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A College Graduate in Every Virginia Home

This op-ed was published in the Richmond Times-Dispatch on September 15, 2013.

Virginia's Community Colleges aspire to a goal that would tangibly elevate the economic outlook of the entire commonwealth. We strive to see a college graduate living in every Virginia home by the year 2025. This is neither a dream nor a fantasy. It is a necessity. Two out of every three jobs available in Virginia will require more than a high school education before this decade is through.

A game-changer for Virginia

Having a college graduate in every Virginia home would give future Virginia governors a unique advantage on foreign trade trips. Existing employers would benefit from convenient access to educated and trained talent. Moreover, higher education would no longer be a mystery to any Virginia child because she or he grows up sharing a home with a college graduate.

It took America less than eight years to meet President Kennedy's challenge to send a man half-a-million miles to the moon and return him safely to Earth.

Is it too much to think that over the next twelve years we cannot convince every Virginia family to travel 30 minutes, or less, to their nearest community college campus and earn a postsecondary credential?

Where we begin

Ensuring there is a college graduate in every Virginia home is guiding Virginia's Community Colleges in forming its next statewide strategic plan, which will carry us into the next decade.

A series of listening sessions, beginning later this month, begins that work. People in the communities we serve know best about the challenges we can help them solve. Similar sessions helped us create our current statewide strategic plan, Achieve 2015.

From a statewide perspective, there are three significant challenges standing in our way.

High school is no finish line

First, our community colleges must help prepare more high school students for the rigor of college work in partnership with K-12 public education leaders. Nearly half of last June's high school graduates required remedial education when they began community college this fall. We must bridge that gap.

That means finding systemic ways to build on the partnerships we already have with Virginia's K-12 leaders:

- Dual enrollment is helping more students than ever before earning college credits while still in high school;
- Community college Career Coaches work in more than half of Virginia's high schools helping students create career and college plans; and

- The Virginia Education Wizard, our free online tool, serves a growing number of families to connect a student's ambitions and aspirations with the education needed to realize them.

Uniting the two Virginias

Second, we must bridge the educational divide that separates the two Virginias, and I'm not talking about West Virginia.

Of the state's 8.2 million residents, more than six million live in Virginia's urban crescent, stretching from Northern Virginia to Richmond to Hampton Roads. Were that its own state, it would rank number two in the nation for educational attainment, with 90 percent of the population have graduated high school and 38 percent holding at least a bachelor's degree.

If the rest of Virginia – stretching from the Eastern Shore through Southern Virginia to Southwest Virginia and up through the Valley – were its own state, it would rank last in the nation for educational attainment with one in four people there failing to finish high school and only 19% holding at least a bachelor's degree.

Our Virginia Rural Horseshoe Initiative will take time to address this pipeline issue. Ignoring it, however, means a lot of Virginia talent will be untapped and many families will find themselves locked out of 21st century career opportunities.

Education for tomorrow's jobs

Third, we must do a better job across Virginia aligning our educational offerings with the science, technology, engineering, mathematics and health science (STEM-H) opportunities that will drive tomorrow's economy.

One out of every five jobs available in the year 2011 was a STEM-H job. Half of those jobs were available to people who had graduated with nothing higher than an associate's degree. Those jobs offered an average annual salary of \$53,000, 10-percent higher than jobs with similar educational requirements.



Yet, less than one out of every four Virginia graduates in 2011 earned a postsecondary credential in a STEM-H field. That figure lags behind the national average – a figure that needs to grow too if America is to meet the projected workplace needs of the year 2020.

There are, of course, other challenges we face in ensuring there is a college graduate in every Virginia home by 2025. That includes making it easier for military veterans to earn college credit for prior learning experiences and deeply examining the meaning of the phrase student success.

I am convinced, however, that we can set and meet the ambitious goal of having a college graduate in every Virginia home by the year 2025. We must. The workplace demands of the near future require this priority focus from us.

Virginia created its 23 community colleges to do what no one else would, to address the commonwealth's unmet needs in higher education and workforce training. We have been at it for nearly fifty years now and the urgency of our mission has never been clearer.