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(00:00):

Good morning, everyone! How's everyone doing? So Dr. Ganther, she wanted me to fly in like Tom Cruise, but I told her that the only thing Tom Cruise and I have in common is we are both short. So it is wonderful to be here at the Hotel Roanoke, and I love coming here. And one of the reasons why I love coming here is because I always leave with really good memories. I've been here for student leadership conferences. I've been here for new, how many people have been here for New Horizons? Raise your hand. Oh. Oh good. A lot of people higher ed. How many people have been here for higher ed? Great. I've been here for a lot of occasions, but again, I always lead with good memories. The other thing about the hotel Roanoke is the food is really good here, and that is because the chefs are actually graduates of Virginia Western Culinary Program.

(01:01):

But in the last time I was in this hotel was on a Saturday evening back in June, and my partner Chauncey and I, we had made the trip. We even brought our dog Riley with us. We made the trip to Roanoke to attend this really beautiful black tie gala event here, right here. And even 10 of our presidents came and the room was filled with hundreds of leaders from throughout this region, leaders in government, philanthropy, education, and they were all here to say thank you to the retiring president of Virginia Westman Community College, Dr. Bobby Sandel. And as I reflected on that evening and on Bobby's time at the Virginia Community College system, I've really been moved by the impact that Bobby has had on this region over a quarter century of leadership. And Bobby's leadership really exemplified what is possible when you lead with heart and stay true to the mission over time.

(02:10):

And his legacy really demonstrates, I think, for all of us that our leadership is really measured in the lives that we change every day. And so this retreat is really about how do we carry that same commitment forward every day across our entire system. Now before I begin my remarks, I want to take a few minutes to acknowledge some special people that are part of this retreat. First, I want to express my appreciation to the Honorable Secretary of Education, Aimee Guidera, and to the Deputy Secretary Zach Jacobs. And they were here last night and the Secretary spoke to our board and presidents and our advisory board members at our colleges. And Secretary Guidera has really been a leading force in innovation in education across the commonwealth. And I just want to thank her for the partnerships that we have deepened under her leadership. I also want to acknowledge Nicole Overley, who is the Commissioner of Virginia Works. Nicole, are you in the room somewhere?

(03:17):

And I want to thank Nicole for being here as well and for our partnership with Virginia Works. Next, I would like to make a special acknowledgement of board member Terri Thompson, who served as our board chair last year as chancellor. I know firsthand the countless hours that Terri put into this role demonstrating a dedication and a commitment to our community college system that is both remarkable and inspiring. Terri led our board with grace, diplomacy and strategic intentionality, and she really united



the board and all of us around our fundamental mission of serving students. And she played a critical role in advancing our system forward. And Terri, I am personally grateful for your leadership and the many ways that you both challenged me last year and supported me. And most of all, I'm really grateful to you for encouraging in all of us the importance of leading from the heart with courage. And so on behalf of Virginia's Community Colleges, I want to thank you for your leadership and your incredibly dedicated service as board chair.

(04:38):

I also want to acknowledge our speaker this morning and express my gratitude to our current board chair Dr. Michael Wooten, who began his role in July. Dr. Wooten is a lifelong advocate for students and brings vast executive experience as you heard from his introduction both at the national level and throughout the state in everything from government leadership and education. Dr. Wooten, I am excited for the year ahead under your leadership and all the things that we're going to accomplish this year. So thank you, sir. I also want to acknowledge all of our state board members, but in particular, I want to thank those who are attending this year's retreat. And I want to welcome and introduce Dr. Michael Wooten's wife, Deandrea, who is with us. Deandrea, could you raise your hand please?

(05:36):

I want to acknowledge the Vice-Chair of our board, Mr. Mark Hourigan, who is with us. I want to acknowledge and thank Mr. Bruce Meyer and his wife Connie, who is also a member of the Tidewater Community College Board, who's with us. I want to acknowledge Mr. Tony Miller, who is with us. Tony, raise your hand. I want to acknowledge Ms. AJ Robinson and her husband Erik who is with us at this retreat. And finally, I want to acknowledge Mr. Michel Zajur and his wife, Lisa, who are with us. I want to thank all of our state board members for taking the time to be here at this retreat. I know your time is very valuable, so we are very grateful that you're dedicating these days to be with us. Next, I want to acknowledge we have members from all of our college local advisory boards who are with us this morning.

