

FastForward VA

CONNECTING WORKERS, EMPLOYERS, AND SKILLS

/ **DAVID DORÉ** VIRGINIA COMMUNITY COLLEGE SYSTEM

An earlier version of this chapter, authored by former Chancellor Glenn DuBois, appeared in the first volume of Workforce Realigned in 2021.

INTRODUCTION

FastForwardVA is a pay-for-performance model designed to increase the number of Virginians earning short-term credentials across an array of accelerated, noncredit training programs for industries as diverse as welding, aviation, health care, and IT — with the ultimate goal of closing the workforce talent gap.

FastForwardVA began with a statewide commitment. In 2015, the Virginia Community College System (VCCS) set a goal of tripling the number of credentials awarded in the Commonwealth of Virginia through a brand-new system of shared responsibility and accountability that would bring together students, employers, the state, and Virginia's 23 colleges — and give each one a financial stake in success. At that time, we projected that by 2025, Virginia would need to fill 1.5 million jobs, many of which would require a postsecondary credential but not a bachelor's degree.

To meet those needs, we launched the FastForwardVA program as part of Complete 2021, a statewide VCCS strategic plan to build the infrastructure to prepare Virginians to fill the jobs our economy

demands.²⁴⁵ Complete 2021 set the specific goal of tripling the number of credentials earned. This included the traditional degrees, diplomas, and other credentials we already conferred, as well as a new set of credentials added to the mix: industry-recognized credentials earned through the workforce divisions of our community colleges. Unlike the degrees and diplomas that the colleges issue, these credentials are competency based and issued by third parties, often state agencies or industry associations. Credentials such as commercial driver's licenses, certifications for nursing assistants and medical assistants, and cybersecurity certifications are just a few examples. Many of these credentials align with the occupations on Virginia's annual high-demand occupations list.²⁴⁶

FastForwardVA works like this:

- Upon enrolling in a credentialing course, a student is responsible for paying one-third of the tuition (which is less than \$800 on average). In some cases, employers cover this first third. For those who can't afford it, we have created need-based financial assistance.
- If the student completes the course, the state pays the institution the second one-third of the tuition. If the student doesn't earn a satisfactory mark in the course within 30 days following the course completion date, the student must pay this additional one-third tuition share. Similarly, employers who pay for their employees commit to making this second payment; if the student does not complete the course, the employer may require the student to repay it.
- If the student proceeds with the program and earns the industry-recognized credential, the state pays the community college the final third of the tuition. If the student does not earn the credential, the institution does not recoup this final third.

Initially, we expected FastForwardVA to attract former students who had previously started but did not complete a degree or certificate program and would need to re-enroll to take advantage of the financial incentive. Instead, the program tapped into an entirely new demographic: Most students were people in their mid-30s with dependents, who had no college degree or previous contact with the community college system.²⁴⁷ Demographics also show that

245 The Workforce Credential Grant (WCG) was launched in 2016 to make workforce credentials more affordable and accessible for Virginians. FastForwardVA is the VCCS program that is funded by WCG.

246 Issuu, "Virginia's High Demand Occupations List," January 9, 2024, https://issuu.com/vedpvirginia/docs/virginia_s_high_demand_occupations_list_12_19_23.

247 Di Xu, Ben Castleman, Kelli Bird, Sabrina Solanki, and Michael Cooper, "Noncredit Workforce Training Programs Are Very Popular. We Know Next to Nothing about Them," Brookings Institution, May 23, 2023, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/noncredit-workforce-training-programs-are-very-popular-we-know-next-to-nothing-about-them/#:~:text=We%20know%20next%20to%20nothing%20about%20them.,-Di%20Xu%2C%20Ben&text=Well%20before%20COVID%2D19%2C%20politicians,skills%20possessed%20by%20available%20workers>.

