

Richard Bland's Sydow Focuses on Pivot Points for Student, Economic Success

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/EINPresswire.com/ -- Debbie L. Sydow, Ph.D., knows that students have two paths after they complete their studies at Richard Bland College of William & Mary (RBC), Virginia's only two-year residential college. Many will continue to a four-year school and complete their undergraduate degree; others will enter the job market.

As president, Sydow knows she needs to prepare those on both paths for success. And with increasing attention on post-college outcomes, she is ensuring that RBC is a vital partner in developing the workforce and driving innovation in Virginia's Gateway Region.

"We are so nimble in the two-year sector," said Sydow, who arrived on campus in 2012. "We work to understand what employers are looking for, and then we bring in the programming to hit that sweet spot of having both an industry-recognized credential as well as the college credential."

That agility is crucial as the region navigates a shifting economic landscape. With the decline of traditional manufacturing, localities are focused on cultivating new high-tech industries, including unmanned aerial systems (UAS), pharmaceutical production and cybersecurity. Bringing in new industry also means doubling down on preparing future professionals to support them, such as building the next generation of health care providers – which is one reason the college has a bridge program with Bon Secours to educate future nurses.

Under Sydow's leadership, Richard Bland College – whose campus stretches across Dinwiddie and Prince George counties – is playing a key role in readying Virginia for that evolution.



RBC President Debbie Sydow giving remarks at the introductory DroneUp press conference in 2022, as Virginia Gov. Glenn Youngkin and DroneUp founder/CEO Tom Walker look on.

Taking a leadership stance on innovation

The centerpiece of its commitment is the creation of the 180-acre Business Innovation Park, developed in partnership with VGR and other state and local economic development leaders. A GO Virginia grant to VGR was instrumental in positioning the site for Tier 4 opportunities, and Sydow is working to have those leaders add the site to their potential development portfolios.

Anchoring the complex is DroneUp, a pioneer in the use of drone technology across security, logistics and infrastructure applications; the company is planning to build a research-and-development facility at the site.

The park's benefits are twofold: Tenants have access to college resources, including the recently opened Academic Innovation Center. And RBC students have increased opportunities for paid internships for Richard Bland students with companies on the campus.

"We believe it's important to prepare in a way that allows for multiple pivot points for entering the workforce, but also to continue to pursue a baccalaureate degree," Sydow said. "Because what we know for sure is that the money you make over the course of a career with a degree – whether it's an associate's or a baccalaureate – is worth it."

That focus on workforce development and economic impact puts Richard Bland in a slightly different space than Virginia's traditional community colleges. What is common is how the two-year programs have the flexibility and engagement with local industries to develop just-in-time training programs.

While most two-year schools concentrate on terminal associate's degrees, Richard Bland has a unique focus on pathways that enable students to transition smoothly to four-year universities. The campus features dormitory rooms for almost 500 students and fields 15 intercollegiate sports teams. Nearly all of the college's students – 98% – hail from a 50-mile radius.

"We are ensuring that students are preparing for the four-year baccalaureate, even as they may also be working to complete a micro-credential," Sydow said. "We are keeping students in state. We have dozens of articulation agreements – guaranteed admission agreements – with universities in-state that make that transition for our students extremely easy and effective."

Campus is part of the community

Richard Bland's impact extends beyond its own students. The college's collective 750-acre campuses are an open, welcoming space for the broader community, hosting everything from corporate training sessions to family pecan-gathering days.

"We are a natural extension of the community, and the community knows that," Sydow said. "They can use this campus. It really is just something that is a given, and has, I think, always been part of what our commitment is to the community."

That commitment extends to the college's new Office of Research and Innovation, which has secured \$8 million in primarily federal grant funding over the past three years. The focus is on STEM-H and workforce development, supporting paid internships and summer camps that expose students to in-demand careers. That investment comes in step with the Industry 4.0, a fourth revolution with deep roots in artificial intelligence and other emerging technologies.

It's all part of Richard Bland's mission to be a driving force in the region's economic transformation. By preparing students for the jobs of the future and partnering with industry, the college is positioning itself as an essential player in the area's long-term vitality.

"We partner so intricately," she added, "that it really is just how we function."

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