

PREPARED TESTIMONY FOR DR. GLENN DUBOIS, CHANCELLOR OF VIRGINIA'S COMMUNITY COLLEGES
HIGHER EDUCATION AND WORKFORCE INVESTMENT SUBCOMMITTEE
"ENGINES OF ECONOMIC MOBILITY: THE CRITICAL ROLE OF COMMUNITY COLLEGES, HISTORICALLY BLACK COLLEGES AND
UNIVERSITIES, AND MINORITY-SERVING INSTITUTIONS IN PREPARING STUDENTS FOR SUCCESS."
RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING, ROOM 2176
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10:15 AM

Chairwoman Davis, Ranking Member Smucker, Members of the Committee: Good morning.

The fact that I am sitting before you today is proof-positive that community colleges are engines of economic mobility. I am a community college graduate.

I was first in my family to attend college – a community college in New York. I was disinterested in high school, and anything but "college material." Were it not for my mother's persistence I would have never even considered community college.

Thankfully, I did. My classes were interesting. My professors were engaging. For the first time ever, I aspired for more, earned my doctorate and became a community college instructor. I eventually climbed the administrative ranks.

Today, I am the chancellor of the Virginia Community College System. We operate 23 colleges, and 40 campuses, across Virginia. In fact, we like to say that nearly every Virginian lives within a 30 minute drive of a community college campus.

I am also a founding board member of Rebuilding America's Middle Class (RAMC), a coalition of community colleges focused on advancing postsecondary access and affordability.

Why Students Choose Community College

Virginia's Community Colleges were created to do what no one else would: respond to the commonwealth's unmet needs in higher education and workforce training.

Cost and convenience are the two biggest reasons why students choose to attend a community college.

We are open-access institutions. We give everyone a chance. For those who may have struggled through high school, or even bombed-out during a brief stint at a university, we offer a second chance.

For those of limited means, demanding responsibilities and difficult personal schedules, and who may be the first in their family to pursue higher education, we offer what might be their only chance.

This is especially true for minority students who do not pursue college at the same rate as their white counterparts. And when they do, they often struggle. African-American and Latino students significantly trail Asian and white students when it comes to student success and credential completion. That remains unchanged since the 1980sⁱ.

Attracting more of these students and helping them succeed is a matter of equity and social justice, a requirement to restore the American Dream, and an obligation of the VCCS mission.

For many lower-income Virginians, the local community college represents not only the best opportunity to elevate their life, but often the only opportunity.

Roughly half of Virginians born into poverty today will remain there for life if they do not earn a postsecondary credential. Only three percent of them will reach the wealthiest income brackets. Three percentⁱⁱ.

Conversely, nine out of 10 Virginians born into poverty will reach at least the middle class after earning a college credential.

We are the institutions where the promise of the American Dream is made real.

Rural Virginia

One example where location and access can make a difference is in rural Virginia.

Rural Virginia badly trails the rest of the state in both high-school graduation rates and college attainment. The decline of tobacco production; the decimation of the furniture-making and manufacturing industries; and the long-running struggles of coal communities have drained those places of opportunity and hope. There, we have to convince families, who are often white, and who never before needed an education to get a good job, to send their children to college.

In fact, our Rural Virginia Horseshoe Initiative targets a huge region of Virginia that, were it a separate state, would rank 50th in the nation for postsecondary educational attainment.

Knowing that, and doing nothing, is turning our backs on more than two million people, ensuring their communities will fail in the 21st century. The ten-year goals of our Rural Horseshoe project include cutting in half the areas' high school dropout rate and doubling its college credential completion rate. We are pursuing that through student coaching practices and other hands-on strategies.

Virginia Community College Statistics

The Rural Virginia Horseshoe Initiative, like many of our ongoing efforts, is challenged by current student enrollment patterns.

We are in the midst of an historic enrollment decline. That's a reality for community colleges across the nation. Our enrollment typically runs counter-cyclical to the larger economy. When times are good and unemployment numbers are low, our enrollment shrinks. When the economy faces challenges and unemployment rises, so does our enrollment.

That said, in Virginia, we are posting solid numbers. We are compiling data now from the academic year that concluded a few days ago. However, I can share figures from our last academic year (2017-2018):

- We enrolled a total of **234,369** students.
- One-third of our students in traditional academic programs were age 25 or older.
- Minorities accounted for 43% of our student body. At least eight of our 23 colleges are majority minority institutions.
- **43,606** of our students were enrolled in **Dual Enrollment** programs that allow students to earn college credit while enrolled in high school classes that can be offered on either a college or high school setting.

- **52,205** of our students were enrolled in **non-credit training programs** that help them prepare to work in high-demand fields through affordable short-term programs that include FastForward training credentials.
- Another **53,466** students enrolled in traditional **Career and Technical Education (CTE)** programs – offered for academic credit – which help prepare students for career fields like nursing, airplane maintenance, and cyber security that often require workers to hold an applied associate degree.
- All told, **32,607** community college degrees, diplomas, and certificates were earned in 2017-2018. That's the second highest annual total in VCCS history.