(06:45):

Could you all stand so we could give you a round of applause? All of our local advisory board members, I said this last night to our presidents, but most everyone in this room receives a paycheck for being here except our board members. And so I want to, particularly on behalf of the Virginia Community Colleges, express my gratitude to both our state board members and all of our college advisory board members for your incredible generosity in serving and supporting our colleges. So thank you so much. Also, we have all 23, some of them are a little newer than others, but we have all 23 of our college presidents with us and their leadership teams. Could we give them a round of applause? Did you raise your hand? Raise your hand if you're a president.

(07:55):

I also want to acknowledge the Chancellor's cabinet and the leadership of the system officer are with us. Could you raise your hands for us? Great. Thank you. And this morning we have two special groups of people who are here with us this morning that I want to particularly recognize. I am very grateful that we have numerous members, almost all I believe, of the Chancellor's Faculty Advisory Council who are with us as well as other faculty members. Our faculty are of the highest quality, and they are at the heart of



everything we do as a teaching and learning system. So could our faculty who are here, could you please stand? We can recognize you.

(08:51):

There's another special group of folks that are here and I would like to welcome and thank our classified staff who are here this morning. Actually, could you raise stand up please? Our staff, classified staff. I'm really excited – we are now in the process of forming a Chancellor's Classified Staff Advisory Council, which we have not had, and I appreciate them for being here. And like our CFAC, this group is going to provide ongoing engagement and input directly to me from classified throughout our 23 colleges about how can we better serve our students and how can we better support you as our classified staff members. So thank you for being here. And lastly, I would like to thank Dr. Felicia Ganther. There she is over there and her team and the planning committee for the work on this year's retreat. Thank you so much.

(09:59):

Since we have last gathered here for the Chancellor's retreat last year, there's been some leadership changes. We've had some folks that have retired, and we have new presidents. I want to take a moment to introduce our new presidents and our new system office leadership who have started their roles since the last retreat that we had. First I'm going to go from, I'm going to go from left to right over here. I want to welcome our new college presidents. Now what I'd like to do is see which of the colleges can applaud the loudest for their president. Okay, so Dr. Robert Brandon, New River Community College; Dr. Cornelius Johnson, Danville Community College; Dr. Laura Treanor, Virginia Western Community College; Dr. Daryl Minus, Eastern Shore Community College; Dr. Clinton Hayes, Southwest Virginia Community College; and Dr. Van Wilson, interim president of Germana Community College. Well, you're only going to get him for six months, so.

(11:22):

Okay, System office, you got some competition. Now I also want to welcome our new system office leaders. So we're going to try to compete with that a little bit. Dr. Tommy Wright, Senior Vice Chancellor, Finance and Operations; Dr. Felicia Ganther, Senior Vice Chancellor, Academic and Workforce; Dr. Kenneth Alexander, Vice Chancellor of Strategic Partnerships; Greg Lehman, our Controller; and this is an exciting role – Mike Skrocki, our Director of Internal Audit. So I am really looking forward to working with each of you. This past year has been a time of significant transition and change both within the Virginia Community College system and throughout our country. But amid these changes, it really is our commitment to our learners that remains the constant that guides us. So I ask that you take the next couple of days to ground yourselves and to reconnect with why we do this work and who we do it for.

(12:48):

So the theme for this year's retreat is Mission Possible. How many people saw the movie this summer? Anybody see the movie? Oh, we just got a few. I didn't see the movie, but mission possible. It's not just a slogan, it really is a call to action for this retreat, and it reminds us that our mission is possible when we stay focused on what matters most our students and our communities and our mission. It really does live every day in the lives that we transform one learner at a time. Because every time a student earns a degree, gets a credential, lands a job, or returns to finish their education, we get to see our mission in



action and it is proven possible. And so our job is to ensure that everyone in Virginia can access opportunity through education. This is not just an aspiration with the right partnerships, the right people, and the right priorities, it is possible.

(13:57):

Nick Saban, who is the former head coach of Alabama football team, he once said that success is defined by how consistent you can be in how you perform. Pretty simple. And for us to be the best community college system in the nation comes down to every one of us and everyone on our teams performing consistently at the highest levels across our system. And so let's remember that our mission is in that consistent day in and day out, caring, high impact work that changes the lives of our students and their families. Now, nearly 60 years ago, the Virginia Community College system was founded to expand access to affordable high post-secondary education across the commonwealth. And this rooted in the values of the 1965 Higher Education Act. The system was designed to promote access, opportunity and economic mobility values that remain central to our mission. Our historic mission is just as vital today, but the landscape, as Dr. Wooten said, the landscape has evolved and has changed dramatically.

