

4-1-2024

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### Recommended Citation

Colangelo, M. R., Graham, M., & Sicka, B. (2024). Get Skilled, Get a Job, Give Us More: An Early Review of G3. *Inquiry: The Journal of the Virginia Community Colleges*, 27 (1). Retrieved from <https://commons.vccs.edu/inquiry/vol27/iss1/4>

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# Get Skilled, Get a Job, Give Us More: An Early Review of G3

Melissa Colangelo, Melanie Graham, and Bhavika Sicka

## ABSTRACT

If community colleges are to remain relevant, they must be future-oriented, and responsive to demographic and labor force shifts. The Get Skilled, Get a Job, Give Back initiative (G3) was implemented during the 2021-22 academic year to retain economically disadvantaged students, improve community college completion, and help students graduate into productive jobs with the ultimate goal of boosting Virginia's economy. G3 is an attempt to make postsecondary education and workforce development systems in Virginia more capable and successful in preparing Virginians for available jobs. The aim of this policy review is to examine the current details of the policy and explore its surrounding contextual influences, while also acknowledging limitations of the policy and program.

It is imperative to continue thoughtful deliberation and planning regarding strategic and evolving practices that meet current and future needs of Virginia's community college students, as well as Virginia's workforce and businesses. Changes must be made to address G3's funding to ensure that this program can continue to help economically disadvantaged students and ultimately boost the Commonwealth's economy. Changes must also be made to extend the benefits of G3 to more students and should be made available to a wider range of high-demand fields. In the coming years, more clarity on G3 will emerge and the Commonwealth will be better positioned to make data-informed decisions on the longevity of the program.

## Introduction

On March 29th, 2021, former Virginia Governor, the Honorable Ralph Northam, signed Senate bill No. 1405 to create and fund the *Get Skilled, Get a Job, Give Back* initiative (G3). G3 is an innovative initiative with intentional strategies to retain economically disadvantaged students, improve community college completion, and help students graduate into productive jobs with the goal of boosting Virginia's economy (Office of Governor Ralph Northam, 2019). G3 does so by making community college available at a lower cost to Virginia students in low-and middle-income households who pursue jobs in fields that have been identified as being in high-demand (Get Skilled, Get a Job, Give Back Fund and Program, 2021). These include certifications and associates degrees for early childhood education, healthcare, manufacturing, public safety, skilled trades, and technology (Office of Governor Ralph Northam, 2021).

The aim of this policy review is to examine the current details of the G3 policy and explore its surrounding contextual influences, while also highlighting limitations of the policy and program. G3 programs typically have eligibility criteria that may exclude certain individuals. Moreover, G3 programs have a limited program scope, which means that students who are interested in pursuing careers in other fields may not benefit from the program. To ensure G3's vision remains in place, the Commonwealth should consider allocating funding for G3 from the state budget for the next ten years, providing ample time for case studies and research. Stakeholders should continue deliberation and planning regarding strategic and evolving practices that meet current and future needs of Virginia's workforce and businesses. Finally, G3

should expand and diversify to cover Virginians regardless of their intended career field or their immigration and citizenship status.

## Literature Review

### **Evolving Mission of Community Colleges**

In the 1900s, community colleges operated as low-cost, open-access institutions by providing educational opportunities to community members (Eddy & Garza Mitchell, 2017). Community colleges are equity-focused institutions that serve large populations of racial and ethnic minority groups (Garza Mitchell & Garcia, 2020). They provide students with access to convenient, affordable, and extensive programs to meet the needs of their communities (Grubbs, 2020). Community colleges are also incredibly responsive to societal and economic change and have strong ties to local industry and government, which allows them to adapt in order to promote regional development (Amey et al., 2008). Historically, community colleges have assumed a significant role in enabling student success by paving pathways through career exploration and just-in-time training (Walker et al., 2022).