VCCS Transfer Statistics

We also serve a number of students who begin at their community college with the aspirations of eventually transferring to complete a bachelor's degree at a university.

There is a lot of money to be saved for families pursuing that pathway. In Virginia, the tuition and fees charged to attend a community college are approximately one-third the comparable costs at a public university.

In 2017-2018, some **106,048** students transferred from a Virginia Community College to a university.

That same year, **45,131** bachelor's degrees were awarded to former VCCS students.

Many of those students used one of three-dozen guaranteed articulation agreements that we hold with public and private universities.

These statewide agreements make clear that if a student completes an associate's degree, while earning a specific grade point average (GPA), he or she will be guaranteed acceptance into the university in the next semester with the standing of a third year student.

The State Council for Higher Education in Virginia estimates that in a best case scenario – and admittedly, this rarely happens – if a student completes an associate degree in two years; transfers immediately to a university with institutional and state financial aid available uniquely to transfer students; and completes a bachelor's degree in two years; he or she would save more than \$50,000 on the cost of the bachelor's degree.

That's especially significant given that the typical bachelor's degree graduate leaves Virginia's public universities with nearly \$30,000 in student debt, on average.

We are working with SCHEV and the Aspin Institute in a three-year effort to expand our college transfer pathways to make them more user-friendly and easier to understand. The ultimate goal would be to eliminate the credit-loss that occurs too often in transfer situations, costing students additional time and money.

Community College Students Face Different Life Challenges

But let me be clear. It is rare for a community college student to complete an associate degree in two years – and much of that has to do with the life circumstances of the individuals we serve.

From the outset, we attracted a different kind of student.

In the middle of the last century, the phrase “college student” caused no confusion.

Universities, public and private, served young people directly out of high school. They went to class fulltime. They lived in dorms. They ate at the mess hall. They attended the football and basketball games. They wore letterman sweaters. They were mostly men, and they were almost entirely white. Most majored in the humanities.

But community college students were different.

Community college students lived nearby, driving to and from campus only to attend class. Some were in high school the year before; many more had already been working for a few years. Many were military veterans. They typically worked part-time, while taking classes. Their studies were often vocational, focused more on career training than contemplating the nature of humanity. And while it was subtle, the classrooms they sat in were more diverse in gender, race, and age.

Over time, the differences between the typical university student and the typical community college student have grown starker.

Simply put, our students today are older, poorer, more likely to be the first in their family to go to college – just like I was – and they are more likely to attend class part-time while working fulltime.

That working statistic is significant for us, and more importantly, for the success of our students.

A recent national study found that:

- Nearly half of working students are low income;
- Those working students are more likely to attend community college and to be more diverse;
- They are disproportionately African-American, and Latino, women, and first-generation college students; and
- Low-income working students are less likely to earn a credential overall, even if they come from the upper end of the academic performance distribution.

Let me repeat that last point: Even if the individual is a strong student, the challenges of being poor and working while studying means they probably won’t graduate.

That is, in part, why it is a mistake to refer to our institutions as two-year colleges. Three out of five of our students attend part-time. They take about nine credit hours a semester, not the 12 to 15 hours that fulltime students take. And it takes them five or six years to graduate – if they ever make it.

The students who pursue traditional academic degrees with us are older than their university counterparts are. Nearly half of our students are minorities.

Nearly half of our students demonstrate financial need. In rural Virginia, that need is greater.

Poverty is a major hurdle to college progress and completion. The vast majority of our community colleges operate on-campus food banks to serve hungry students, and that number is growing.

In a national study released last year:

- 42% of community college students indicated they struggled to get adequate food;

- 9% said they had gone at least one day during the last month without eating because they lacked the money.

I recently heard an anecdote from an instructor about a student he perceived to be slacking off in class. He asked the student to visit during his office hours, with the intention of really pushing him hard – you know, the old nose-to-the-grindstone approach.

When the meeting happened, the professor became increasingly annoyed because the student wasn't paying attention to him, instead focused intently on a granola bar that was sitting on the professor's desk.

Finally, the professor asked, well, do you just want the granola bar?

I really do, the student said. I haven't eaten anything in two days.

This is our new reality.

Housing insecurity is another issue we face. That same national study found that 46% of community college students said they had difficulty paying for housing and utilities.

Whether its food insecurity or housing insecurity, students throughout our colleges are living through the reality of those national survey findings. And I think we are serving many people who are overcoming challenges that don't fit neatly onto surveys.

Responding to Demographic Changes

Moving forward, our legacy of serving students who are different, will serve us well. Its preparation, really, for what I believe will be the biggest disruption to higher education that any of us have ever seen in our lifetimes – and that's America's shrinking birthrate.

