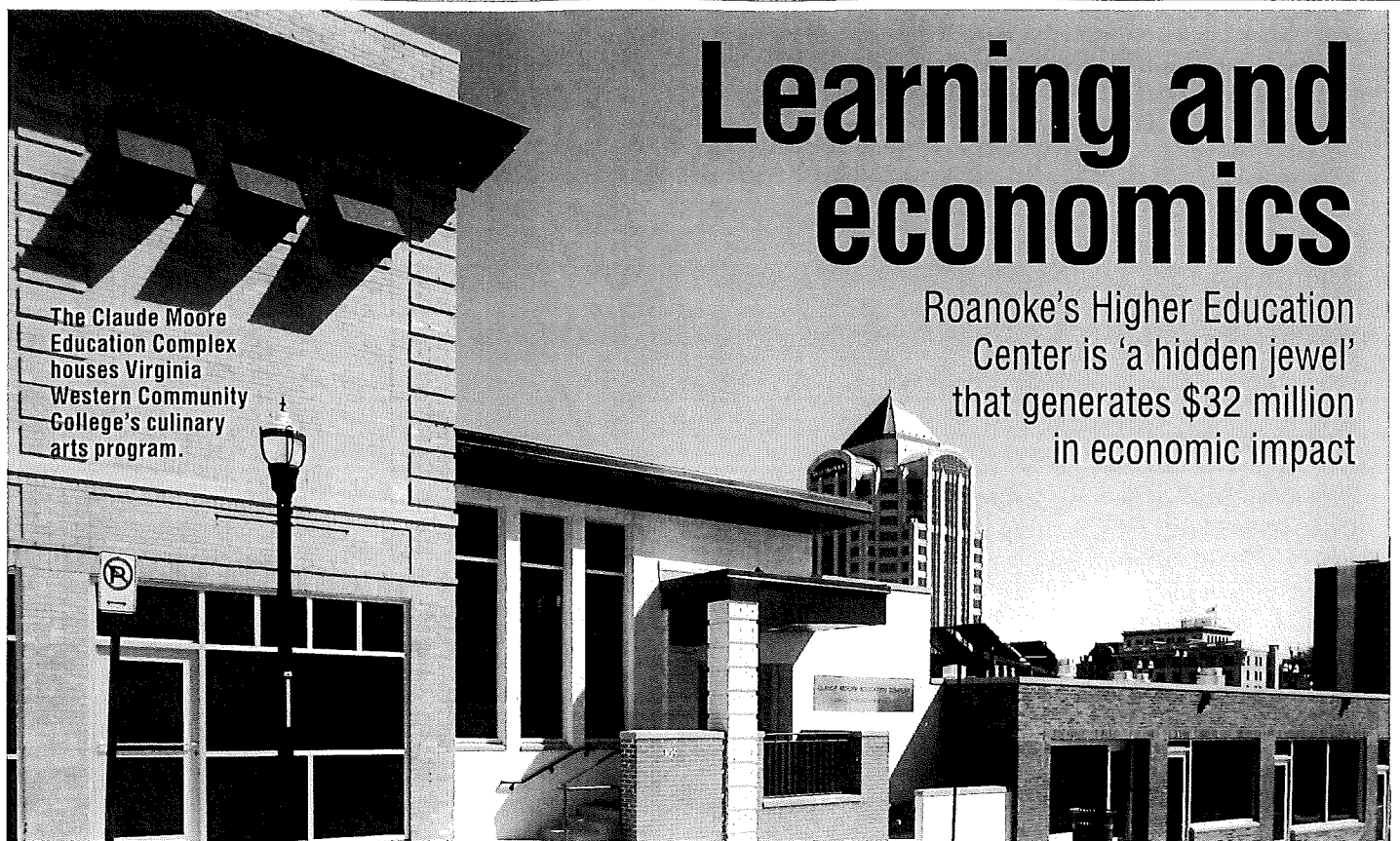


Learning and economics

Roanoke's Higher Education Center is 'a hidden jewel' that generates \$32 million in economic impact



by Donna Alvis Banks

Every year, 500 people graduate from the Roanoke Higher Education Center (RHEC). Some graduates leave with a high school equivalency diploma, while others earn their doctorate. The center offers more than 200 programs — as varied as computer training and culinary arts. All that education has a big impact on the local economy, providing the region with an annual stimulus of \$32 million.

