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## Remarks at the VCCS Hire Ed Conference (2018)

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## Remarks at the VCCS Hire Education Conference (2018)

*These remarks were delivered at the Omni Homestead Resort in Hot Springs, VA on December 5, 2018.*

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We are in the midst of an historic enrollment decline. After reaching a high-water mark in 2012, we have lost enrollment for seven straight years. We look into those numbers, time and again, seeking ways to reverse them.

We found something surprising – or at least, its scope is surprising. Most of our enrollment decline comes from one group, “non-traditional” students; some describe them as, “working adults.” I’ll make it simple: its people age 25 and older. We served some 18,000 fewer students, between the ages of 18-24, last year than we did in 2012. During that same period, we lost more than 46,000 students, age 25 and older. That means for every traditional-age student we lost, two or three adult students left with them.

Instinctively, when facing these kind of trends we like to point to the economy. When it’s stronger, community college enrollment is typically weaker. At less than three-percent unemployment today, Virginia’s economy is historically strong. However, what we’re seeing is more than that.

Everything about adult students is changing. Who they are; the struggles they face; the jobs available to them are all in flux. We need to change to help them meet those needs. We need to take a hard look at what we do, and how we do it, to win back those students.

For several reasons I’ll mention, the future of our colleges – and it may not be overly dramatic to say that the future of Virginia – depends on our ability to get those adult students back. The good news is that we can. And, the people in this room are leading the way.

### **FastForward**

Three years ago, at this very conference, we introduced a plan to establish the first-ever state funding for our short-term workforce training programs. We promised to chip-away at that big disconnect between Virginians who struggle to find a job to support their family, and the employers who struggle to find qualified, skilled candidates for the job openings they had.

What we now call FastForward is our fastest-growing program, and it’s filling critical needs in Virginia’s workforce. FastForward makes our short-term training programs more affordable. Moreover, they are designed for the schedules of working adults, taking only weeks or months to complete, not semesters and years. In just two years, our colleges put over 12,000 high-demand credentials into the Virginia economy through FastForward. That tremendous number beat our expectations.

FastForward is recovering some of those adults we’re losing. Students in our training programs are older, typically in their mid-30s to mid 40’s. The careers they begin after earning a credential are boosting their take-home pay anywhere from 25-percent to 50-percent. That’s a big deal, especially considering that one in five of our FastForward students received some form of public assistance the year before. FastForward is the fastest way out of poverty.

### Seeking more FastForward funding

It's worth noting that we exhausted the available grants in each of the program's first two years. Despite an increase in years three and four, we expect to exhaust them too. FastForward has a lot of room to grow. The commonwealth is investing just under \$10 million a year in it. I suspect we



would still run out of funds if that number doubled. After all, 98-percent of the FastForward credentials earned have been in Virginia's top 12 career fields, as defined by demand. Who wouldn't want to invest in that?

The good news is that I am encouraged by the conversations that we are having with lawmakers and policymakers. Our pay-for-performance results are encouraging our

supporters and turning around our skeptics. The creativity, innovation, and enthusiasm many of you in this room have put into FastForward is making it a vital pivot for our colleges.

### Demographics

Before you know it, we will soon all experience what I believe will be the biggest disruption to higher education seen in our lifetimes – and that's America's shrinking birthrate. Our birth rate is at an all-time low, declining 12 percent since the year 2007. The realities of that take time to appear on campus, though it's coming. Beginning in 2026, we will see an unprecedented decline in the traditional college-age student. The Northeast and Mid-Atlantic will take the biggest hit.

What does that mean for all of higher education? There are more than 5,300 colleges and universities across the US today<sup>1</sup>. How many of them, do you think, will survive higher education's version of *The Hunger Games*? The Ivy League and top tier institutions will be fine, of course. However, the rest will be fighting for survival. Regional institutions will be forced to open their doors wider to fill their classes – recruiting the community college students they used to ignore. And many small, high tuition liberal arts colleges may be forced to close their doors for good.

For us, serving 18-year-olds remains an important part of what community colleges do, but it probably won't be the most important thing we do. Much like when our colleges began, our future will be about expanding the meaning of the phrase "college student" once again.

### Beyond 18-year-olds

Case in point: The State Council for Higher Education in Virginia is currently promoting its strategic plan, called The Virginia Plan. It aspires to see Virginia lead the nation for educational attainment with 70-percent of our population holding a postsecondary credential by the year 2030. The Virginia

Plan aligns with our current strategic plan, *Complete 2021*, to triple the number of credentials our students earn.

The truth is Virginia may not have enough 18-year-olds for us to realize those lofty goals – even if every single one of them earned a credential.

### **ALICE**

No, we simply must help more adults, age 25 and older, earn postsecondary credentials. These folks often lack the skills and knowledge needed for today's high-demand careers. We're talking about an untapped pool of talent that lies beneath every community – People who began but never finished college; People who work multiple jobs to make ends meet, and plenty of single parents. Some of these folks are included in Virginia's poverty statistics, but not all of them. These families, however, lead a fragile existence, and have a hard time affording the basic costs of living. One missed paycheck, one emergency expense and they are broke!

We have learned a new way to describe these households. It comes from a big report published by the United Way<sup>ii</sup>. They refer to these folks with the acronym, ALICE. It means Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed. ALICE. Statewide, the number of households who qualify as ALICE is two out of five. The numbers are even starker in some communities across Virginia.

As our enrollment numbers demonstrate, very few of these folks will enroll in a traditional college degree program. It takes too long to complete; it's too expensive to pursue; and it requires a sense of academic confidence they haven't felt in a long time, if ever.

