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Remarks at the VCCS Chancellor's Annual Planning Retreat (2012)

These remarks were delivered on August 7, 2012.

Distinguished guests; friends and colleagues; ladies and gentlemen: good afternoon. I want to begin by thanking you for joining us at this year's annual planning retreat. This event is now in its tenth year and getting better all the time. In fact, one of our community college presidents says this is the most important statewide event of the year for his staff – and I'm sure he wasn't saying that just because his college is only a few minutes down the road and he doesn't have to pay for hotel rooms.

I am grateful to have with us some very special friends and higher education leaders joining us today. I am, of course, talking about Dr. Martha Kanter, the United States Undersecretary of Education and Laura Fornash, Virginia's Secretary of Education. Both of these ladies are not just impressive and accomplished leaders but they have also been friends, both directly and indirectly, to our community college mission. Please join me in offering both of them a round of applause in appreciation for their partnership and hard work.

Their presence today is symbolic of something that I believe is very important today and it's something that I talk about a lot. Higher education is a unifying issue in our nation today. As a nation, we need more college credentials to bolster our nation's economic prowess in the 21st century. As individuals, we need college credentials to bolster our chances at a good job and a rewarding career in the 21st century.

Now, Martha and Laura, I only know this because I read it in the paper; but there might be a few things that your respective bosses don't see eye-to-eye on; there might be a few issues that they don't agree about. But higher education isn't one of them. Martha, thanks in part to your leadership, President Obama is calling for an additional five million more college graduates in America by the year 2020. Laura, thanks in part to your leadership, Governor McDonnell is calling for 100,000 more college graduates in Virginia by the year 2025. Both of those goals, of course, dove-tail with what the Lumina Foundation calls their big goal: to increase the percentage of Americans holding postsecondary degrees to 60-percent by the year 2025. The heavy-lifting necessary to reach all of those goals are going to be done by community colleges. It's going to be done by the people sitting in this room today.

So, Martha, the next time you talk to your boss please tell him that the folks at Virginia's Community Colleges are grateful for his support and tell him to keep talking about our nation's community colleges. And you may want to ask him to keep working with us to make filing out the federal financial aid form and easier process for the people we serve. And, Laura, the next time you talk to your boss please tell him that the folks at Virginia's Community Colleges are grateful for his support and tell him to keep talking about the prominent role we play in his signature higher education agenda.

My Remarks

Friends, I want to talk with you briefly today about three things: First, I want to share with you some good news about the work we have been doing.

Second, I want to talk with you about why and how we need to leverage that success to overcome some sobering threats that face our industry. Third, I want to talk with you about some new ways I see our mission coming into focus for the 21st century.

And finally, I want to just highlight some of the break-out sessions that we have assembled for you for this retreat.

Achieve 2015

Let's start with the good news. Three years ago, with the help of a dream team of community college leaders – some of whom are in the room today – we introduced an ambitious agenda called *Achieve 2015*. It was a bold six-year strategic plan. What made it different from a lot of other strategic plans you see is that it is a public agenda. It's not focused on the needs of our community colleges but rather on the needs of the communities we serve.

It began with a series of town hall meetings where, together, we went to the public, to business leaders, to elected leaders, to community leaders and to students we served and we asked them, "What do you need from your community college to be successful or more successful?"

After eighteen months of collecting that input, putting it all together, breaking it all apart, wringing our hands, gnashing our teeth, growing some gray hair, losing some hair and perhaps even shedding a few tears, the taskforce produced the five-point plan you see behind me.

So, where are we after three years? Well, we were right. We were right. And we were wrong. We were right about these goals. This public agenda placed our colleges exactly on the path we needed to be on and gave us a head start on those larger public policy goals that would later come at us from both Capitol Square and Capitol Hill. We were right to set these stretch goals. It made us nervous at the time. The economy hit bottom as we were putting this plan together. It would have been easy to just hunker-down and batten the hatches. Instead, we looked around and wondered how many more people we could help.

We were wrong, however, in what we thought that outer-limit was. We underestimated ourselves. We underestimated how many people would seek their future at our doors. And we underestimated how long it would take us to achieve the majority of these ambitious goals.

When you consider the URP goals tucked within those five focus areas, it's easy to see that we truly have eight goals contained within *Achieve 2015*. As we stand here today, ladies and gentlemen, it is an honor to share with you that we have already met five of those goals! And we are on track to complete all the others.

Let's take a look at some of those. Our first goal has two parts:

Reengineering

But that's not the only good news I have to share with you. We are finding success with another "All Hands on Deck" initiative that has allowed us to examine and re-examine everything Virginia's Community Colleges do. Of course, I'm talking about the work being done by the VCCS Reengineering Task Force.

Since we met at this planning retreat one year ago, the taskforce has taken their original ten big ideas and have put in motion nearly 30 workgroups to vet, explore and refine recommendations for the task force to advance. Obviously, that's a lot of moving parts. Given the intensive nature of that work and the inclusive way we go about doing it, those workgroups will not cross the finish line at the same time.

