

Transcript

Janet Michael

Hello and welcome to the Valley. Today I am your host Janet Michael. It is Laurel Ridge Community College Day. This month we have the privilege of being on the Zooms with Brandy Hawkins voice. She is director of communications and outreach for Laurel Ridge. Thomas Monk is joining us as well. He is an outreach specialist and a career coach based at the the Middletown campus. And Brandy, I'm excited that we're going to talk with Thomas today because I think that this is one of those positions that you have at Laurel Ridge that more people need to know are there and what they're there for. So I'm glad we're highlighting it today.

Brandy Hawkins-Boies

Yeah, really happy that Thomas could join us today. He's our outreach specialist at the Middletown campus, but he travels around and some of you may have had the opportunity to meet him out and about in our community, but his role really is that first interaction with a, with a human associated with the college. He really can answer any question. He's pretty good. It's that initial, Hey, let's chat about your goals. Let's chat about what Laurel Ridge has to offer and what path we can get you on.

Janet Michael

I would imagine that's a pretty diverse group of people that you're talking to as well. I think sometimes we just assume it's all high school students, but that is not the case at all when it comes to Laurel Ridge. Oh, you're absolutely right.

Thomas Monk

There's all sorts of people that come in, people who have come back after 15 years, people that want to learn a new skill or trade sets, people still in high school that are trying to learn healthcare programs and things like that while they're there. You're absolutely right. There's all sorts of people there.

Janet Michael

And it doesn't even necessarily have to be when you mention learn a new skill or even get a certification. This doesn't have to be someone who wants to completely change careers. It could be someone who just wants to learn something new and they don't even know where to start to be able to take a class, much less go through whatever process.

Thomas Monk

Yes, it's very interesting because we have all these little processes that people aren't aware of. So I try to keep in mind that I do this probably 1000 times, they're each doing it once. So there's just these little steps that people might not be fully aware of that I'm happy to show them or just to try to get them across the finish line so they can get to exactly where they want. In my mind's eye, like 50% of the hurdle is just right there to get started. And then everything else should just continue on easily for them, relatively speaking. I.

Janet Michael

Think that's one of the other benefits of having an actual human being in this position is that it's very hard sometimes to go on any website and find all of the answers to your questions because typically websites and their FAQs are somewhat vague because they want to apply to everyone and people that have a question think their question only applies to them. So being able to explain it to you themselves makes it a whole lot easier.

Thomas Monk

For sure. I've taken a lot of time going to different departments. So if a student asks me a question, I'll go to that department and I might not know the full answer. So I'll get context for what that reasoning is or what specific link or form they need to fill out and I bring it back. And like Brandy said earlier, after doing that a couple dozen times, I've started to pick up how each process might work or how that aligns with other departments, right? I think of it as like a baton passing where you go from one step and then you go into the other. When I think of prospective students that walk into the campus, They'll come to the welcome desk, they might ask for information, then they'll meet me, I'll help them apply to the college. In that process, they do a survey that matches them with an academic advisor for whatever their program of interest is. And then they might go talk to financial aid or the business office. That's about five different departments this person went to, but to them, they just went to the college for an hour, right? So I try to keep that stuff in mind to help students in a holistic approach, try to meet them where they're at.

Janet Michael

Do you find that there are common barriers that people have when they come in? I would imagine one of them is, oh, I would love to go back to school, but I can't afford it. And you're probably in the hot seat to be able to say, oh no, actually here, let's take a look at these options.

Thomas Monk

Exactly, yeah. There's a lot of concern about things like that. And I try to allay those concerns that they might have, especially having them talk to people in the financial aid department or talk to them about scholarships and what's available to them. A lot of people look at college as one giant piece. When they look at the price, they're looking at two years and some change worth of education or fees. And I go, no, no, no, break it down. You have to dip your toe in to at least start getting some of the questions that you have answered.

Janet Michael

And then from a career perspective, there are a lot of people, not just high school students, there are retirees, there are 30 somethings, 40 somethings, 50 somethings who might not know what they want to be when they grow up.

