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Remarks at the VCCS Annual Planning Retreat

On October 12, 2016, this speech – marking the 50th anniversary of the Virginia Community College System – was delivered at the Founders Inn and Spa in Virginia Beach.

“If there is a universal enemy...if there is a handmaiden to poverty and failure, it is ignorance. Let us marshal all our resources against it.”

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. That quote I just read was a warning; it was a call to action; it was a battle cry. Mills Godwin said those words during his inaugural address in January 1966.

Within months of that statement, Godwin – who campaigned against tax increases – would go on to convince Virginia to adopt its first-ever sales tax through a public referendum. One penny of that tax was earmarked for a new, radical idea that would shake-up higher education in Virginia. It would fund the creation of a comprehensive community college system.

Godwin faced doubters and critics. Some university leaders at the time saw this as a threat to their institutions, especially the satellite campuses they had built in each other’s backyards in a thinly-veiled competition with each other. Some business leaders, no doubt wondered, if this would actually deliver the trained workforce they desperately needed or instead become an expensive boondoggle. And surely there were families throughout Virginia questioning what this meant for the commonwealth’s low-tax reputation.

Godwin needed a point-person to make everything happen – someone who knew enough about higher education to make it work, enough about politics to avoid its traps, and enough about people to help them believe in this new idea. And so Godwin tapped Dana Hamel as the inaugural chancellor for the Virginia Community College System.

There were so many ways for it all to go wrong. Virginia is America’s 12th largest state when it comes to landmass. Families and communities were more spread out, just as you would expect from a state that made its way by growing tobacco, mining coal, and producing textiles and furniture. And its urban centers weren’t then what they are today. What would it take to bring affordable, higher education everywhere it was needed?

Many didn’t realize it at the time, but the needs were tremendous. Virginia’s public university capacity was limited, crafted to serve, basically, just Virginia’s white men. As the ranks of young veterans swelled, as the Women’s Rights Movement inspired mothers and daughters to see themselves outside the home, as the Civil Rights Movement inspired more African-Americans to seek college opportunities: Virginia had little to offer them.

There was yet another group of Virginians who needed new opportunities, though they weren’t organized or vocal. These were people who couldn’t even begin to imagine standing in the hallowed halls of William & Mary, UVA, or Virginia Tech – and they wouldn’t know what to do if they got there. I’m talking about those who grew up in poverty, those who had never known a college

student much less a college graduate. They, too, needed some way, some chance, to join the new and growing Virginia.

As the colleges rose from the ground, as the classroom filled with these people hungry for opportunity, Godwin bragged about it. The speeches he made throughout his tenure are full of references to community colleges serving “thousands of men and women of every creed and color...from every walk of Virginia life.” And he bragged about what our colleges meant to parents in every community “whose hearts are full with the knowledge that...their sons and daughters enjoyed opportunities far greater than their own.”

I’ll tell you: I don’t know how they did it. I can’t imagine the pressure and politics, the ups and the downs of creating a VCCS from scratch, but thank God they did. I can’t pretend to know every name that rightfully earned mention among the list of VCCS’s founding fathers. However, I would suggest to you, were we to build our own VCCS Mt. Rushmore, the first two faces on it would be Mills Godwin and Dana Hamel.

They served 7,500 students that first year at two colleges, Virginia Western and Northern Virginia. We’ve since served more than 2.6 million. And the questions we face, 50 years after their heroic and game-changing work, are these:

- How do we demonstrate that we – the current generation of community college leaders – are worthy of that proud legacy; and
- Do we have what it takes to ensure that our mission endures, that our colleges continue and that there is something to celebrate at the end of another 50 years?

The challenge of change

Today’s Virginia barely resembles the commonwealth that Godwin and Hamel faced when they began this work.

Let’s just start with the basics. The Virginia of 1960 was home to a population of less than four million, and a homogenous one at that; during that time:

- Seven out of 10 Virginians told the U.S. Census that they were born inside the Old Dominion;
- Less than one percent of Virginia’s population was born outside our country;
- 80 percent were white;
- 20 percent were African-American...and that was that.

Today’s Virginia doesn’t even look like the same state. We have more than doubled in size to 8.4 million residents. We are now home to families that have come here from practically every continent. In fact, more than 100 languages, other than English, are spoken by students at just our Northern Virginia campuses. According to recent census numbers:

- 63 percent of the commonwealth’s population is non-Hispanic white;
- 20 percent of Virginians are black;
- Nine percent are Hispanic or Latino; and
- Nearly seven percent are Asian.

Virginia’s evolution demands that we seek new solutions to new challenges and that we discard the notions and practices that no longer serve us. As the commonwealth expands, and becomes more

diverse, we are gaining among our friends and neighbors a growing number of families who have little or no college experience.

We have a term for them in higher education. We refer to them as under-represented populations, or URPs. The URP designation includes students from certain minority and ethnic groups, those who come from low-income families, as well as those who are the first in their family to attend college. I was a URP. I was the first in my family to attend college.

