THE CASE FOR SUPPORT
The Rural Virginia Horseshoe Initiative
While it is abundantly clear that many parts of Virginia are seeing positive economic activity, even as we grow out of the most recent recession, this is not the case for nearly 75% of the Commonwealth's geography. The Rural Horseshoe region of Virginia begins on the Eastern Shore, stretches across Southside to Southwest Virginia and up the Shenandoah Valley. Although Virginia's Horseshoe is facing many challenges, the most debilitating may be its growing gap in educational attainment.

Nationally, Virginia ranks among the top 10 states in educational attainment, with 33% of its citizens over the age of 25 holding at least a bachelor's degree. However, if the Rural Horseshoe were its own state of nearly 2.1 million residents, it would be tied with Arkansas at 50th and ranked between Mississippi and West Virginia with only 19% of its residents holding a bachelor's degree or higher.

Conversely, if the non-Horseshoe region of Virginia were a state, it would be ranked 2nd in the nation with over 38% of its citizens having at least bachelor's degree. This is particularly troubling as Virginia is rapidly becoming two states economically. This trend will only be exacerbated since most forecasts project that by 2020, 66% of all jobs will require a career certificate or a college degree.

Despite Virginia's top 10 ranking for higher education attainment, we rank 19th from the bottom in percentage of the population with at least a high school equivalency. It should concern all Virginians that 1 in 4 people across parts of the Rural Horseshoe has less than a high school education.

VIRGINIA’S RURAL HORSESHOE

1. Blue Ridge Community College
2. Danby S. Lancaster Community College
3. Danville Community College
4. Eastern Shore Community College
5. Lord Fairfax Community College
6. Mountain Empire Community College
7. New River Community College
8. Patrick Henry Community College
9. Paul D. Camp Community College
10. Rappahannock Community College
11. Southside Virginia Community College
12. Southwest Virginia Community College
13. Virginia Highlands Community College
14. Wytheville Community College

It should concern all Virginians that 1 in 4 people across parts of the Rural Horseshoe has less than a high school education.
If Virginia’s education gap in the Rural Horseshoe is left unaddressed, we will doom vast areas of Virginia to permanent poverty and a continuing reliance on support payments from governmental entities:

- The average high school dropout in Virginia generates a fiscal lifetime surplus (taxes paid/services required) of only $17,000, while an individual with just a high school equivalency will generate a fiscal surplus of $368,000.

- On average, by the time she reaches age 65, a white female high school dropout will cost taxpayers $60,000 in Medicaid and Medicare payments alone; give the same woman a high school equivalency and the cost is reduced to only $23,000. A college graduate costs just $3,000.

- More than 22% of adults age 16-64 without a high school diploma are dependent on Medicaid for their health insurance, at an average annual cost in Virginia of $6,059 per recipient. A high school equivalency education cuts that percentage in half.

The ability of the Horseshoe region to address many of these challenges is particularly impaired when you consider:

- In Southwest, 32% of adults age 25-64 are not in the workforce; in Southside, 31% of adults are not employed.

- The 5% poverty rate for Northern Virginia is reassuring but Southwest, Southside and the Eastern Shore have rates of 19%, 17% and 12%, respectively.

- More than 30% of the households in Southwest and Southside do not have adequate income to meet their monthly expenses without some form of assistance.

- Foster care rates per 1,000 are also higher in the Horseshoe region than in more affluent parts of Virginia. Southwest Virginia’s foster care rate is 13 per 1,000 children while Northern Virginia’s rate is 2 per 1,000. This adds to the achievement burden, as foster children have a nearly 50% dropout rate, and only 3% earn a college degree.

- While 1 in 10 male high school dropouts are incarcerated during some period in their life time, the rate increases to 1 in 5 for former foster youth. By contrast, only 1 in 35 with a high school equivalency ever become incarcerated. The average cost of housing an inmate in Virginia has grown to $24,667 per year.