Community colleges are uniquely poised to build workforce competence and increase the number of citizens who earn a certificate or degree (Eddy & Garza Mitchell, 2017). To meet increasing demands, community colleges are expanding and diversifying their mission beyond solely providing vocational training, transfer education, and community enhancement (Eddy, 2010). Now, colleges are experiencing a shifting institutional mission, pushing them to balance their social justice roles with economic development and evolving corporate priorities (Harbour, 2014). This being said, because the subject of college costs are at the forefront of national concern and proposals to make public higher education free are gathering steam, community colleges are offering a range of initiatives in line with this tuition-free college movement (Davidson et al., 2020; Monaghan & Goldrick-Rab, 2016).

### **Free College & Initiatives**

A once seemingly radical proposal by President Obama in January 2015 (Morris, 2015), the concept of free community college has been an integral component of President Biden's higher education agenda since his 2020 presidential campaign (Mott, 2022). Despite routinely dying in Congress or being stripped from bills entirely, free college is still in the conversation at the national level. Approaches to college affordability are steeped in equity and stability, as the primary objective of these bills is to reset how citizens pay for community college education (Mott, 2022). Commonalities in bill provisions front-load federal-state partnerships and include funding, expand access to grant programs, and prioritize free community college (Mott, 2022). While no federal-state partnership program has passed, states have started developing free college initiatives on their own. Apart from *G3*, Promise programs, FastForward, and Virginia Ready are a few other initiatives and programs that aim to promote access to education and workforce development

opportunities in the US, and while these programs have distinct goals and characteristics, they share a common focus on enhancing education, skills development, and employability.

Promise programs have loosely existed since the 1950s but gained popularity following Michigan's Kalamazoo Promise in the early 2000s (Rios-Aguilar & Lyke, 2020). An integral component of the campaign for free college, Promise programs are location-bound scholarships that either eliminate or reduce tuition and sometimes fees (Gàndara & Li, 2020). Promise programs vary in financial support, applicability, eligibility, and are funded by an array of actors, including states (Monaghan, 2023). Despite their differences, Promise programs make financial awards broadly available and reduce economic barriers to postsecondary education for community college goers. Currently, 41 out of 50 states have active Promise programs including Beacon of Hope in Lynchburg, Virginia (Billings, 2018). While *G3* has never publicly been referred to as a Promise program, there are parallel elements.

With similar goals and objectives to Promise programs, the Commonwealth of Virginia is currently amplifying postsecondary campaigns. The State Council of Higher Education for Virginia's (SCHEV) strategic plan, *Pathways to Opportunity: The Virginia Plan for Higher Education* (State Council of Higher Education for Virginia, 2021a), outlines goals to promote equitable, affordable, and transformative postsecondary education. For the Commonwealth to become the "best state in the nation for higher education," the percentage of adults with a postsecondary credential must increase from 57% to 70% by 2030 (State Council of Higher Education for Virginia, 2021a). For 70% of Virginians to earn a credential by 2030, various pathways to credentials have been developed, beyond the traditional two-year or four-year degree programs, to prioritize lower costs for students (State Council of Higher Education for Virginia, 2021a).

The Commonwealth of Virginia has created multiple postsecondary campaigns to propel Virginia and its citizens forward toward credential achievement and attainment. Another postsecondary campaign example is FastForward, a short-term workforce training program at Virginia community colleges with the aim to jumpstart high-demand careers in over 40 industries (Virginia's Community Colleges, 2022). Most FastForward programs require a commitment between six and twelve weeks and advertise affordability, flexibility, and proven success with upwards of 32,000 certificates and credentials earned (Virginia's Community Colleges, 2022). FastForward has helped individuals earn nearly 18,000 credentials in high-demand fields in just over three years, particularly in rural Virginia (DuBois, 2022). A partner of FastForward, the Virginia Ready Initiative is another example of an accelerated training program available through the Virginia Community College System (VCCS). Advertised toward individuals who are prepared to learn a new skill and seek out a new career, the Virginia Ready Initiative provides incentives to train for in-demand jobs in high-growth sectors (Virginia Ready Initiative, 2023).

