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Remarks at the VCCS New Horizons Conference (2016)

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Remarks at the VCCS New Horizons Conference (2016)

These remarks were delivered at the Hotel Roanoke & Conference Center in Roanoke, VA on April 13, 2016.

Ladies and gentlemen: good evening. “If there is a universal enemy, if there is a main root to the excesses and to the inertia which get in our way, if there is a handmaiden to poverty and failure, it is ignorance. Let us marshal all our resources against it.”

That declaration, made a half-century ago, became a battle cry. The stakes were nothing less than Virginia’s future. That battle cry ignited imaginations across our commonwealth, setting ablaze a revolution whose bright embers, today, continue to light our way and lead us forward. Education sparked that revolution. Industry’s need for it; individuals’ hunger for it; and the undeniable promise of it all led to the creation of the Virginia Community College System.

The quote I read to you a moment ago, the battle cry, came from the 1966 inaugural address of Governor Mills Godwin. As a newly-elected governor, Godwin courageously put everything on the line to create our colleges. Through a statewide referendum, he convinced a smaller, more rural commonwealth to pay new taxes they didn’t want for educational opportunities they never had. Godwin convinced people that the idea of our community colleges – what he called “A bold new concept” was worth the chance, and he was right.

Virginia families thought so. One by one, as our 23 community colleges opened over the next six years a consistent pattern emerged. The demand exceeded the availability of classes every time, and everybody noticed.

“Whatever else our community colleges may accomplish,” Godwin said at the 1967 dedication of John Tyler Community Colleges. “They have taught us that we can never again think of a college education as something that belongs to the privileged or the few.”

Since our doors first opened, Virginia’s Community Colleges have served more than 2.6 million individuals. That’s nearly the entire population of Jamaica. Over the same time, we have put more than half-a-million degrees and credentials into Virginia’s economy.

Today, we serve people between the ages of 16 and 94. When it comes to public institutions we are the leading provider of higher education to African Americans; Hispanics and Latinos; first generation students; and new Virginians. While other institutions define themselves by who they keep out, we define ourselves on how many more people we can serve.

“No computer, no scientific study, will ever be able to measure in full the benefits accruing to Virginia and to coming generations from our community college system,” Godwin said in 1969 while dedicating a library at Northern Virginia Community College.

We are celebrating our 50th anniversary throughout this year with a focus on the progress we’ve made to date and the promise of what’s to come.

And that's the big question, right? What is to come for the colleges that we love and the people that we serve? Like Winston Churchill once famously said we are at neither the beginning nor the end, though perhaps we are at the end of the beginning. Let me offer you just two data points that whisper to us about the road ahead.

The first is a national statistic. Since the end of the Great Recession, 97-percent of all the good jobs – and by that I mean fulltime with healthcare and retirement benefits – have gone to college graduates. We've said for years that a high school diploma is no longer a finish line. Each passing day makes that truth more stunning.

The second one is a Virginia statistic. Over the next decade Virginia will have to fill 1.4 million jobs. As many as two thirds of them will require more than a high school diploma but less than a bachelor's degree. They will demand the associate degrees and industry-recognized credentials that

our students earn. In other words: As our community colleges go, or more specifically, as the students we serve go, so goes Virginia.



The mission of Virginia's Community Colleges over the next 50 years is clear. We must see to it that there is a college graduate in every Virginia household. We must strive to see the day when the phrase "first generation student" is a rarity, if not obsolete. We have now at our disposal two tremendous tools to help us pursue that ideal.

The first is a six-year statewide strategic plan, *Complete 2021*, which is defined by a single goal: for us to collectively triple the number of credentials we put into the Virginia economy in six years. We are in the first year of that plan, building the culture, the mindset, and processes that will help us enroll more students and help more of them earn a degree or credential before they leave us.

The second is an historic achievement realized this year with the help and leadership of the McAuliffe Administration and the Virginia General Assembly, and the support of business leaders from across the state.

Beginning this year, for the first time ever, Virginia will invest public resources in our short-term workforce training programs that lead to industry-recognized credentials. This historic investment is a game-changer for so many of our students. Many of these credentials can lead people into high-demand jobs, paying family-sustaining wages, in a matter of weeks or months. The credentials are

stackable. And at least one out of every three people who earn one go on to later earn a traditional degree.

Inside our colleges, this means we are nearing the end of the divisions that have held us back and confused our students. The days of “credit” versus “non-credit” and “academic” versus “workforce” are drawing to a close. The paths to success we offer will increasingly be presented on an equal footing. From welder to engineer, from electrician to cyber-security analyst, from medical technician to nurse, we are better poised to help the people who count on us find their next success.

The passport to the American Dream, has taken many forms over the years. Many of our grandparents made due with an eighth grade education. For many of our parents it was often some combination of a high school diploma and a union card, with perhaps a little time in a trade school. The results are in for what it will take for our children and that’s a postsecondary credential. Mills Godwin knew it. That’s why he was willing to stake his political life on it. He had the foresight to predict it 50 years ago.

“In every walk of Virginia life,” Godwin said. “There will be thousands of men and women of every creed and color who will look back with grateful thanks to the new horizon opened for them in the classroom and laboratories of our community colleges.”

Ladies and gentlemen, there’s never been a better time to be a part of Virginia’s Community Colleges. Our mission has never offered more importance, urgency, and clarity than it does today. Our best days lie ahead of us, and it lifts my heart to know that we are moving forward toward them together. Thank you.