- 25 of the 29 localities in Virginia that lost population during the last census period are in the Horseshoe region. Additionally, 8 of the 10 unhealthiest jurisdictions in the Commonwealth are also located here.
Without an educated populace, current employers are much less likely to remain in an area and new employers are unlikely to relocate to an area, even when local or state economic incentives are provided. Likewise, home-grown entrepreneurship will also be drastically limited.

Further, an unspoken and largely unmet challenge for our rural communities is maintaining their capacity for producing and fostering local community-based leadership. The average age of residents in the Rural Horseshoe is increasing at a faster rate than the rest of the Commonwealth, which means that there are fewer and fewer young leaders to accept the mantle of local leadership.

Improving basic educational attainment must be a high, if not the highest, priority for Virginia’s Rural Horseshoe. Because of the size, scope and geographic reach of Virginia’s Rural Horseshoe, the only entity with the capability, capacity and track record to address this challenge is the Virginia Community College System. By increasing the number of rural citizens who graduate with at least a career certificate or two-year degree, we are creating a much more conducive environment for rebuilding our community capacity across the Rural Horseshoe.

When we support rural Virginia with outreach such as the Horseshoe Initiative, we directly benefit three groups:

1. Middle class families who believe that a post-secondary education is out of reach financially
2. Foster children who are at most risk of being left behind
3. Dropouts who can perform but need access to funds for advanced training beyond a GED
With today’s climbing tuition rates and declining public support, we need to find new resources to expand several initiatives that we believe can increase educational attainment levels in the Rural Horseshoe.

College Access

Career Coach and College Access Initiative
The Career Coach and College Access Initiative currently places a part-time coach in the high school setting to assist students with their post-secondary education search and share vital financial aid information. Coaches typically cover multiple high schools but, even with limited time to work individually with students, initial data shows these coaches are making a positive difference. Just three years after placing a coach in a high school, on average, we have seen an 8% increase in recent graduates enrolling in a community college; a 4% increase in graduates enrolling in career training programs; and an 11% increase in high-school students taking advantage of dual-enrollment opportunities.

The Patrick County Education Foundation funded two full-time coaches during the past 10 years and saw post-secondary participation increase dramatically. In 2002, nearly 30% of Patrick County High School seniors had no plans upon graduation. By 2011, all had plans, with over 83% of students planning to continue their education. Significantly, the number of students expressing plans to attend community college jumped from 27.8% in 2002 to over 45% in 2011.

The Horseshoe Initiative will fund full-time career coaches in high schools across rural Virginia. Each career coach will cover two high schools.

Great Expectations Program for Foster Youth
The Great Expectations Program for Foster Youth is a nationally recognized path-breaking initiative serving foster care youth who are entering community colleges across the Commonwealth. It employs coaches to help these at-risk youth overcome well-documented barriers to their higher education, including housing, transportation, medical and child care issues. The coaches advise foster youth on educational and career paths, assist in accessing sources of financial aid, and link students with mentors and other resources within the college and community. They provide a crucial source of stability typically missing from these young people’s lives and thereby improve their chances of educational and life success.

Great Expectations is clearly beginning to pay off:

- More than 1,000 students have been served across Virginia since 2008.
- Great Expectations students are graduating with an associate’s degree or a workforce training certificate at a rate of more than five times the state and national average for foster youth.
- Of the high school students served by Great Expectations, nearly seven out of ten have graduated as compared to the national average, which is less than 50%.

Additional funds are needed to sustain and expand availability of coaches, financial aid and mentoring opportunities for foster youth throughout the Rural Horseshoe.
An Incentive Program for GED and Adult Education Students

Financial aid and continuing educational incentives are desperately needed to support students as they return to or continue their educational careers. There is a clear and growing need to support students from middle-income backgrounds because they:

- are not eligible for traditional financial aid
- are often working and cannot complete programs as quickly as full-time students
- are in need of additional tutoring to ensure they are successful when they return to an academic environment
- may not have a support system outside of the community college they attend

Funds are needed to provide GED completers who immediately enroll in a local community college with a $1,000 grant that can be used for tuition, fees, and books, as well as for costs not covered by traditional financial aid. Such tangible financial incentives not only encourage GED completers to enroll in college and but also help them stay in school to complete their academic programs or workforce training.

