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TOP STORY SPOTLIGHT

ROLE REVERSAL

Commentary: In Virginia, private colleges are the new front line for access

FRANK SHUSHOK JR.

Jun 3, 2025



Forty percent of Roanoke College's students are "underrepresented or underserved," including veterans, rural students, and those eligible to receive federal Pell Grants.

Paul Stoutamire, Autonomous Flight Technologies

This summer marks three years since I became president of Roanoke College. When I arrived in 2022 after 30 years serving at large research universities, including nearby Virginia Tech, I brought what some on campus jokingly (and not-so-subtly) called “big school energy.” I had a lot to learn about leading a small private college.

I spent the bulk of my career at land-grant institutions, including Ohio State, the University of Maryland at College Park and Virginia Tech, drawn by their historic missions to expand access to practical, high-quality education for students from all walks of life, especially those from working-class families and rural communities.

Ironically, it was those same values of access, opportunity and service to the greater good that led me to a small private college.

Over the past two decades, many public land-grant universities in the U.S., including our own Virginia Tech, have boomed in popularity, prestige, resources and selectivity. At the same time, Virginia’s independent, nonprofit colleges and universities, like Roanoke College, have stepped up to become the front line for college access — a striking role reversal in the higher education ecosystem.



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You might even say that these Virginia independent colleges, collectively, are a new brand of land grant.

Consider this: the class of 2008 entered Virginia Tech with an average GPA of 3.67, and 75% of students who applied were admitted. Compare that to the 56% of applicants who were accepted for fall 2024, with GPAs averaging 4.11. What's more, when I departed Virginia Tech to become president of Roanoke College in 2022, the average family income of a Virginia Tech student exceeded an eye-popping \$200,000.

My point isn't to pick on Virginia Tech (once a Hokie, always a Hokie). On the contrary, I believe the rising prestige of Virginia Tech and the commonwealth's other leading public universities is critical for Virginia's future. Instead, I want to make the case for the essential role private institutions also serve in shaping that future.

Today, Virginia's 28 private nonprofit colleges enroll diverse student bodies, serving more underrepresented and underserved students than public institutions and educating primarily lower- and middle-income Virginians.

At Roanoke College, 40% of students are "underrepresented or underserved," categories that include veterans, rural students, first-generation students, students of color and those eligible to receive federal Pell Grants, which are provided to students who demonstrate significant financial need. Pell-eligible students make up only 29% of the student bodies at Virginia's public institutions.

Many students come to private institutions from small towns and under-resourced communities, often bringing with them strong work ethics and a growing sense of purpose. In smaller classes with personalized attention, private colleges help

transform these students into doctors, educators, nurses, engineers, counselors and community leaders.

And when they graduate, many stay in Virginia — contributing to their communities. At Roanoke College, for example, we are proud that more than 30% of our graduates choose to settle in the Roanoke Valley.

What's even more remarkable — and often overlooked — is that private colleges achieve this impact at a cost to Virginia students that is often equal to, or even less than, that of public universities. We are able to do so, in part, because of the direct financial assistance in-state students receive from the **Virginia Tuition Assistance Grant Program** (TAG).

Because TAG is awarded based on residency rather than income, it benefits a wide range of students, making it one of Virginia's most effective tools for expanding college access, allowing students and families to choose the institution that best fits their needs, not just their finances. For many, TAG often makes the difference between a promising student attending college and not attending at all.

TAG is a smart investment for Virginia — and comes at a fraction of the cost compared to public institutions. A **recent poll** by the Virginia Business Higher Education Council found that a strong majority of Virginians not only support state funding for TAG — they want lawmakers to increase it.

The payoff is clear. Virginia's private colleges support over 28,000 jobs, generate \$4.6 billion in economic output, contribute \$157 million in state and local tax revenue, and strengthen the state's economy, workforce and quality of life.