### **A sense of scale**

So how many people are we talking about? If we limit the conversation to Virginians between the ages of 25 and 44, who today lack a postsecondary credential, we're talking about just over 1.2 million people. Now, that's more than thirteen times the 90,000 Virginians who graduate from high school each year – More than thirteen times as many.

If that weren't enough, then look ahead. Over the next decade, that high school age range of 15 to 19 will shrink. The number of adults between 25 and 44, however, will grow. We cannot ignore those population trends. FastForward is just the beginning. The responsibility is ours to create opportunities that attract these adults, not intimidate them.

### **Loyal FastForward graduates**

You might be surprised to learn: FastForward is also our leading program in terms of customer loyalty. We recently surveyed your FastForward graduates, and most of them see their experience with you as a beginning, not an end. Of the graduates we surveyed, more than half – 56 percent – have already returned to your college for additional training or will soon. In addition, another 36 percent said they were open to the idea.

Taken together, that means that nine out of every ten FastForward graduates have returned to your college for training, or could be persuaded to do so. So, my question for you is who on your campus is responsible for nurturing those relationships? Who is responsible for helping your FastForward graduates return for that next, stackable credential? And, if we don't have someone taking on that responsibility then shouldn't we?

### **G-3**

That next, stackable credential might just be in the G-3 program Governor Ralph Northam announced last week. Many of the details are still being determined, and the biggest parts of the proposal will be offered to the General Assembly not this coming year but in the year after, for the 2020 legislative session.

Make no mistake, however, G-3 is a continuation of what began with FastForward. It's a challenge to rethink what we do and what we offer, and to make it work within the lives of those we want to serve. The basics of G-3 are this: The Governor wants to create a version of a free college program that focuses state investment on students pursuing career and technical programs in high-demand fields.

The competitive grants the Governor announced last week are really setting the stage for that. The grant money will help our colleges turn specific career and technical programs upside down, offering the hands-on technical training classes first and the general education classes later in the program. The idea is to see that even those who stop out after a semester, or a year, still obtain the skills – and a credential! – necessary to secure a job.

The G-3 initiative is about bringing lessons learned from FastForward into these CTE degree programs. In fact, FastForward will be the first rung on this G-3 ladder for many students.

### **Partners needed**

Bold initiatives like FastForward and G-3 are promising steps. They won't be enough, however, to address all the needs of the students we serve today, nor the needs of the adults we seek to serve. I've worked in community college education for 38 years now. It never ceases to amaze me how things continue to change.

The people we serve today are struggling with the basics of life in ways that I never had to, and I didn't grow up in a wealthy family. The traditions of the college experience we know – lectures, readings, projects, and homework – are tough by design. We expect to push students, to broaden their horizons, elevate their thinking, and challenge assumptions.

How much harder does all of that become when you don't know where your next meal is coming from? How much thought can you give to that semester-long group project when you can't be sure where you're living next month? These are the questions I ponder as I learn more about the food insecurity, housing insecurity, and other poverty-related woes our students face.

We do what we can to help. We raise money for student emergency funds. We stock food pantries on campus. However, good intentions and big hearts aren't enough in this case; we need partners. We need to enlist other people and organizations who share our spirit of service and our desire to make a difference. When it comes to food insecurity, who can be there on campus to help students obtain SNAP benefits? What about the options when it comes to housing insecurity? What partner can guide students through available resources for assistance? What about the need for childcare – and in some instances, senior care – that can support a student while she or he attends classes? Who can offer those services on your campus? If public transportation is insufficient, as it often is in rural areas, how can we work with the Ubers and the Lyfts of the world to make it possible to get students between home, class, and their job?

How creative can we be? How resourceful can we be? How many win-win collaborations can we build to serve our students? We need to find out. Those answers will go far in determining what we can do for both those we serve today and those we hope to serve tomorrow.

### **System office transition**

Speaking of creativity, I want to close my remarks this afternoon with a mention of some staff transition that is underway at the System Office. As you have likely heard, with the retirement of Donna Van Cleave, Craig Herndon becomes the Senior Vice Chancellor for Administrative Services. Further, Sharon Morrissey, who is currently the Vice Chancellor for Academic Services and Research, will also assume the leadership of our workforce development services to form a yet-to-be-named unit.

The reality of it, friends, is that both of these individuals are tremendous and talented leaders. Their respective strengths, and their strong working relationship, allowed me to make this transition. Let me be clear about this: this transition is not a template for our colleges. I do not consider it an example for our presidents to follow, though I believe it is the right move for the System Office, given our talent and needs.

A moment ago, I described both FastForward and G-3 as bold innovations and I believe that deeply. They will pace the many ways we are transforming our colleges to meet the needs of the community and the commonwealth. I am grateful to have both Craig and Sharon in these roles to leverage this work and this success, and to build upon it. As for the workforce side, in Sharon you are getting a leader who understands your work. It's been part of her career for a long time – from her tenure as vice president at AB Tech to her work as Executive Vice President for Programs in the North Carolina Community College System Office. The biggest difference from what you are used to with Craig, from what I can tell, is that Sharon doesn't speak nearly as fast.

Ladies and gentlemen, with that I will say thank you. I hope that you enjoy our HIRE ED conference and get a lot out of it.

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<sup>i</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2015/07/20/how-many-colleges-and-universities-do-we-really-need/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.575b7fa65624](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2015/07/20/how-many-colleges-and-universities-do-we-really-need/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.575b7fa65624)

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.unitedwayalice.org/virginia>