But we're feeling good about the ones that have already begun to bear fruit. That includes:

- The sharing of distance learning classes that has opened doors for thousands of students across the state who may not have otherwise been able to access those courses;
- A transition to our new developmental mathematics approach that focuses on the needs and the deficiencies of individual students. So far, we have only anecdotal results from it but they are encouraging and preparing us for this year's transition with reading and writing;
- A broadening of our faculty employment spectrum that gives our colleges yet another pathway to expand the number of full-time teaching faculty; and
- A recasting of the faculty performance review system which we believe will elevate the process from a bureaucratic exercise in paperwork to one that ensures our colleges are hiring the best instructors and we are helping them become the best professionals they can be.

I've been asked, more than once, when do I think the work of the Reengineering Task Force will be complete? The answer, my friends, is that it won't be – at least not for the foreseeable future.

We are working now in what's really the Age of Reengineering. That's true, I believe, for our colleges, our industry, our commonwealth and our country. The need to re-examine and reinvent ourselves – the very thing that we offer to the people we serve – needs to become part of our DNA and it is. As we institutionalize this work, however, we may need to rename it. I'm open to your suggestions.

American Higher Education Today

Change is essential, not just for our colleges, but for our entire industry. It's a tall order to articulate everything that's now happening with higher education in America. Perhaps the word crisis might be a good place to start.

Just this year, we have seen some stunning developments that bode badly for our industry:

- One, student loan debt has hit an all-time high, surpassing consumer credit card and car loan debt. I seem to recall similar warnings about mortgage debt just before the bottom dropped out on the real estate market;
- Two, one of Virginia's leading universities went through a gut-wrenching and very public leadership struggle after its president and board chair clashed on the pace of and nature of change in how the university works and what it offers; and
- Three, we've read and we've seen some dramatic student protests in California as leaders there have been forced to raise what were some of the lowest tuition and fee rates in the nation?

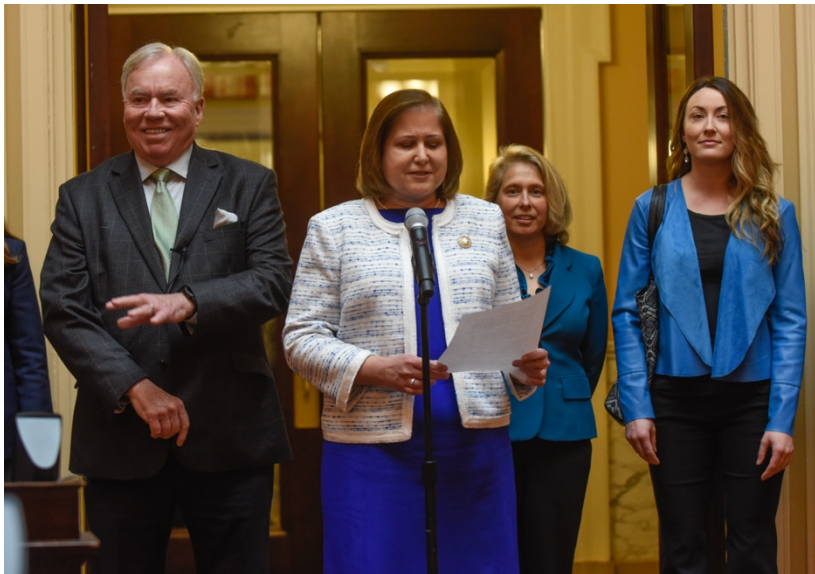
As we heard at a convening of the Rebuilding America's Middle Class, or RAMC, meeting national pollsters are finding that parents across the country are worried that the cost of higher education is

placing out of the reach of their family. It's no surprise that parents are worried about the costs of higher education. It's tough to see how the numbers add up.

According to federal statistics, the average cost of earning a bachelor's degree at a public university – and this is assuming that the student is attending full-time and finishing in four years – is more than \$60,000ⁱ. That number more than doubles if the student is attending a private university. Meanwhile, the national median income between the years 2006 and 2010 was just under \$52,000ⁱⁱ. What exactly do we expect a family of four to do?

The numbers are better here in Virginia, but not by much. According to SCHEV statistics, the average cost of earning a bachelor's degree at one of our 16 public universities is nearly \$40,000.

Make that \$70,000ⁱⁱⁱ should the student live on-campus for all four years. The Council of Independent Colleges in Virginia, which represents the commonwealth's 28 private colleges do not



publish average prices on their website, though they boast there that nearly three-quarters of their students used financial aid packages that averaged almost \$21,000^{iv} per year. Meanwhile, Virginia's median income between the years 2006 and 2010 was just over \$61,000^v and it's fair to question how much Northern Virginia skews that figure.

