Why Virginia keeps winning the workforce race

CHANCELLOR DAVID DORÉ

National Workforce Development Month just concluded, and Virginia had plenty to show for it. Earlier this year, Business Facilities named Virginia the No. 1 state for “customized workforce training.” The commonwealth has held this distinction for four consecutive years, an honor punctuated by September’s celebration.

National Workforce Development Month recognizes the systems that connect people to opportunity and employers to talent. In Virginia, this year's observance carried a second meaning beyond marking that original purpose.

Eric Schmoll, a Paul D. Camp Community College alumnus, now works as an electrician at Day & Zimmermann. His career reflects the role Virginia’s community colleges play in connecting students to skilled jobs and employers to talent, writes Chancellor David Doré.

Gov. Abigail Spanberger proclaimed September as Workforce Development Month in Virginia, citing the importance of a skilled and adaptable workforce to the commonwealth's economic future. For Virginia's 23 community colleges, that proclamation affirmed work central to our mission since our founding.

The Virginia Talent Accelerator Program, a collaborative effort between the Virginia Community College System and Virginia Economic Development Partnership, has helped support more than 22,000 jobs since 2019 by training workers to meet a company's exact standards before its doors even open. Results like that are why Virginia keeps winning this ranking, and why employers keep choosing Virginia.

Community colleges connect Virginians seeking better careers with employers who need skilled workers. We provide the training, credentials, apprenticeships and career pathways that let students enter the workforce, advance within it or change direction entirely, whether that means someone's first credential or their third career.

Employers help write that curriculum. “The community college, more so than any other institution, can really change its curriculum to meet the needs of the employer.” These are the direct words of Nathaniel Marshall with BWX Technologies, a specialty manufacturer in Lynchburg, describing why it works with VCCS colleges. That's the collaboration the governor's proclamation points to: colleges responding to what employers truly need, not guessing at it.

Powerline students at Southside Virginia Community College prepare for careers with energy companies such as Southside Electric Cooperative, Mecklenburg Electric Cooperative and Dominion Energy. The program reflects how Virginia's community colleges connect students with skilled careers while helping employers meet workforce needs, writes Chancellor David Doré.

Employers are only one part of this ecosystem: Virginia Works and regional workforce boards, K-12 schools, universities, economic developers and veterans' organizations all move in the same direction, because none of us can respond to Virginia's needs alone.

That responsiveness is reflected in the results. Forty-three percent of VCCS students are enrolled in programs aligned with Virginia's fastest-growing, hardest-to-fill industries, and FastForward — our short-term credential program — has awarded 80,629 credentials since 2016, worth $11 billion in wages and a $14,869 increase in average annual income per graduate. The payoff follows: 93% are working within six months, many at our industry partners like Amazon, Day & Zimmermann, Dominion Energy and Trane Technologies.

Those credentials span the industries reshaping Virginia's economy: advanced manufacturing, skilled trades, healthcare, information technology and cybersecurity, data centers, energy and infrastructure. Each of our 23 colleges tailors its programs to the labor market in its own region, from shipbuilding and offshore wind training in Hampton Roads to data center training in Northern Virginia.

Numbers show scale. They don't show what access, affordability and opportunity mean to one person. Ask Sarah Savedge, who traded a job as a teacher's assistant for FastForward training that led her to Day & Zimmermann. She said, "I can afford to buy a house and have a life now without having to pay off student loans," a weight many of her peers carry.

Ashley Ramirez, an HVAC student at Northern Virginia Community College, plans to join the family business after completing her training.

The Virginia Employment Commission projects 2.6 million middle-skilled jobs in Virginia this year, jobs that need training but not a four-year degree. Most of those are human-centered roles — healthcare, skilled trades, advanced manufacturing —where judgment and hands-on skill still decide the outcome, not AI.

Looking back on the month, I want to recognize the faculty, workforce professionals, career coaches, program staff, and college leaders across our system who do this work every day, as well as the employers, workforce boards, and state and local partners who make it possible. Workforce development is not a program alongside our mission. It is our mission.

Virginia's workforce future depends on our ability to connect people to opportunity, employers to talent, and education and training to the needs of a changing economy, and it's why Virginia keeps winning this distinction.

David Doré

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