(15:21):

We are living in a time defined by moments that ask us to adapt. Students, communities, policymakers and legislators now expect greater quality, increased responsiveness and operational excellence, and delivering a seamless high-quality experience for every student requires shared responsibility and a commitment to working together during times of change. As we navigate change, the image of a storm often comes to mind, and I'm reminded of the parable of the bison and the cattle. It is said that when a storm comes rolling across the plains, cattle tend to run away from it. They try to outrun it, and as a result, they actually end up spending more time in its path. Buffalo, however, do something different. When the storm comes, they run into it, they face the storm directly, and as a result, they actually move through it more quickly and they reach clearer skies sooner. This is the courage that we must embrace as a system.

(16:33):

We run into the storm, we run towards our community's greatest needs. We run towards those who need us the most, and those who have been left behind. We run towards the barriers that stand in our students' way and we do everything we can to remove them because when we support our students, we also are strengthening our communities, our businesses, and the entire commonwealth. Now to meet this moment, we must move forward with a unified purpose, honoring our founding mission, while addressing the evolving needs of today's learners shared accountability, building trust with key partners, state policy makers and legislators and philanthropic leaders demonstrating cohesion and excellence and strategic alignment, aligning programs, funding and policy advocacy to more effectively serve all Virginias. Now we are stronger again as Dr. Wooten said, when we work collectively as one mission driven system. Now, last year we made substantive progress on our one system initiatives and I want to highlight two key accomplishments with you to promote consistency across our system.

(17:53):

A single code of conduct has been established and is being implemented at all 23 of our colleges this fall. Yes, thank you to all of you that worked on this until this fall. There were 23 different codes of conduct



that in some instances provided inconsistent guidance to students. This was not only unfair to our students but made us legally liable as a system. Our new common code promotes consistency, clarity, and fairness for students, faculty and staff at all of our colleges, and it helps to create a safer and more positive learning environment for students. So I want to thank all of you that worked on that code. Now in terms of dual enrollment through the college and Career Ready Virginia program being implemented this fall at every Virginia Community College eligible high school students in every school division throughout Virginia will now have access to a pathway to complete a 15 credit passport and a 30 credit uniform certificate of general studies, both of which are widely accepted for transfer credit to our four year universities.

(19:11):

Most importantly, they will be provided at no cost to the student. I want to emphasize just how monumental this is in terms of aligning our system and in terms of access for high school students. This is a monumental endeavor, and I am appreciative to everyone that worked to ensure that we were going to be able to implement this. And I look forward to our high schools and community colleges strengthening their partnerships, which will offer students more opportunities to reach their academic and professional goals. Next, I want to discuss the incredible progress we have made towards the vision set in our strategic plan accelerate opportunity. I want you to think about the overarching goal. We have committed to awarding 300,000 meaningful degrees and credentials by 2030. This is our North Star. This is not simply a data point to report to the board. This is tens of thousands of individual stories.

(20:18):

Every certificate, every degree, every credential that we strive to award represents someone who is chasing a better life for themselves and for their families. Our Accelerate Opportunity Committee has brought together leaders from across the system to form dedicated work groups focused on prioritizing the most critical goals and actions to achieve the objectives in our plan. Now this work is collaborative, it is data informed, and it's built around real impact for students, employers, and communities. And our efforts are helping us lead with clarity and purpose and helping to position Virginia as a national model of mission-driven innovation. The presidents and the board heard from the secretary yesterday about the incredible ways that Virginia is leading, and I want to just share one, Virginia was recently named the number one state in the nation for customized workforce training.

(21:26):

By the way, Virginia was also ranked number one in education. But this award is really thanks in large part to the leadership and innovation of our community colleges. Our collaboration with the Virginia Economic Development Partnership and the Virginia Talent Accelerator Program is really setting a national standard, one that is rooted in agility, speed to market, and true employer collaboration. We recently had all of the state directors of community colleges throughout the country in Charlottesville. They were so impressed everyone was trying to figure out how we are doing this in Virginia in terms of specific metrics. I am not only excited, but I am truly proud of the work that you have all accomplished together. In the last 12 months, we have not only met, but we have exceeded expectations in several key areas of our strategic plan, particularly in enrollment, growth completion, and job placement.

