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Remarks at the Botetourt Chamber of Commerce 49th Annual Dinner

These remarks were delivered at Virginia Mountain Vineyards in Fincastle, VA on May 15, 2018.

Thank you and good evening. Before I begin, I would like to thank just a few of the many, many friends I know here in the room this evening.

Delegate Terry Austin has been a good friend for some time now. He was indispensable when it came to the Shared Services Center deal, and he's been a reliable partner in the General Assembly for the community college agenda. Ken McFadyen, the director of the county's economic development department and a member of the VEDA Board was essential in that deal as well. Ken, thank you for your good work. Gary Larrowe, the county administrator, has been a wonderful partner in our work as well. Thank you, Gary, for all of your help.

And let me thank the Roanoke Valley Economic Development Partnership. Your ability to come together as region is encouraging – and I can say this as an outsider – it makes working with you more attractive and easier to do.

I would also like to thank two people – who are here tonight – that you know well: Dr. Bobby Sandel is the president of Virginia Western Community College. Dr. John Rainone is the president of Dabney S. Lancaster Community College. They share the privilege of serving Botetourt County. I think you're in good hands there. Bobby and John are two of our best.

And, finally, let me thank the Botetourt Chamber of Commerce for the kind invitation to speak this evening. I'm happy, really, for any excuse to get out of Richmond – and this is a good one.

Impressive Botetourt

After all, it's not every day that you are invited to speak to the economic development capital of Virginia. I tip my hat to all of you in this room. While there are plenty of places that are talking a good game when it comes to economic development, Botetourt is out there scoring deal after deal – and earning headlines and praise across the commonwealth.

Ballast Point Brewing and Spirits... ELDOR Corporation... Altec Industries... Arkay Packaging Corporation... When it comes to relocations and expansions, those are just a few of your recent hits. You're bringing new companies in, and expanding the ones who are already here.



The short story is that what's happening here is impressive. I say that as someone who is proud to live in rural Virginia, and glad to see that success is not limited to Virginia's urban crescent. I say that as a life-long educator, eager to be a partner in educating and training your workforce. And, I say that as a customer, proud to affirm years after the fact, that locating our VCCS Shared Services Center right here in Botetourt was absolutely the right decision.

Workforce development

So, what can our community colleges do, what can we offer, to help you advance? Community colleges are unique in that respect. We take the word "community" seriously. Our colleges were created more than 50 years ago to do what no one else would – to address Virginia's unmet needs in higher education and workforce training.

For the most part, we got that access to higher education part right. Nearly every Virginian lives within 30 miles of a community college campus. But I would like to talk for a moment about that workforce training side of our mission.

1:2:7 challenge

A few years back, we became aware of a business challenge that we describe as the 1-2-7 problem. If you are a business owner, or a hiring manager, you know exactly what I'm talking about. Here's how it works for every job that requires an advanced degree – think doctor, lawyer, engineer – you need two bachelor's degrees to support that job – think administration, HR, public relations – and you need seven front-line technicians to get the work done – think certified nursing assistant, welder, electrician.

Well, businesses have no problem finding the ones and the twos. In fact, they can recruit them from practically anywhere in country, and often the world. But the sevens are a different matter entirely. They have to be there already for a business to succeed. And if they're not there, there has to be a way to create them quickly.

FastForward

Understanding that challenge – and helping policy-makers understand that challenge – is what led to our FastForward program. The tagline is "Credentials for a Career that Matter." That captures it perfectly. FastForward – and the Workforce Credential Grants that make the training so affordable to students – is the nation's first pay-for-performance workforce training program.

We're nearly two years into FastForward, and we're proud of the results. In fact, those state grants I mentioned have sold out each of those first two years. We're hoping to see more money for those grants when the state budget is finalized. To date, nearly 9,000 Virginians have enrolled in those short-term training programs, leading to jobs in an estimated 40 different career fields.

Nine out of every ten people who enroll complete their course of study. So far, those graduates have earned nearly 6,000 credentials. And the real story is what happens after people finish those programs. They are moving into jobs that increase their take-home pay anywhere from 25-percent to 50-percent. What's not to like about that?

We're also finding two important factors in the numbers that bode well for Virginia. The average age of those enrolling in our FastForward programs is 36. And unlike much of traditional higher education, where female students typically outnumber males, men are the majority of our

FastForward program. I say that bodes well for Virginia because it's an important step in expanding higher education offerings to meet the true needs of Virginia communities.

ALICE

We are serving fewer younger people in Virginia today in higher education. That's true in our community colleges and it's true throughout the universities. You see, as we ride Virginia's demographic waves there are simply fewer younger people to serve. In fact, our nation's fertility rate has declined 12 percent since the year 2007, and that will have consequences.

