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Glenn DuBois
Virginia Community College System

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Remarks at the Equity Summit

This speech was delivered virtually on October 5, 2020 during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Let me begin by being crystal clear: Black lives matter. Like you, I know intuitively that all lives matter. However, as a white man living in rural Virginia I don't fear being hunted and gunned down when I decide to walk through my neighborhood because someone else thinks I don't belong there. I don't fear for my adult son's life every time he gets behind the wheel of a car, worried that he will be suffocated on the side of a road by someone kneeling on his neck for nine minutes. And I don't fear that one of my adult daughters, asleep in her own bed, will be gunned down by a team executing a flawed no-knock search warrant.

However, we know such fear is real for too many families. The tragic and unnecessary deaths of Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, and Breonna Taylor show us why that fear exists – and why we cannot say that all lives matter in America until we can demonstrate that Black lives matter in America.

Inflection point

Our nation has reached an inflection point. Tomorrow's historians will have to explain why now. That requires a hindsight we can't yet have. The confluence of a deadly, global pandemic, a broken body politic, damaged by deep division and dysfunction, and the killings of more Black people at the hands of police officers has called us to a moment of reckoning.

Our shared work to form a more perfect union is far from finished. Many would suggest we've only begun. The American ideal of equality – the notion that we are all created equal – demands from us so much more than just Fourth of July fireworks. It requires tireless dedication and a collective vigilance.

Disparities practically define our nation. Educational attainment; income and family wealth; incarceration rates; and even life expectancy all highlights the different realities facing white families and families of color. Those disparities are nothing new where we live. In fact, you might just say they're Virginia traditions.

Virginia traditions

We like to say that Virginia is the place the American story begins. Plymouth Rock has gotten much better PR over the years, but Jamestown is where English-speaking settlers first encountered Native Americans and established a permanent colony in 1607. Enslaved Africans joined that mix 12 years later.

Much of the modern America we know sprang from that tiny outpost on the banks of the James River. And race plays a leading role in so many of the chapters of that story, including bloody clashes between native tribes and English settlers, the origins of American slavery, the Revolutionary and Civil wars whose battle scars yet mark Virginia soil, and the shadows of Reconstruction and Jim Crow that linger yet.

Patrick Henry, famous for his “Give me liberty or give me death!” speech was the first of 73 governors Virginia has elected to date. All have been men. All but one has been white. A racist state government bureaucrat successfully erased Virginia’s Indian tribes on paper a century ago, ultimately making their struggle for federal recognition longer and harder than what tribes in other states endured.

Massive Resistance shuttered Virginia’s public schools for almost a generation. Mildred Loving, a black woman, and Richard Loving, a white man, were sentenced to a year of prison for the crime of being married in Virginia. That was until the U.S. Supreme Court intervened in 1967 to invalidate a state law banning interracial marriage. Virginia was among a list of states that forcefully sterilized people, as late as the 1970s – well into my lifetime – enacting the principles of Eugenics.

In 2017, the debate over the fate of Confederate statues turned bloody in Charlottesville, where an Alt-Right rally became violent and deadly, costing the lives of two State Troopers and Heather Heyer, who was once one of our students. And that’s to say nothing of 2020 – something I’ll get to in just a moment. When it comes to the issue of race, Virginia has baggage. However, the commonwealth is growing too big, too dynamic, and too diverse to be held hostage by that past.

VCCS founding

Addressing that cultural baggage was among the primary motivations for creating Virginia’s Community Colleges more than half-a-century ago. Beginning in 1966, and over the next seven years, policy makers established a network of 23 community colleges. The first year we opened for business, we served 7,500 people. We have since served more than 2.6 million. And we are far and away the leading provider of higher education to minority Virginians.

Our community colleges were created to address the state’s unmet needs in higher education and workforce training. In other words, we were created to do what no one else would. Since the founding of Virginia’s Community Colleges – and I would like to think in part because of it – Virginia has changed dramatically. Technology has replaced tobacco as the state’s leading export. Virginia is home to the world’s largest naval base and the only shipyard in the nation capable of building nuclear aircraft carriers. We have an international airport that connects with nearly every continent on Earth.