## Commonwealth Context

### Virginia's Community College Students

Virginia's community colleges serve students at 23 colleges across 40 locations. Community college students presently make up 46% of Virginia's undergraduates from public institutions and 36% of Virginia's undergraduates from all higher education institutions (State Council of Higher Education for Virginia, 2022a). During the 2021-22 academic year, 86,615 students were enrolled full-time in Virginia's community colleges (Virginia Community College System, 2022b). Students may choose to attend community college for financial reasons (Fike & Fike, 2008). During the 2022-23 academic year, the average annual tuition at a public four-year institution in Virginia was \$13,554 compared to \$4606 at Virginia's community colleges (State Council of Higher Education for Virginia, 2022c). In 2021, 78,206 community college students in Virginia received \$380.7 million worth of financial aid (Virginia Community College System, 2021a). Furthermore, the need for financial aid for these students appears to be growing. The number of Virginia community college students receiving financial aid has increased 11.8% over the past ten years, even though enrollment rates have decreased (Virginia Community College System, 2021a).

During the 2021-22 academic year, VCCS awarded 32,898 degrees and certificates, 17,497 of which were associate degrees (State Council of Higher Education for Virginia, 2023b; Virginia Community College System, 2022a). However, only 26.5% of Virginia's community college students ever graduate with an associate degree (State Council of Higher Education for Virginia, 2022b). Community college students' financial needs are a predictor of graduation rates, and students who have greater financial needs are less likely to graduate than their peers (Fike & Fike, 2008). Community college students often report financial difficulties as being their main reason for dropping out of school (Zhai & Monzon, 2001).

### Virginia's Skills Gap

A skills gap occurs when individuals in the workforce do not possess the skills required to perform jobs (Hine, 2013). The presence of a skills gap implies that employers' demand for a particular skill exceeds the amount of workers who have that skill (Weaver & Osterman, 2017). When local workers are not trained on the development of an in-demand skill, employers must either recruit workers with the required skill to the area or move their operations to an area with a labor force that possesses the required skills (Weaver & Osterman, 2017). A misalignment of worker skills with the demands of companies could result in lost opportunities for millions of workers (Bartlett, 2018).

VCCS highlighted the need to recenter workforce development for sustaining a vibrant middle class, lamenting the existence of a skills gap and gaps in interest, affordability, and competitiveness for middle class careers in the Commonwealth (DuBois, 2015). The most pressing higher education issue facing the Commonwealth's community colleges is positioning Virginia's workforce to meet the requirements for

current in-demand jobs (DuBois, 2015). The Commonwealth's skills gap has been attributed to retiring baby boomers as well as poor perception of vocational careers among young workers (Berg et al., 2018). Federal and state governments have failed to dedicate sufficient resources to advancing vocational programs, while 4-year colleges and universities have received significant resources and attention (Berg et al., 2018). Virginia's skills gap must be addressed by the Commonwealth to remain competitive in the national and global market.

### **G3 Policy Overview**

*G3* was implemented to connect students in VCCS to in-demand career pathways (Get Skilled, Get a Job, Give Back Fund and Program, 2021). *G3* offers financial assistance to Virginia's low- and middle-income community college students who pursue jobs in fields in high-demand, which include healthcare, technology, early childhood education, manufacturing, skilled trades, and public safety (Get Skilled, Get a Job, Give Back Fund and Program, 2021; Office of Governor Ralph Northam, 2021). This legislation was initially supported by \$36 million from the state budget to assist eligible Virginia community college students with tuition and fees (Office of Governor Ralph Northam, 2021). The 2021-22 academic year was the first year of enrollment for *G3*. During the inaugural academic year, Virginia *G3* reported 11,084 students received funding from *G3* across all VCCS campuses (2022). Since *G3* is a last-dollar program, the average student first received 51% of their funding from federal financial aid and 12% from state financial aid; then received 36% of funding from the *G3* program itself (Virginia *G3*, 2022).