FastForwardVA students have a wide range of backgrounds: 43% are minorities, over 60% have dependents, and they are more than two times as likely as other college students to receive benefits from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or Temporary Assistance to Needy Families.²⁴⁸

By and large, these students were eager to get what they needed to advance their careers and (in many cases) support their families without spending months or years out of workforce to do so. Having such a diverse and previously untapped student population focused on quickly getting trained and into the workforce helped us attract the attention of more employers, who saw a new talent pipeline emerging. Today, we believe that the 3.2 million Virginians with some or no postsecondary experience are vital to meeting Virginia's workforce needs — and we want to continue engaging them through FastForwardVA.

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Since the original projection in 2015, the middle-skill job openings in the Commonwealth have increased to 2.6 million positions.²⁴⁹ This number grew significantly during the turbulent financial era of the COVID-19 pandemic, when the labor force participation rate dropped to 60%²⁵⁰ and a rising share (38%) of households in Virginia were struggling to afford basic needs.²⁵¹

248 FastForwardVA, "2024 FastForward Fact Sheet," January 2024, <https://fastforwardva.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/2024-FastForward-Fact-Sheet.pdf>.

249 FastForwardVA, "2024 FastForward Fact Sheet."

250 Louise Sheiner, David Wessel, and Elijah Asdourian, "The US Labor Market Post-COVID: What's Changed, and What Hasn't?" Brookings Institution, March 22, 2024, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-us-labor-market-post-covid-whats-changed-and-what-hasnt/#:~:text=Unemployment%20reached%2014.8%25%20in%20April,pace%20since%20the%20mid%201980s>.

251 United Way, "Pandemic Impact: More Households Financially Insecure," n.d., <https://www.unitedwaynsv.org/news/pandemic-impact-more-households-financially-insecure>.

Our employers, meanwhile, have jobs to fill: Research from the National Skills Coalition shows that in Virginia, only 41% of workers have the skills needed to fill the state's most in-demand middle-skill jobs.²⁵²

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FastForwardVA is a key part of our latest strategic plan, Accelerate Opportunity. We are using the FastForwardVA model — and what we've learned over the last several years from implementing it — to form partnerships that better connect our students with Virginia's most in-demand industries throughout the state.

BACKGROUND: FASTFORWARDVA AND COMPLETE 2021

FastForwardVA was set apart early in its inception by its model of shared accountability. Even though industry-recognized credential programs tend to cost students a fraction of degree-granting programs, they remain inaccessible for many candidates, in part because Pell grants and many other traditional student financing mechanisms cannot be used to pay for most noncredit credential programs. People working full-time who are eager to change or advance their careers can find the up-front cost prohibitive.

As a result, it is the students themselves who typically front the cost of training in a credentialing program, whether through out-of-pocket expenditures or by taking on debt. Under this approach, training providers offer little incentive for students to complete the program. For the training provider's bottom line, it doesn't matter if the student never shows up or completes the course successfully, or if the student ever passes the exam to earn the credential.

At the same time, for busy students juggling professional and family obligations, tuition is a sunk cost.

Furthermore, too many students had historically completed courses with passing marks only to fail the credential exam — or not take the exam at all. That end result doesn't align with our mission to confer credible credentials that will open doors to middle-skill careers for our students.

252 Jeran Culina, "How Virginia's FastForward Program Is Transforming Workforce Training," What's New (blog), Business Leaders United for Workforce Partnerships, June 6, 2024, <https://www.businessleadersunited.org/news/blog/how-virginias-fastforward-program-is-transforming-workforce-training?emci=56249115-dd2f-ef11-86d2-6045bdd9e096&emdi=2596b5e0-f32f-ef11-86d2-6045bdd9e096&ceid=11714372>.

FastForwardVA addresses this lack of shared accountability by making training providers' revenue conditional upon both course completion *and* credential attainment. Our research and conversations led us to believe that incentives matter. While students always want to succeed, they are more likely to persist when they have a financial incentive to do so. And while our institutions have always been engaged wholeheartedly, a financial incentive more substantively aligns colleges with their students' success. At the same time, we envisioned that the program would eventually pay for itself through decreases in social service benefits and increases in income tax revenue.