The promise of opportunity that inspired those first English settlers to come here in 1607 now inspires people to come here today from across the globe. Fewer than four million people called Virginia home in 1960. That’s more than doubled to nearly 8.5 million today. Seven out of ten Virginians told the U-S Census in 1960 they were born here. And the total percentage of Virginians of “foreign stock” – that’s what the Census Bureau called it back then – was less than zero-point-four percent.



In 1960, 80 percent of Virginians were white, and 20 percent were African-American...and that was that. Today’s Virginia doesn’t even look like the same state: 63-percent of us are white, 20-percent of Virginians are Black; nine percent are Latinx; and almost seven percent are of Asian ancestry. Virginia is evolving. Our community colleges must follow suit. So where do we go from here?

The inspiration of Arthur Ashe

The protests and demonstrations that have swept across America since the killing of George Floyd has brought to a head the debate over Confederate monuments. While those statues stood in localities throughout the former confederacy, Richmond may have offered the best-known collection of them along its iconic Monument Avenue. The figures they depicted ran from the easily recognized, like Lee and Jackson, to the more obscure, like Stuart and Maury.

Nearly all of them have been razed this summer. Lee, the lone holdout thanks to technicalities and legal challenges, will likely be on his way soon too. But, there's one monument that remains. On the avenue's western edge stands a champion who always stood apart from the others. Instead of a weapon of warfare, he holds a tennis racquet in his hand. Instead of riding a galloping horse, he stands among school-age children.

Of course, I'm describing the monument to Richmond's late tennis great and humanitarian, Arthur Ashe. His inclusion on Monument Avenue was controversial when he was added just over 20 years ago. In fact, David Duke even paid a visit to Richmond to protest it. City leaders wisely ignored him. Ashe's tennis achievements were legendary. Considered the best in the world during his prime, Ashe was the first Black player selected to our country's Davis Cup team and remains the only Black man ever to win the singles title at Wimbledon, the U.S. Open, and the Australian Open. After his 1980 retirement, he suffered from heart disease that ran in both sides of his family. He contracted HIV from a blood transfusion. He died in 1993.

“Start where you are. Use what you have. Do what you can.”

That was Ashe's signature line as he used his celebrity to advocate for civil rights and human rights after retiring from tennis. His advice is practical and straight forward. And I think it makes a lot of sense when asking what can our colleges do in this moment? Diversity, equity, inclusion, and access to opportunity have been at the heart of our community college mission since we first opened our doors. However, our efforts to translate those ideals into action for all Virginians have not always yielded the results that we seek as quickly as we would like. Simply stated, we must do better, and we have some work to do.

To that end, we are taking some significant steps to move our colleges forward, closer to the ideal of our mission.

Campus and facility names

The first, and most symbolic, step we are taking is to review the appropriateness of the names of our colleges and facilities. Our State Board initiated this review. College presidents and their local advisory boards will carry it out. Many of our colleges bear names inspired by geography. We're really not talking about those. Others are named for individuals. Let's take a hard look at those. Who are those people? Why were they chosen? Are the achievements they earned, and the values they lived, aligned with our mission and values today?

Moving forward, we must be deliberate on the signals we send. People encounter these names on college materials and signage, on the transcripts they carry forward in their academic careers, and on the degrees and credentials they earn and proudly hang on their wall.

A strategic plan for equity

That brings me to the even larger step Virginia's Community Colleges are taking in response to this larger moment we face. As we seek the way forward beyond our *Complete 2021* strategic plan, we are assembling a new blueprint that is focused on equity.

I want to thank Anne Kress, president of Northern Virginia Community College, and Sharon Morrissey, the VCCS Senior Vice Chancellor for Academics and Workforce Programs, for leading this work. I'm not sure they would thank me in return. This is an enormous task. Like everything else we do, it's made harder by the circumstances of the pandemic. But they, and the dream team built from our college system, are working hard to ensure that what our institutions do, and how they do it, truly helps everyone succeed. That's not the case today.

