

## HIGHER EDUCATION: American National University

# Night and day

American National University, which caters to working students, has seen its night classes grow



Most of American National University's students attend night classes.

by Shawna Morrison

**W**hen Sarah Russell of Roanoke first started taking college classes, she found that huge class sizes and their “plentiful” distractions weren’t for her.

She decided to give American National University – known at the time as National Business College – a try, taking classes toward an associate degree in medical assisting. She was so pleased with the experience that she decided to take classes toward a second degree in business administration manage-

ment – while working 25 hours a week through a federal work-study program, tutoring fellow students as a second job and raising four kids who are now between the ages of almost 2 and 11.

“I really like the fact that they have small classes. The teachers are usually people who work in the field,” she says. In fact, Russell says, her accounting teacher is an accountant. The program director for medical assisting works as a nurse. “That real world experience is immeasurable,” she says.

American National draws many students for whom a college with a freshman class full of recent high school graduates is not a good fit. Ron Bradbury, American National’s Roanoke Valley campus director, says many students are in the 50- to 60-year-old age range. “When I first started, for about three months, I couldn’t tell the students from the faculty,” he says. “We just had an MBA graduate who was 72. It’s a pretty wide range.”

The Roanoke Valley campus,



“Every 10 weeks,” according to Ron Bradbury, American National’s Roanoke Valley campus director, “there’s another batch of students ready to get into the workforce.”

along with other campuses across the state, adopted the American National name during the 2013-14 school year. The school was formerly called National Business College and National College of Business and Technology. Bradbury notes that though many people may not recognize the American National name yet, “we’ve been here since 1886 doing the same thing, although as career technology has changed, our programs have adapted and changed with them. We are career education here in the Roanoke Valley.”

Gone, though, is the degree in stenography. One of the school’s latest offerings is a Ph.D. in cybersecurity through its online school, the University of Fairfax. Other doctoral programs are being considered, says American National’s Communications Director Jill Sluss.

Bradbury says American National President Frank Longaker and his teams are “constantly look-

ing at the industries to see how they can tweak our current programs or add programs that fill needs.”

The school is housed in the former Conehurst Elementary School building on East Main Street in Salem. American National has a total of 31 campuses, with Virginia campuses in the Charlottesville, Danville, Harrisonburg, Lynchburg, Martinsville and Northern Virginia areas. About 175 students take classes at the Salem location.

“The model we use for our teaching is we have a lot of professionals who are working in their fields, and they come back in the evening to teach,” says Bradbury. The programs that have the biggest enrollment are generally medical, business and information technology. Class sizes this term average only 8.1 students.

According to Bradbury, the school partners with many businesses. Businesses will call and say they need a certain number of stu-

dents in a certain field, and Bradbury says he and his team deliver. Currently, he says, there is a high demand for entry-level pharmacy technicians and medical coding specialists.

“Because of the nature of our accreditation, we are highly accountable for job placement, so we are not able to continue to exist if our graduates aren’t getting jobs. And so we see ourselves as supplying an important part of the workforce here,” he explains.

That doesn’t mean finding graduates any job, either. To be counted, a graduate’s job must be in a chosen field of study. The Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools has calculated the school’s placement rate to be 77 percent, based on employment in the field of study or in a related field, Sluss says.

The school has a unique schedule, with five term-starts each year. Each term is 10 weeks long. “Every 10 weeks, there’s another batch of students ready to get into the workforce,” Bradbury says.



More than three-fourths of American National’s graduates find work in their fields of study.



At least three-quarters of the students at the Roanoke Valley campus are taking night classes because of work or family commitments during the day. “That’s been a shift lately that’s been more and more pronounced. Nationally college enrollment is down, and as we’ve ridden into that trend of declining enrollment, our numbers are more sharply defined day and night, and the bigger number by far is at night,” Bradbury says.

The school serves many students for whom English is not their first language and is one of only a few schools in the state to offer an ESL program approved by the Commission on English Language Program Accreditation. “It kind of sets us apart from other schools,” Bradbury says. “It’s the gold standard in English language programs.”

American National also serves many students in the military. A Wall of Honor in the hallway is filled with framed photographs of students and employees who have served. A small table with one placement setting pays honor to prison-

ers of war and troops missing in action. A decorated Special Forces officer who served in Vietnam, Longaker makes it a priority to cater to those who have served in the military, Bradbury says.

Juliann Poff made the drive to Salem from her home in Christiansburg to attain not one, but three degrees from American National. Poff, a senior global sales executive at Qualtrax, which sells compliance management software, earned an associate degree in legal assisting in the early 1990s, a bachelor’s of business administration in 2011, and an MBA in 2013. She said she didn’t find a job in legal assisting after getting her associate degree but she found that what she had learned in the classes was valuable in other facets of her work, so she went back.

“I liked the diversity in the classrooms and being an older student,” Poff says. “I felt very comfortable there.”

Poff and Russell both say they liked the school’s policy of giving class credit – up to two credits per

degree – based on life and work experience. Russell says she will be able to complete four years’ worth of work in about 2½ years because of that and the way American National’s terms are structured. She will complete her medical assisting courses in December and continue taking classes toward her business administration management degree for another year. She says she feels comfortable both degrees will enable her to find work no matter where she may go. **RB**

## American National University

- National Business College, now American National, got its start in Roanoke in 1886.
- It has 31 campuses in six states: Virginia, West Virginia, Tennessee, Kentucky, Ohio and Indiana.
- School offers more than 45 academic programs.
- “Famous graduates” of National Business College include Don Lorton, former CFO of Carilion, and Thomas Robertson, former CEO of Carilion.
- The word American in the school’s name was chosen to reflect its “role as a leading American institution for career-focused education for students from around the world,” and National to acknowledge its “historical roots and nationwide reputation.”
- All campuses in Virginia and West Virginia are now known as American National University; those elsewhere are changing this year. Tennessee will keep the National College name.
- The school’s main building, where classes are held, is located in Salem. Another building a half-mile away, where marketing and financial aid offices are housed, is in the city of Roanoke.

Sources: Jill Sluss, American National University, [an.edu](http://an.edu)



# Learning to lead

**Participants say executive education makes profound differences in how they do their jobs**

by **Shawna Morrison**

Institutions that include the Roanoke Higher Education Center and American National University offer programs that, while not necessarily geared toward executives, cater to and enroll many managers.

“An increasing number of students are taking classes when it is convenient for them in order to advance their careers,” says Jill Sluss, communications manager at American National. Many programs, including graduate programs, are offered online, “so students who are also parents can take courses online at home, in a coffee shop or anywhere that is convenient for them.”

She said students’ reasons for enrollment vary. Sometimes, students wish to further their education; sometimes, an employer suggests an employee obtain a degree or further training. For companies that offer tuition assistance, American National offers a Business Partnership



Dave Simmons says he has been able to use nearly everything he learned in night classes that led to a management degree.

Grant that can provide up to a 50 percent match, which can mean the student pays little or nothing out-of-pocket. The school also offers refresher courses for life without any additional cost to the graduate, allowing them to keep up with evolving technology, Sluss says.

Dave Simmons worked 50 to 60 hours a week as an assistant service manager at Varney Inc., an industrial and commercial services contractor, while taking night classes for more than four years at what was then National

College of Business and Technology (now American National University). He earned a bachelor’s degree in business management administration. Before he started, Simmons says, he couldn’t even turn on a computer, but he saw the educational opportunity – for which Varney paid – as a way to get out of the field and into the office. He is now a project manager for Varney and says that while it was a challenge, “I’m glad I did it. I’m able to use almost everything I learned.”