River Valley talks growth, future plans with local legislators in Keene

By KAITLIN MULHERE Sentinel Staff

The Community College System of New Hampshire wants to increase enrollment, accessibility and affordability while improving students’ success at its seven schools in the coming years.

And River Valley Community College, through several initiatives, will help the system achieve those goals, college leaders told local state legislators at a luncheon Friday in Keene.

River Valley is based in Claremont and has an academic center in Keene.

One of the system’s most immediate focuses is on decreasing the cost to go to community college.

New Hampshire has the second-priciest tuition rates of all public community college systems in the country, said Ross Gittell, the system’s chancellor.

He’s thankful the state Legislature largely restored funding last year after higher education took a serious budget cut in 2011. If the Legislature can continue its support of community colleges, the board of trustees won’t just hold tuition flat, Gittell said. It will decrease it by 5 percent, from $210 per credit to $200 per credit.

“For student success, they have to be able to come in the door,” Gittell said.

For its part, River Valley is planning to launch a scholarship campaign next fall to help students pay for courses.

Another big focus of River Valley, and the system at large, is increasing enrollment numbers. The system hopes to grow the numbers by 25 percent over the next few years.

River Valley administrators have started an enrollment committee with two focuses, recruitment and retention, and all of the community colleges have started reaching out to select high schools, including Conval and Keene high schools, to tell students about what’s offered at community colleges.

One idea Gittell floated Friday to help in that effort is a partnership between the University System of New Hampshire and the community college system to hire guidance counselors who would help high school students with questions about colleges in the state systems.
As part of the community college system’s push to double the number of graduates in science, technology, engineering and math by 2025, River Valley has started offering new programs in math and science, and an engineering program is in development, President Alicia B. Harvey-Smith said.

Harvey-Smith updated the participants on the progress of a $2.9 million renovation project at the Claremont campus, scheduled to be completed by June 2014, which will upgrade nearly everything on campus, from classrooms to labs to equipment. In that time, River Valley also hopes to complete some upgrades at the Keene Academic Center, including paving the parking lot and renovating the entryway.

The legislative luncheon is something the community college system organizes annually at each of its seven schools to update legislators and answer their questions. State Sen. Molly Kelly, D-Keene, attended the event, as did Democratic state representatives Gladys Johnsen, Larry R. Phillips, Timothy N. Robertson and Charles F. Weed, all of Keene.

Kaitlin Mulhere can be reached at 352-1234, extension 1439, or kmulhere@keenesentinel.com. Follow her on Twitter @KMulhereKS.