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Remarks at the VCCS Hire Ed Conference (2017)

These remarks were delivered at the Homestead Resort in Hot Springs, VA on December 8, 2017.

Ladies and gentlemen: good afternoon. It's a pleasure to welcome you back to the northern campus of Dabney S. Lancaster Community College – the Homestead Campus, John Rainone calls it.

A few month ago, a woman stopped one of our chief workforce officers as he shopped in a grocery store. She recognized him from an orientation session at his college.

“Look at this,” she said as she handed her smartphone over to him. The man studied the screen for a moment before looking back up at the lady.

“Ma’am,” he said. “I don’t know what I’m looking at here.”

“That’s my son’s pay stub,” she said. “He’s earned more than \$104,000 dollars this year – thanks to you.” That’s a big number. The man was intrigued.

“See, I’ve worried about my son for my entire life,” she said. “He hated school – hated every class he ever took from kindergarten on up. I used to cry myself to sleep three nights a week, worried about what he would do for a living. Then, we found out about your power line worker training program.

“He’s made more money than he knows what to do with since graduating from your program.”

If there is a single moment that makes clear why all of us get out of bed in the morning and come to work at Virginia’s Community Colleges; if there is a single moment that explains what our FastForward training programs are all about; if there is a single moment that demonstrates what can happen when we bring together business and industry, elected leaders, and the community to build solutions; it might just be the moment that Keith Harkins, from Southside Virginia Community College, had with that lady in a grocery store aisle, as his six-pack was getting warm and his ice cream was melting.

My friends, we gather at a critical moment when it comes to workforce training in Virginia. You’ve heard my story – perhaps too many times – about the first time I attended the Hire Ed conference. Suffice to say that it was a small, intimate event. It catered to a select group of community college professionals who were operating in niche areas, working on boutique initiatives.

“If only we have some resources,” was a common refrain.

“If only people understood what we can do,” was another.

Those days are over. Workforce training is no longer the proverbial man-behind-the-curtain; it’s now center stage. Your departments have gone from that tiny corner of the building – that no one knows about – to becoming the place everyone’s talking about. Your programs have become a

reason for people to reach out to the college. They've become a reason for businesses to reach out to the college. They've become a bigger and bigger reason for elected leaders to reach out to the college. And folks, we're just getting warmed up.

While this has been brewing for some time, we reached a pivotal moment a little more than two years ago. The General Assembly gave us a mission. They asked us to study the needs across Virginia for workforce training. And that's a funny phrase, isn't it? "Workforce training" is one of those catchall descriptors. I mean everyone from Pre-K to medical schools talks about how their work improves "workforce training."

But the General Assembly wanted to know what's needed among Virginia businesses. Some industry leaders said they had jobs they couldn't fill. Others were concerned about the percentage of our population who dropped-off the unemployment rolls out of frustration, simply giving up on their job search.

Yet, others in the economic development community were sounding their own alarm. Having a skilled workforce to offer, or a way to create one quickly, was becoming increasingly important in the process that businesses used to decide to expand or relocate. Some say it's becoming THE factor. We understood those concerns. We embraced the legislative challenge, and we tackled it together.

With your connections, with your perseverance, with your help, we conducted 22 town hall meetings across Virginia. We engaged with more than 1,500 business and community leaders. We learned a lot. From those town hall meetings we first learned about, and then became teachers of the 1-2-7 problem. You don't need me to explain that in this room. Many of you still have those 1-2-7 tattoos on your upper arms. (I'm looking at you, Ted Raspiller.)

However, we learned about those "sevens." We learned about how crucial they were to the operations of practically every business; how hard they could be to find; and how there seemed to be no consistent, reliable approach to helping people get those skills. We heard it in Northern Virginia. We heard it in Abingdon. We heard on the Eastern Shore. We heard it in Winchester. And we heard it again, and again, and again. In response, we produced a report to the General Assembly that said the challenges Virginia faces in workforce development fall into four categories: the skills gap; the interest gap; the affordability gap; and the competitiveness gap.