Thomas Monk

That is true. And that's part of the, I think the appeal for Laurel Ridge is a lot of our stuff kind of lines up with each other, right? Unless they want to do something very specific. A lot of our courses are going to be like the same, especially those first two semesters, English 111, Psychology 230. a biology class. So I try to make sure that students don't feel like they've wasted time or taken classes that might not go towards their degree or certificate or what they want to do. I want to make sure that people feel very confident in being a student here.

Janet Michael

I recently had the privilege of working with a group of rising juniors and seniors in our local high schools in Winchester, Frederick and Clark Counties as part of the Chamber's Arising Leadership Program. They came to the radio station and spent the afternoon We talked about all of the different jobs and careers that are available in radio that don't even necessarily involve being on the air. And the number of shocked faces that I saw around the room of people that, oh, I didn't know I could work for a radio station and be an engineer. I didn't know I could do sports. There's probably a lot of people out there that have this idea about what they want to do, but they don't know what career it might fit into.

Thomas Monk

Oh, yeah, that's very true. A lot of people, like you said, they just this job or this degree only goes for specific careers. And that's part of the fun for me to also figure that stuff out for people. Everybody has their own individual questions, but a lot of them help out other students unknowingly down the road for me when I'm answering those questions for everybody else.

Janet Michael

I look at this show the very same way. I literally just recorded a show that people heard yesterday on the air from the Red Cross and it was about nurses and the need of nurses for Red Cross. I'm like, oh wait, I just did a show last month about the new nursing program at Laurel Ridge Community College. Let me connect you with them because they have this whole program. And so you have a whole lot of information about a whole lot of things that you're able to just plug in holes wherever you need to.

Thomas Monk

Exactly, yeah. Part of the other thing as well that I enjoy in outreach, just with students, but I'll table at other events as well. And there'll be other resources that are available that are outside of the college. But then I can connect those resources with our resources here. We have a social worker who recently learned that the Goodwill, they offer mailing addresses for people that currently don't have those. And that is just a great resource that many people don't know about. But because I'm out and about, I can share that with people internally as well as any student who might have those kind of concerns.

Janet Michael

Are there questions that you typically get asked over and over again right out of the gate?

Thomas Monk

The biggest question is how do I get started? But there are people who might've finished an application, they might've missed an e-mail of how to do the next steps to get onboarded. I have a lot of questions regarding healthcare programs and computer science programs. Those are big programs that we offer. It's interesting because I send a lot of similar messages. But it's all very unique to every single person. That's something that I'm always in awe of. I'm happy to give out that information. The other steps are typically just knowing what resources are available. Students might need accommodations and they might not know that they have to advocate for themselves here. So I try to make sure that students get their own advocacy and are able to find their way around after somebody shows them.

Janet Michael

I would think too that people that maybe have taken a class here or there and have not completed anything, or maybe they graduated high school, but that 40 some odd years ago and they're like, does anybody have to start all over? Do I have to start at the basics? We see commercials on TV about life experience counting. I would imagine you get a ton of those kinds of questions as well.

Thomas Monk

Oh yeah, for sure. And luckily I can give them insight. We're part of 22 other community colleges in the state of Virginia. So we have access to additional information if they had gone to a previous college as well as at Laurel Ridge. And then I can also help students who might have gone to a university and then come back to show them how they can move their transcript just continue with their education and not feel like they have to start all over again.

Janet Michael

Transfers are huge within the Laurel Ridge Community College system as well. And sometimes I think that might get confusing if you know what your career path is, but what you've been taking is here and where you're going is there and making sure those two things align. I would imagine you probably give advice out for that as well. Oh, for sure.

Thomas Monk

Yeah. I mean, as a community college, our bread and butter is transfer and we're very good with that. We have a guaranteed admission with 37 in the state of Virginia, and each student academically will have an academic advisor that will help them figure out what college will suit them best. The two main caveats to the guaranteed admissions would be a GPA. Each university has their own GPA that they would like the student to have, as well as course transfer. An example, there's a student who's interested in a business program at JMU. The advisor was able to look and say, hey, everything looks good except for this one course that you haven't taken yet. You need to swap it for this for JMU to accept it, and then the student had successfully So yeah, we're very good at that. I like making sure that students are aware of every option that they have at their fingertips. Let's take a break.

