

College sees boom

Lagging economy and job layoffs result in higher enrollment at Western Piedmont

By FREELIN JONES
The News Herald

MORGANTON — It can be difficult to find a silver lining to an increasing unemployment rate, but Western Piedmont Community College is seeing quite a bit more silver.

Western Piedmont has seen an 8 percent increase in enrollment over last year with more than 2,420 students signed up this fall. College officials point to higher joblessness as the primary reason.

"The rapid rise in unemployment in the county has created an immediate need for training and retraining of persons who have unexpectedly found themselves out of work and do not have adequate basic skills to be competitive in the job market or continue their education," wrote Jim Richardson, president of Western Piedmont, in a letter to Trossie Wall, chairman of the Burke County Board of Commissioners.

Richardson said in his letter that basic computer skills is a primary need for the unemployed who have done production line work for their entire careers.

Richardson added that basic computer skills and high school completion classes are needed to provide potential workers with a competitive edge and when the unemployment rate drops, training will still be needed to maintain the workforce that will make Burke County a desirable place for new industry.



In top photo, Western Piedmont Community College Instructor Larry Kortering leads an Early Childhood Development class in discussing special education Thursday. Students are, front row, from left, Coronna Caldwell-Kanipe, Kelth Smith, Mark Patrick; second row, Joyce Whitley and Zinetta Kincaid. At right, Alice Thompson scans job listings on the computer at the Morganton Employment Security Commission office on East Union Street recently. The office has seen more traffic as the unemployment rate rises.



Top photo by Kimmy Costner
Bottom photo by Bridgett Baker

A 15 percent hike in full-time student enrollment from a year ago along with an agreement between Appalachian State University and Western Piedmont to offer coursework in several baccalaureate and mas-

ters degree programs on the campus of the community college has also created some space problems for Western Piedmont.

College officials from Western Piedmont approached the county commissioners during

their last meeting for additional funds to pay for rental space for several courses which had to be offered off-campus as a result of the limited space on Western Piedmont's campus.

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Western Piedmont requested \$18,600 to cover the rental expenses, but commissioners instead appropriated \$12,000.

The community college does not currently pay rent for any facilities it is using throughout the county, but now that the commissioners approved the partial funding college officials are in the process of renting several vacant store buildings and some space at a local computer store, said Richard Greene, executive vice president for Western Piedmont.

Across North Carolina, statis-

tics show for every 1-percent increase in the unemployment rate, community colleges experience an additional 4-percent increase in enrollment.

"It is an unfortunate reality for us (Western Piedmont)," Greene said.

Greene was also notified Thursday that state legislators had increased tuition for all state community colleges by \$3.50 per course hour.

In-state students at Western Piedmont who take a full course load of 16 or more hours will now pay \$496 per semester while out-of-state students who take a full course load will pay

\$2,772 per semester.

Greene said the college originally billed students the cost of last year's tuition while the General Assembly hashed out the new state budget, which includes community college tuition, and will be sending out bills for the difference between what the students originally paid and the new higher tuition.

Even with the limited space Western Piedmont officials are looking forward to the challenges of serving Burke County.

"Increased enrollment brings with it some problems, but these are good problems to have," Greene said.