(22:39):



Let me just share a few with you. We surpassed our target for awarding meaningful credentials by 25%. 75% more of our graduates entered high growth industries than we had projected. Pretty awesome cumulative enrollment in high demand fields also outpaced our annual goal by over 30%. We also exceeded our goal for the number of students enrolled in fast forward by 30%. Fast Forward continues to have a positive impact on the lives of our students. Fast forward students saw an average 55% increase in wages and the jobs they're getting also is resulting in a higher quality of life. 77% have paid vacation and 74% have employer paid health insurance. This is awesome. I think you should give yourselves a round of applause.

(23:45):

These are clear signs of momentum and that what we're building together is working. Now, these are just a few examples that demonstrate how accelerate opportunity is not just a vision, it's a system-wide movement, a shared commitment to creating more pathways, more relevance and more results for every learner we serve. Now, we must stay focused. We are all ambassadors of this work. Every single one of us and each of you has influence far beyond your job title. Because when we share our student stories, their determination, their grit, their successes, we make this mission stronger, and we ensure that it is supported. Now, let me tell you about a student here in Roanoke at Virginia Western named Latrice. Latrice is, yes. All right, you guys know Latrice. She is in the new majority of learners, those adult learners looking to upskill or re-skill who require us to adapt our delivery to accommodate their busy lives.

(24:54):

Latrice was an experienced business administrator, but looking to the future, she knew that she was falling behind her younger colleagues in skills such as coding. Thanks to the flexible courses right here at Virginia, Western Latrice was able to enroll in coding classes online while working full-time. She learned more than coding. She learned different perspectives from her younger classmates most significantly because of the support and encouragement she received from Virginia Western's team, she learned that she had the grit and the determination to keep up in those challenging coding courses. And Latrice said that she can't believe that she waited so long to come back to school. We need more students like Latrice looking to upskill and re-skill in the most in demand sectors and the most in demand jobs. Now, industry collaboration is critical to our strategic plan. Our statewide industry summits continue to be a powerful catalyst for mobilizing action and accelerating strategic partnerships across the commonwealth.

(26:10):

Our first summit was in the fall of 2023, and we focused on identifying solutions for closing the healthcare skills gap in Virginia and addressing the growing shortage of allied health professionals by bringing together educators, healthcare systems, and public health leaders. The summit spotlighted new models and best practices that we have been scaling across the state. Our second summit was in October of 2024, focused on skilled trades. This meeting laid the groundwork for expanded employer engagement, new advisory structures, and a system-wide surge in programs aligned with construction, electrical, HVAC, and other trades. We are strengthening a coordinated system that adapts in real time to economic signals. On October 3rd in Richmond, our focus will turn to information technology and cybersecurity. One of the most dynamic and fast changing workforce sectors in the Commonwealth. The need is urgent. Virginia is projected to add over 20,000 new IT jobs over the next five years.



(27:27):

Yet completion rates in related degree and credential programs is simply not keeping pace. The IT summit is our opportunity to realign in this space and better respond to new technologies like artificial intelligence. Our summits are not just about conversation. They are about coordinated strategy and shared accountability for action. Virginia's community colleges are responding to workforce needs with a coordinated strategy and shared accountability. The vision becomes even more meaningful when we see it through the eyes of our students. I want to tell you a story about the Rosales family. So these are a family from Rappahannock Community College.

(28:17):

So that's Joshua on the left and his son Ethan on the right. So during COVID, Joshua, who is an IT professional, launched his own company and Ethan wanted to follow in his father's footsteps, but he needed hands-on skills. He needed networking certifications and cybersecurity fundamentals. And thanks to Rappahannock Community College, Ethan was able to build the skillset and gain a head start on a career in a high demand, high wage field. And I have to tell you, this young man is a force and he will be a future force in Virginia, but this is what our partnerships should deliver real pathways to real jobs for real families in every one of our communities. Stories like the Rosales family are powerful reminders of what is possible when we advocate boldly and consistently. Now, this past summer, I had the opportunity to visit two places that I had never been before.

(29:24):

My partner, Chauncey and I have long planned a trip to Spain to see some friends, and after postponing that for two summers, we finally got to go this summer. How many people have ever been to Spain? Raise your hand. Okay, so we have a few in the room. The one thing I learned about Spain, first of all is the food is really, really good, very good. And in terms of prices, the food in the restaurants is actually less expensive than it is here. I couldn't believe that. The other thing though that was so surprising to me is do you know that it is not customary to tip in the restaurants and cafes in Spain? And since the food's so good and the service was so good, I wanted to leave a tip, but every time they would bring the check, there's not even anywhere to write a tip in there.