Janet Michael

When we come back. Can we talk a little bit more about some of the other questions that you get and maybe some hesitations that people have that you're able to overcome to get them to take that first step? Can we do that in the next segment? Of course we're on the zooms today for Laurel Ridge Community College Day. Brandy Hawkins voice is joining us. She is director of communications and outreach. is Thomas Monkey is an outreach specialist and a career coach at their Middletown campus. We're going to come back and talk more with both of them in just a couple of minutes.

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Janet Michael

Welcome back to the Valley today. I am your host, Janet Michael. It is Laurel Ridge Community College Day. We are on the Zooms with Brandy Hawkins voice. She is director of communications and outreach for Laurel Ridge. Thomas Monk is joining her today. He is an outreach specialist and a career coach. And Brandy, before we jump back over to Tom I want to talk for a second about your title. Not so much the communications part. I get that part. But when you say outreach, what does that mean exactly? Because while Thomas is an outreach specialist, you have an entire team of people that are doing what exactly?

Brandy Hawkins-Boies

So our main mission is to just shout Laurel Ridge from the rooftops and to go out and about and really tell people what we're all about and what we have to offer and the opportunities that are here. We've been open since 1970, but it's still a secret to some, right? So there's a lot of people that still don't know what all we have to offer. And so our main responsibility, our mission and what we're passionate about is getting out there into the community and letting people know what we're all about. And that might mean our staff or myself presenting to a group of any age because We're open to everyone. We're very diverse, inviting groups here. Thomas and others on the team will set up tables at events, at festivals, just to be there to answer questions. But we are open to those invites. So if there's an opportunity out there that anyone is listening, that you have interest in us coming out, meeting with a group or no matter the size, we'd love to come and share with you about the college, but vice versa, we'd also invite you to come here. If you have a group that would love to come visit us, see what we have to offer. We're open to that as well and encourage you to reach out to us.

Janet Michael

Thomas, have you been at events and talked to people that have said to you, I'm so glad that you were here today because I probably never would have walked through the door otherwise?

Thomas Monk

I have, yes, surprisingly. There's just a lot of people that might not get the full information or they've heard like, oh, so-and-so says that you guys do this. Is that true? And then I go, of course it is. Yeah, here's how you do it. I like to think that a lot of stuff at the college It just might not always be intuitive. So the biggest thing that I really try to tell students about is to just ask questions. Everybody that works here is here to help you. That might be daunting to maybe ask a question or it might be a little shy about it, but that is everybody's job here. That is really what I like to press for people to know that we're here to help.

Janet Michael

You guys are truly the epitome really of there are no dumb questions because any question that you have about bettering your future and improving your career or any of those None of that can ever be a stupid question or a dumb question, and you guys are there to answer all of them.

Thomas Monk

Exactly. There are people who apologize profusely, and I say, don't apologize. Again, this is your first time doing it. I do it all the time. We're all here to help you. And if I don't know the answer, I will find people who know the answer to help you out.

Janet Michael

Brandy, you and I have talked in the past about how beautiful it is, first of all, when you walk in the door of the Middletown campus in particular, and how different it looks now than it did even just 10 years ago. and welcoming and all the different spaces. But there are still some people who are intimidated by just walking in the door to ask that big question. I'm thinking about this, what do I do? And that's why you have these open houses. So then it's a whole lot more laid back and not as individual in the beginning.

Brandy Hawkins-Boies

Some people, including myself, you feel a lot more comfortable in crowds, right? Versus just walking in somewhere by yourself because you don't know what the experience is going to be. If you've never been through our doors, I'm proud to say that I have no doubt that anyone that walks through our doors instantly feels welcome, whether it's Thomas that they see for the first time or someone at our front desk. So it's really nothing that anyone needs to worry about, but that's just what we do as humans. So yeah, taking that first step through the door, an opportunity that we have coming up this July July 23rd, we're hosting an open house virtually and in person for anyone that just has not taken that next step or they're not sure if they want to take the next step. They just have questions. We are here to host them and give them all the information they need.

