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Remarks at the VCCS Chancellor's Annual Planning Retreat (2019)

These remarks were delivered at the Hotel Roanoke & Conference Center in Roanoke, VA on October 16, 2019.

Ladies and gentlemen; good afternoon. I would like to begin with a shout-out to the many of you who are attending this retreat for the first time. That includes college local advisory board members who arrived yesterday for the State Board's annual meeting, and they're staying with us for the retreat. We're delighted to have you.

I would also like to welcome our new college presidents. The presidential ranks of community colleges are undergoing a generational shift. That's happening across the country, and certainly here in Virginia. Among our 23 institutions, only three of them have the same president today that they had ten years ago. The three are John Downey at Blue Ridge; Frank Friedman at Piedmont; and Bobby Sandel at Virginia Western. (For what it's worth, these veteran presidents asked me to remind you of the tradition for new presidents to buy them a drink at the bar, later tonight. They say it's a long-standing tradition.)

I look forward to seeing what our new presidents bring. Many come from other states, offering fresh perspectives and different ideas. As a group, this new generation of college president is more focused on issues of equity and social justice; and creative workforce development solutions and partnerships – and we certainly need all of that.

For those who know me, I'm a history junkie. I'm almost always in the middle of a book, and it's almost always related to history. I've been reading a book our faculty council chair, Charlie Errico, gave me called *Profiles in Leadership*. It's a collection of essays by leading historians who are trying to articulate – as the subtitle suggests – the “Elusive quality of greatness” in leaders. Many of the essays focus on US presidents, who are relatively easy to study, given the copious amounts of information that exist about each of them.

The book's editor, Walter Isaacson, wrote something that really struck me. He wrote, “Our most influential presidents were not necessarily our smartest ones, but rather the wisest at the tricky art of balancing pragmatism and principle.” That balance really is the trick, isn't it? When do we compromise? When do we stand firm? When do we try something new? When do we double-down on something we know is right? I mention that because, really, those questions – what Isaacson called the tricky art of balance – is the leadership test facing us all today.

What if? That's the theme we selected to frame this event's conversations. So, let me offer a few What Ifs to get us started. And just to keep us balanced, how about a few hard ones and then a few encouraging ones? Let's start with the tough ones.

Number one: What if our historic enrollment slide continues another five years?

In simple terms, our colleges, collectively served 60,000 fewer students last year than we did in 2011-2012¹. We have declined each of those years. This is the longest slide in our history. 60,000 is a lot of people. In fact, that's how many students UVa and VCU serves last year, combined. If our enrollment slide continues on its current pace for five more years, we will lose another 57,000 students, and we will feel that across our system.

Since 2012, almost every one of our institutions, including the System Office, have gone through layoffs – some more than once. We’ve shed good jobs and lost good people. Two years ago, when our colleges operations were studied by the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission (JLARC). They pointed out that we had no policy in place for examining college efficiency and sustainability. They made a fair point: everything in our policy manual was about how and when to open a new college. We had never considered the possibility of closing one.

In response, our State Board established criteria for annually reviewing our colleges. The policy establishes four thresholds to examine. Failing them all triggers a detailed assessment – a study to consider the best way forward to make the college sustainable. Options include: a chance to refocus and turn around; or a merger with another institution; or a closure.

That’s a tough but necessary process, and Eastern Shore just went through it. Jim Schaffer – one of our newest presidents – was hired in part to implement a three-year plan to turn Eastern Shore around and return it to viability. He’ll be the first to admit, he and his team have their work cut out for them. But Eastern Shore won’t be alone if our enrollment doesn’t rebound. There are a handful of colleges – as many as five or six – that could be facing that process too.

That brings us to number two: What if we’re not as creative or flexible as we think we are?

I’ve been in this business for 40 years now. We’ve always described ourselves as responsive, flexible, and creative. What if, fifty-some years later, that’s no longer true? What if we’re not actually offering the programs people need when and how they need them? What if there is nothing magical about the 16-week semester? And what if there is no longer such thing as a typical college student?

Let me offer you an interesting side note on that last one. Our statewide foundation runs a fellows program for fulltime second year students, and it’s a big deal. These high-achievers get their tuition, fees, and books covered. They get leadership training. They travel and meet a lot of interesting people.