Pivoting to a new system like FastForwardVA represented substantial financial risk for VCCS. But accepting those risks provided the most viable pathway to meeting the need. Nearly a decade later, the FastForwardVA program proved that this model is successful in bridging the skills gap in Virginia.

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Since implementation began in 2016, FastForwardVA has seen immense success. The program currently has a 95% completion rate²⁵³ and a 72% credential attainment rate — well ahead of the national 43% completion rate for two-year degrees²⁵⁴ — and has helped students earn over 52,900 credentials, enabling them to achieve an average increase of \$11,749 in annual wages.²⁵⁵ What's more, 80% of FastForwardVA students say they are satisfied with their postcredential job stability, and 81% reside and work in Virginia.

A December 2023 study from Lightcast²⁵⁶ found that, through programs like FastForwardVA, VCCS generated \$11.6 billion in economic impact during the 2021–22 fiscal year. Overall, a VCCS education offers Virginia taxpayers a benefit-cost ratio of 2.7 — meaning that every dollar invested in VCCS generates \$2.70 in taxpayer benefits over the course of a student's working life.

The success of this program has encouraged continual improvement and funding for the FastForwardVA program, including a recent state budget expansion that will include up to \$24 million by fiscal year

253 FastForwardVA, "Program Details," <https://fastforwardva.org/program-details/>.

254 Matthew Dembicki, "Two-Year College Completion Rates Edge Up Again," Community College Daily, November 30, 2023, <https://www.ccdaily.com/2023/11/two-year-college-completion-rates-up-again/>.

255 FastForwardVA, "2024 FastForward Fact Sheet."

256 Lightcast, "The Economic Value of the Virginia Community College System," Executive Summary, December 2023, https://www.vccs.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/VCCS_FY22_EIS_ExecSum_Final.pdf.

2026.²⁵⁷ This success has allowed FastForwardVA to continue to grow and serve more people each term.

FASTFORWARDVA IMPACT AND ACCELERATE OPPORTUNITY

With new leadership postpandemic, VCCS implemented Accelerate Opportunity, our latest strategic plan that is focused on equitable outcomes for all students. The plan includes measurable objectives to assess the outcomes of our plan's overarching and supporting goals.

Accelerate Opportunity was developed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the social justice movements for Black lives, and the enrollment challenges for Virginia's 23 community colleges in serving communities of color. Accelerate Opportunity addresses internal structures that may be impacting students of color by adjusting program delivery modalities, teaching practices, remote services, integrated student supports, funding, and financing.

Accelerate Opportunity expands on the success of FastForwardVA by leveraging the model toward our goal of awarding 300,000 cumulative meaningful credentials by 2030 through equity in access, learning outcomes, and success for students from every race, ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic group. This six-year plan, which went into effect in July 2024, provides a new robust initiative to pursue equity within VCCS, which will translate to a more equitable Virginia workforce. It targets five objectives — developing Virginia's talent, reaching more Virginians, delivering education to today's learners, supporting today's learners, and investing in Virginia's workforce — that we are actively tracking through a dashboard system.²⁵⁸

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These objectives speak to one aim: connecting workers, employers, and skills. Two examples in particular show how the FastForwardVA program brings colleges, students, and businesses together.

The eastern region of Virginia has a robust shipbuilding and repair industry. The VCCS schools there — Virginia Peninsula, Tidewater, and

257 Culina, "How Virginia's FastForward Program Is Transforming Workforce Training."

258 Virginia's Community Colleges, "Accelerate Opportunity: 2024–2030 Statewide Strategic Plan," <https://www.vccs.edu/accelerate-opportunity/#dashboard>.

