

## Column: Community college investment pays dividends for region

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*VCCS State Board Chair Peggy Layne*

### **Peggy Layne, Guest Columnist**

Virginia's Community Colleges' Chancellor David Doré recently presented a new approach to increasing the workforce talent pipeline, one that has the potential to uplift the people of Hampton Roads by directly impacting our business community.

Virginia confronts a widely acknowledged skills gap, with about 249,000 unfilled jobs. This labor gap is worsened by Virginia's consistent net negative out-migration for the past nine years, alongside a looming decline in K-12 populations for years to come.

There are 3.2 million Virginians lacking postsecondary credentials. The best path for many Virginians to prepare for good jobs is accessing one of Virginia's 23 community colleges. In this region, we have four community colleges from Chesapeake to the Eastern Shore to Williamsburg, and it's easier than ever to access and attend one of these colleges.

Virginia's community colleges serve all Virginians, but an important population is adult learners looking to skill, reskill or upskill. Many of these adult learners are known as ALICE (Asset Limited Income Constrained Employed), a United Way term that signals a working class that is often one missed paycheck away from economic instability.

To fulfill their dual role as individual and workforce economic mobility engines and the answer to the talent question, Virginia's community colleges are realigning and revitalizing themselves to leverage resources to address critical regional business needs.

For students, this means pursuing industry certifications through FastForward, a pay-for-performance, short-term career training program, where they pay one-third of the cost of tuition with grant funding supporting the rest. Training courses focus on high-demand careers with a local connection. This program works. Recent data shows students completing the program saw an average increase in wages of \$11,746.

Another program, G3, puts education for high-demand occupations within reach of low/middle income students who want applied associate degrees. This tuition assistance program is a last-dollar support: After federal and state aid are applied, the funding covers the remainder of the tuition costs. The latest data shows median wages of G3 graduates increased by 95% within six months of graduation. Our community colleges seek to expand the talent pipeline in Hampton Roads for industries such as health care, skilled trades and energy. To get more workers into the pipeline, training programs must be innovated, scaled and promoted.

One example is Dominion Energy and its offshore wind farm, which is anticipated to support 1,100 direct and indirect full-time jobs across the region with \$82 million in salary and benefits. Tidewater Community College has expanded its Skilled Trades Academy with welding booths, maritime training equipment, additional HVAC and electrical training spaces in addition to supporting CDL training. Expanding these short-term training programs leads to long-term industry growth.

With 81% of graduates staying and working in Virginia, community colleges are best positioned to prepare Virginians to fill today's open jobs. However, as the most affordable higher education option in Virginia, it's also the lowest funded. For every dollar supporting a student at a public university, Virginia invests only 57 cents in a community college student.

To compete effectively with neighboring states such as North Carolina and Tennessee, which are making record investments in their community colleges, Virginia must make similar investments. A recent study by Lightcast, a national leader in labor market data for higher education institutions, confirmed dollars invested in Virginia's community colleges pay big dividends.

Lightcast noted, “Altogether, the social benefits of VCCS equal a present value of \$18.7 billion. These benefits include \$12.6 billion in added student income, \$4.7 billion in added business income, \$1.1 billion in added income from college activities, as well as \$319.7 million in social savings related to health, the justice system, and income assistance in Virginia.”

With additional funding, the region’s community colleges — Tidewater, Eastern Shore, Camp and Virginia Peninsula — can continue to build upon their successes by expanding state-of-the-art programs, increasing the supply of skilled workers, and meeting the industry needs in our region.

*Peggy Layne of Chesapeake, Virginia is chair of the Virginia Community College State Board. She previously worked for 40 years at Dominion Energy.*