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Remarks at the VCCS New Horizons Conference (2015)

These remarks were delivered at the Hotel Roanoke & Conference Center in Roanoke, VA on April 2, 2015.

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen: Save the best for last. That's what they always say. Well, I'm going break that rule tonight. I'm going to start with the best.

Welcoming the T-Man

In this case, it means beginning by introducing a good friend – a good friend to most of us in the room. In fact, if you don't consider him a good friend, well, that just means you haven't met him yet. I consider this man, in many ways, the dean of the VCCS faculty. He's the executive director of the Virginia Master Teacher Seminar; a retired community college professor; an active community college advocate; and a community college graduate. Would you join me, please, in giving a warm welcome to Dr. Terry Whisnant?

Terry, we're delighted to have you back with us at the New Horizons conference. I have one question for you, however. For those who may not know it, Terry's background includes service in the U.S. Army, where he was part of a psychological warfare unit. So, Terry, I wonder: Do we really love you as much as you just saw, or did you just get us to think that we love that much? No, wait, don't answer that.

Complete 2021: three take-aways

Friends, I was asked to talk with you this evening about our next VCCS strategic plan, *Complete 2021*. While nothing about it is easy, the plan itself is quite simple. We are making a pledge to triple the number of credentials that our 23 colleges award by the year 2021.

Many of you attended a session earlier today about the plan presented by Blue Ridge President John Downey and Tidewater President Edna Baehre-Kolovani. They chaired the committee that created the new plan, and did a great job of it. Unlike them, I won't go in to detail about all the numbers behind it and the machinations they endured to create it.

For those who missed it, however, there are three big take-aways: One, this goal was created to address what Virginia needs. Over the next decade, we need to fill 1.5 million jobs across the commonwealth. Two-thirds of those jobs require postsecondary credentials, but not necessarily bachelor's degrees. Tomorrow's Virginia desperately needs the associate degrees and the workforce certifications and credentials that your college produces, and they need a lot more of them.

Two, while I expect our colleges to accomplish this goal, I can assure you that business-as-usual won't get us there. Mark Twain once wrote, "If you always do what you've always done, you'll always get what you always got." The students we serve are different today. The challenges they face in the pursuit of a middle class lifestyle are different today. And the expectations of what community colleges can and should be are different today too. We heard Dr. Jill Biden say it yesterday. I deeply believe it too: this is our time.

And three, this pursuit will likely change the very essence of what it means to be a Virginia community college. While it will poke and prod the habits and myths that hold us back, I think it

will liberate each of us to embrace the hopes and dreams that first drew us to this work – the chance to wake up every morning and change someone’s life.

Community college instructors

That’s what I really wanted to discuss with you tonight. Look around you. Tonight, we gather with hundreds of colleagues from across Virginia, and beyond – friends, who may live and work hundreds of miles of away from you but share a powerful bond. We are community college instructors.

Like we heard from Jill Biden yesterday, we deeply understand what it means not just to share information but to impart knowledge. We know that telling look when a student awakens, when that connection is made between ideas, when that confidence gets a jolt of “I can do it,” and when those dreams begin to feel not just tangible but reachable. We are community college instructors.

That means we are on the front lines of a massive effort, waged one person at a time, to enact our mission of giving everyone the opportunity to learn and develop the right skills so lives and communities are strengthened. Said another way, we want to help our graduates achieve the good life. We can’t do it without you, and we can’t do it if we don’t support you.

Moving beyond a culture of access

As we transition from the pursuit of our *Achieve 2015* goals to the single goal of *Complete 2021*, we are doing a lot more than just moving from one plan to another. While this has been underway for some time now, I would suggest to you that we are transitioning from our 20th century roots to our 21st century needs. We are moving beyond our foundations, established just after a global war, into a future defined by global competition. We are evolving from a Culture of Access to a Culture of Completion.