Although individual and familial benefits are high priorities, the greater potential good is hard to ignore as policymakers conceptualized *G3* to create a world-class workforce, aid businesses of all sizes, and substantially contribute to the Commonwealth economy (Office of Governor Ralph Northam, 2019). According to a *G3* recipient pursuing a degree in healthcare at Laurel Ridge Community College, "I'm not worried about a tuition bill, I'm not worried about books. I'm able to focus on my classes, focus on taking care of my kids, working with a dream of becoming a paramedic" (*G3-Fact-Sheet*, 2022). Another *G3* recipient, pursuing an associate degree in public law at Tidewater Community College, opined that she was grateful for the industry experience and professional networking that *G3* provided her (*G3-Fact-Sheet*, 2022). *G3* offers institutional flexibility to deliver specific programs based on the needs of individual communities. Students enrolled in maritime programs at Tidewater Community College (TCC), for example, may be eligible for *G3*, while those programs are not available to VCCS students in western Virginia (Virginia *G3*, 2023). This is due to the proximity of TCC's four campuses to several integral waterways, including the Atlantic Ocean, the Chesapeake Bay, and the Intracoastal Waterway (Virginia *G3*, 2023).

### **Details and Eligibility**

Students must meet certain eligibility criteria to qualify for *G3*. These criteria include qualifying for in-state tuition, having a household income of “less than or equal to 400% of the federal poverty level” (i.e., approximately \$100,000 for a family of four), and having earned a high school diploma or General Education Diploma (Office of Governor Ralph Northam, 2021). Moreover, qualified students must be enrolled in at least six credit hours at one of Virginia’s twenty-three community colleges, enrolled in a designated *G3* program either part-time or full-time, and apply for federal or state financial aid for the current term (Get Skilled, Get a Job, Give Back Fund and Program, 2021). *G3* also offers student-support incentive grants to assist students with out-of-pocket expenses such as food, housing, childcare, and transportation (Office of Governor Ralph Northam, 2021). These are non-instructional expenses that can otherwise pose a significant barrier for students with limited means (Baugus, 2020; Peterson & Freidus, 2020). Students in a *G3* program who receive a full federal Pell grant and who are enrolled full-time will receive student-support incentive grants (Office of Governor Ralph Northam, 2021). Students who are eligible for these grants receive up to \$900 for the fall and spring semesters respectively and up to \$450 for the summer semester (Office of Governor Ralph Northam, 2021).

*G3* incentivizes Virginia’s community colleges to participate in the program. Institutions participating in *G3* receive payments for each student who receives a student-support grant and completes 30 credit hours and additional payments when these students complete their programs (Office of Governor Ralph Northam, 2019). When these students earn an associates degree, an additional performance payment is allocated to their institution (Office of Governor Ralph Northam, 2021). In return, participating institutions must provide students enrolled in the program at their institution with academic and career counseling (Get Skilled, Get a Job, Give Back Fund and Program, 2021). Additionally, participating institutions must annually report data on program enrollment, retention rates, student income (both pre- and post-enrollment), and completion rates to the Governor and chairpersons of several of Virginia’s House and Senate committees (Get Skilled, Get a Job, Give Back Fund and Program, 2021).

### **Limitations of *G3***

Despite *G3*’s obvious advantages, the program has limitations that must be acknowledged. *G3* is currently unavailable to large portions of Virginia’s college student population, including undocumented students, students attending four-year institutions, and students enrolled in programs outside of healthcare, technology, early childhood education, manufacturing, skilled trades, and public safety. An additional limitation is that *G3* funds are awarded to students after public funding and grants have been distributed.

***Undocumented Students***

*G3* requires qualifying students to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). For this reason, it is not currently available to undocumented students, including Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals students. In the United States, undocumented students are excluded from public financial aid for higher education because of their immigration status (Flores, 2016). Currently, there are 12,387 undocumented college students in Virginia (Higher Ed Immigration Portal, 2023), and if these restrictions were to continue, these students would be unable to utilize the benefits of *G3*. However, undocumented students may become eligible in the future, when two financial assistance bills (i.e., SB 1387 and HB 2123), signed into law by Governor Northam on March 12, 2021, come into effect (Del Rosario, 2021). As of August 1, 2022, both bills have been indefinitely delayed. If these bills are passed, all college students in Virginia, regardless of their citizenship and immigration statuses, will be eligible for state financial aid if they are also eligible for in-state tuition (Virginia Coalition of Latino Organizations, 2021). These proposed bills build upon a previous bill that allows Virginia's students to receive in-state tuition, regardless of immigration status (Virginia Coalition of Latino Organizations, 2021).