Janet Michael

Randy brings up an interesting point, Thomas. I didn't think to ask you about this earlier, but when she talks about this open house being available in person or virtually, people can have access to you virtually as well. They don't necessarily have to come in.

Thomas Monk

No, on our website we have multiple options for people. Students can book tours with us as well outside of events or they can schedule time with me virtually and I'm happy to field any questions that they might have or show them how to get started.

Brandy Hawkins-Boies

You can do that by visiting laurelridge.edu/visit. Our entire outreach team is there. One of the first options, the first box that is at the top of the page is what questions do you have for us? So someone can honestly just submit a question. If they don't feel like meeting with someone or scheduling a time, the first thing they can do is ask the question, no matter what it is. I have a student that's in high school, how do they get started in dual enrollment? I want to switch careers and I'm interested in nursing, any question. And those actually go to our outreach team. So Thomas or the other team members will get those and reply within 48 hours to their question. The second box on that page is schedule a meeting with us virtually or in person. And so someone can book a quick 30 minute, it usually doesn't even take that long to connect with Thomas on a certain day in a certain And that's where they can ask their questions or he can walk them through the process or they can come in person. And it could be as simple as them walking through the door, Thomas saying, hi. They're like, hey, I just want to get started on an application. So he walks them over and gets them started. Or they could say, I don't even know the first thing to do and I've never been here. And he might say, hey, you want to take a tour first? You want to see what we have to offer or do you want to sit down and talk about programs? So it really is customized. Now, the upcoming coming open house is a little more structured with some flexibility built in. And so on July 23rd, people can attend virtually in the middle of the day from 12 to 1. Our data shows us that's kind of a nice time, especially if it's a busy parent or someone working full time. They might take their lunch break to log in. Thomas is going to be leading that effort where he's going to talk about programs, talk about getting started, answer questions. But then that evening at 5 P.m. we have the in person and that's where we're going to have tour options, but also it can be a little more diverse where Thomas is going to give an overview, but then someone be like, all right, I'm ready to apply. So he just sends them to the apply room. Or they can say, hey, I have specific questions about health professions. Okay, go to this room and you can talk to this professor or this advisor about

health professions. So we're really excited to have a semi-flexible, customized opportunity there. But also anyone can reach out to Thomas or anyone else on the team and schedule one-on-one meetings.

Janet Michael

I like that idea of being able to log on between noon and one because that overcomes at least the initial barrier. And then they have that conversation or they learn about something and then they're like, okay, now I'm going to go at 5 o'clock and I'm actually going to take the tour and I'm going to see what it's like because that first hour wasn't as scary as I thought it might be.

Brandy Hawkins-Boies

Yeah, absolutely. We're here to meet people where they are, like Thomas said. And in today's age, everything can be automated. Someone could log in figure out how to fill out the application themselves and work through the process. But if you're anything like me, you just want to talk to a human. I'm the person that calls that number and just pushes 0 until a human picks up. I need a Thomas. I need a Thomas so that when I'm sitting down going through that application and all of a sudden it gives me an error message. I can be like, Thomas, what did I do wrong? Help me. So yeah, we're really proud to be able to offer a mix of opportunities for people.

Janet Michael

How many of those situations do you field in a week's time, Thomas?

Thomas Monk

I'm going to confidently say over 25 at least. Yeah.

Janet Michael

I'll tell you a little personal history. So James Wood Colonel graduated, born and raised and took some classes out of high school in accounting. I don't know what I was thinking because numbers are not my thing. So I took one or two, enough to realize numbers are not my thing and this is not a good idea. And then I fell into this whole marketing career and decided that rather than go back to school, I would work my way through all the industry. So I've worked in newsprint, I've worked in radio, I've worked for a marketing company, I've done ad specialty items. So I've done all of that sort of thing. But I have one of my very best friends from high school who listens to the show all the time. And every time I have Laurel Ridge on, I get a text from her that says, I really wish she would find something You need to go back to school. I sense that you want to go back to school. She's not wrong, but what

would I take? I mean, I feel like I know all of the things. Do you have those kinds of situations that come to you and they're like, I love to learn, but I don't know what I should be learning. Oh, definitely.