(30:13):

There's no such thing. So I don't speak Spanish, so we'd have to go into this whole argument of how you could go back and add more money onto the check. But needless to say, I think we became very popular in the restaurant since we were insisting on leaving tips. But one of the highlights of going on the trip was going to Barcelona and we got to tour the basilica of the Sagrada Familia, which was designed by the famous architect Antoni Gaudi. This was actually just recognized as one of the top tourist destinations in the world.

(30:56):

What I was most touched by was the way Gaudi integrated light and nature into every aspect of the basilica. And for me, it was not just about kind of visiting a building, but it really was a deeply moving experience being in the space. At one point, I think I even was brought to tears, but when I thought about that, I believe that we are also architects of the environments and the spaces that we create for our



students, and we must pay attention to the details of student experience and faculty voice and cultural relevance and really create spaces and environments that inspire our students. I was also struck by how long the Basilica has been under construction since 1882 and it is still not finished. It sounds like some of the construction projects in Virginia for those of Virginia is a very slow state to get anything built around here.

(32:09):

Mark knows that, Mark actually builds 'em fast, but although Gaudi is credited with the vision for Sagrada Familia, no single person will finish it, but each generation contributes to it. Likewise, each of us is shaping a system that we will not finish alone, but we will elevate the system together and it will benefit future generations just like the Sagrada Familia. Now, later in the summer, I said I got to go to two places I had never been before. Later in the summer, I had the opportunity to host the American Association of Community Colleges State Directors Conference in Charlottesville. I want to give a big shout out to Dr. Jean Runyon and her team for their generous hospitality to the state directors and to the chancellors. Where's Okay, keep mind. Really very gracious host. So thank you. But as part of the conference, we had a tour of Monticello, and so I got to visit Thomas Jefferson's home for the first time.

(33:24):

As I walked the grounds, I was really taken by how central Jefferson is to Virginia's history and to public education. And I thought about how the decisions that we make today can really have a lasting impact in the way that Jefferson has. And I was also struck by the continued relevance of so many of Jefferson's writings. If you go to the Jefferson Memorial in DC on the southeast wall, there is a quote engraved that reads and I quote, as new discoveries are made, new truths discovered, and manners and opinions change. With the change of circumstances, institutions must also advance to keep pace with the times. The idea that our institutions must grow alongside the world is foundational to the work that we do in community colleges. Virginia's community colleges are uniquely equipped for this moment. We are nimble by design. We evolve how we teach, how we support, and how we design pathways so that we can meet our students and communities where they are and help them to become what they aspire to be.

(34:51):

Our North Star has remained unchanged, awarding 300,000 meaningful credentials by 2030 to drive progress. The state board has endorsed a focus set of priorities from our broader metrics framework. These are the priorities I will be emphasizing this year, and they represent the shared foundation upon which all of our colleges will be measured. We are focused on increasing fast forward completion rates because we've seen firsthand the life-changing power of our fast forward program, but every dollar we invest must maximize value for Virginians and for the Commonwealth. We're also committed to increasing the number of working age adults we serve. Virginia is home to 3.2 million adults who need the kind of flexible career aligned education that we provide. We must meet them where they are. Getting Virginia's underemployed adults into higher wage jobs is actually essential to the future economic growth of our commonwealth. We are expanding access to passport and UCG courses, especially those offered asynchronously online so that even more Virginians can pursue transfer pathways to a four-year university.

(36:24):



Our faculty are fundamental to everything we do. We are investing in their development because our mission demands that we not only recruit outstanding faculty, but also ensure that they have the tools, support and training that they need to thrive in today's environment. And we're also investing in our staff because they are often the first line of connection for our students. From financial aid to advising to wraparound support, our staff play an essential role in helping students navigate college successfully. We'll also continue working towards one system with specific goals for the upcoming year. First, we will continue to pursue a consistent high quality adult learner experience across our 23 colleges. Adult learners are vital to Virginia's economic future, but their needs are often very different than traditional age college students. We must ensure that our faculty have the support they need and are equipped to meet adult learners' needs.

(37:36):

This includes professional development in adult learning principles and closer examination of how our support systems reflect the lived reality of our adult learner students. A one system approach allows us to pool resources, align support services, and close service gaps for adult learners, positioning Virginia's community colleges as a leader in workforce reentry and economic transformation. Secondly, we will establish a consistent approach to campus safety and emergency preparedness. The safety and wellbeing of our students, faculty and staff is a fundamental obligation. One system enables coordinated emergency planning, shared safety protocols, and scalable training, ensuring that every campus benefits from expert guidance and meets state and national standards. Third, we will work towards a single budgeting system for the Virginia Community College system. Our system is committed to transparency and maximizing our scarce resources in support of our mission. Our current fragmented budgeting system and business practices are hindering our ability to track outcomes and demonstrate needs.

