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## It's Time Virginia Credentials Up

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## It's Time Virginia Credentials Up

*This op-ed was published in December 2014.*

Postsecondary workforce credential is a rather sterile moniker for what amounts to today's passport to a solid and stable middle class lifestyle. Awareness of these important opportunities is growing this week as the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission (JLARC) releases a new report on the programs placing those credentials within reach. While some of its recommendations, like those calling for additional bureaucracy, won't move Virginia forward, I applaud JLARC for calling attention to promising possibilities about which too few Virginians know.

The industry-recognized credentials, at the heart of this matter, open doors to many of Virginia's fastest-growing and most highly-demanded jobs. The opportunities run the gamut from blue-collar to white-collar careers, including healthcare, specialty welding, project management, next-generation manufacturing, and pharmacy technician.

These certifications, credentials and licenses represent knowledge and skills obtained through training beyond high school, and are considered just under the associate's degree. People typically earn these credentials in a matter of weeks or months, not semesters and years acquiring mountains of debt along the way. People pursuing these credentials today come from every segment of Virginia, including:

- High school graduates who lack both the means to immediately pursue the university experience and the desire to go into debt for it;
- Bachelor's degree holders who seek to add technical relevance to their university educations; and
- Working professionals wanting to advance in an existing career track, or begin another.

These credentials often represent critical missing links, in the chain connecting Virginians seeking great jobs to the companies that are ready to hire skilled employees. A growing number of states across the nation are acting to connect that chain and become more competitive. Some 19 states are investing heavily in the workforce training necessary to earn these credentials, including several of Virginia's neighbors like Maryland, North Carolina and South Carolina. Sadly, Virginia trails the pack in investing in these high skilled, high-wage jobs.

The JLARC report draws attention to that, mentioning a general perception that Virginia lacks the capacity to increase access to, and to increase the production of, these sought-after credentials,



though it stops short of recommending additional resources that can be directed toward this priority.

Fortunately, Governor Terry McAuliffe and members of the Virginia General Assembly are currently working to remedy that. Last August, the Governor issued Executive Order 23, calling for an additional 50,000 credentials by the end of his term. Over the next decade, 1.5 million jobs will be available in Virginia, according to the Governor's Office. More than half of those jobs will require these industry-recognized credentials, not bachelor's degrees.

State Senator Frank M. Ruff, Jr. (R-Clarksville) advanced a modestly priced proposal last year to generate an additional 7,500 high-demand credentials by reimbursing a Virginia community college \$1,000 when a student successfully earns a credential.

Larger fiscal challenges facing the state budget make it nearly impossible to initiate anything new. The case for investing in these credentials – and the life-changing promise they hold for both families and employers – is so compelling, though, that it ought to be an exception.

"Opportunity is missed by most people because it is dressed in overalls and looks like work," Thomas Edison once said. I think he was talking about moments like this. In the face of decreasing state revenues, federal sequestration, and shrinking federal spending that has supported a large part of the Virginia economy for decades, it makes great economic sense to invest in the education and training that will help to attract and sustain a more balanced and stable mix of industry sectors in Virginia.

In conversations with employers, economic developers, and elected officials from across Virginia, I am hearing a clear and gathering consensus that Virginia must invest in growing the number of these credentials, held by Virginians. Specifically, I am talking about the credentials that address business-led priorities and are emphasized by the commonwealth's leading industry sectors and organizations.

These credentials create opportunities. They help existing businesses compete in a fierce global market. They play a significant role in attracting new businesses, diversifying our economy. And, perhaps most importantly, they enable Virginians to pursue the American Dream by establishing a firm foothold in the middle class.

Virginia's Community Colleges are not the exclusive providers of the training programs that lead to these credentials, but we do deliver the lion's share. Incentives that can expand our capacity will answer the regular and repeated demands to do more from the employers and communities we serve. Only time will tell, but a bold step to produce more credentials could become Virginia's most significant education reform of this young century.