The skills gap is easy to understand. Virginia businesses cannot find enough qualified candidates in their community to fill the vacancies they have today in good-paying, middle class careers. The number of man-hours, wages, and tax collections lost to this was staggering. The interest gap is big part of the reason for the skills gap. Typically, people don't know what it is that they don't know. In a society that has long embraced a bachelor's-or-bust mindset, these career opportunities were often invisible.

Many of those who might know about those opportunities couldn't afford to pursue them because of the affordability gap. While we have financial aid for practically every undergraduate and graduate program of study, we don't have it for these programs. People who wanted to pursue training were asked to write a big check up-front. Too often that was beyond their means. And the competitiveness gap has to do with losing ground to the other 19 American states that already funded this level of training. (Our friend, Stephen Morey, the president and CEO of the Virginia

Economic Development Partnership, will offer some thoughts on this, here at this conference, on Friday morning.)

My friends, we got it right. Sometimes, life offers us the chance to experience a rare achievement, like hitting a hole-in-one, like bowling a perfect 300 game, or celebrating a friend's 100th birthday. You know, experiences that are not impossible but yet so infrequent that they are worthy of celebration. I would add to that list the achievement of getting the Virginia General Assembly to agree to create and fund a new program. Leaders there take a critical eye to anything that can become an on-going funding commitment. That level of scrutiny makes sense, right? As taxpayers, we're grateful for it.

But in 2016, through overwhelming bipartisan majorities in both chambers, the General Assembly created the New Economy Workforce Credentials Grant program. What we call WCGs was one of only two new programs the legislature created that year. *Go Virginia!* was the other. WCGs are an unprecedented investment in workforce training. And it's a unique pay-for-performance program that ensure taxpayer dollars are spent on results. That literally means that taxpayers are investing directly in high-demand credentials.

The grants aimed directly at the skills gap and the affordability gap. Never did we believe that the \$12.5 million investment would entirely fill those gaps. But it would let us begin – and that was the most important thing.

Let me take just a brief moment to talk about some of the work we've done to address the interest gap. Smart marketing efforts always begin with research. We don't always have the resources and time needed to do that. But this was important, and we had to get it right.

What we found was that there is one group in particular who is ripe for the opportunities these training programs present: and that was Virginians between the ages of 25 and 39, who lacked a postsecondary credential. Many of these folks had pursued college at some point, maybe with us, maybe at a university. So, they had accumulated some college debt. Paying that back, of course, is no easy task without the degree or credential to get a good-paying job.



You may know these people. They may be in your family or among your friends. You probably encounter them on a regular basis. They check you out at Target. They make your drink at

Starbucks. They serve your table at nice restaurant. These people are hungry for an opportunity. Having failed college once, they feel locked-out. They feel like they're on the outside looking in. Social media doesn't help by connecting them to the people they went to high school with who went on to graduate college and find success. We have to talk about these opportunities in a way that makes sense to them, intrigues them, and inspires them to act.

I assure you: something called the New Virginia Economy Workforce Credentials Grant program ain't going to do it. So we have branded our eligible training programs as FastForward training programs. The tagline is, "Credentials for a Career that Matters." Not only is the FastForward moniker more descriptive for and appealing to our students, but it also opens the door to co-branding throughout our colleges. Saying, "FastForward at Germanna Community College," actually makes sense.

We have a terrific website we built to advance this brand. It's written in plain language and simply explains where these training programs can lead you. It's FastForwardVA.org. It's most exciting feature is that it is a lead-generator, connecting interested people directly with FastForward Career Coaches now working at every community college. All we need is your name, your zip code, and an email address, and you will be connected directly with someone who can help you explore your options and enroll. And we have a paid marketing program that's loaded up and ready to go. We ran into a tiny snag, however, as we were about to launch it.

It's no surprise that our FastForward training programs are a success. We expected to hit a home run. But we didn't expect to hit the cover off the ball. And boy, did we ever. In the program's first year, which was fiscal year 2016, the state had allocated \$5 million dollars for workforce credential grants. That money almost lasted the entire year. We came up a bit short but worked it out. Every student who sought a grant was able to get one.

