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## Virginia's Challenges Underscore the Community College Mission

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## Virginia's Challenges Underscore the Community College Mission

*This was written exclusively for the Richmond Times-Dispatch on January 12, 2009.*

Virginia's Community Colleges were established to address the commonwealth's unmet needs in higher education and workforce training. We are serving nearly half-a-million Virginians this year in transfer-related degree programs and high-demand, high-growth workforce training programs – creating the intellectual infrastructure essential to minimizing Virginia's recession and enhancing its global competitiveness.

I am writing to offer some context to the *Richmond Times-Dispatch's* recent story on the state budget trends outlined in a report of the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission. While I do not question the *RTD's* reporting of the numbers, I am concerned that those numbers could be misleading without the context of the incredible enrollment growth occurring at our colleges and the



hard work of those colleges to serve that influx with per-student funding that is virtually unchanged since the 2000-2001 academic year.

Virginia's Community Colleges have no greater partner than the General Assembly and we do not envy the tough budget choices that await our delegates

and senators. But it would be a mistake to believe our community colleges have been protected from budget cuts. Already, we have cut \$40 million and are preparing for the additional \$20 million cut included in the proposed budget. We have been willing partners along with the governor and the General Assembly to play our part in balancing Virginia's budget.

We do this while meeting a record demand for the offerings of Virginia's Community Colleges. Since the fall of 2006, the enrollment in our credit-bearing courses has increased by 16, 285 – a figure that is larger than the individual enrollment numbers of nine of Virginia's 15 public four-year institutions. In fact, two out of every three undergraduate students attending a public institution in Virginia are enrolled at a community college.

Awareness is growing of the unique guaranteed transfer agreements we hold with more than two dozen public and private colleges and universities – a way for families to save a lot of money as their child pursues a bachelor's degree. Last year, more than one-third of those who earned a bachelor's degree in Virginia began their education at, or supplemented it along the way with courses from, Virginia's Community Colleges. And hardly a day goes by when I don't hear from an employer who is seeking from our community colleges more qualified people for good-paying careers that don't require a four-year degree like dental hygiene, nursing, engineering and welding.

Through career readiness certificates, apprenticeships and other cutting-edge workforce training, our community colleges offer people an affordable and quick way to begin or re-start a career. Those are the opportunities that will help Virginia navigate through the recession as quickly as possible, while minimizing the pain and confusion that comes with layoffs and company closures. Those are the opportunities that will help individuals gain some control over their future. And those are the opportunities that will help our employers enhance their global competitiveness.

While helping Virginia fight-off economic challenges is a central focus of our colleges, it is not our only one. We are seeking ways to combat a growing vulnerability to Virginia's future prosperity: stagnation in the number of Virginians who earn a postsecondary credential. Nationally, our nation is poised to replace its most highly-educated generation, the Baby Boomers, with a generation that is less educated. Germany is the only other industrialized nation to share that distinction. In the commonwealth, the percentage of people born in Virginia, who are now between the ages of 25 and 64, who have earned a bachelor's degree is 24, placing us well below the national average of 42% and ranking us 45<sup>th</sup> among the 50 states.

For years, Virginia has prospered through immigration, attracting college degree-holding people from other states and other countries. This is simply not a sustainable strategy as the global competition for talent intensifies. Compounding the challenge is Virginia's population, which is both growing older and growing more diverse. Between now and 2025, demographic groups that traditionally have lower levels of higher education participation will represent a much larger percentage of Virginia's population. The need to include those individuals in higher education to ensure they have the skills and knowledge necessary to lead an independent life will reach every corner of the commonwealth.

The economy we have all heard and read so much about, and probably lost sleep thinking about, underlines the urgency of our mission. But the needs of Virginia over the next few decades truly demonstrate just how critical our mission is.