POLICY DISCUSSION SUMMARY
Student and Institutional Success:
Persistence/Retention and Completion/Graduation Rates

Success – defined for students as persistence and completion and for institutions as retention and graduation rates – was the focus of the second discussion in the State Council's policy-discussion series. At the Council's July 2008 meeting, national expert Elizabeth "Betty" Capaldi of Arizona State University shared her thoughts (based on her knowledge and experiences at multiple institutions) on student and institutional success and on strategies for ensuring and improving success. A panel of representatives from Virginia public institutions responded to Dr. Capaldi's remarks and shared information about relevant activities and initiatives on their campuses; the respondents were Mark McNamee of Virginia Tech; Laura Moriarty of Virginia Commonwealth University; and Monty Sullivan of the Virginia Community College System.

Dr. Capaldi's presentation centered on a premise that constituents at all levels – from the state, to the institution, to the classroom – should focus their efforts and attention on those factors impacting student and institutional success over which they can and do have control. At the institution level, she stressed such factors as:
- information sharing (e.g., tracking or e-advising systems; course-scheduling systems) that promotes student advising and advancement;
- institutional language (e.g., mission statement; strategic plan; institutional catalog) that fosters and conveys a commitment to student retention and completion;
- integration strategies that promote new students' social and academic connectedness to the institution and to each other; and
- intervention strategies that ensure that students understand how to navigate the curriculum (e.g., choosing an appropriate major) and that *require* students who need advising and/or tutorial assistance to seek and receive it.

At the state level, Dr. Capaldi advised that rewarding institutional progress/improvement through new and additional funding often produces better outcomes than mandating specific goals and targets tied to existing funding pools/streams. She also commented on the federal formula for calculating graduation rates, which many see as problematic for its exclusion of various students (e.g., transfers; non-first time, full time students) and offered alternative graduation efficiency measures, such as those used in Washington state, as better means of assessing institutional success in retaining and graduating students.

Dr. Capaldi also pointed out potential barriers to success, such as:
- focusing too much on graduation rates and too little on student retention, especially between the freshman and sophomore years;
- organizing the curriculum, the catalog, and perhaps the institution around the faculty in ways that contribute to student confusion, frustration and lack of connectedness and integration;

- allowing the students that need the most assistance – academic and non-academic assistance – to choose whether and which assistance opportunities to pursue; and
- allocating institutional resources and funds based on student-credit-hours such that organizational units are rewarded for the number of students they attract rather than the number they graduate or the rate that their students' graduate.

Drs. McNamee, Moriarty, and Sullivan discussed various initiatives undertaken at Virginia Tech, Virginia Commonwealth, and across the Virginia Community College System to address student success. Each stressed how their institutions' efforts were tailored to each's mission, student population, and specific needs.
- Based on Virginia Tech's prior examination of instances of students' poor performance and/or failure, the first-year experience will be the focus of the university's upcoming Quality Enhancement Plan required by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) for recertification of accreditation. The university has instituted an academic enrichment center, a program planner (VT Pathways), and other support services. As its population of new students with advanced-placement and transfer credits grows, Virginia Tech is finding it challenging to offer sufficient numbers of certain sophomore-level courses.
- Virginia Commonwealth University has seen significant improvement in its retention rates since implementing its University College and VCU Compact. These efforts, funded mostly by reallocation of resources, provide formal and informal support structures and services (e.g., orientations; tutoring; shared experiences; skill development; and focused learning) to assist students to succeed.
- Given that well over half of community college students are not "program placed" (not seeking degrees), the Virginia Community College System advocates broader and perhaps multiple interpretations of "success." The system is seeking to better understand students' intentions when they enroll and their engagement throughout the educational process (be it one course or a full degree program). The VCCS seeks to ensure that students have a plan for success, that courses are available when and where students need them, and that faculty and advisors are responsible for shepherding students once they enroll.

Echoed across the discussants was the importance of:
- K-12 academic preparation, especially in mathematics;
- students' development and understanding of individualized learning plans;
- high-quality student data and integrated data systems; and
- the fostering and maintenance of student engagement in the college experience, especially in the academic experience.

In response to questions regarding what the Council might do to promote and facilitate student and institution success, respondents indicated that, while additional funding (i.e., moving closer to full base-adequacy funding) never hurts, it is often the Council's voice of reason and restraint (i.e., what it does not do) that permits the institutions to be creative and mission-appropriate/reflective in responding to such issues.