OUR GOAL

With the establishment of a $21 million fund to match funds raised by community colleges in Virginia’s Rural Horseshoe, we’ll support some of the Commonwealth’s most rural communities and change the educational and economic landscape for all Virginia.
It is said that, even with an education, no one is guaranteed a job. However, without an education, one is most certainly guaranteed of not finding one.

The Virginia Foundation for Community College Education believes that, with the right support, we can:

Close the Gap

Statewide, 14% of Virginians are without a high school diploma or equivalent degree. In the Rural Horseshoe region, that number jumps to 21%. In 10 years, we can close that gap, aligning the educational outcomes of these rural communities with the statewide average.

Double Educational Attainment

Currently, 26% of Rural Horseshoe residents earn an associate degree or other college certification. In 10 years, we can double that number, raising post-high school educational attainment to 52%.

As part of this increased attainment, we’ll also double the number of participants in the Great Expectations program, raising our participation rate to 1,000 students per year and setting a 10-year goal of doubling the number of foster youth who graduate with an associate degree or workforce training certificate.

We are mindful that, given the multitude of issues facing rural Virginia, this effort is challenging. To meet this challenge, we must start now.

Our community colleges have the facilities and experience to remove a barrier to an improved economy in the Commonwealth’s Rural Horseshoe. We can deliver a high quality education to citizens who are not currently being served and, in doing so, we can prepare them for the jobs of the future.

If we successfully implement the Horseshoe Initiative, the entire Commonwealth will realize the return on investment.

In the Horseshoe today 21%, or over 400,000 residents, have less than a high school diploma and have median annual earnings of $15,445 less per year than someone with a community college education. When spread over an average working career of 40 years, we only need to move 68 of our fellow Virginians into this higher level of educational attainment for us to recover the $42 million dollar investment in their increased income alone.

Further, 25% of foster children who “age” out of the system are incarcerated within 2 years. In the Horseshoe, approximately 1,342 children are in foster care today and each year approximately 254 age out of the system. Given this, on average 63 will be incarcerated every year at a cost of $24,667 per person/per year. If we can prevent just 19 young people each year from entering the correctional system by expanding the Great Expectations Program, in 13 years it would save the taxpayers over $21 million and move these young people into the ranks of productive citizens.

Increasing the earning potential of citizens residing in the Rural Horseshoe will have many significant financial benefits for all Virginians. Reducing entitlement payments and increasing opportunities for those in foster care carry significant returns well beyond the small examples described above.

For nearly 50 years, Virginia's rural community colleges have been trusted by the people who live in the places they serve. The Rural Virginia Horseshoe Initiative will provide the resources these colleges need to position themselves to address a pressing and unmet need. Together, we can ensure that rural communities across the Commonwealth are better prepared to grasp the economic opportunities of the 21st century.

Sources:
The Virginia Report 2011: Council on Virginia’s Future; Issue Insight; August 2008: Council on Virginia’s Future; Demographics & Workforce: Weldon Cooper Center, UVA; Mitigating the Risk of Improper Payments in Virginia Medicaid Program: JLARC, October 11, 2011; Complete College America, Virginia 2011 Profile Honoring Emancipated Youth: Barriers Facing Foster Care Youth, Assessing Foster Care in Virginia: Virginia Performs; The Fleecing of Foster Children: First Star The Conservative Case for Reform: Texas Public Policy Foundation in cooperation with Prison Fellowship; New York Times, October 8, 2009: Study Finds: High Rate of Imprisonment Among Dropouts; Photos used were taken in areas throughout rural Virginia, including the Shenandoah Valley, Pamplin City, Richlands and the town of Bassett