

Higher education 'an economic machine'

By [Ragan Robinson](#) | Hickory Daily Record

Lenoir-Rhyne University and Catawba Valley Community College have more students this semester than ever before.

Record numbers of students could result from the economic downturn, with unemployment at 15 percent in the four-county metro area.

But those students, regardless of why they're in school, are good economic news, said Danny Hearn, president of the Catawba County Chamber of Commerce.

"Higher education can help the economy as much as any major business or industry," he said. "It is almost an economic development machine that creates jobs."

Hearn ticked off the list of fiscal benefits from being a higher education hub.

â ¢ Faculty and staff members become taxpaying residents.

â ¢ Buildings at colleges mean more tax money paid to the city and county.

â ¢ Athletic teams come into the area to stay the night and spend money, as do fans.

â ¢ Students graduate skilled and trained, and, with any luck, willing to keep that talent in the community.

â ¢ Those graduates become the kinds of employees who help lure industry.

Catawba County and the three others that make up the metro area, Burke, Caldwell and Alexander, could use the help.

Out of every metro area in the nation, this one is among the lowest in college graduates, Hearn said.

"I don't like to mention educational attainment rates, but that gets people involved and trying to fix it," he said. "While we have a negative, we've got more positive stories to tell."

Lenoir-Rhyne University has 1,682 students this year, one more than in the last record-setting year a decade ago in 1989. The fall semester's enrollment includes 117 more students than last year, a 7.5 percent increase.

The school was concerned the poor economy would cut enrollment, said Rachel Nichols, vice president of enrollment management.

University officials say careful financial management mean L-R did not cut back on the amount of financial aid it awarded this year. A semester at Lenoir-Rhyne runs full-time students \$12,100, not including room and board or other fees.

The college estimates it adds more than \$80 million to the area's economy every year, said Margaret Allen, assistant director of marketing and communications.

"This includes such things as payroll, supplies bought from area businesses, construction projects, student spending, etc.," she said.

While Allen isn't sure how many of those students came from another county to live and spend in Hickory, she said the number of residential students jumped significantly this year, by 79 students.

Over the two previous years combined, the number of residential students increased only by 22.

L-R's estimated \$80 million economic contribution also takes into account the money that results from jobs created thanks to L-R spending.

Catawba Valley Community College is breaking records by a wider margin than the university.

This semester, the school has approximately 5,600 students, a 13 percent increase from the previous record of 5,079 in 2007. In 2001, the college had fewer than 4,000 students.