“The Higher Education Center is unique because it offers a whole range of programs — from the GED to the Ph.D. We have more colleges and universities [represented here] than any other facility in the state,” says state Sen. John Edwards, D-Roanoke, chairman of the board of trustees for the nonprofit Roanoke Higher Education Authority, which developed and operates the center.

Twelve colleges and universities lease space at RHEC as well as the Western Virginia Workforce Development Board, and TAP/This Valley Works, an organization that provides

job matching and training resources.

Besides offering classes, the center offers testing and meeting services for businesses. Edwards recounts how he helped recruit one agency in his occasional role as marketing director — a position he says is needed but remains unfunded. When leaders of the state's division of child support enforcement were looking for a conference site, Edwards sold them on the center. “It is a lot cheaper than, say, the Hotel Roanoke,” he notes.

The center also serves as a valuable technological resource, he adds, with state-of-the-art computer labs, teleconferencing equipment, an exam center and a nursing simulation lab.

RHEC opened Aug. 15, 2000, with an enrollment of 2,500 students. Housed in downtown Roanoke's renovated Norfolk and Western Railway headquarters — a 1931 Art Deco building on Jefferson Street — the center began with \$200,000 from the 1996 Virginia General Assembly for a feasibility study. The hope was to create a centralized place that would

meet demands for skilled jobs in the Roanoke region by offering a variety of college education and workforce-training programs under one roof.

A 2012 market assessment by the Clarus Corp. found that the center's educational providers serve 2,100 students each semester, the majority 35 to 44 years old. Female students outnumber males nearly 7 to 3, and 48 percent of the student population receives no financial aid.

Kim Roe, a 46-year-old mother of two, graduated from the center in 2012 with a bachelor's degree in Business for a Sustainable Future from Mary Baldwin College. Trane, her employer, paid for her schooling.

“That was the best part,” Roe says. When her supervisor approached her with the idea of going to RHEC, Roe was thrilled. “I had always wanted to go back to school to get my degree. I had been looking but kept thinking it was just too expensive. The Roanoke Higher Education Center had all the good opportunities there,” she says.

Roe, like most students, took classes at night. “It was challenging

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and took time away from my family, but they were understanding," she said. "I guess I approach things a bit differently now since I went back to school. It makes you more open to new ideas."

The center has a positive impact on the local economy. A 2010 independent study by the Roanoke Valley-Alleghany Regional Commission credited the center with producing a \$32 million annual stimulus for the city's metro area. Through student and alumni spending, as well as operations at the center, the study concluded that the \$32 million came from annual sales activity and 310 jobs earning an average of \$35,142 per year supported by the center. "This is quite impressive," the report said, "considering that this annual impact is generated from a base annual budget of \$9 million [of the center and its member institutions]."

The center employs 13 full-time and five part-time employees. Despite its unique mission, it doesn't enjoy broad recognition. The report showed

that two-thirds of the region's 377 larger employers were familiar with the center, but 16 percent had never

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"The Higher Education Center still remains sort of a hidden jewel in the valley," acknowledged Academic and Student Services Director James. "We're offering 218 programs right now ... The center is here for the community — for the learners and the employers. We really want to be a resource for everyone."

It was a helpful resource for Ian Fortier, 41. He graduated in 2012 with a master's degree in public administration from James Madison University. Currently the Jefferson Center Foundation's director of patron services, Fortier chose the RHEC because it was geared to working professionals. "It is convenient, accessible and a warm environment for learning," he says. "It also lacks all the bureaucracy and silos often found at larger traditional campuses, which makes it much easier to focus on the actual workload and excel."

The only drawback for Fortier was a lack of electives in his satellite program. "Because we are a satellite program, the tenured and adjunct professors do not reside in Roanoke. Each semester there were two courses offered, and you took it or missed it and had to wait again for it to come around."

A variety of short-term programs, such as GED certification and computer training, are available for those not pursuing advanced degrees. James says the culinary arts career certificate offered through Virginia Western Community College is so popular RHEC dedicated a separate building, the Claude Moore Education Complex, just for it.

Dr. David Trinkle, a psychiatrist and Roanoke city councilman who also owns three local restaurants — Fork in the City, Fork in the Alley and Fork in the Market — hired several employees who completed the program. "They seem to *be* able to quickly take on management roles," he said. "Because of the school, they know the community, too. Every restaurant that hires one of these students has an edge up."

That edge, Trinkle adds, is especially important in the restaurant "It's a tough business." RB