That Culture of Access has defined our first 50 years. But if we are going to live up to our mission; if we are going to address Virginia’s unmet needs in higher education and workforce training then it, alone, cannot define our next 50 years. You’ve probably heard me say it a million times: a high school diploma is no longer the finish line. The truth today, my friends, is that college admission is no longer the finish line.

Ellis Island & those left behind

If you’ve ever been to my office in Richmond, you’ve probably seen a framed image that I keep on the wall there of Ellis Island. That’s an important symbol, I believe, for who we are and what we do. For 62 years, Ellis Island was the gateway to our nation. More than 12 million people came through its doors. Every one of those people represented a unique journey into the American Dream.

The people I wonder about sometimes, though, are the people who reached Ellis Island but failed to complete their journey. Tens of thousands – at least a quarter million of them – were turned away for a myriad of reasons.

It’s hard to imagine, isn’t it, what it means to be driven by that idea of a better life, to spend what little money you may have for a chance at it, to suffer the adversity necessary to get it only to come away empty-handed. That’s tragic. That’s soul-crushing. That’s something you don’t wish on anyone. And I wonder: As much as we embrace the idyllic side of the Ellis Island story, does that darker side apply to us too?

We know today that two out of three jobs available in Virginia – and the nation, for that matter – will require more than a high school diploma in just three years, according to a leading labor economist. State leaders tell us that Virginia will have to fill 1.5 million jobs over the next decade. Two-thirds of them will require a postsecondary credential, most will require less than a bachelor's degree.

Information like that can fill you with hope or dread. Either way, it can inspire people to pursue their future at our community colleges. And we know today that for every five students who come through our doors, only one of them will walk out of them with a credential in hand.

Higher education is too expensive to pursue, and to provide for that matter, and our credentials are increasingly too important to an individual's prospects for us to be satisfied with those results. We can do better. And we must.

A culture of completion

As community college leaders, we are comfortable with the Culture of Access. Unlike our counterparts in the universities, we take pride in the number of people we let in, not the number of people we keep out. But in our zeal to convince more and more people about the “why” and the “what” of higher education, we’ve not done enough to help them with the “how.” That’s what moving to a Culture of Completion is all about.

One of our presidents spent his winter break combing back through five years’ worth of his college’s catalog. You know what he found? He was shocked by it. With the exception of two of his programs, it was literally impossible to graduate from his college on-time in two years. The offerings didn’t allow it.



Another college closely examined what happened to an individual between the moment they thought about attending until the moment they actually did and identified more than 100 individual steps to make that happen. Similar work at Northern Virginia Community College uncovered similar results. They talk about students being “NOVA-whelmed” when they try to come to the college. That’s what moving to a Culture of Completion is all about.

Look, academic rigor will knock some students out, and that’s as it should be. In the hospital, I want to know that my nurse understands enough math to give me the proper amount of medicine. At home, I want only the electrician who knows how to avoid burning down my house. But bureaucratic red tape, the hassles of navigating our campuses and our processes should never stand in the way of student success. That’s what moving to a Culture of Completion is all about.

Earlier this year, we wrapped up the VCCS Reengineering Taskforce. For five years, the people from across our colleges who worked on that panel asked tough questions about why we do many of the things we do. I like to say that, thanks to their work, reengineering is part of our DNA now. That ability to take a critical look at what works and what doesn't is growing throughout our colleges.

We're going to need that, up and down the organizational depth chart. We're going to need that from every person who works for our colleges. We're going to need to elevate and prioritize our problem-solving instincts. With our shared passion and experience, that will lead us to become the community colleges that we know that we can be – and to become the community colleges that the people we serve need us to be.

Every student who walks through our doors is on a unique journey to his or her American Dream. Together, let's work to see that more of those tales end with caps and gowns, and careers and paychecks – the things they need for a chance at the good life. That's what moving to a Culture of Completion is all about.

And ladies and gentlemen, that's what our new strategic plan, *Complete 2021* is all about. Thank you.