Academically speaking, these students are our best. You know who they are; you nominated them. You brag about them at the Kiwanis Club luncheon. You put them in your college ads. You pick them to meet with lawmakers. Yet, they’re not typical.

Of this year’s 43 scholars:

- Two in five are first generation students;
- Almost a third are personally responsible for caring for children or grand-children;
- Four out of five work full-time or part-time jobs;
- More than half are older than 24;
- One in five is a military veteran; and
- One in five was born outside the U-S.

You tell me, what’s typical there? What if many of those 60,000 students we’re missing walked away because they didn’t think we understand them, or their realities? Community colleges were lean and hungry in our early days – ready to try just about anything within reason to attract and serve people. What if we find that spirit again? That leads me to our next what if?

Number three: What if the question of equity becomes our focus, not just an aspiration?

Study after study confirms that students who both work and come from low-income families are less likely to earn a credential overall, even if they are terrific students. Georgetown University affirmed that with another report this summer, which they summarized this way, “In short, in America, it’s better to be born rich than smart.” This is terrible news for those of us who believe in the American Dream, and the role our colleges have in it.

Poverty ends too many college dreams. We need to change that. Paula Pando, the president of Reynolds, is leading our task force on this. The Power of Possible, or P-Squared as they call it, is what exactly our students face. Their biggest challenges come from outside the classroom. National studies say two in five community college students endure food insecurity. Slightly more face housing insecurity. How focused can you be if you haven’t eaten, don’t know where your next meal is coming from, and can’t find a friend’s couch to sleep on tonight?

Yet, the credential they pursue with us is the best chance they have to disrupt the very cycles that keep them in motion but rob them of progress. SCHEV just ran some numbers that demonstrate the challenge here. Nearly 17,000 college-going students used SNAP benefits a few years ago. Three out of four of them are our students. These challenges defy stereotype. They weigh down urban, suburban, and rural students of every racial demographic. And when they force a student to quit; when they deny that person the credential they need, they dampen what our colleges offer.

What if we can support the entire person in their credential pursuit? We can’t do it alone. We need partners – other agencies, other organizations, other community members, and volunteers – to come on our campuses and help us serve these individuals. This is a passion for Paula and those working with her. They’re going to offer us powerful recommendations. So, let’s help them at this retreat by having this important conversation here too.

So, that brings us to what if number four: What if we really embrace the part of our mission that says we give everyone an opportunity?

The Virginia State Chamber of Commerce has a strategic plan called *Blueprint Virginia 2025*. It’s the result of their work with more than 6,000 business leaders across the commonwealth. Do you know what their number one concern is? It’s developing talent. The answer would have been tax policy or transportation infrastructure 25 years ago. Today, it’s talent. It’s the top concern, the Chamber says, because “Companies need people with the right skills to help them grow, thrive, and prosper.”

Make no mistake: their talent challenge and our enrollment challenge are intertwined. And Virginia demographic trends are working against both of us. One, Virginia’s birthrate remains below the national average and it is declining just as fast. You’ll see that in a big way on campus beginning in 2026. And two, Virginia is losing the migration battle with other states. During the first decade of this century, Virginia annually gained between 10,000 and 20,000 people from other states. That trend turned 180 degree in 2012 and we’ve been losing that many people to other states every year since.

Now is the time to shift our focus beyond that traditional college age of 18-24. When we prioritize serving adults, we step into a new dynamic. So how many people are we talking about? If we limit the conversation to Virginians between the ages of 25 and 44, who have not earned a postsecondary credential, we’re talking about roughly 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 at the trending. 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 can't ignore that reality.

And that brings me to my last What If? Many of you have heard me talk about this before, but I need to say it again. It's only becoming more important.

Number five: What if there was a postsecondary credential in every Virginia home within ten years?

I'm avoiding the phrase "college graduate" because I think that's confusing. People hear "college graduate" and they think "bachelor's degree." What I really mean is every postsecondary credential earned because they all count – every CDL, every AWS, every CMA, and every traditional college degree. 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 more than a high school diploma, but less than a bachelor's degree. They require the credentials and degrees our colleges offer.



Success requires more today than just being a hard worker. The workplace is too technical; the marketplace is too global; and the odds are too daunting to seize opportunity with just a high school diploma. Some communities, here in the Commonwealth, are getting a head start on this.