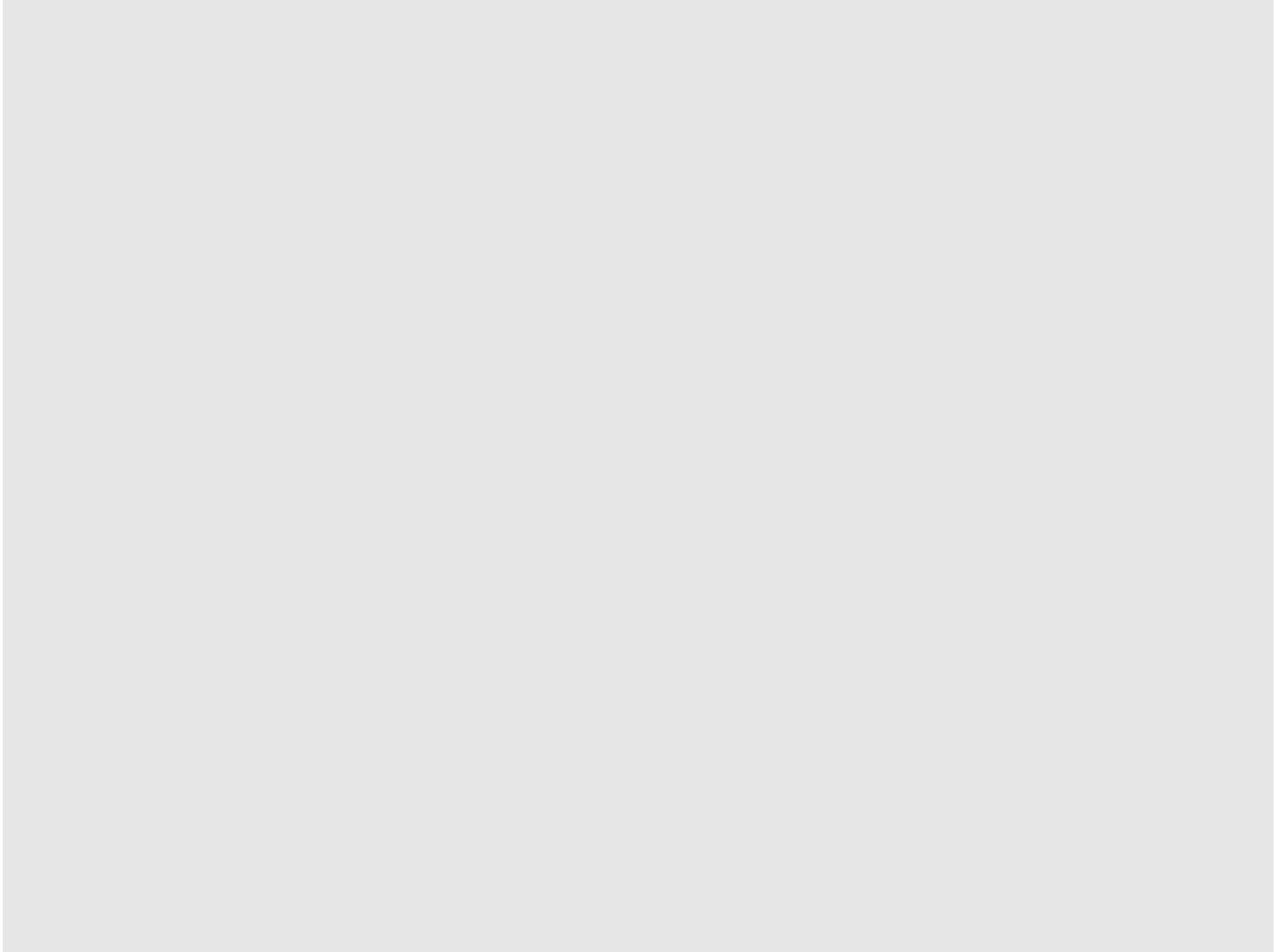
Our campuses also face challenging headwinds from demographic changes, rising operating costs, federal financial aid delays and heightened public debate over the value of a college degree.

Simply put, for higher education in Virginia to work its magic, we need a robust, healthy, and sustainable ecosystem of institutions — public and private — to serve our diversity of citizens. Roanoke College needs Virginia Tech, and Virginia Tech needs

Roanoke College. Hampton University needs the University of Virginia, and vice versa.

When we each do our part, Virginia wins.

From the Archives: Oregon Hill



06-21-1957: Two children sit outside Engine Company No. 6 in Oregon Hill.

Staff photo
