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Remarks at the Chancellor's Retreat

On August 3, 2021, this speech was delivered at the Hotel Roanoke in Roanoke.

Working together but apart, we have learned so much over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. This virus – which continues to mutate, threaten, and kill – has taken the lives of more than 4 million people across the world. That includes more than 600,000 Americans. That includes some 12,000 Virginians; and it's not yet finished as we are learning from the Delta variant.

Those of us fortunate enough to survive this virus, to benefit from those amazing vaccines, are left with tough decisions to make and hard work to accomplish. One thing that's clear is that we must move forward. I'm not sure what "normal" was, or even is, but it's clear to me that we are not returning to something. Instead, we press on.

That's what this chancellor's retreat, this face-to-face gathering, is about. *Opportunity 2027*, our new six-year statewide strategic plan, is a product of the pandemic. By being forced to stay away from each other, we gained new perspective. By being called to serve students differently, we were compelled to rethink everything. And suffering yet another year of enrollment decline, we must ask what are we missing? For example, have we lost our relevance when it comes to what we offer and how we offer it? The number of Virginia households that meet the ALICE threshold continues to rise while our college enrollment continues to shrink. How can that be? We need to answer that question.

Opportunity 2027 is a product of the legacy of George Floyd and too many others to name. While a guilty verdict was returned for Floyd's murder, the jury remains out on whether everything that came after his death, and because of it, represents a movement or merely a moment. Statues have been razed. Institutions have been renamed. And people came out to vote in record numbers. Yet, the question remains: what does the past year mean for the cause of social justice? That my friends, in a very big way, is up to us to answer.

Those who dedicate their careers to it, believe in the transformative powers of higher education. And those who believe it should be accessible to all, work at a community college. After all, many institutions of higher education define themselves by how many people they exclude. On the other hand, we define ourselves by how many people we can serve. The more, the better. That's important because the breadth and depth of a community's education defines its capacity for social equity.

Our ability to see beyond the superficial – of color, of culture, of difference – and act outside of the base instincts of fear, judgement, and exclusion requires knowledge and perspective. It requires education. It requires us, in a functional sense, putting an end to the phrase "first generation" college student. How can it be, some 55 years after we first opened our doors, that so many families have yet to send that first child to college?

Opportunity 2027 is a return to our roots. It affirms the vision of Dana Hamel, and his contemporaries, some 50 years ago, in creating our system of colleges. Together, we commit to help every person in every community that we serve enjoy stronger, healthier, and more lucrative lives.

And together, we vow that when we reach the end of this plan, we will have made a difference extending well beyond good intentions and hopeful prose.

During this retreat – through new voices and fresh perspectives – we will explore the ins and the outs of *Opportunity 2027* and its bold central aim to eliminate equity gaps throughout Virginia's Community Colleges. There's a lot to unpack in that pledge and it's five supporting goal areas.

What I want to focus on in my remarks today is the why. Why do we place this focus on serving students of color, and why do we do that now? To answer that, consider the VCCS mission statement: We give everyone the opportunity to learn and develop the right skills so lives and communities are strengthened. We're not doing that today. We're simply not, and the numbers bear that out.

Our challenges begin before students even reach a community college campus. Dual Enrollment courses for high school students are among our most cherished and celebrated offerings. Just think: what would happen tomorrow if we announced that we're shutting it down? Yet, students of color are practically ignored by Dual Enrollment.

Across Virginia, Black students make up almost 22-percent of the high school population. They account for just over 10-percent of Dual Enrollment students. Latinx students present a similar story. Accounting for nearly 17-percent of all Virginia high school students, they are about 5-percent of those in Dual Enrollment. Our community colleges, and what they offer, were created in response to Virginia's shameful period of Massive Resistance – not as a tool to continue its practice of segregating public school students.

We cannot ignore these numbers. Doing so would mean contributing to yet another structural inequity facing Black and brown families across Virginia. Dual Enrollment didn't arrive at this point on purpose. But improving it – fixing it – requires intention and action. Additional metrics, across our colleges, highlight the need for intention and action when it comes to serving students of color.

