

Presentation to the Senate Finance Committee January 28, 2010

This year Northern Virginia Community College expects to have an unduplicated student headcount of 72,500 students (31,500 FTE).

For some time now it has been apparent that a small percentage but a significant number of our students have difficulty attending college because of housing-related challenges, especially around our urban campuses.

Last year NOVA conducted a feasibility study to determine how great the need was at our 9,500 student Alexandria Campus. Here are some of the study highlights:

- Only half of the students who completed our housing survey (1200 respondents) actually live with their parents or other relatives.
- 57% of the students indicated that they currently had to rent a place to live while they attended NOVA.
- 48% of the students surveyed responded that it was difficult or very difficult for them to find housing near the campus.

In our follow-up focus group interviews we found that most of our students need to work at least part time in order to be able to attend college, but housing is so expensive they cannot afford both the housing costs and educational expenses. As a consequence, they take far fewer courses per semester and the time to degree is much longer.

Another group of students has to rely upon public transportation to attend college, but that means they need to live in an area near one of our two large urban campuses. However, the cost of housing makes it difficult to afford their educational expenses.

A third group is our international students (we have over 2,000 international students on an F-1 visa) who attend NOVA as out-of-state students and need housing as part of their arrangement to attend college.

A final group of students include foster children who have graduated from high school, want to attend college, but need a place to live.

The following are excerpts from interviews with two NOVA students:

- “I would love an affordable option for housing, especially in the expensive Northern Virginia area. At 22, I am an older student who is completing a full-time course load and working full-time at a government agency. I can’t afford to live anywhere near Arlington, where I work and study, so I commute about three hours daily.....”
- “I believe providing student housing for this campus would be excellent. Currently, nearby living accommodations in the Alexandria area are too expensive for NVCC students and are not practical.”

Unlike many other community colleges, NOVA’s Alexandria Campus is an urban facility situated squarely in the midst of the third most traffic congested area in the United States. With the vast majority of our students being active members of the workforce, the daily challenge of getting from home, to work and to school is measured in hours not miles.

On top of that, the average rental rate for a one-bedroom apartment in the immediate Alexandria/Arlington area is nearly \$1,400 a month – closing in on the cost of a full-time semester at the college!

Finally, students and faculty alike face the transcending challenge that community college life for a majority of us no longer means a place where students take a class or two at night. Eighty-two percent of our Alexandria students are on campus throughout the day or come in during the daylight hours and stay until late into the evening. An average twenty percent of every high school graduating class in Northern Virginia is coming our way because we are their only dependable, affordable path to the Commonwealth’s four-year institutions.

NOVA is no longer just a “commuter school.” We are a seven-day-a-week higher education institution and community anchor with classes running from 6 am to past 10 pm most days.

Accordingly, our objective is to be able to solicit a partnership with the private sector to provide an on-campus housing option for future students who are stretched for money, time and a sense of place in our rapidly changing community.

Advance authorization to use non-general fund monies for this project is necessary as private sector proposals are always focused on near term financing numbers. Given the rapidly changing marketplace, to undergo a solicitation first and then wait for a future General Assembly session to secure approval would leave us with dated, unusable solicitations.

We recognize that this is a change for the Virginia Community College System. However, dormitories have been built to serve other community colleges at various locations around the country. According to the latest figures from the American Association of Community Colleges, 258 public community colleges have some form of on-campus housing. They are virtually all self-funding operations; using rental income to serve partnerships or retire debts.

Community colleges have historically been known for our ability to nimbly respond to the needs of our students and the business and civic communities we serve. What we are asking for today is the ability to continue this tradition.