Paul D. Camp Community Colleges — have trained marine electricians, welders, and coatings technicians for years. With the introduction of FastForwardVA, the Commonwealth’s ship repair association worked with the businesses and colleges in the region to build curricula and develop new credentials that aligned with the training programs. Our state board approved these third-party issued credentials for funding under FastForwardVA, and as of 2023, more than 2,600 students have completed the program.²⁵⁹

At Southside Virginia Community College, the rural electric cooperatives and the Commonwealth’s primary public electric utility developed and launched a first-in-the-state powerline worker training program funded by FastForwardVA in 2018.²⁶⁰ Students earn five industry-recognized credentials, and the program has close to a 100% employment placement rate. Last year, the program celebrated its 500th graduate. The success of this program has resulted in the industry partners and the state office investing in similar programs at four other colleges in strategic locations around Virginia.

As our talent pipeline grew, employers in the infrastructure space — including heavy construction, broadband expansion, and wind and solar energy infrastructure and distribution — saw an opportunity to work with us to hire credentialed graduates to fill their more than 100,000 open jobs across Virginia, many of which were created through funding in the federal Bipartisan Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act.²⁶¹ The result was the Virginia Infrastructure Academy (VIA), launched in August 2022 with support from the Lumina Foundation. The VIA works with industry partners and VCCS to coordinate, scale up, and replicate FastForwardVA and other successful infrastructure-related community college training programs to align the skills needed by these employers with the credentialed graduates of our programs.

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As part of Accelerate Opportunity, we are also working toward serving 25% more incarcerated students by 2030. As of 2023, more than 116,000

259 FastForwardVA, “Exploring the Virginia Ship Repair Association’s Marine Trade Training Program,” February 3, 2023, <https://fastforwardva.org/exploring-the-virginia-ship-repair-associations-marine-trade-training-program/>.

260 Craig Butterworth, “Virginia’s Community Colleges Expand FastForward Workforce Training in Rapidly Growing Solar Energy, Heavy Construction Sectors,” Virginia’s Community Colleges, September 18, 2018, <https://www.vccs.edu/news/virginias-community-colleges-expand-fastforward-workforce-training-in-rapidly-growing-solar-energy-heavy-construction-sectors/>.

261 Jim Babb, “Virginia’s Community Colleges Launch Virginia Infrastructure Academy,” Virginia’s Community Colleges, August 11, 2022, <https://www.vccs.edu/news/virginias-community-colleges-launch-virginia-infrastructure-academy/>.

people were incarcerated or under supervision in Virginia (about 1.3% of the Commonwealth's total population), and 13 of the 23 VCCS colleges offer programs within correctional facilities. While many incarcerated students in prisons find transfer degrees the best fit for their career path, not all incarcerated individuals will pursue credit courses or a transfer degree, especially those who are close to release or incarcerated for shorter durations in jails or detention centers.

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Several of Virginia's Community Colleges offer highly successful FastForwardVA programs that provide credentials toward in-demand occupations such as HVAC, welding, truck driving (CDL Class A), building trades, drafting, electrical, heavy equipment operator and construction trades, forklift operation and logistics, solar installation, and manufacturing, to name a few. Having the ability for colleges to employ their diverse programs and the strengths of their localities increases program options and employability skills for this population while meeting employer needs.

Offering credentialing programs through FastForwardVA to justice-impacted people²⁶² solves three problems: It reduces the likelihood that the individual will reoffend, it offers a path toward stability and economic mobility for the justice-impacted individual and their family, and it helps Virginia employers fill much-needed roles as well as grow our economy.²⁶³

CAN FASTFORWARDVA BE REPLICATED?

FastForwardVA was the first program of its kind in the country, revolutionizing the standard of risk sharing for credentialed education. Students are getting industry-applicable education and credentials at a fraction of the cost, allowing Virginia to have a larger middle-skill job pool and maintain a competitive economy. Other community colleges

262 The term *justice-impacted* is used to describe those who have experienced arrest, incarceration, or other involvement in the criminal justice system, as well as family members directly affected by that involvement.