While overall enrollment has been receding throughout the past eight years, the decline of Black students has been greater and steeper. The Black students that we serve are earning fewer college credits than their peers. The percentage of Black students who pass college-level Mathematics and English courses is significantly less than their classmates. Not surprisingly, those students of color are less likely to earn any kind of credential or degree with us, and nearly all of them who aspire to use us for two-plus-two college transfer aren't making it through. And all too often, when our students of color do succeed, they do so in programs that lead to low-income jobs. We need to help them aim higher.

This is a dismal reality, but it shouldn't be disheartening. I say that because together, we are drawing a line in the sand with this new plan. Past plans have seen signs of inequity as something to fix along the way as we pursue other goals. Not this time. We'll get this right and make real the promise of our mission statement to every son and daughter of Virginia.

There's a lot riding on our success. While ending equity gaps throughout our colleges is the absolute right thing to do, sentiment alone won't get it done. Collectively, we have a terrible track record of accomplishing things that are considered the right thing to do. Closing our colleges' equity gaps is the right thing to do, and Virginia's economic future depends on it.

Opportunity 2027 is a workforce development plan. It's about training and educating the talent Virginia's pipeline desperately needs. That includes our colleges, for which this is an HR plan. Our students need to see themselves in the faculty and staff that should reflect the diversity of the broader community. We're proud to be among the reasons that Virginia has been declared the Best State for Business two years in a row. Retaining that reputation requires us to do a lot more moving forward.

Earlier this summer, the CEO of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce wrote a guest column on what she called the biggest challenge facing American business. "Solving the worker shortage crisis must be job No. 1," Suzanne Clark wrote in *Baron's* magazine. She goes on to say, "I hear it all day, every day from businesses of every size, region and industry: A lack of available workers is holding back business growth, threatening our recovery and competitiveness."

Her assessment rings true for Virginia, where the state Chamber of Commerce identifies "Building a talent supply pipeline" as its top strategic priority. The state Chamber's Blueprint Virginia 2025 plan begins with the sentence: "The availability of a well-trained and educated workforce remains the top concern for Virginia's business community."

Name the region. Name the industry. Name the company, big or small. They'll all tell you the same story: they can't find enough people with the right skills to take the jobs they need to fill. And they're facing two very specific, and very strong headwinds in their search for qualified workers.

The first is our declining birthrate. Last year's drop in America's birthrate was the steepest we've seen in nearly half-a-century. We are not having enough babies to replace those who are dying. That's been the case since the early 1970s. Some hoped pandemic lockdowns would lead to a baby boom, but that didn't happen.

The second headwind facing our businesses in the search for talent is the immigration battle. Nationally, people coming to the U.S. has been a divisive, hot-button issue. That's not likely to change anytime soon. But closer to home, Virginia is losing out to the other 49 states. For years, Virginia was winning that game, with more people moving here than leaving. But that changed in 2013 and we've been bleeding population ever since. The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that we lost nearly 12,000 people to other states between the summers of 2018 and 2019.

So, where will we find the people to take all these terrific jobs that need filled? In Northern Virginia, thousands of folks – from electricians to I.T. experts – will be needed to support the Amazon HQ2 project in Arlington. In Hampton Roads, the shipyard says they need thousands of welders and pipefitters to keep building submarines and aircraft carriers as their Baby Boomer workforce retires. Roadbuilders say they need a few thousand people over the next decade to expand the Hampton Roads Bridge Tunnel. That's to say nothing of the thousands of people that Dominion needs to build the wind power infrastructure off Virginia's coastline. Similar struggles can be found in Southwest Virginia, as companies plan for the much-needed expansion of Interstate 81. What happens if Congress passes the biggest infrastructure bill our nation has seen in over 50 years? From where will the work crews come? It doesn't matter how many shovel-ready projects we can plan if no one is there to operate the heavy equipment.

The list goes on in every corner of Virginia: where are the 10,000 trained nurses the V-E-C says we need before this decade is done? Where are the countless early childhood educators needed everywhere? Where are the trained professionals we need to staff assisted living facilities? Where are the I.T. professionals that every company needs to keep their systems safe from ransom-seeking hackers? And what about cannabis? Virginia's journey to legalize its production, sales, and usage will launch an industry that exists today only in the shadows.

