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## Remarks at the VCCS Hire Ed Conference (2016)

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## Remarks at the VCCS Hire Ed Conference (2016)

*These remarks were delivered at the Homestead Resort in Hot Springs, VA on December 7, 2016.*

Ladies and gentlemen: good afternoon. It's a pleasure to be with you once again at the HIRE ED conference – back at what some might say is the event's true home, The Homestead Resort.

As we bring 2016, our 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, to a close, I can't help but reflect on just how far community college workforce development services have come.

As we consider the emotions and fears expressed in the voting booth; the growing number of Virginia children raised in poverty; and Virginia's slide out of the top five in the rankings of best states for business<sup>1</sup>: I can't help but reflect on how far we have to go.

Let's me start with that look back. Workforce development has always been at the foundation of the community college mission.



Here in Virginia, the creation of the VCCS was due in large part to the business community. Virginia's business leaders, circa 1960, complained about the lack of trained and skilled workers, capable of keeping up with rapidly-evolving technology. (Who says history never repeats itself?) Virginia at the time had vocational institutions, and I suppose even some private training providers. They were insufficient, however, to meet the needs of an agrarian commonwealth that was coming quickly into its own industrial age. Manufacturing, welding, truck driving, plumbing, secretarial services – these were just a few of the initial offerings we had.

Through them, we helped people earn the skills they needed to join Virginia's middle class. And those offerings shaped the image of what our colleges were, even to those who had never stepped foot on campus.

At nearly the turn of the century, Virginia decided that its community colleges would lead the state's postsecondary workforce training efforts. Years later, the VCCS absorbed some of Virginia's other workforce-related offices. Even then, the growing importance of workforce training was evident even among those who understood it only as a collection of buzzwords.

Lightning struck in 2016! This year, the General Assembly and the Governor agreed to provide General Fund support for our short-term training programs. The Workforce Credentials Grants

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<sup>1</sup> Forbes ranks Virginia #6 11/16/16 and CNBC ranks Virginia #13.

program represent the first such funding in our history. And while 19 other states were already funding similar programs, our unique plan is the first pay-for-performance plan in the nation. Taxpayer dollars are spent only after a student completes a program and earns a credential. And these grants couldn't have come at a better time.

Let me talk about last month's election for a moment. I know, it's not easy. Emotions run hot on this one. And I'll let the political analysts, like Dr. Bob Holsworth, who will be joining us later in the conference, explain what it all means. But I think there's a message in its results that applies to our work.

People are worried. They are scared. They remember a time when a strong back and a decent work ethic was all you needed to provide for your family, and they wonder why that's no longer true. They're anxious, like they are standing at a darkened station platform, watching the last train fade into the distance, and knowing another may never come. Coal mines have been closing. The rise of natural gas has more to do with that than government regulation. But a promise to re-open the mines was an Election Day winner.

Manufacturing is on the rise in America, if you measure it in dollars. While companies are returning their operations to America, technology means they don't need as many employees. But a promise to restore those factory jobs was an Election Day winner. The studies and the statistics are staggering, and they all indicate that we are living in a new reality.

Good jobs are available. Jobs that offer full-time hours; healthcare and retirement benefits; and the salary that is necessary to support a family are available today – but not for just anyone. You must hold a postsecondary credential to get one of those jobs. With few exceptions, it's been that way since the Great Recession ended.

Traditional college degrees – including our associate's degrees – are terrific. But they can feel out of reach to families that live paycheck-to-paycheck, or have little or no college experience. We call the associate's degree a two-year degree, but it's really not.

We looked back at those who earned our associate's degrees in 2016. Of those who began with us as full-time students, it took them nearly four years to finish. Our part-time students took more than seven-and-a-half years to finish. The vast majority of our students, as you likely know, attend part-time.

For someone who is the first in the family to attend college, like me; for someone who's never spent more than six months at any particular minimum wage job; for someone who's intimidated to commit to a two-year contract for their smartphone; how viable is that associate's degree?

Our short-term credential training programs are different. We measure most of them in weeks and months, not semesters and years. 12 weeks? Three months? Six months? Those timeframes make more sense to many of our students. They're more tangible and realistic. They're a stackable first step into higher education. We don't just think that. We know that from experience.

(A quick aside here: When an individual successfully applies for unemployment here in Virginia, the benefits max out at 26 weeks. If someone who just lost her job, and came looking at your college's

website, do we make it easy on them to learn what they could accomplish in those 26 weeks? And if not, why not?)

The General Assembly set aside \$4 million dollars for our first year of workforce credential grants. The clock began July 1 and runs to the end of June. As we stand here today, more than \$3.5 million of that \$4 million has already been spent. Remember, this is a pay-for-performance plan. When that money goes out the door that means people are completing their training programs and they are securing their credentials.

The shorter time frame is only one of the incentives for people to consider. The close connection these credentials have to high-demand fields is compelling. It's easy to understand that earning this credential leads to that job.

Let me share just one example with you of a college that is really setting the example in this work. Southside Virginia Community College created a power line worker training program this past year. In just a matter of months it went from being an interesting idea tossed around over box lunches to an actual program. And it would have never happened without Virginia's electric co-ops stepping forward to help.

The results have been amazing. The program's first two cohorts graduated a total of 30 students, each earning a handful of credentials necessary to work on power lines. Of those 30, 29 have already earned full-time jobs as power line workers. The third cohort will finish later this month. We expect the industry to hire them away similarly.

These kind of success stories are emblematic of what inspired voters' decisions last month. These are the kind of opportunities that they need and demand. Politics can be strange, tough, and messy. Occasionally, promises – like more jobs and career opportunities – fail to meet expectations. But for half a century now, Virginia's Community Colleges have been a constant for the communities they serve.

We face our own challenges, like drops in student enrollment or the promise of yet another round of budget cuts. Despite that, we have been there for people, often in their most desperate hour. And we will continue to be.

And now that we have these Workforce Credentials Grants, this new and incredible tool, we will be there for people in even more, greater and exciting ways. To the business leaders in the room, we seek your continued help to ensure that we understand your needs and prepare would-be employees to meet them.

To the elected leaders in the room, we seek your continued partnership to ensure that we are the solution you need us to be to connect the individuals you represent, who are ready to skill-up, with the businesses that are ready to hire. And to the community college presidents and workforce leaders in the room, we're off to a good start on one of the most exciting developments I've seen in my career.

Let's really use this conference to share and learn the practices and epiphanies that will make our programs the life-changing opportunities we know they can be. Virginians are counting on us.

Thank you, and let's have a great conference.