***Students Attending Four-Year Institutions***

Extending Virginia's *G3* program to college students attending four-year institutions is a strategic move that aligns with the program's goals and has the potential to significantly benefit both the students and the state's workforce development efforts. First, it's important to note the substantial number of in-state undergraduate students enrolled in Virginia's public four-year institutions, totaling 137,385 individuals (State Council of Higher Education for Virginia, 2023a). Currently, these students are excluded from the *G3* program, which was initially designed to cater exclusively to those attending Virginia's public two-year institutions. This exclusion overlooks a significant portion of the state's student population and misses an opportunity to further enhance access to higher education and vocational training. One of the key rationales for initially implementing the *G3* program through the community college system was the vital role these institutions play in providing vocational training and degrees that directly align with high-demand industries. However, it's essential to recognize that students pursuing specific programs at public four-year institutions could also benefit immensely from *G3* funding if they were instead enrolled in a public two-year institution.

During the 2021-22 academic year, public four-year institutions in Virginia awarded 39,102 bachelor's degrees, 631 certificates, and 105 associate degrees, as well as graduate degrees and certificates (State Council of Higher Education for Virginia, 2023b). The substantial number of degrees and certificates awarded emphasizes the significant contribution four-year institutions make to Virginia's workforce development. Two of the most popular programs during the 2021-22 year were Computer and Information Sciences and Registered Nursing (State Council of Higher Education for Virginia, 2023b), both of which are key components of industries that the *G3* program was specifically created to target, namely healthcare and



information technology (Office of Governor Ralph Northam, 2021). Extending the *G3* program to students attending four-year institutions would not only widen access to affordable education and vocational training but would also help address the pressing workforce needs in critical sectors like healthcare and information technology. It would ensure that students pursuing degrees in these high-demand fields have access to the financial support they need to complete their education and enter the workforce with the skills and qualifications that are in demand by employers.

### ***Other Fields of Study***

*G3* supports only students seeking degrees or credentials in one of Virginia's high-demand careers such as technology, skilled trades, healthcare, early childhood education, and public safety (Office of Governor Ralph Northam, 2021). However, *G3*'s coverage excludes students pursuing careers in lesser-in-demand fields such as English, history, anthropology, and visual and performing arts. In 2021-22, the top three most popular programs at Virginia's two-year institutions included Liberal Arts and Sciences/Liberal Studies (20%;  $n = 3639$ ), General Studies (13%;  $n = 2284$ ), and Business Administration and Management (9%;  $n = 1623$ ; State Council of Higher Education for Virginia, 2023b). These fields, which accounted for 42% ( $n = 7546$ ) of total degrees and awards at Virginia's two-year institutions, followed by Registered Nursing/Registered Nurse at 9% ( $n = 1424$ ) and Social Sciences ( $n = 1203$ ) at 7% (State Council of Higher Education for Virginia, 2021b). General studies should be included in *G3* because it is a flexible degree program that allows students to design a varied curriculum that informs many disciplines. Moreover, degrees in the humanities and social sciences should be considered for *G3*, as careers in these majors add value to the labor market as well. Humanities and social sciences programs develop a broad range of skills, including critical thinking, communication, research, and problem-solving, generic skills that are applicable in a wide variety of contexts and provide broader re-employment opportunities (Giles and Drewes, 2001). These skills allow for flexibility and adaptability to new positions and new careers (Porter & Huber, 2019), have a greater longevity, and are complementary to continued, lifelong learning in face of labor market changes, when compared to applied programs (Giles and Drewes, 2001).

### ***First-Dollar and Last-Dollar Programs***

In a first-dollar program, funds are provided to students before any other grant or funding is awarded, whereas in a last-dollar program, students must use any available public funding before being awarded program funds (Association of Community College Trustees, 2023). First-dollar programs with income caps are more racially equitable than last-dollar programs (Carnevale et al., 2020). First-dollar programs are often simpler to understand, as they cover the full cost of tuition directly (Carnevale et al., 2020). On the other hand, last-dollar programs can be more complex, involving multiple stages of financial aid application and coordination, potentially leading to confusion and discouragement among prospective

students (Carnevale et al., 2020). In other words, first-dollar programs provide immediate and comprehensive financial support including the potential to cover associated costs of being a student, such as transportation, childcare, and textbooks, to name a few, but last-dollar programs do not have the potential to reduce associated costs (Association of Community College Trustees, 2023).

