New site designed for language learners

National Capital Region facility encourages a student-centered approach

By Rich Mathieson

NATIONAL CAPITAL REGION — All the chairs have wheels to make it easier for students to team up on activities or in-class readings. Personal whiteboards at each desk let them work together on writing tasks. Special “collaboration rooms” with dedicated computers and large monitors encourage group projects and presentations.

Every detail of the Virginia Tech Language and Culture Institute’s National Capital Region location, which opened this year in Fairfax, Virginia, has been designed with one goal in mind: to help students learn English.

“The space really provides our students with an inviting, learning-oriented atmosphere,” says Andrea Todd, the institute’s director of Northern Virginia operations. “With technology designed specifically for language-learning and furniture that represents the newest classroom options, the institute is able to maintain its focus on high-quality academic preparation.”

So-called teacher-centered approaches have long emphasized a passive transfer of knowledge from teacher to student. Picture a lecturer standing in front of a large classroom. Increasingly, though, researchers say that student-centered approaches, which engage language students actively in ways that are appropriate for and relevant to them in their lives outside the classroom, are more effective. That’s at the heart of the Language and Culture Institute, Todd says.

In a student-centered class, she says, students don’t depend on their teacher all the time, waiting for instructions, words of approval, correction, advice, or praise. Rather, they cooperate and learn from each other. Classes are smaller, and students are encouraged to interact, with teachers offering guidance and support.

continued on back
“No detail in this new location — which was years in the planning — was overlooked,” says Don Back, the institute’s director. “We spent hundreds of hours poring over color schemes, furniture choices, classroom configurations — and that work is reflected in this beautiful new facility. The response from our students and our faculty has been tremendous.”

The new facility is about four miles from the university’s Northern Virginia Center and about 15 miles from the heart of Washington, D.C. The location, in Fairfax’s Mosaic District, was chosen because it is close to a Metro stop, making it a convenient destination.

One student says the best part is the view from the sixth floor. “Most of the classes have a spectacular view of the trees and streets, which I find very calming,” says Talah AlSecait.

Another student, Salem Almara, has a slightly more ground-level appreciation.

Teachers have been praising the facility’s design and organization. “The space offers students nice seating areas for breaks and socializing, and there is an impressive number of computers,” says instructor Patti Mihm. “The setting is also a teacher’s dream, with a nice staff lounge, a spacious and well-supplied copy room, and an abundance of ESL texts and teacher resources.”

Todd says the “executive feel” of the new location is helping attract more than just college-age students. The institute has started offering TOEFL preparation classes as well as highly customized courses aimed at diplomats and working professionals who want to improve their English. Also, she says, the institute is collaborating with the Pamplin College of Business to design an MBA preparation program. Outside of regular class hours, the facility will be available to Virginia Tech Continuing and Professional Education for conference use.

“This additional programming is possible because of the increased space and technology available in our specially designed Fairfax facility,” Todd says.

The new Language and Culture Institute is the university’s seventh location in the National Capital Region. “This new facility strengthens our ability to offer language and culture education for academic and professional development as Virginia Tech expands its leadership role in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan region,” said Steven McKnight, vice president for the National Capital Region.