So, again, I ask: what exactly do we expect a family of four to do? Are we looking at the beginning of the next Border's

Books and Music? At a time when more and more leaders agree that our nation needs more and more college graduates, the numbers simply don't line up to get us there. Something needs to change and I believe that our community colleges will play a leading role in bringing about that change.

VCCS in the 21st Century

So what does that change mean for us? What does it mean for the mission of Virginia's Community Colleges? The who, what, when, where and why of our mission is firmly established. Who do we serve? Individuals, families, employers and communities looking to close that gap, at least somewhat between their American reality and their American Dream.

What do we offer? The skills and knowledge necessary for them to compete for and win the opportunities, jobs and a brighter future. When? Now. Tomorrow and increasingly, on-demand. Where? Twenty-three colleges, 40 campuses, dozens of centers and be it a traditional monitor of just a smartphone, on a screen near you.

Why? Because Governor Mills Godwin, and every governor who followed, the 1966 General Assembly, and every one that followed and Dr. Dana Hamel, and every chancellor and president

who followed, understood that Virginia needed institutions that were big enough and local enough to address the state's unmet needs in higher education and workforce training.

It is the "how" of our mission that demands our discernment, calls for our creativity and forces our flexibility. Virginia cannot afford for us to allow sentiment, nostalgia and habit to dictate what we do moving forward.

In fact, I see the 21st century needs of those we serve changing how we work in at least two distinct ways: One, the role our colleges play, especially those in the rural parts of Virginia, is undergoing a fundamental shift. I used to describe the role those president's play as that of a town minister. Well, increasingly you are trading in your clerical collar for a pair of futuristic glasses.

Our colleges are no longer just a place where the community can come together. We are now becoming the leading institutions of regional change – the place where elected leaders, business leaders and community leaders are comfortable coming together to unite behind a vision of what their corner of the world can be? So, I wonder: are we preparing you to be this crossroad? And how can we do it better?

And two, I believe it is time for our colleges to take the lead on establishing, creating, promoting and expanding the pathways to a \$25,000, or less, bachelor's degree. When I consider our mission of addressing Virginia's unmet higher education needs and when I look at the median income of Virginia families and the costs of a baccalaureate I can only conclude that this is an unmet need.

We are beginning that effort with an agreement that will be publicly announced later this month with the help of the Governor's office. We have signed an agreement with Western Governor's University that will create a pathway for a nursing student to earn a bachelor's for less than \$20,000. That will establish a framework that we can use to develop baccalaureate pathways in other high-demand and high-employment fields like, perhaps, IT, teaching, law enforcement and other health-related fields.

Five years ago, I would have told you that our colleges had no need to get into the baccalaureate game. We had more than enough on our plate to say grace over. But my thinking has evolved on this issue – inspired by the elevated demands of fields like nursing, where starting jobs increasingly require a bachelor's degree. My thinking has been changed by the feeling that more and more families fear that their children are priced out of our universities and their hesitation to saddle them with mortgage-sized loans for a home they don't own. We simply cannot ignore the need.

Three Types of Critics

There is nothing simple about the changes being required of our work. Then again, throughout my 30-year community college career, the road forward has usually been uphill. I often find, however, that when the path is the steepest we do some of our best work, right?

Our community colleges enjoy the support of elected leaders from both parties and all levels of government as well as business leaders from across the state. We also enjoy a reservoir of good will that appears in statewide polling we do every year. But our support is not universal.

Let me briefly speak about the three types of people who stand in the way of our mission. I describe them as people who don't believe in higher education; people who don't believe in our community

colleges; and – the most challenging group – people who don't believe in themselves. The first group, the people who don't believe in higher education, found a hero in one of this year's presidential candidates and a more-recent voice in a popular columnist.

While campaigning for president, former Pennsylvania Senator Rick Santorum said, and I quote, "Colleges and universities... are undermining the very principles of our country every single day by indoctrinating kids in...ideology." And he called the President a "Snob" for wanting every child in America to go to college.

We saw similar sentiments at the beginning of this past summer from syndicated columnist Robert J. Samuelson, who wrote^{vi}, and I quote:

"The college-for-all crusade has outlived its usefulness. Time to ditch it. Like the crusade to make all Americans homeowners, it's now doing more harm than good...We overdid it. The obsessive faith in college has backfired."

Samuelsson goes onto write:

"There's much worrying these days that some countries (examples: South Korea, Norway, Japan) have higher college attendance rates, including post-secondary school technical training, than we do. This anxiety is misplaced...On paper, we're turning out enough college graduates to meet our needs."

ⁱ <http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=76>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.usatoday.com/money/economy/story/2012-02-09/income-rising/53033322/1>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.schev.edu/Reportstats/2011TuitionFeesReport.pdf?from=>

^{iv} <http://www.cicv.org/Affordability.aspx>

^v <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/51000.html>

^{vi} http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/its-time-to-drop-the-college-for-all-crusade/2012/05/27/gJQAzcUGvU_story_1.html