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Expanding Opportunity with Community College Transfer Grants

This op-ed was originally published in the Richmond Times-Dispatch in 2007.

Finding a good job will soon be impossible for those who lack a college degree. The link between education and success is largely understood. College graduates are more likely to be employed and earning better pay. Recent statistics show that the median income of a Virginian with only a high school education is roughly \$7,000 less than someone who has an associate degree and almost \$22,000 less than a person holding a bachelor's degree.

Income statistics, however, reveal only part of what's occurring. Technology and other knowledge-based industries are changing the very nature of Virginia's job market. For example, after centuries as the commonwealth's leading exports, coal and tobacco are eclipsed by the microchip. And good paying jobs – like those at our factories and mechanic shops – that were once obtainable with only a high school diploma now require postsecondary education.

More and more, Virginia families understand this. They know that their child needs a college education to lead an independent life. But only one in five Virginia students now in the 9th grade will earn a college degree.

Rising tuition prices that outpace family incomes are a big reason for that. As public officials, we must expand the access families have to an affordable college education.

To that end, an important reform effort, the Virginia Community College transfer grant proposal, is under consideration by the General Assembly. This proposal will encourage more students to go further in their college education, it will make



obtaining that education more affordable, and it will make Virginia's higher education system more productive. As introduced, the transfer grant proposal would hold mandatory tuition and fees to the community college rate for a student's third and fourth at a four-year school – saving Virginia families thousands of dollars a year.

To qualify for a transfer grant, a student would have to earn a 3.0 grade-point average or better while completing an associate degree, apply for financial aid, demonstrate financial need, and enroll in one of Virginia's public or private four-year colleges or universities upon graduation from a community

college. For qualified students moving on to a private university, their grant amount would be determined by the average cost of tuition and fees at Virginia's public four-year universities. Almost 1,800 students would benefit from the grants in the first year, if the proposal, as introduced, wins legislative approval.

Virginia's four-year colleges and universities, which already partner with community colleges through an impressive number of guaranteed admissions agreements, would benefit by having motivated, successful students transferring onto their campuses—students that succeed at the same rate as their traditional students. The grant program positions community colleges as an on-ramp to a four-year degree and is also a cost-effective way for our higher education system to absorb the increased demand of the thousands of additional students expected in the next five years.

The transfer grant proposal meets higher education priorities expressed by the Republican and Democratic leaders of the General Assembly – who want our higher education network to operate as cost-effectively as possible – and Governor Tim Kaine, who calls in his economic development strategic plan for an increase the percentage of Virginians enrolled in college and increase the proportion of Virginia's population that holds a bachelor's degree. The community college transfer grant would help achieve all these goals.

Jobs and opportunities will go where knowledge and talent thrives in the 21st century. The bad news is that secret is out, and nations across the world are positioning themselves to be *the* destination of that future opportunity. But the good news is that Virginia has the people and resources to remain a leader. Virginia has everything to gain and nothing to lose by making affordable access to higher education a bigger priority. For the commonwealth, it means being better positioned to compete and win in a truly global economy. For individuals, and the communities in which they live, it means a better life.