DURHAM — The Durham Fire Department and Durham Technical Community College benefit from a partnership that lets them share each other’s resources to train firefighters.

Under the agreement, firefighter recruits and others not affiliated with a fire department get classroom training at Durham Tech’s campus on Snow Hill Road. Many of the instructors are seasoned Durham firefighters with years of training experience who teach the classes on their days off.

That new process is freeing the Fire Department’s training staff to focus on more advanced firefighting instruction on the days they work at the department, instead of having to spend most of their time on basic training, Durham Fire Chief Dan Curia said.

One example of how the partnership will help the Fire Department is by allowing the department’s training staff time to teach a new course called rapid intervention training. The three-month course, set to start in January, will focus on how to rescue a firefighter who becomes trapped in a burning structure.

“It’s very complicated training, and everyone in the department will get it,” Curia said. “Before this partnership, scheduling this would have been extremely hard, because the training staff would have been so wrapped up in basic training.”

The partnership means the Fire Department no longer runs its own academy, but students at the Durham Tech academy receive training that’s at least as good, according to Curia.

“This program is a drastic shift from the paramilitary structure that a fire department typically operates in,” he said. “All the different players have an agreement to share our resources and our expertise to build a better fire service. And it means we’re spending taxpayer money a little more wisely.”

The partnership is a plus for Durham Tech as well, because it lets the community college use the Fire Department’s training center on Camden Avenue, which would be a major expense if the school had to build its own. The center lets recruits use its “burn building” to simulate real fires, as well as its drill tower, fire hoses and other “props.”

Randy Egsegian, dean and department head of the public safety program at Durham Tech, is sold on the partnership’s value.
“The Durham Fire Department is getting a higher level of training than they otherwise would,” he said. When firefighters graduate, they’ll be certified as Level II firefighters and EMT, and be certified in technical rescue and hazardous materials.

The Durham Tech academy also includes instructors from the Chapel Hill Fire Department and firefighter recruits from Orange County.

“This saves money, because we’re not running two separate academies in Durham and Orange counties,” Egsegian said.

“This whole concept is new,” he said. “We’re the only ones in the state with this type of partnership with a big-city department. And we’re giving people the opportunity to get top-caliber training.”

A big boost for the program is the expertise of Ernest Jannetta, fire extension coordinator for Durham Tech who retired from the Durham Fire Department after working there 29 years. He helped train several academies.

In the past, Jannetta said, Durham Tech students in the program often had to travel out of state or to other parts of North Carolina to get in-field training. The partnership has changed that.

“We’re doing more training on Durham Fire Department grounds,” he said. “We’re bringing it all into Durham.”

Jannetta said the changes will save students money.

“They won’t have to travel as much,” he said. “Many students have quit their jobs to attend the academy and don’t have much money. We’re providing a good-quality, all-around education and a place to train, so it’s good for everybody.”