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## Remarks at the 35th Annual Conference of the National Association for Developmental Education

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## Remarks at the 35<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the National Association for Developmental Education

*This speech was delivered at the Marriott Wardman Park Hotel in Washington, D.C. on February 24, 2011.*

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Good morning. I'm delighted to be with you to help kick-off the 35<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the National Association on Developmental Education (NADE). The theme for this year's meeting, "Capitalizing on Developmental Education," couldn't be more timely. It fits nicely, in fact, with what we all heard just a few weeks ago in the President's State of the Union speech. President Obama referred to America's collective challenges, describing them as today's Sputnik moment. Later, after talking about community colleges and universities, he urged the nation to, "Win the Future!"

Too few people realize what I firmly believe: the work of the people in this room, the creation of a new and more effective developmental education, and our ability to elevate those who were once considered "not-college-material" will determine America's place in the world.

Our Sputnik moment? Without your best efforts, America will lack the people we need to build and fuel the rockets on this next proverbial space race.

Win the future? Without your success, we won't even be able to field a team, let alone win anything.

Once, perhaps, we had the luxury of sitting back, waiting for the best and brightest to reveal themselves. That's no longer a winning strategy. Our success, today, depends on getting as many people as possible to reach their potential – and we quantify that, we make it tangible with a postsecondary credential.

"Opportunity is missed by most people," Thomas Edison once said, "Because it is dressed in overalls and looks like work." Were he with us in this room today, Edison would agree that the opportunity we face with developmental education today is boundless.

### **On the challenge**

Like a Charles Dickens novel, the last four years has been the best and worst of times for Virginia's Community Colleges. Our enrollment has grown by nearly 48,000 people. Our annual state funding has been slashed by \$105 million.

Neither of those facts keeps me up at night. What keeps me up at night is knowing that we share a dubious distinction with Germany as the only industrialized nations that is replacing its current generation of workers with one that is less educated. What keeps me up at night are memories from a visit to Turkey where students and families are desperate to access a college education and will go just about anywhere and pay just about any price to get it. What keeps me up at night are memories from a visit to China where I visited an institution roughly as big as a mid-sized community college that is educating more STEM students than its American counterpart is educating total students.

I applaud and support President Obama's goal of increasing the number of American college graduates by five million over the next decade. I feel the same way about Virginia Governor Bob

McDonnell's goal of increasing the number of Virginia college graduates by 100,000 over the next fifteen years. These are the right public policies – and one of the few issues that achieves bipartisan agreement in today's politics.

At Virginia's Community Colleges, we are pursuing an aggressive public agenda to hold up our end of the deal. It's a six-year strategic plan, called *Achieve 2015*, five goals largely focused on the issue of student success. To truly pursue that plan in a time of tight budgets, we are in the midst of a statewide reengineering process centered on the issue of developmental education. That's the biggest roadblock we face to achieving our strategic goals and being the partner that students, families, employers, and elected leaders need us to be if America's best days are still ahead of us. While I could go on and on with the nuance of what we are doing, I think our strategy comes down to three simple elements: priorities, partnerships, and results.

### **On priorities**

Virginia's Community Colleges are proud to say that we were among the inaugural participants in the Achieving the Dream project. That helped us really focus on the barrier that developmental education poses to student completion and student success. Half of our incoming students need developmental education. Of that group, three out of four students fail to graduate or transfer within four years. We like to consider ourselves as experts in developmental education. Those numbers, however, tell a different story.

Next, we created a statewide taskforce that studied the issue and made three significant recommendations: first, we must reduce the overall need for developmental education in Virginia. That means swimming up-stream to address the problem and that means bolstering the partnerships we have with those who work in K-12. Second, we must redesign developmental education courses. The students who take these courses and the instructors who teach them are both so much better than results indicate. We are failing, however, to position those students for success. The process is failing them. The status quo – little more than a false promise – is no longer justifiable. And third, we must articulate measurable goals for this reform effort and reach them. In a perfect world, every student that needs developmental education would get it and get on his or her way to graduation and further success. While we aspire to that; we must be better than 25 percent.

The mechanics of our reform, explained briefly, simply involves moving our process from a broad-based assessment that gives you either a thumbs up or thumbs down on the need for a semester or year of developmental education to one that reveals an individual's particular areas of weakness and helps them improve through shorter, module classes. We aim to give the student exactly what they need without bogging them down in things they don't. While the mechanics of this reform are important, so too is the larger cultural shift that is at its heart.

### **On partnerships**

The most important thing we need to do to make our developmental education more successful is to bolster the relationships we hold with those engaged in it – I am talking about our community college faculty, I am talking about those who work in the high schools, and I am talking about the students themselves.