### Recommendations

In response to the ever-evolving educational landscape and the growing need for affordable and accessible opportunities, this section highlights a set of comprehensive recommendations aimed at prolonging and strengthening the *G3* program. These recommendations encompass securing additional funding and expanding accessibility to a wider range of students and career fields. The long-term sustainability of *G3* is a concern, as it requires significant financial resources. It remains to be seen whether funding will remain consistent over time and will be available to future generations of students. Changes must be made to address *G3*'s funding to ensure that this program can continue to help economically disadvantaged students and ultimately boost the Commonwealth's economy. Additional funding must be secured for *G3* to continue. Intentionally allocating state funds to *G3* for the next ten years will allow many more students to benefit from the program. Funding will also allow for expanded research, assessment, and evaluation of program goals and objectives, which could redefine and improve best practices for free community college. The distribution of *G3* funds to students needs to be addressed as well. *G3* could be changed from a last-dollar program to a first-dollar program with an income cap. This will make *G3* more equitable, allowing lower-income students to receive full *G3* funding regardless of any additional aid they might receive (Carnevale et al., 2020).

Other changes to the policy should focus on extending *G3*'s benefits to more students. Currently, *G3* is not available to undocumented students due to the eligibility requirement that students submit a FAFSA application. Thus, another consideration is to make the submission of a FAFSA application optional to allow the Commonwealth's nearly 12,500 undocumented college students to have the opportunity to benefit from *G3*, regardless of whether the financial assistance bills (i.e., SB 1387 and HB 2123) pass in Virginia (Higher Ed Immigration Portal, 2023). Additionally, *G3* was specifically designed for students attending community college in Virginia and is not available to the approximately 137,385 in-state undergraduates at Virginia's 15 public four-year institutions (State Council of Higher Education for Virginia, 2023a). The *G3* eligibility should be extended to students at public four-year institutions as well. A potential approach to integrating *G3* into four-year institutions could involve the continued funding of community college students as they transfer into four-year institutions. In this case, available funding would be linked to individual students rather than to specific programs.

Last, *G3* is only available to students studying a narrow range of high-demand fields (e.g., healthcare, early childhood education). However, professionals in other fields that require a college education, such as social workers and technical writers, also contribute financially to the Commonwealth's economy, albeit to a lesser degree (College Measures, 2012). *G3* eligibility should also be extended to students pursuing careers in all fields to allow students to develop their skills while benefiting from *G3* regardless of their major. It is paramount to consider these recommendations to ensure *G3*'s longevity and to provide access to as many students in the Commonwealth as possible.

### **Implications**

Higher education leaders and policymakers must develop strategies to expand access, improve affordability, and increase completion rates in higher education. If community colleges are to remain relevant, they must be responsive to labor force shifts and adaptive to societal expectations and technological needs (Matheny & Conrad, 2012). *G3* has the potential to bridge socio-economic gaps through college attainment and shrink workforce gaps across the Commonwealth through skill development (Office of Governor Ralph Northam, 2019). Upon its inception, it was estimated that *G3* would enable upwards of 36,000 Virginians to earn degrees (Office of Governor Ralph Northam, 2021). Throughout the 2021-22 academic year, *G3* provided last-dollar funding to approximately 11,000 students (VCCS, 2022c). *G3* boasts a 83% retention rate from one semester to the next and a 9% increase in enrollment in *G3*-eligible programs from the 2021-22 academic year to the 2022-23 academic year (*G3*-Fact-Sheet, 2022). In published personal testimonials, students acknowledge *G3* as an affordable opportunity to pursue credentials and new skills for jobs (*G3*-Fact-Sheet, 2022). *G3* was created to ensure that Virginians may not only support themselves and their families but also invest in their communities and propel the Commonwealth forward (Office of Governor Ralph Northam, 2021). *G3* is an investment in equity and economic growth and should be prioritized for years to come.

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