Thomas Monk

Yeah. And that's part of the appeal. We just have so much to offer for students through our academic courses, through workforce solutions, short-term skill sets, things like that. There's a lot of interest that people have. matter of having conversations to kind of whittle down. I like to talk to students and try to figure out what you don't want to do. That usually makes it a little bit easier to figure out what they do want to do eventually.

Janet Michael

Yeah, and Thomas, wouldn't.

Brandy Hawkins-Boies

It be a little bit in Janet's situation, kind of like, what do you do now that you feel like you can have a little more continuing education in? Or what do you find that's on your plate a lot? Janet, I know you've got so much on your plate, but one thing that comes to my mind is the corporate training opportunities and all of those they provide there, or, gosh, you're so surrounded in leadership all the time. There's opportunities there. I know that me personally, sometimes I enjoy taking a leadership class through Workforce just because I love leadership. Or it might be something as simple as an Excel spreadsheet class because things are.

Janet Michael

Just-- Remembers those conversations. Excel has been a portal enemy and I cannot figure it out to save my life.

Brandy Hawkins-Boies

Things are changing so rapidly and so fast that I feel like the opportunities to continuing education, personal enrichment are just endless. You're never going to see me sign up for a math class. No, thank you. I mean, I'll run away as far as I can. So that's what I first tell Thomas. This is what I'm not going to do. But there's just so much to always keep up with and learn. So that's part of the conversation as well.

Janet Michael

And I think that's the beauty too, Thomas, of what you do, because you are that objective third person. My husband or family members could say, you know what you should do, or I

don't think you'll like that, but I'm either going to listen to them or not based on the relationship that I have with them. But you are a complete stranger for lack of a better word. And so to have somebody say, have you thought about this because you have this and this and this, it just lends itself to people being more open to suggestions than maybe they would be otherwise.

Thomas Monk

Yeah, I have to agree with you on that, especially like you said, friends or family. For younger students, their parents, they might not want to listen to what their parents have to say, but there is wiggle room. People change their minds all the time, so they pivot. I try to find that middle ground for any student to figure out, okay, what works best for you where you're at now. Or we offer a multitude of modalities where stuff might be in person or stuff might be Zoom, so we try to figure out what works best for that. We're very happy to accommodate any questions a student might have or any concerns they might have.

Janet Michael

Randy, I should take classes in AI.

Brandy Hawkins-Boies

Yeah, that's gonna be hard to keep up with, man.

Janet Michael

Hazard even say that out loud because that's going to be the text tonight is Mary sending me a text saying you should absolutely and I will go with you to the school to get you signed up and meet this Thomas person. I can hear it now.

Thomas Monk

We do have AI and machine learning if you'd like to. Yeah, that's a recent program that we offer.

Janet Michael

So Brandy, where can I find details about the open house on July 23rd or just do a little more exploration or find a way to reach out to Thomas directly?

Brandy Hawkins-Boies

Laurelridge.edu slash open house for that event. Again, that's on July 23rd. However, you can reach out to our entire outreach team, explore at laurelridge.edu slash visit. And again, that question box is at the top. What questions do you have for us? And right below that is

schedule a time to meet meet with us. And then below that, the open house is listed there, info sessions. That's even where you can reach out to us if you would like to request us to come set up a table, talk to a group. You can submit that there as well.

Janet Michael

Thomas, it was fantastic talking to you. And now I'm going to have to give it some more thought, I guess.

Thomas Monk

Well, yeah, I'm always here if you need me. Thank you for having me on.

Janet Michael

Brittany, this was an outstanding conversation. I'm glad you chose Thomas. I think this is something that people, they need to know what they don't know, they don't And I think this is a good first step to that.

Brandy Hawkins-Boies

Absolutely. He's here to meet you where you are and get you to the next steps. We're just here to welcome anyone.

Janet Michael

I will be back tomorrow with a brand new episode of The Valley today, a few minutes afternoon. So meet me here then.