For us, that process began with a statewide taskforce model that was inclusive of those broad perspectives. We have separate task forces for developmental mathematics and developmental reading and writing. Those panels are co-chaired by both a retired and current VCCS president and

include vice presidents; deans; academic and student services people; faculty members from inside and outside of the respective subject areas; workforce non-credit people; counselors; and a K-12 representative.

We began with mathematics. That panel's work is already finished. It's now being implemented by a second panel that consists of 40 math faculty members, including at least one instructor from each of our 23 community colleges. They are meeting now and will continue to meet through the full implementation across the state, scheduled to occur in spring, 2012. The process will repeat itself with developmental reading and writing, obviously on a different timeline.

The perspective our faculty offers is critical to the success of this effort. That's why our commitment to them is so strong and will grow stronger in time. This April, we are hosting an inaugural Developmental Education Symposium for our faculty. We hope this becomes an annual event. This year, we are expecting 200 developmental faculty members from across the state to gather, hear from our keynote speaker from the National Center for Developmental Education, and participate in collaborative working sessions to tackle the challenges they share in this field.

Further, we are assembling what we hope will be another annual event, our Chancellor's Developmental Education Institute in June. This will be a smaller, more intensive effort where 50 faculty members will attend a week-long institute, likely led by the folks at the National Center for Developmental Education. This will be unique for the nation, with an agenda focused on Virginia's developmental reform efforts.

We are trying to build a group of master developmental faculty members. We will challenge them to be part of the solution to this issue and to lead at least two professional development opportunities for their colleagues back on campus. Both opportunities require significant resources and labor. But they are a shrewd investment in the men and women who will be transforming white paper ideas into action and transforming lives in the process.

I mentioned earlier that one of the needs we discovered when we focused on the issue was the need to swim up-stream and to reduce, if not eliminate, the need for developmental education. Hard data over the last four years consistently shows that half of the recent high school graduates we serve require developmental education. Finger-pointing is easy, isn't it? I mean how simple would it be to publicly cry that a lack of college readiness among high school graduates is the reason our success numbers aren't higher?

It would be easy to make that case. It would also be a waste of time. Instead of pointing a finger, we extended our hand to our K-12 partners. Our 23 community college presidents met with local school superintendents face-to-face to share the grim statistics. They met with a simple message, an appeal, really, asking what can we do together to turn these numbers around?

Those conversations led to some promising collaborative efforts. We are conducting several pilot programs across the state right now that work like this: high school juniors take our community college placement tests. Those who demonstrate a need for remedial education are offered a capstone college readiness class in their senior year of high school. That class is designed cooperatively by our community college faculty and their counterparts at the high school. We began with mathematics. We are expecting to see the results from those pilot efforts soon but I would be willing to bet a week's pay that they will be significant.

Of course, that willingness to work together extends to so many other things we do including:

- Our Dual Enrollment offerings that serve more than 30,000 high school students;
- The Virginia Education Wizard that we designed that will soon be used by every public school student for career and college planning beginning in the seventh grade; and
- The community college employees who work in half of Virginia’s high schools, called Career Coaches, who are solely focused on getting more students college-bound with impressive results.

And finally, what we are talking about here is a stronger partnership with the students we serve. The process we have now for developmental education simply serves them poorly. You either test into developmental education, or you don’t. And if you do, you are signing up for a long ride over ground you may or may not need to cover. An approach that breaks down to one-credit modules, which can be customized to the needs of an individual student and his or her path forward, will better position them for success while keeping the faith they showed in us by enrolling.

### **On results**

Years ago, I heard a community college president say in jest that developmental education was the whirlpool of higher education. Once a student floated into it, he or she would churn and churn until they ran out of financial aid. Once depleted, the whirlpool would suck them to the bottom, never to be seen again.



That description bothered me – and it still does. Half of our incoming high school graduates need some form of developmental education. Three out of four of those students fail to graduate or transfer. What a waste.

We will ultimately judge our reform efforts not by how good our intentions are, nor by how hard our people work, but rather by the results we can measure. We must make a difference. Should our reforms fail, should it fall short of moving the needle, we will do it again – and again, and again, until we get it right. Personally, I believe it is a moral imperative, and I believe we are on the right track.

In closing, let me thank you again for the chance to speak today and share with you some of our thinking about where we are going with developmental education. And thank you for your passion and dedication to this issue. Edison was right, by the way. Opportunity is missed all of the time because it is dressed in overalls and looks like work. But we’re here. We aren’t missing it. And we’re not afraid of the work.

That’s a luxury we can’t afford when the future of our industry, and perhaps even our country, hangs in the balance. To me, “Capitalizing on Developmental Education,” means creating and implementing the reforms that will allow the people we serve to make the most of their future – and ending the false promise that now leads to many of them to nowhere. Moving forward I am excited about sharing our results and learning from yours as we try to create the future we all believe is possible.