Jefferson College adopts a more collegiate air
Thanks to marketing efforts, students at the small and intimate college are getting younger and are coming from a wider geographic area.

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In some ways, Sheila Mason is not a typical Jefferson College of Health Sciences graduate.

At a school where the average student comes from within 50 miles of Roanoke and is 27 years old, Mason is 22 and hails from Hendersonville, N.C.

Mason represents the beginning of a five-year effort to attract a younger, more traditional college student population to the downtown Roanoke campus.

For Mason, who receives her Bachelor of Science in Nursing degree at a ceremony this morning, the appeal of Jefferson College was its size, program focus and urban location. A transfer student eager to be a nurse, Mason was impressed with the education that comes from a small student population of 1,100 people.

What she didn't expect was so many classmates with spouses, children and past careers.

The average age of today's 172 graduates is 31.

"There is still a decent age mix with people in their late 30s and early 40s. It was a little bit of a surprise," Mason said. "In some ways, though, it is nice because they brought a different perspective."

She found the college experience, and community, she had sought.

"We've really formed a tightknit group between us all," she said. "Every one of us has faced our challenges and had stuff going on, and we've figured out how to support each other when one person had a rough week."

It's that message that the college's marketing team seeks to emphasize and mold.

Three years ago, Jefferson College launched a Facebook page. On Thursday, it had 1,276 likes.

Like all those wanting to capture the younger crowd, the college has a Twitter handle (@JCHSRoanokeVA), which mostly points out its own public relations communications and those of its parent, Carilion Clinic.

On Monday, a new television advertisement began running, specifically targeting younger applicants by appearing on BET, A&E, ESPN, USA and Lifetime, said college spokesman Mark Lambert.

There are other touches, too, like creating the school mascot, Jeff the Blue Healer. Jeff, a Saint Bernard, debuted in 2008. He now graces the wall of the student lounge and makes appearances during college events.
"It sounds like a funny thing, but having a mascot creates a loyalty among the students," Lambert said. "It's one of the things that you start to do to build that community. It makes a difference."

Then there are the recruitment efforts that include reaching out to high schools and drawing a larger radius for attracting a student population. Those plans are still being fine-tuned, but Lambert said the school hopes to define a footprint that includes West Virginia and northern North Carolina.

Mason credited a high school guidance counselor with a sister living in Roanoke as the reason she arrived at Jefferson College.

"She kept telling me about Jefferson College and the opportunities it had," Mason said.

Jefferson College already has had some success in changing its student population demographics. The average student age has dropped from 32 in 2008 to 27 in 2011, and Lambert said school officials anticipate it declining even further.

In part the shift was necessary for the college to survive. In 2003, about 500 students attended Jefferson College. As the college looked to grow, it initially attracted a lot of students from Carilion, which paid for employees to further their education.

"That is finite number," Lambert said. "So we had to begin to look elsewhere."

Still, the school doesn't aspire to abandon its role for nontraditional students, he said. In addition to seeking more traditional students, Jefferson College also is targeting veterans, he said.

Carilion continues to benefit from the college's growth as it hires graduates, whether or not they were previous employees.

Mason said she will begin work at Carilion in the summer after she passes her nursing board exam.