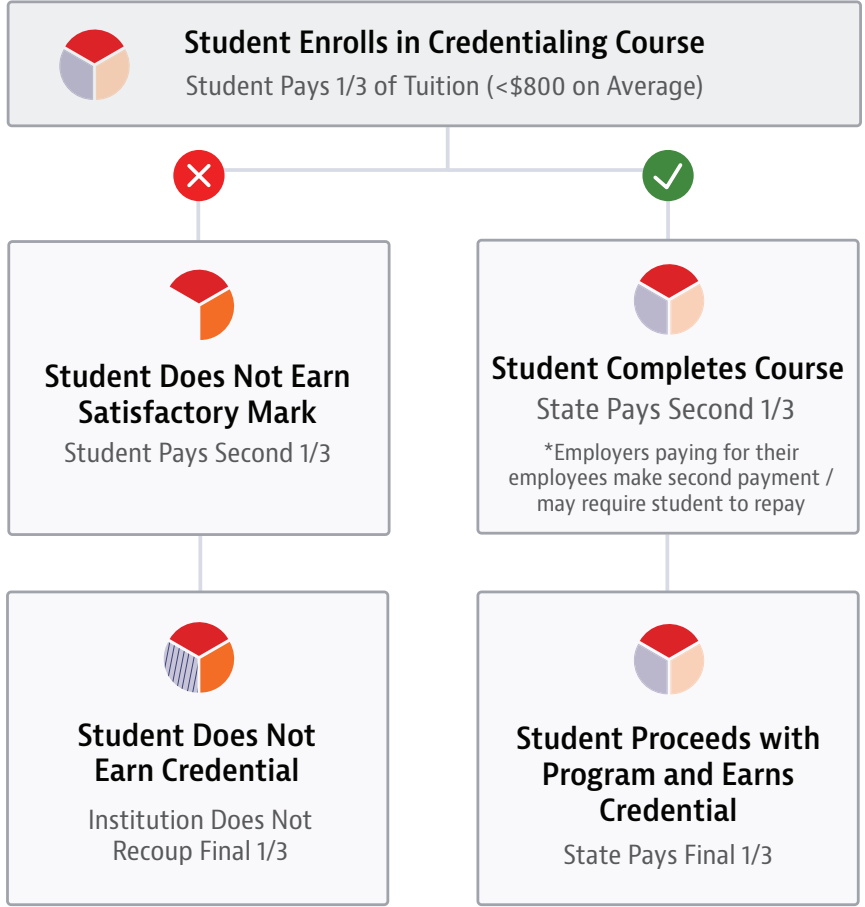
263 Angela Lawhorne, "Higher Education for Justice-Impacted Individuals," Advance CTE, October 19, 2023, <https://careertech.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Angela-Lawhorne-Real-World-Project.pdf>.

across the country can learn from this model and adapt it to their own workforce needs.²⁶⁴

We are pleased to see that some of this adaptation is already underway. As of 2023, several other states have launched approximately 60 initiatives to support noncredit or short-term credentialing to connect would-be workers with employer demands.²⁶⁵

/ FIGURE 1 /
HOW FASTFORWARD WORKS

STUDENT TUITION
PAYMENT TRACKER



264 ERIC — Institute of Education Sciences, “Optional ERIC Coversheet — Only for Use with U.S. Department of Education Grantee Submissions,” <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED616929.pdf>.

265 Stephanie Murphy, “In Our Short-Term Credential Era,” Beyond Transfer (blog), Inside Higher Ed, February 29, 2024, <https://www.insidehighered.com/opinion/blogs/beyond-transfer/2024/02/29/ensuring-equitable-outcomes-short-term-credentials>.

The state of Indiana is now offering last-mile performance-based funding to students pursuing noncredit, short-term training for in-demand jobs — and reimbursements to the employers who hire them — through its Next Level Jobs initiative. They are now set to expand into supportive services for students.²⁶⁶ In late 2020, Education Design Lab (EDL) launched the first cohort of its Community College Growth Engine (CCGE), which engaged employers, students, and community colleges as co-designers of “micro-pathways”²⁶⁷ to better careers.²⁶⁸

The hardest part of creating this model was the shift in allocation of risk: VCCS would be assuming the bulk of the responsibility if this program failed. It is understandable why this risk would make others hesitant to adopt this plan: The initial financial shock could deter community colleges from entering a risk-sharing agreement.