This year's been a different story. Planning for the program to ramp up, the state allocated \$7.5 million for this fiscal year's grants. The current fiscal year goes through the end of June. Well, folks, we are victims of our own success here. Those grants sold out one week ago, on December first.

We have some amazing stories to share, however. Since the program began July 1, 2016, nearly 7,000 Virginians have used workforce credentials grants. The average age of a grant recipient is 36. The median income of those students – in other words, their annual salary before the training program was \$20,000. Some of them were as low as \$8,000.

Rural Virginia is embracing FastForward in a big way. While rural Virginia accounts for about 25-percent of the state's population, they account for more than 40-percent of those who've earned FastForward credentials. One out of every five of these students received public assistance the year before they enrolled in a FastForward training program. Two out of every three of these students are new to our community colleges. It's fair to believe that we would not otherwise be serving them in a traditional degree program.

And I promise you that no one is more excited to see the job placement and wage data than we are. But we don't have it yet. Those are lagging information sets that simply take time to develop. We hear anecdotes here and there. For instance, that power line training program I mentioned at the beginning of my remarks just graduated their 100th line worker last month. The program has a job placement rate of more than 90-percent. And we're seeing indications that the starting wages of the

careers people are using these credentials to enter represent a 50-percent increase, or more, in their annual salary. We'll be sharing more information as we obtain it. I believe its going to help us tell an even better story moving forward.

So, what do we do now? What do we do about that grant funding? In the short-term, we are asking Governor McAuliffe to include an additional \$2 million dollars in what's called the caboose budget. You don't hear much about the caboose budget. It's not a particularly controversial measure. It just allows the administration and the General Assembly to do what's necessary to balance out the current budget, which ends in June.

Moving forward, we're asking the Governor to increase the grant funding in the new two-year budget that he will propose to the legislature in just 12 days. We're asking him to include up to \$15 million per year for each of the two years. Given the tens of thousands of skilled jobs that have yet to be filled, and the response we are getting from students across the state, I have no doubt that every region of Virginia would benefit from that level of funding.

Now, no matter what the budget news holds for us, we have a lot of work to do in the legislature. Not only do we have a new governor and lieutenant governor next year, we have a House of Delegates that is almost evenly divided, and could well end up that way. There are a lot of new lawmakers to education about what we do, and these grants in particular. Come January, when the House of Delegates gavel into session 47 members – nearly half of the House – will have four years of government experience, or less.

One of the most effective ways we can advocate for the grants that make FastForward programs accessible is to engage the business leaders in your community. We need to connect them with your delegates and senators and let them explain the benefits to their company to be able to find and hire these skilled, trained, credentialed employees.

I often remind people that elected leaders don't aspire to fund government programs. Instead, they seek to solve community challenges. When someone who earns their paycheck from the community college promotes this program, that can be helpful. When a business leader can explain what it's meant to their company that will make a difference.

In closing, let me just thank you for all that you do. The FastForward program is transformative internally. It's giving us a new way to think about, describe, and articulate the benefits of what we do under the banner of "workforce development." And externally, FastForward is positioning us to help individuals find opportunity they probably wouldn't find in a traditional college program. And FastForward is helping us partner with businesses in ways, and at a scale, that just wasn't possible before.

A report published last week predicts that up to 800 million jobs that exist across the world today will be replaced by automation in just 13 years. That includes up to one-third of the jobs in the US. If Virginia is to hold onto and improve that recently announced ranking of America's fifth best state for business, opportunities like FastForward will be essential. You can't ask people who may be parents, who may pay a mortgage – or both! – to update their skills and refresh what they offer without affordable, accessible, and convenient ways to do it. They will need FastForward.

I don't think we began this work one day too early. I'm convinced, beyond any doubt, that years from now we are all going to stand witness to a more successful, more prosperous Virginia and we will see just exactly how FastForward helped make that possible.

Thank you. Enjoy the conference.