Across our colleges, Black students represent our largest minority group – and every indication we have tells us they are lagging behind their peers. That is true no matter the college, no matter the program. For example:

- It starts at the beginning. While more than half of all students who apply to one of colleges actually enroll with us, that is true for only about a third of Black students.
- In fact, in just the last five years, we had more than 12,000 fewer Black students attending our colleges.
- Four out five of our first-time, full-time Black students fail to complete a community college credential or degree of any type in three years.
- It's not surprising then, when you add together all these factors, we are graduating fewer Black students today than we were just five years ago, despite increasing graduation rates for all other minority groups across all our colleges.

Make no mistake about it: these results are troubling and unacceptable. Through this task force, we examine these numbers earnestly, and we will propose and pursue solutions deliberately. The task force is exploring our evolving teaching and learning practices; modernizing how we support students; the future of work; and the funding and financing of our colleges.

We also decided to take a quick look at our criminal justice curricula – one of the first state systems in the country to do that. And I want to thank Quentin Johnson, the president of Southside Virginia Community College, for leading a panel that brought together teaching faculty and program heads with law enforcement officials and community activists. This was personal for me. I spent the first ten years of my community college career teaching criminal justice classes. And while we served more than 2,300 students last year in these programs, I'm less concerned about preparing good police officers than I am with our responsibility to prepare good people who strengthen our communities. I believe the panel's recommendations will help us do that, and we will be advancing their work along with that of our strategic planning task force.

Three principles of DEI

As that work continues, it falls to the rest of us to bring that plan to life and bring its benefits to our students. Accordingly, I recommend we consider three guiding principles to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion across our colleges.

First, our business case both demands and justifies a focus on faculty and staff diversity. You see, it's not enough to talk about diversity as simply doing the right thing. This priority must be stated clearly and pursued consistently to support our business case.

Second, we must focus not just on diversity, but also on inclusion. It's not enough just to have a diverse looking collection of people in the room. They must be at the table where the decisions are made, and they must have a voice in that process.

And third, finding and fostering inclusion is a leadership competency that must permeate our organization. Leaders at every community college, at every level, must be part of embedding this into how we think, who we hire, and all that we do.

The business case

All too often, organizations express diversity initiatives as moral imperatives. Being an Equal Opportunity employer is considered to be the right thing to do. Do you know what else falls into the category of being the right thing to do?

- Obeying the speed limit;
- Avoiding cigarette smoking;
- Cutting down on fried, fatty and sugary foods;
- Drinking alcohol in only reasonable amounts;
- Washing your hands regularly; and
- Calling your mother.

Each of those things is considered the right thing to do. However, experience suggests that we as a people have a spotty record when it comes to doing the right thing. Consider this:

- Excessive speeding causes one out of every three fatal car wrecks in America.
- Some 34 million Americans will smoke cigarettes this year, despite half-a-century of government warning against doing it.
- So much for watching what we eat: America has the highest rate of obesity of any developed nation in the world. More than two-out-of-five Americans are obese today – a 26-percent jump since 2008.
- When it comes to drinking, we just broke a 40-year record. We drink more, per person, than we did in the run-up to Prohibition – and that was before we quarantined.
- As for handwashing, well, it only took a deadly, global pandemic to demonstrate our challenges with it.
- And I've never, ever, met a mother who complained about her children calling too often.

The case for inclusion

That brings me back to the workplace. Knowing that something is the right thing to do isn't enough to make us act. For diversity to matter, it must be institutionalized and tied to your mission. For inclusion to matter, it must be institutionalized and tied to your mission.

I began my career as a community college instructor. That's where I learned a valuable lesson: students don't do optional. It took me the rest of my career to understand that nobody else does either. I learned this in recent years with an effort we called the Chancellor's Faculty Diversity Initiative. We launched this a decade ago to address something that bothered us. Taken on the

whole, the demographics of our teaching pool were not aligned with the demographics of our student body. This is not good for business. We also saw this disparity in our adjunct ranks, the part-time instructors that we rely on to carry so much of our teaching load.

To remedy that, we made a concerted effort to diversify the adjunct pool. Why did we focus on adjunct? Usually, when colleges make the decision to hire a fulltime instructor, those hires often come from our adjunct pool. We launched and publicized two programs to find some teaching talent that we were otherwise missing.

