ENROLLMENT SKYROCKETS AT NEW RIVER’S NICHOLAS COUNTY CAMPUS

[SUMMERSVILLE, WV] Fred Culler has been in community college administration a long time, but he’s never seen anything like the explosion in enrollment on the Nicholas County Campus of New River Community and Technical College this semester. Culler, who was appointed dean of the Nicholas County Campus last December, said that the norm is for enrollment to drop in the spring. Instead, he is scrambling to find space to fit in the additional 133 students who have enrolled since the end of the fall semester. They represent a 31 percent increase in headcount in just a few short months.

Culler’s experience as an administrator is serving him well as he explores every option to serve more students without sacrificing quality of instruction and most importantly, without turning away anyone who wants to further his or her education.

To address the challenges presented by the rapid growth, Culler has created an additional classroom by moving a lab around, making room for an evening class that filled instantly. He has also re-directed some students into general education courses other than the ones they had planned to take this semester, although he regrets that not all students are getting their first preference.

Community colleges around the country are seeing enrollment increases due to the economic downturn, but Culler does not believe the increase on his campus is tied to the recession. Rather, he said it is part of a trend that has been apparent over the
past three semesters. And if things continue along the same track, he projects that there could be as many as an additional 100 students by next fall.

“I can’t think of higher praise for our faculty and staff than to have this problem,” Culler says. “It’s like the theater district in New York. The preferred sign out front is Standing Room Only.”

He credits the student services staff in particular for following up personally to ensure that students enroll and stay in school. He also gives the faculty high marks for being available to assist students.

Looking ahead to continued growth, Culler says he can make a few more adjustments in space to create more classrooms and increase class sizes. But glancing around at the solid concrete block walls that separate most of spaces in the building, he admits that he is running out of ways to refigure the building to accommodate more students.

“If demand exceeds capacity, we will have to go elsewhere. I will try to work with the library and with Workforce West Virginia to find additional instructional space. I will do my upmost to keep from turning students away,” he says.

The college’s 10-Year Master Facilities Plan, which was unveiled in 2007, includes a major expansion of the Nicholas County Campus. However, funding has not yet been secured for construction. And, Culler notes, even if construction were to begin immediately, it would be at least two years before operations could begin in the expanded space.

“Realistically, I need to be looking at space off campus for the next two to three years,” he says.

In addition to popular programs such as practical nursing and medical assisting that are already offered at the Nicholas County campus, Culler said that a pharmacy tech program will be added in the summer, and that plans are underway to offer a laboratory technician program at Summersville Memorial Hospital. A truck driving/heavy equipment operator program is also being explored.

“We are finding new ways to grow,” Culler comments. “We are even looking at extending into the weekends as a way to expand.”
Culler says the experience of adapting to such dramatic growth and change is something akin to being on a thrill ride at a theme park, but he is enjoying every minute of it. But even as he welcomes enrollment increases, he is mindful of the importance of putting students’ needs first.

“I hope to add some additional part-time help to provide services to students, and I will probably need to seek additional part-time faculty,” he says. “You have to have qualified faculty. I would rather turn people away than sacrifice quality.”

New River Community and Technical College was founded July 1, 2003, by enactment of the WV Legislature. The college serves Fayette, Greenbrier, Mercer Monroe, Nicholas, Pocahontas, Raleigh, Summers, and Webster counties from locations in Raleigh County (Beckley, Beaver), Greenbrier Valley (Lewisburg), Nicholas County (Summersville) and Mercer County (Bluefield and Princeton).

Dr. Ted D. Spring, president of New River, noted that dramatic enrollment increases are creating challenges at all of New River’s locations. “Across all of its campuses, the college has experienced an enrollment increase of 40 percent over the past two years,” he commented. “We are pursuing every possible avenue to provide the facilities and services necessary to serve our students.”

New River is accredited by the Higher Learning Commission of North Central Association of Colleges and Schools. For more information about degree and certificate programs offered by New River, go to www.newriver.edu, or call the Nicholas County Campus at (304) 872-1236.

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Photo Caption: Fred Culler, dean of the Nicholas County Campus of New River Community and Technical College, is coping with a huge jump in enrollment this semester.