(39:05):

Our existing tool set stands in the way of providing the transparency and efficiency that we expect of ourselves and what our stakeholders expect of us. Creating a unified budgeting system enhances transparency, strengthens resource alignment, and improves strategic planning and boosts our credibility when advocating for funding, empowering us to speak with one voice about system-wide fiscal priorities. Fourth, we will create a consistent dual enrollment and concurrent enrollment experience by aligning pricing and assessing college level services and support. Dual enrollment is more than a program. It's a powerful on-ramp to college and career success. Although we now have a consistent approach to the passport and the UCG access and support in other areas of dual and concurrent enrollment remain uneven across the state. By aligning pricing and services system-wide, we will ensure that every high school student, regardless of geography or college affiliation, receives a consistent high quality and opportunity rich experience again, while also strengthening the case for an increased state investment.

(40:32):

Now, despite all the distractions swirling around us, our mission remains our powerful North star. An accelerate opportunity will continue to serve as our roadmap, a bold statement of who we are, where we are going, and how we intend to get there. We are building a system that expands access, aligns workforce needs, and delivers measurable results. And mission possible isn't just a theme for this retreat, it is a mindset for the months ahead. It is a call to action, and that action begins with every one of us. Over the next two days, we will hear from national leaders learn from one another and dive into the



real time challenges and opportunities shaping our system. In a few moments, we will hear from Dr. Michael Bastion, president of Cuyahoga College, whose student-centered leadership has driven record breaking, enrollment, completions, and workforce alignment. He will challenge us to reignite our mission with purpose and possibility.

(41:48):

Tomorrow we will hear from Dr. Jim Murdaugh, president of Tallahassee State College, whose track record of steady leadership, public service and national recognition will guide us through what it means to lead with focus and resolve. You will hear student voices from Dr. Felicia Ganther session and join briefings on policy, workforce, artificial intelligence, institutional agility, all aimed at supporting your leadership and our collective impact through focused discussions. Now, I know there will be no shortage of ideas that emerge from our time together. I hope that you will share them with me, and please know that I am here to listen and to support you. I spoken today about the courage that we are called to in Virginia's community colleges, the courage to face hard realities and still believe in possibility. And for me, the most powerful examples of that courage comes from our students. And so before we head into the rest of the day, I want to share one final story with you.

(43:02):

Ridge Skyler, who is the dean of community self-sufficiency programs at Piedmont Virginia Community College, shared with me a story about Nathaniel who was in the network to work programs very first class. 10 minutes into the first session, Nathaniel asked to step out into the hallway where he told the instructor he was dropping out. And the reason was because he had spent 35 years in the state penitentiary, and he believed that no one would give him a chance. He thought that the seat that he occupied would be better used by someone else, but the instructor talked him into staying. And that decision, that moment of choosing to step into the storm rather than run from it, changed everything. Nathaniel was placed in a job where he was responsible for opening every morning. Within 30 days, he was named employee of the month. And several months later, he came back to say thank you, but not for the job for showing him that who he had been, didn't have to define who he would become in his words. Nathaniel said before this, I used to always look down, but I want to thank you for teaching me to look up.

(44:27):

This is the storm that we run into. It's not just a metaphor, it's a choice, and it is part of our mission. And for tens of thousands of students like Nathaniel, it is a new beginning. And Virginia's community colleges, we are built for storms. We have proven repeatedly that we can weather them and we can come through stronger. And so here we stand strong. I want you to hold on to that sense of purpose. Each of you has a voice, and it is up to every one of us to speak for our students to tell their stories and demonstrate the value of the work that we do. To every policymaker, every member of the General Assembly, every community leader and every partner, but we're building together is more than operational alignment. It is a vision for opportunity excellence and readiness for the future. This is not about uniformity. It is about unity One system, one shared commitment to every single student that walks through our doors. And through that unity, we honor our past and shape a stronger, more opportunity rich future for all Virginians. And we stay in the storm, not because it's easy, but because what awaits us on the other side is worth it. So I want to thank you for your partnership. I want to thank you for your leadership, and I want to thank you for everything that you do to keep this mission possible.