When I was 18 years old, and just starting at my community college, there were more of us than there were seats available.

That's not true anymore. Our nation's birth rate is at an all-time low, declining 12% since the year 2007.

Beginning in 2026, we will see a decline in the traditional college-age student that is more dramatic than we've ever seen before. The Northeast and Mid-Atlantic will take the biggest hit.

What that means for our community colleges? What does that mean for the entire sector of higher education?

I contend that top tier institutions – Harvard, Yale, and closer to home, the University of Virginia – will be just fine. But regional institutions will spread themselves further. Small, liberal arts colleges will close.

Students turned away for years by regional universities, and who would instead attend community college, will begin looking much more attractive to those institutions.

All of this to say that while serving 18-year-olds remains an important part of what community colleges do, 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.

There are people throughout Virginia, older than that classic 18-24 age range, who need our help. And we need them.

We have to help more adults – people over the age of 24 – earn postsecondary credentials. There are career opportunities that exist today but didn't when these people were 18.

These are careers offering family-sustaining wages, but require skills and knowledge these folks lack.

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 to make ends meet. It includes parents; many of them are single parents. They have a car payment or two, and they pay rent or a mortgage.

Not all of these people live below Virginia's poverty line. Some are just barely above it, making them harder to see, understand, and serve.

We have 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. The numbers are even starker in some communities across the state.

These folks feel locked out of opportunity. They're desperate for a way in.

The truth is, however, very few of them 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.

So how many people are we talking about when we talk about adult students?

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 just over 1.2 million people. That figure is current.

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 would be negligent to ignore those population trends.

We have to create opportunities for these adults, 25 and up, which attract them, not intimidate them – opportunities that account for the challenges of their lives – opportunities like FastForward.

FastForward

FastForward is our fastest-growing program, and it's filling critical needs in Virginia's workforce. This pay-for-performance program makes our short-term training programs more affordable. And the

programs are more realistic for the schedules of working adults, taking only weeks or months to complete, not semesters and years.

In nearly three years, our colleges put more than 13,300 high-demand credentials into the Virginia economy through FastForward.

FastForward is attracting people who otherwise aren't coming to our community colleges. They're older, typically in their mid-30s to mid-40's.

The careers they are beginning after earning a credential is boosting their take-home pay 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 they came to us. FastForward has become the fastest way out of poverty.

For many FastForward students, these stackable credentials are a first step.

In fact, of the graduates we surveyed, more than half – 56% – have already returned to their community college for additional training or intends to do so in the near future, and another 36% are open to the idea.

Meeting Business Needs

Individuals earning these FastForward credentials are not the only winners. This program is aimed directly at the challenge confronting Virginia businesses in finding trained and skilled employees.

FastForward was created after meeting with some 1,500 business, civic, and educational leaders across the state – including the state and local chambers of commerce. Our approach prioritizes state investment in the programs that lead to high-quality, stackable credentials. Importantly, we train people for jobs that align with verified, regional business needs.

Launched in July 2016, FastForward made training more affordable, reducing student out-of-pocket tuition costs by two-thirds. It also ensured accountability by funding community colleges only after class and credential completion.

All told, 98% of the FastForward credentials earned have been in Virginia's top 12 career fields, as defined by demand.

Pell Grants for FastForward Students

In closing, I would suggest to you that the biggest difference-maker we could work together on to expand the role community college play as engines of economic mobility is to expand the usage of Pell grants for high-quality, non-credit workforce training programs. (This is the biggest priority of the RAMC group I mentioned at the beginning of my remarks.)

We're proud of Virginia's results. However, expanding the usage of Pell grants for high-quality, non-credit workforce training programs Pell grants would help us serve so many more people.

Our most expensive FastForward programs cost students \$1,500 out-of-pocket.

That modest amount is out of reach for too many people. Four out of ten households cannot cover an unexpected \$400 expense, according to the Federal Reserve Board. These are the individuals, and the

households, who often have the most to gain from FastForward training programs. Pell Grants could be a vital boost here.

This is especially true in rural Virginia, which is over-represented in the percentage of FastForward credentials earned.

Should Pell Grants be extended to these students, I would suggest you do so with a solid system of accountability that includes program completion data and income gains for program graduates – just like we’ve established in Virginia to ensure we’re meeting the program’s promise.

For the same reasons that the federal government invests in those pursuing traditional academic degrees, we should invest in those pursuing high-quality, stackable, postsecondary workforce credentials, and unleash a powerful engine of economic mobility.

Thank you.

^{i i} http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d15/tables/dt15_302.60.asp?current=yes

^{ii ii} “Economic Mobility and Postsecondary Completion: The Imperative for Virginia,” David Dodson, President, MDC. A presentation to the Virginia State Board for Community Colleges. September 15, 2016.