Minority students do not pursue college at the same rate as their white counterparts. And when they do, they often struggle. African-American and Latino students significantly trail Asian and white students when it comes to student success and credential completion. That remains unchanged since the 1980s.

An important part of reaching those students is ensuring that we have a faculty and staff that reflects them. We are putting a priority on building college staffs who don't just look like our students but who also relate to their life experiences – the good and the bad. In fact, just last week we held our first-ever VCCS diversity, inclusion, and student success summit with roughly 150 people from across our colleges in attendance. I'm encouraged not just by the conversations that occurred there but by the leadership imperative this is setting throughout the VCCS.

Of course, race is not the only dimension to this challenge. Rural Virginia badly trails the rest of the state in both high-school graduation rates and college attainment. Attracting more of these students and helping them succeed is a matter of equity, a requirement to restore the American Dream, and an obligation of the VCCS mission. For many of these people, the local community college represents not only the best opportunity to elevate their life, but often the only opportunity.

We are the institutions where the promise of the American Dream is made real. However, that's easier said than done. We are serving fewer students today than we were yesterday, and that's been the case for five years now. These enrollment challenges are being felt in every region of Virginia, and at every one of our community colleges. Many of those we are losing are working-age adults – and we aren't sure why.

More concerning yet is that our colleges are attracting a shrinking share of graduating high-school seniors year after year. To put all of that into perspective, let me say this: our statewide enrollment figures are expected to fall again this year. Should those expectations be realized, we will be serving fewer students than before the Great Recession began.

There's another, deeper dimension to this challenge. We are losing poor students at a troubling rate. Last year, the number of students we served with the greatest financial needs, those who would qualify for a full Pell Grant to cover all of their tuition costs, dropped by 8,500. I can't help but wonder – understanding the numbers and what they signify – if that means we are dooming 8,500 Virginia families to yet another generation of poverty?

Ladies and gentlemen, this is occurring on our watch. It will take vision and courage to find solutions. But when we do, we will prove ourselves worthy of the legacy we inherited from Godwin and Hamel. Just a few weeks ago, we watched thousands of college students in Virginia simply abandoned when ITT Technical Institute closed its doors. They may not be the end of the story. Accreditation challenges threaten to soon close perhaps another dozen for-profit colleges operating

in Virginia. That is a powerful reminder that we hold no promise of permanency. Our first 50 years are no guarantee of another 50 years. Needs change, circumstances change, business models change, and so must Virginia's Community Colleges.

The big question we need to answer to ensure the future of our colleges is this: How will we offer students what they need, when they need it, in a way that they can access and afford it? To get there, we need to do a better job at connecting with students while they are still in high school. We need to do a better job ensuring that our existing students stick-with-it and finish what they began. And we need to ensure that the people who can really benefit from them understand our short-term training programs and the opportunities they create.

A focus on dual enrollment

Let me begin with that first notion: the idea of doing more with students who are still in high school. For nearly 30 years now, we've led an effort to help students gain college experience and earn college credit while they are still in high school. It's called Dual Enrollment. All 23 of our colleges offer these courses, and roughly 33,000 students are taking them this semester.

But we have only begun to tap the potential of what Dual Enrollment could be for both our students and our colleges. Today, few Dual Enrollment students complete a credential from us while they are still in high school.

Some do, but not many. Fewer still come to our colleges after high school to finish that work.

Moving forward, we need to be more strategic about what we offer in Dual Enrollment. We need those classes to serve as a pathway, helping students progress



in deliberate way toward a credential, and not just a random bag of credits. Fixing that would help more students succeed. And it holds the potential to remedy the enrollment losses that our colleges are currently experiencing. In fact, we currently attract roughly 6,000 Dual Enrollment students onto our campuses each year after they graduate high school. If we could double that number, we could undo about one year's worth of our recent enrollment declines.

I've long said that a high-school diploma is no longer the finish line. The longer I've been in this job, the more agreement I find on that. But no one ever said that we have to just sit and wait for students to reach that point before we can help them.

A focus on student success

Second, I would like to talk about our work to help more of our existing students follow-through on their intentions, continue with their studies, and earn a postsecondary credential that has value in the marketplace. In July, we finished the first year of Complete 2021. That's our statewide, six-year strategic plan, which aims to triple the number of credentials annually put into the Virginia economy by 2021. And we ended it with a bang.

Last year, our 50th year, produced an historic number of graduates. That includes 7,000 individuals who became the first in their family to graduate from college. That's great news, and a reminder that we can do more and we can do better.

We need to become more creative, flexible, and responsive to meet our strategic goal while serving Virginia's shifting demographics. More students are working, and working full time, while attending classes. More of them are supporting a family while pursuing their studies. These students need more help, not just choosing a class schedule, but planning how to meet their career and life aspirations.

