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More Credentials Essential to Individual and Business Prospects in Virginia

This op-ed, co-written with Barry DuVal, the president and CEO of the Virginia Chamber of Commerce, was published in the Richmond Times-Dispatch on December 17, 2015.

Virginia is on the verge of taking an important step forward in filling the job vacancy backlog that exists in our state by bridging the gap between a skilled workforce and quality career choices. The plan Governor McAuliffe unveiled yesterday will put more people to work and help businesses fill vacant positions by expanding certification programs at Virginia's Community Colleges.

Certifications are a growing and increasingly important part of Virginia's postsecondary picture, driven by employer needs. Some of Virginia's fastest-growing industries, like cybersecurity healthcare and advanced manufacturing, boast the greatest needs for these credentials. Meanwhile, other industries that Virginia relies on daily are seeking ways to replace an aging workforce in essential positions like HVAC, electricians, plumbers, and truck drivers.

Our commonwealth today invests in individuals who pursue anything between an associate degree and a doctorate. Virginia needs all those credentials. The need is just as great, however, for the



postsecondary certifications that denote critical skills, essential to keeping Virginia moving forward.

There were more than 175,000 job vacancies last year in Virginia that required postsecondary certifications, according to research conducted by the company Burning Glass. The unfilled jobs paid more than \$28 an hour, or more than \$58,000 dollars a year – a figure that is just shy of Virginia's median household income of

\$63,000. Those jobs each sat vacant for nearly a month, longer than the national average. We all paid a price for that. Virginia businesses lost more than 36 million hours of productivity. Individual Virginians lost more than \$1 billion in wages. And our state government, which depends on income tax withholdings more than any other state save one, lost more than \$54 million in tax revenue.

That's not a one-time occurrence. Over the next decade as many as two-thirds of the 1.5 million jobs that Virginia must fill will require more than a high school diploma but less than a bachelor's degree, according to leading economic analysis. Those jobs will demand an associate degree and industry-recognized certifications that Virginia's Community Colleges help people obtain.

Virginia's Community Colleges spent the spring and summer studying this issue, at the direction of the General Assembly and the McAuliffe Administration. More than 1,500 business leaders weighed in at 22 town hall meetings held across Virginia. While those sessions confirmed the nuances and distinctions that make our regions unique and fascinating, they all confirmed the urgent need for more credentialed talent. That feedback echoed the message from the 7,000 business and community leaders who engaged in the process of putting together the Virginia Chamber's Blueprint Virginia business plan for the Commonwealth in 2013, with workforce development cited as the top priority for our long-term prosperity.

We're not alone in identifying this need. Across the nation, 19 states are already funding the training programs that lead to these credentials. That includes many of Virginia's neighbors, like Maryland, Kentucky and both Carolinas. North Carolina, alone, is investing more than \$92 million a year on its non-credit training programs. For the sake of comparison, Virginia spent \$5 million on comparable programs last year. Virginia can do better and we must.

The training programs that lead to these credentials are short-term, lasting weeks or months, compared to the semesters and years it takes to earn a traditional college degree. The programs cost, on average, \$3,100, though there is little to no financial aid available for people pursuing them. It's not hard to see what a deterrent that can be given that 75-percent of Americans live paycheck-to-paycheck, lacking even a spare \$500 to cover a medical emergency. These training programs offer people a second chance to pursue their American Dream. The average age of Virginians pursuing these credentials today at our community colleges is 37, more than a decade older than the average age of those pursuing our traditional academic programs.

We can't say enough about how important those second chances are. More than 1.1 million Virginians have some college experience but no college credential. When you consider how many of them could be facing college debt, it's easy to see how important these credential opportunities can be. Given the pressures facing the Virginia economy, we have no talent to waste. Interestingly, one out of three people who earn these industry-recognized certifications go on to earn a college degree. That means these credentials truly are stackable, supporting individuals on the way up a career ladder.

Virginia's Community Colleges were created nearly 50 years ago to address the commonwealth's unmet needs in higher education and workforce training. Today, those needs are taking the form of more credentialed talent. We are honored to work with Gov. McAuliffe and General Assembly leaders to connect more individuals with vital career opportunities and the businesses who are eager to hire talented, trained people who will bolster their competitiveness.