That said, our results show that we have developed a proven model that can be replicated to reflect the needs of various communities across the country. If your college system or state is considering starting such a program, we would pass along a few lessons from our experiences with FastForwardVA:

1. Having a data system for registration and tracking is critical. We worked with a vendor to develop an “Amazon-like” registration system that streamlined the enrollment processes for students and centralized our data collection and tracking. Having comprehensive, reliable data on student outcomes has been vital as it enables us to demonstrate success and make the case for increased state support.
2. State-level data-sharing agreements with licensing agencies have helped us capture more evidence of credential completions. Broadly, the value of alignment with other relevant state initiatives cannot be overstated. More specifically, being able to match our data with other state government organizations like the Department of Motor Vehicles and the Board of Nursing has allowed us to more effectively track students’ credential completions and has mitigated the risk that the colleges assume for the last third of the tuition.
3. Marketing matters. Our communications office has had a long and productive relationship with two marketing businesses who have come to know us, understand our program and


266 Michael Prebil, “Beyond ‘Train and Pray’: State Training Policies to Connect Workers to Good Jobs,” *New America*, September 9, 2021, <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/reports/beyond-train-and-pray-state-training-policies-to-connect-workers-to-good-jobs/case-study-indiana/>.

267 Micro-pathways are defined by EDL as “two or more stackable credentials, including a durable skill micro-credential, that are flexibly delivered to be achieved within less than a year and result in a job at or above the local median wage, and start (I)earners on the path to an associate degree” (Education Design Lab, “Community College Growth Engine,” n.d., <https://eddesignlab.org/project/growthenginefund/>).

268 Education Design Lab, “Community College Growth Engine.”

our students' interests, and deploy outreach and recruitment campaigns that have driven awareness of FastForwardVA and its benefits to students, businesses, and communities.

4. **Start small and ensure credential quality and relevance.** The credentials that are awarded through FastForwardVA represent only a small portion of all the credentials students earn through our programs. We have a very stringent vetting and approval process to ensure that public funds are only supporting truly meaningful training and credentials that are valued by businesses and that lead to actual employment. In many cases, our business partners guarantee interviews to FastForwardVA completers and often come to campus to recruit our students right out of the classroom. But this only happens because they know that we focused on quality and delivering credentials that are relevant to their workplace needs.
5. **Track outcomes, not just completions.** While the funding model is based on course and credential completion, those are the milestones along the way to the real, ultimate outcomes for our students. Employment, wage gains, upward mobility, health care coverage, and self-sufficiency are the most important results, and we work hard to be able to track and report on those outcomes.

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As FastForwardVA continues to expand, we will have the opportunity to learn and improve as we go. For instance, VCCS developed a task force that analyzed disaggregated data to inform the goals and strategies of Accelerate Opportunity. The work of this task force revealed some deep inequities in how students were supported from enrollment to completion within VCCS. This finding was instrumental in shaping the strategic plan's five core objectives. An evaluation of the labor market outcomes of FastForwardVA, based on data collected since the program's launch, is currently underway.²⁶⁹ Once completed, it will provide us with even more insights into how to grow and expand pay-for-performance models in ways that meet the needs of all Virginians seeking stable, well-paid work.

269 Di Xu, "Exploring Noncredit CTE Program Factors that Strengthen Workforce Pipelines," IES — Institute of Education Sciences, 2022, <https://ies.ed.gov/funding/grantsearch/details.asp?ID=5773>.

Risk sharing as a financing model paves the way for opportunities not only for students but also for community colleges to pursue additional initiatives. This forward mobility allows educators and students to reach new heights in their academic and industry goals. As FastForwardVA grows over the coming years, we hope to see other community college systems explore the model.

David Doré became the tenth Chancellor of the Virginia Community College System (VCCS) on April 1, 2023.