Our colleges are evolving to meet these needs. With a student success focus, they are building campus cultures that value every student as an individual, launching and guiding their studies with a career in mind, and providing the financial aid, advising, and other support they need along the way. I'm seeing evidence of that today. I am visiting all 23 of our colleges to learn more about their efforts to improve student success. What I'm learning along the way is that we are planning and executing an array of best practices that are brimming with potential and promise. The very best of those will become evident as more are scaled-up from select, and niche, student cohorts today to entire campuses tomorrow.

College graduates, today, hold 65% of the nation's jobs – a figure that will only increase over the next 50 years. Helping more of our students become graduates is essential to strengthening both their lives and the communities they call home.

A focus on credentials

And third, I want to talk about our short-term training programs and the needs that exist across Virginia to boost those offerings in a big way. The historic graduation numbers I just mentioned do not include nearly 15,000 industry-recognized credentials earned by our students in short-term workforce training programs last year. Those programs operate outside of the traditional academic calendar and, at least for now, are counted separately.

And those numbers are bound to grow for three important reasons: one, Virginia's business community urgently needs trained, skilled, and credentialed talent for jobs that are available right now. Two, economic developers will tell you that these credentials are increasingly the most important factors for business leaders considering moving or expanding an operation. Historically, physical infrastructure and tax policies determined these decisions. But that's no longer the case. Today, it is the existence of talent, or a pipeline to it, that is making or breaking economic deals. And three, Virginia's General Assembly responded to those needs this year. They approved, for the first time ever, a measure that allocates public resources to the short-term training programs that lead people to these high-demand credentials. It's called the New Economy Workforce Credentials Grants program, and it is unique in that it is the first-in-the-nation pay-for-performance plan. The grants make these training opportunities even more affordable for Virginians, while ensuring that

our colleges are paid only for the high-demand credentials they produce. The early results are promising. While we are only three months in, more than half of the money allocated for this year's grants has been claimed.

And I wonder if these credentials are a more appropriate starting-point for many of the students we serve? Stackability is a key feature of these credentials. While our most important credentials can lead you into a good-paying job immediately, the ability to earn one and then another, and then another, can propel someone up the career ladder. Already today, one out of every three people who earn one of these credentials go on to later earn a traditional college degree.

For students who are the first in their family to attend college, for the students who question whether they are college material, for those of limited means, perhaps a two- or four-year degree is too much to ask from the start. Perhaps they would be more successful in a program that is measured in weeks or months, not semesters and years.

And I bet our faculty members could tell us who those students are. They know. The teachers always know.

A graduate in every home

So, where does all this lead? What does it all mean if we serve more students before they leave high school, help more community college students complete their programs of study, and boost the number of short-term training program credentials we put into Virginia's economy? What does the next 50 years of community college education look like?

I'll tell you what it is: It's realizing the vision we share to see a college graduate in every Virginia household. I first mentioned that audacious-sounding goal at this event four years ago. Its urgency has only increased since. Labor economists say that 97 percent of America's good jobs – full-time positions with healthcare and retirement benefits – have gone to college graduates since the Great Recession ended.

The American Dream is an amazing story. We have reached a new chapter, however, where just working hard is no longer enough. The workplace is too technical. The marketplace is too global. The odds are too daunting to seize opportunity without a college credential.

Think about what it would mean for Virginia's global competitiveness, what it would mean to Virginia's businesses, and what it would mean for Virginia's families. Wouldn't it be great if we could make the phrase, "First Generation Student" obsolete in Virginia? We're on the way to that, folks, and it will be our legacy.

A call to action

This planning retreat was built to move that conversation forward. It's become an annual tradition to gather our leaders and board members, and some of the sharpest minds from around the country to ask the hard questions and seek solutions.

Let me just offer a few questions to keep in mind:

1. Considering our enrollment challenges – How will Virginia's Community College attract the students we need to serve tomorrow?

2. Considering our priority on student success – How will we guide more of our students to completion, earning a credential that carries value in the marketplace?
3. And considering the tangible need for lifelong learning in today's job market – How will we inspire students to return to our campuses, and leverage the stackability of what we offer?

It's a lot to take in. It's a lot to remember. But if you remember only one thing, remember this: all of this matters because community colleges have been, and are today, the game-changers that our VCCS founding fathers promised them to be.



Left to right: Jeffrey Kraus, assistant vice chancellor of public relations and Dr. Glenn DuBois, chancellor, Virginia's Community Colleges, discuss an upcoming speech.

good speechwriter." Kraus said. "writing samples to share."

At one of the many groundbreakings and dedications that Mills Godwin attended throughout his time in the governor's office, he said: "No computer, no scientific study, will ever be able to measure in full the benefits accruing to Virginia and to coming generations from our community college system."

Let us dedicate ourselves to the task of ensuring that these colleges continue to be game changers for another 50 years.

Let us be the institutions that bring hope to communities too familiar with despair.

Let us bring prosperity to individuals too familiar with poverty.

And let us be the reason the next chapter of the Virginia story is an amazing one.

Let us be the leaders who put a college graduate into every Virginia home.