The bottom line is that Virginia's ability to compete economically hangs on our ability to educate and skill-up every single Virginian. This is especially true of people of color who've been too often ignored, excluded, and turned away. It's also true of Virginia's ALICE population that bore the brunt of the pandemic and desperately needs a chance. We don't have the luxury of letting anyone sit on the sidelines. We need their talent. We need their efforts. We need them, and we need them now.

A social equity plan, a workforce development plan – and if I may be so bold – I believe *Opportunity 2027* is a plan to save the American Dream. Is that too hyperbolic? Am I overstating the risk of where we stand today?

Step back for a moment and consider the episodes of democratic anarchy that we've seen in just that past year or so:

- The continued harassment and killings of Black motorists, including a viral episode from the town of Windsor, here in Virginia.
- Calls to defund the police.
- An unprecedented effort, in the light of day, to intimidate and threaten local elections officials over the results of the presidential election.
- January 6 – a violent and deadly insurrection attempt at the U.S. Capitol building, all because of a lie.
- And the never-ending political fight over COVID-19, which began over the inconvenience of lockdowns and a denial of the virus's threat; transitioned to a fight over the usage of face masks; and now takes the form of vaccine refusal.

I've read stories about this kind of political instability. History is full of tales about civil unrest leading to the undesirable realities of dictators and strong man autocrats. It's an unsavory prospect.

So, what does all that have to do with us? Democracy is at stake, and I believe that community colleges are among the few institutions that can help protect it. When we enact our mission, we help people find a better version of themselves. When we give someone an opportunity, we give them hope. When we help someone earn a skill, we give them a pathway to a salary that supports their family and makes them part of something bigger than themselves.

We all know the benefits of higher education: Educated people make more money. They live longer, healthier lives. They vote. They pay taxes. They contribute to the social fabric that supports a community. And now, they are much more likely to get a vaccine that protects them from a deadly, global virus. What we help individuals achieve is the antidote to all this fear, pessimism, and anger fueling social unrest. And it is our job to ensure every Virginian gets a chance.

Friends, I want to offer just one last thought as I bring these remarks to a close. I've had the honor of being the chancellor of the Virginia Community College System for more than 20 years now. And this is the fourth six-year statewide strategic plan that we've enacted in my tenure. *Dateline 2009* was our first. *Achieve 2015* followed that, and *Complete 2021* came next. Each of those plans offered stretch goals for our colleges and their leaders. Each taught us lessons, revealing things we were good at doing and things which required us to do better. Each pushed us to learn and to grow.

Looking back, there's an interesting phenomenon that plays out. For example, nearly half of our 23 college presidents who, in 2009, approved the *Achieve* plan, had retired, or moved on, by the time we gathered four years later to upwardly revise its goals. Another third of them had changed in 2015 by the time we launched *Complete 2021*. The transition continued this past year, where 73-percent of the college presidencies had changed hands by the time we adopted *Opportunity 2027*.



Over time, you see a Bob Templin and Debbie DiCrocce give way to an Anne Kress and Marcia Conston. You see a Jack Lewis and Gary Rhodes give way to a Pat Huber and a Paula Pando. And you see a Bobby Sandel and Frank Friedman give way to a Bobby Sandel and Frank Friedman. But you never see our values, our focus, and our desire to serve more students and serve them better give way. Like a well-practiced track and field relay team, you see the baton handed-off from those leaders to these leaders. Our colleges continue forward. Our work goes on.

And, my friends, we're going to see that again as we begin the journey that is *Opportunity 2027*. And this time, that's going to begin with me.

I will be retiring as chancellor, effective at the end of June 2022. I have asked our State Board Chair, NL Bishop, to begin immediately the national search that will be conducted to find my successor. You'll be hearing more about that process very soon. And I announce this today knowing that with *Opportunity 2027*, we are on the right track, and we are in very good hands. And I am excited – just as I've always been – by what we will accomplish by working together.

And know that Carol and I will be cheering you on from Deltaville. We intend to stay right here in Virginia. And who knows, depending on what Shannon Kennedy has on the RCC menu, I might just sign up for a few classes. You never, ever learn too much.