Take a guess: what's Virginia's most educated region? Raise your hand if you think it's Northern Virginia? Well, you just fell into the bachelor's-or-bust trap. In terms of bachelor's degrees, you're right? Northern Virginia leads the way. However, when you consider all postsecondary credentials, on a per capita basis, Southside Virginia is Virginia's true winner.

Our FastForward program is responsible for many of those credentials. Through the game-changer that is FastForward, we have helped people earn nearly 18,000 credentials in high-demand fields in just over three years. Rural Virginia is over-represented in that number. While Virginia's Rural Horseshoe accounts for 25% of the commonwealth's population, it accounts for 40% of the credentials earned through FastForward. And why not? Those credential-earners are getting a bigger boost for their efforts. Their take-home pay grows more than it does for those who earn those credentials in an urban location. We can begin focusing on this immediately.

What if short-term credential training was the beginning for more of our students, especially at-risk students? You know, we have a lot of people who struggle and drop-out of your degree programs. What if they're just starting at the wrong place? What if they earned a credential first, gaining something of value in the job market and some academic confidence? And then, what if we convince them to continue to the degree as their next step? FastForward has proven itself as affordable and accessible, especially for adults. Most importantly, FastForward has shown what happens when people commit themselves to a program that lasts weeks or months, not semesters and years.

We've spent the last year applying those lessons to a number of the Career and Technical programs you offer that lead to high-demand career fields. That was an important part of establishing the ground-work for the G-3 plan Governor Ralph Northam will propose to next year's General Assembly. We've had many conversations with the administration about their plan but we don't expect to have further details until after Election Day. What I can share with you is that G-3 will be an effort to reduce the costs of those high-demand CTE pathways, and to break those programs into stackable credentials that will help individuals who pursue them in an on-again, off-again fashion.

FastForward and G-3 are important innovations toward making what we offer simply more available to the people who have the most to gain. It seems to me that we are no longer in the community college business, but rather the business of helping our students earn jobs and careers.

Mills Godwin, the governor who created the VCCS said that among the many things community colleges 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." He's right. If we can dedicate ourselves to seeing a postsecondary credential in every home we will not simply make Virginia more economically competitive; we will not just give every family access to the type of careers that can sustain them; we might just solve much, much larger equity question. What if, my friends, what if we can do that?

In closing, I want to bring us back to another reference I made at the beginning of my remarks, and that's "the tricky art of balancing pragmatism and principle," the focus of that book I mentioned, *Profiles in Leadership*. There's an early chapter on George Washington, focused really on his time as a general. Its author, Thomas Fleming, makes an interesting point, and that is if we evaluated Washington like we do today's professional athletes, we'd consider him a failure.

In seven years of fighting the British, Fleming wrote, Washington won only three clear-cut victories. One was a raid; another was just a large skirmish; and the third was simply a siege. I mean, how long would a football coach today last in the NFL or a bigtime college program if he won only three games? It wouldn't be seven years, that's for sure.

Washington faced such a long list of challenges, they almost sound comical. He could never get enough money from Congress. He could never get enough regular army soldiers, and he had a hard time attracting and keeping rag-tag militia members. He had no real navy of which to speak. And the popularity of the independence effort waxed and waned throughout those seven years.

Washington's true genius it seems was managing those challenges, and the battlefield defeats, in a way that prevented them from overwhelming the whole. He remained focused on the ultimate goal. He mastered that tricky balance.

It's easy to be consumed by our challenges. Enrollment declines, layoffs, strained resources, campus safety threats – the list goes on. However, there is enough daylight in our What ifs; there is enough promise in our people; and there is more than enough potential in our mission to make that tricky balance work, and to give Virginia the higher education and workforce training it needs to be better tomorrow than it is today.

You know, when I mention the promise in our people that begins with the people in this room today. I have something Washington didn't.

There's a famous moment where Washington watched a bunch of militia members flee from battle without firing shot, without making any effort and he cried out, "Are these the men with which I am to defend America?" I look across this room today and think, "Wow! These the people with which I get to advance our mission?"

Eat your heart out, George. Thank you.

ⁱ http://research.schev.edu/enrollment/E5_Report.asp