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## In Hard Times, Students Seek Bargains in Education

Community College Enrollment Surges

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The biology labs at Northern Virginia Community College increasingly resemble Las Vegas casinos, at least in one respect: Inside the bright, windowless rooms, there's no telling whether it is day or night.

Students rotate in and out from 6:30 a.m. until 10:10 p.m., peering through microscopes and dissecting frogs at hours more commonly associated with channel-surfing, dog-walking and sleep.

This year, the college is offering many more classes that start before 8 in the morning or end after 9 at night, the graveyard shift of higher education. With surging enrollment and dwindling funds, the institution lacks the classroom space to serve every student within traditional operating hours.

So, Virginia's largest college is making more use of the space it has. More than 20 fall courses are offered before 7 a.m. at NVCC. More classes are being offered in evenings, on weekends and online. Professors are no longer permitted to cap enrollments without demonstrating an instructional need.

In the past, the college had offered a few classes at odd times for the convenience of students with jobs and family duties that precluded 9-to-5 study. Over the past year or two, though, graveyard-shift classes have become a relief valve for over-enrollment.

"It's good to have morning classes. I didn't necessarily want it to be this early," said Grace Picchiottino, 18, of Oakton, who signed up for Biology 101 at 6:30 a.m. on Fridays because it was the last available section.

Community college enrollment in the Washington region rose by nearly 12,000 students this fall, a 10-percent bump. The recession diverted large numbers of high school seniors from four-year colleges to less-expensive two-year colleges.

"I've heard stories of high school students who were accepted at U-Va. or Virginia Tech, and what their parents have done is ask them to wait out a year, come here for a year, purely for economics," said Deborah DiCroce, president of Tidewater Community College in the South Hampton Roads region of Virginia. Fall enrollment at Tidewater rose to a projected 30,500 this year from 26,898 last year.

Enrollment is booming, too, among the newly jobless, returning to school to find new careers.

State funding, meanwhile, has declined by nearly 20 percent over the past year at Virginia's community colleges and by 5 percent among Maryland's community colleges, according to school officials. There is less money to spend on classrooms.

Inside Picchiottino's predawn biology lab, students guzzle water and energy drinks, and try to stifle early-morning coughs. Picchiottino drives to the Annandale campus in darkness. By 8, the campus will be mobbed. But at 6:30, she is nearly alone; parking is easy.

She and her classmates are mostly full-time students with part-time jobs and the occasional family obligation. Picchiottino works afternoons at a Hallmark shop. Zina Tihomirov, 21, works at a gym and cares for her father. Said Rojas, 20, works at World Market and helps his parents run a family restaurant.

They also share the distinction, most of them, of having waited a bit too long to register. They had to settle for the educational equivalent of a red-eye flight.

"I'm in a cloud," said Tihomirov, whose slightly glazed expression betrayed that she had stayed up all night to be sure she was on time to class on a recent Friday. "I know I'm not going to wake up. I'm not a morning person."

Instructor Steve Htet is one of a few in the room, along with the firefighter and one or two others, who actually prefer studying biology before the sun comes up. It fits with his work schedule at NIH, studying muscle development in flies. (Yes, flies have muscles.)

"We have only two labs," he said. "A whole lot of things going on in these two labs."

The college is offering 55 sections of Bio 101 this fall at the Annandale campus, and all of them must share the two labs. Mary Vander Maten, assistant dean of biology, has added sections in the early morning and on Sundays; she counts 11 classes taught on Saturdays.

Together, rising enrollment and advancing technology may be pushing community colleges into an era when courses are available at all hours.

Two-year colleges around the Washington region are offering longer hours of weekday and weekend study, although not to the same extent at NVCC. They are also experimenting with class sections offered partly or fully online, which require less classroom space.

Howard Community College, where enrollment is up from 7,905 last fall to 8,778 this fall, is offering 10 "hybrid" classes, taught partly online, up from about three last year. Enrollment is up 70 percent at Laurel College Center, an overflow space shared with Prince George's Community College, said Ron Roberson, vice president of academic affairs. The college offers more early and late classes, too, with sections running from 7 a.m. to 11 p.m.

"I can tell you, that's a much easier sell than a class that starts at midnight, or at 6 in the morning," Roberson said. "We have difficulty getting students into class Friday afternoons, let alone at 6 a.m."

The College of Southern Maryland, where enrollment has spiked from 7,748 to 8,800, has steered overflow students into web-based and hybrid courses, whose enrollment has risen 20 percent.

"Suddenly, we're using that room for double the number of classes," said Bradley Gottfried, the president. "We just don't have the seats that we would like to have."

Tidewater, Virginia's second-largest community college, added 308 new class sections before the start of the fall term, with expanded offerings from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. and on weekends. Montgomery College, where enrollment is up seven percent, offers seven new classes this fall that start before 8 a.m., 24 online classes and six taught on Saturdays, according to spokeswoman Elizabeth Homan.

Some administrators worry for students who reluctantly sign up for classes on the graveyard shift or those taught online. Absentee rates could rise. An undisciplined student could fall behind in an online course. Hybrid classes are tailored to minimize that risk.

Outside Washington, the premiere example of graveyard study is Boston's Bunker Hill Community College, where English and Psychology courses are now taught at midnight. There is free coffee. But, according to English instructor Wick Sloane, no one seems tired.

"The energy from the motivation of community college students -- anywhere -- is enough to wake the dead," he said, writing by e-mail.

Conceived as a convenience to late-shift workers, the courses filled up instead with desperate students who couldn't find classes at any other time. With enrollment up 17 percent, to 10,923, the school pushed the first class of the day from 8 a.m. to 7 a.m. and added more than 100 classes to the schedule before the start of the fall term.

Colleges are expanding hours and taking courses online because they don't like the alternative, which is to turn students away. An informal survey by the Maryland Association of Community Colleges found that the state's 16 community colleges had lost about 2,000 students this fall for lack of available course sections.

An analysis by NVCC found that of 2,200 students who couldn't find an available class, the school found alternatives for roughly 1,500. The school lost the remaining 700.

"It's rare for a community college to say 'No, we can't help you,' DiCroce said. "That's not in our DNA."