plan is to bring the University of Virginia’s College at Wise and that area of the region into the lab school, he said.

Lab schools must be approved by the state Board of Education and unlike charter schools, would not require local approval.

A process for selecting students has not been established, but Guidera said it will most likely be done through a “lottery system.”

The education secretary said the hope is that interest is so high many lab schools will be built in the coming years.

“This is about providing access to excellence and our hope is that there will be so much demand for these schools that we just keep building them and that we keep replicating success,” she said.

She added that more money for lab schools will be sought during the 2023 General Assembly session.

Because no future money is guaranteed, however, Carter, the Smyth County superintendent, said those developing the local lab school must find a way for it to eventually be sustainable on its own.