Beginning in 2026, we will see a decline in the traditional college-age student that is more dramatic than we've ever seen in our lifetime. And while we will continue to need new bachelor's degrees in Virginia's economy, they alone won't meet the needs of our workplace. The 1-2-7 challenge demands greater diversity in both skills and knowledge.

All of this to say that our future depends on a lot more than just 18-year-olds and bachelor's degrees. We have to help more adults earn postsecondary credentials. We must prepare more of them for career opportunities that didn't exist when they were the age of traditional college students, but could help them support a family today.

You know whom I'm talking about. We have an untapped pool of talent that lies beneath every community. It includes people who began but never finished college. It includes people who are working two – or more – jobs trying to make ends meet. It includes parents. And it includes many single parents. They have a car payment or two, and they pay rent or a mortgage. Some of these folks are included in Virginia's poverty rate. But many are not.

I recently learned a new way to describe such folks. It comes from a big report published by the United Way. They refer to these folks with the acronym, ALICE. It means Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed. ALICE. Despite working, many of these folks are having a hard time affording the basic cost of living. Statewide, the number of households who qualify as ALICE is two out of five. In parts of Southwest Virginia, it may be as high as three out of five. These folks feel locked out. You know, they are connected by social media to people they graduated high school with, and they see the lives those former classmates lead as college graduates and they are desperate for a way in.

The truth is, however, very few will pursue a typical college degree. They see the obstacles, not the opportunities, of it and often they lack the confidence. And too many of them are unaware of programs like FastForward. The tradition of the community college mission calls on us to help these people find their way back to a shot at joining the middle class. FastForward credentials are a great first step in that direction. But it won't be our last. Doing more for these people, expanding postsecondary credentials to a growing and diverse Virginia is essential to the vision that I have for Virginia's Community Colleges.

A college graduate in every home

In 1966, a young governor convinced Virginians take a chance. Through a referendum, they accepted a tax they didn't want for a promise of something that they had never had: a comprehensive community college system. We've served more than 2.6 million people since. Mills Godwin, the governor who created us put it this way, "Whatever else our community colleges may accomplish, they have taught us that we can never again think of a college education as something that belongs to the privileged or the few."

So, where do we go from here? How do we leverage that legacy of responding to community needs, and where does that take us next? I'll tell you what it is: We strive to see a college graduate in every Virginia household. And when I say graduate, I mean with anything from a postsecondary credential to a traditional college degree.

That's an audacious-sounding goal. Yet, it's a necessary one. Labor economists say that 97 percent of America's good jobs – fulltime positions with healthcare and retirement benefits – 97 percent of those good jobs have gone to college graduates since the Great Recession ended. Across Virginia, we must fill 1.5 million jobs over the next decade. As many as two out of three of those jobs will require a postsecondary credential, but less than a bachelor's degree.

The American Dream is an amazing story. We have reached a new chapter, however, where just working hard is no longer enough. The workplace is too technical; the marketplace is too global; the odds are too daunting to seize opportunity without a college credential.

Moving forward, Virginia's Community Colleges aspire to convince our friends and neighbors in every Virginia home how earning a postsecondary credential will lead them to success. Think about what it would mean for a future Virginia governor to lead a trade delegation anywhere in the world and proudly say, "There's a college graduate living in every Virginia home." Think about what it would mean to say that there's a college graduate living in every Botetourt home. Think about what that would mean for existing businesses, planning for their future needs. Think about what it would mean for the sake of equity, for every Virginia child to grow up in families unafraid of the myths and mystique that, today, can make college feel so far away.

Let's make the phrase, "First Generation Student" obsolete in Virginia. America has a proud legacy of innovation and rising to a challenge. This is our higher education moon shot. President Kennedy challenged us to send a man to the moon and safely return him to the Earth. America accomplished it less than eight years. They were starting from scratch on that one, and they figured it out along the way. We have a running start on our challenge. We've been producing college graduates for a half-century now.

Closing

So, in closing, let me say that I'm passionate about this work because I'm a community college product. Though my family had been in this country for six generations, I'm the first to attend and graduate from college. I had no aspirations, no direction when I finished high school. All I cared about was getting a few dollars in my pocket from a job washing dishes.

I can't imagine where I would be today if a community college didn't take a chance on me. I don't know what I would be doing right now if I hadn't found my classes interesting and my professors engaging. Moreover, while I could have ultimately pursued a number of different careers, I don't believe any of them would as been as satisfying as the one I choose, focused on preserving and expanding opportunities for those who come behind me, just like the chance I got.

Thank you for all that you do, and for the chance to be with you this evening. Good night.