One program is called the Minority Professional Teaching Fellows. It's built to attract working professionals who hold graduate degrees into the adjunct pool and provide them an experienced teaching mentor should they be hired to teach a class. The other program is called the Graduate Student Teaching Fellows. It's a similar setup for those who are working their way through graduate school and want to teach. Despite some early success, where we hired over 500 fellows in the first four years, we have lost momentum. We took our eye off the ball. Some colleges aren't even using those resources today. We can do better than that.

As the face of Virginia changes, as the need to produce more graduates becomes greater, we must adapt. We need faculty and staff members who look like our students and can connect with them. We need faculty and staff members who share experiences with, and speak the common language of, the people we want to serve – and hold the academic and workforce bona fides to help them excel. The VCCS mission statement says that we give everyone the opportunity to learn and develop the right skills so lives and communities are strengthened. The keyword there, I believe, is everyone.

Leadership competency

So, how do we do that? How do we recruit, hire, manage, and develop that throughout our organization? The answer isn't easy. But I would suggest that we must build inclusion into a leadership competency. After all, it's simply another form of talent management. The same way that we have to articulate a clear and convincing connection between inclusivity and our central mission, we must make the case to managers, at every level, that diversity and inclusiveness is essential to student success.

I feel the need to say very clearly that I am not talking about quotas here. History is full of quota efforts that have failed miserably. One could argue that they are among the right things to do that never could seem to be done right. What I am talking about goes beyond counting noses and checking race and ethnicity boxes on a staffing HR form.

Inclusion, of course, means that we build a community of faculty and staff capable of reaching people from various races and ethnicities and helping them succeed. But it goes further than that. It means building a community of faculty and staff capable of engaging:

- People across the economic spectrum;
- People from different regions;
- People of different ages;
- People with disabilities, or more accurately, different abilities;
- People who were born elsewhere;
- People from across the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer spectrum;
- People who come from different faith traditions, including those with no faith tradition; and

- This may be the most controversial thing I say today given the climate these days: people who come from across the political spectrum.

That's a tall order. Each of us, after all, is a victim of our own experience. That's all the more reason to check ourselves. Don't just do the same thing the same way with the same people. We must all challenge ourselves to recognize the fact that talent and perspective comes before us in countless variations – and it all makes us better.

Candidly, we failed to make that case to our managers when we created the Chancellor's Faculty Diversity Initiative. You see, it feels great to tell you about the hundreds of candidates it added to our hiring pool. It feels terrible, however, to tell you about how the effort has fizzled. People don't do optional, remember? We failed to require our deans and hiring managers to turn to that pool when it came time to hire more adjuncts. We failed to hold them accountable or even teach them a process to foster inclusiveness in this instance. And these hard lessons are helping us get it right as we begin it anew.

While the percentage of our full-time faculty who are diverse has risen from 12 to nearly 20 percent over the last decade or so, we still have a long way to go to look like the Virginians we serve. This next strategic plan will offer ideas and strategies to make our colleges more diverse, inclusive, and equitable. But it falls to us all to make that matter.

Conclusion

I know we can make that matter. You do too. For years, I referred to our response to the Great Recession as the finest hour of Virginia's Community Colleges. In a very short period of time, we lost more than \$100 million in state funding while picking up another 50,000 students. I had never seen anything like it. I believed that I never would again.

Then we came face-to-face with COVID-19. In the blink of an eye, we moved thousands of courses from in-person formats to on-line formats. We focused on the needs of the thousands of students we serve, and we kept them moving forward. It's hard to believe that the pandemic has been with us now for six months. We continue to learn how this pandemic is affecting everything, including student success. To date, I can't say our efforts were textbook – because, really, there is no book for what we did. But what I can say is that we were and are extraordinary in our efforts to help every student succeed. We focused on our students. We focused on their needs. We brought our mission to life.

But we are still challenged to deal with the fault lines that this pandemic has shown so vividly and how they impact so many of our Black students, and so many low-income families who live in urban, suburban, and rural communities. This is what motivates us as we look forward. Virginia's Community College won't cure COVID-19, but we are finding ways to help our students continue safely through it. We likely won't cure the racism that plagues our larger society, but we can rise up together to help our students continue safely through that too.

“Start where you are. Use what you have. Do what you can.”

Arthur Ashe was right. The only thing I would add is, let's all do it together.