

**State Council for Higher Education in Virginia
November 19 2012**

**Remarks by Dr. John Downey, President
Blue Ridge Community College**

Thank you Mr. Chairman and members of the Council. Let me start out by **thanking you** for your service to the Commonwealth. I believe you don't get enough recognition and credit for the hours that you spend reviewing policy proposals and making decisions that impact the lives of countless Virginians hoping to make a better life for themselves through education.

About a month ago, Mr. Martin Briley of the Virginia Economic Development Partnership, worked with every public IHE in the Commonwealth, and this Council, to forge an agreement to work together to foster economic development initiatives in Virginia. I am here today to emphasize to you the important role that **Community Colleges play in economic development**, and why your support of our efforts is so critical for Virginia.

Allow me to start by telling you a little bit about **Blue Ridge Community College**. We are privileged to serve about 6000 students per year in credit bearing instruction leading to the Associate Degree, Certificate and career studies certificate. Another 3000 students benefit from our non-credit personal enrichment and workforce training courses.

In credit instruction, community colleges like BRCC offer **two types of degree programs**. The first are **transfer-oriented degrees** designed to help students complete introductory major courses, along with the general education coursework typically expected of students in the freshman and sophomore years of college. Thanks to innovative partnerships between two and four year colleges, students can seamlessly start at a community college and then transfer and graduate from most of the public and private four year colleges in the Commonwealth. In fact, the first Guaranteed Admission Agreement in the Commonwealth was signed between James Madison University and Blue Ridge Community College back in 2000. Since then, that agreement has served as a model for similar agreements that have been forged between most of the state's two and four year colleges.

The **second type of credit program**... the CAREER AND TECHNICAL ASSOCIATE DEGREE... is not so easily understood. However, the importance of this type of program for Virginia's economic prosperity cannot be overstated. These CTE programs are primarily designed to meet the workforce needs of local employers in Virginia....employers who are increasingly talking about a **WORKFORCE PROBLEM**.... as they grow more and more dissatisfied with the quality of the workforce pool they have to draw upon as they hire for **increasingly technically oriented positions**.

So what is this workforce problem our employers are so concerned about?

With an unemployment rate still hovering around 5.9%, it is almost inconceivable that employers report that a qualified pool of skilled workers is simply unavailable for the manufacturing, health care and service employees that so dominate the Virginia economy.

At Blue Ridge Community College, we have worked closely with the Shenandoah Valley Partnership, the Shenandoah Valley Workforce Investment Board, local economic development directors, the local Chambers of Commerce, and individual employers to explore the issues surrounding workplace readiness and the lack of unskilled workers. I am fortunate to serve as the chair of the Education and Workforce Committee of the Shenandoah Valley Partnership, a regional coalition of educators, employers and community leaders driven toward a quest to solve the workforce issues in our region.

Since Blue Ridge Community College first opened her doors in 1967, we have offered a wide array of Career and Technical Associate Degree programs...everything from Business Management, to Registered Nursing, Veterinary Technology, mechanical design, electronic technology and Criminal Justice. More recently, **as a direct result of our efforts to reach out to local employers**, Blue Ridge Community College has created and established a wide array of **new Career and Technical Associate degree programs** that are designed to deliver specific skills training in high demand, high paying fields.

For example, a little over six years ago, we established an **AVIATION MAINTENANCE DEGREE program** in partnership with an innovative company in the valley called Dynamic Aviation. Dynamic Aviation acquires WWII vintage airplanes and refurbishes them for specialized military and civilian applications. We are the only college in Virginia offering this degree, and the first in the country to secure FAA permission to deliver the didactic portion of that training by way of distance learning.

A year ago, **Hershey was among several companies** that came to us in need of training to address a skilled workforce shortage that is the result of a growing number of workers reaching retirement age. So we worked with both the local plant, as well as with their corporate headquarters, to start a new associate degree in **MECHATONICS**... a mixture of Mechanics, Electronics and Robotics that is in huge demand today within Virginia's still thriving Technology Intensive Manufacturing Plants.

Companies like **Merck, Miller Coors, and the Stanford Research Institute (SRI) located in Rockingham County** prompted us to begin a bioprocessing program earlier this year... in order to equip employees with a growing need in our region for trained bio-technicians.

Finally, in partnership with a number of Technology Intensive Manufacturers in our region, we are about to start a soldering program and we are exploring the possibility of a gluing and die cutting program in response to a huge need in the packaging industry.

SO you see, there is no shortage in our region of the state ... of the desire of community colleges to start programs in response to industry need. The Workforce issue is not about educators refusing to work with employers, or about employer dissatisfaction with the quality of our higher education system. Instead, I believe **our workforce issue is a crisis in career development and awareness, especially among young people...**but also impacting those who are displaced workers and the underemployed.

In my view, there are three ways that Higher Education policy makers can help us address this issue.

First.... We need to **foster a greater understanding of Career and Technical Education educational pathways** among higher education policy makers and the legislature. I am particularly passionate about the need to help make Career and Technical Education Programs in Community Colleges more transferrable to four-year colleges in the Commonwealth. I believe the days are over when employers and educators can sell young people and their parents on the belief that a Career and Technical Degree is an end in itself. Even though it is true that graduates of CTE programs often make a wonderful salary, and perform incredibly rewarding work, there is a pervasive belief today **among both young people and their parents** that a Baccalaureate Degree is the minimum standard for a better life.

Rather than fight that belief, I would encourage you as policy makers to **study the transferability of Career and Technical Associate Degree programs.** With the exception of only two degrees, all but two of the eleven CTE degrees offered at Blue Ridge Community College transfer to at least one university in the Commonwealth. Among the four year Colleges, Old Dominion University is the one institution that understands the benefits of the seamless pathway from CTE to the baccalaureate. They have helped countless CTE graduates in technical fields go on to achieve their baccalaureate, often while those students are simultaneously working in a local company that depends upon them for their success. We need more partnerships like the ones we have with ODU. The importance of the transferability of CTE programs to economic development cannot be overstated. Recently, the Virginia Community College System signed articulations agreements for our CTE **registered nursing graduates** to complete their baccalaureate in a seamless fashion.

In fact, at both Western Governor's University and at George Washington University, graduates of the associate degree nursing programs at community colleges in the Commonwealth can transfer almost 3 years of coursework and obtain their baccalaureate degrees in one additional year, spending only a fraction of the tuition dollars they may otherwise have spent, if the access to the community college program was not available.

Second, I believe we need to increase the awareness among policy makers and the legislature of the fact that **the delivery of Career and Technical education programs... the very programs that employers need and which lead to high paying and sustainable jobs in Virginia... those training programs are more expensive than the delivery of liberal arts and non-technical education program.** These are the programs employers need us to offer, but we are challenged by the equipment costs, the costs of acquiring technically trained faculty, and the costs of hands-on instruction that require smaller class sizes. I believe that many employers are willing to do their part in helping colleges defray some of these costs. Your support of policies that promote **tax benefits for donated equipment and scholarships** ... in order to incentivize such support.... would be helpful. Furthermore, an adjustment of college funding formulas that would incentivize colleges to continue to work with local businesses to establish Career and Technical education programs would be an important development.

Finally, I am delighted with the ways in which the Virginia Department of Education, various Institutions of Higher Education, and this Council are **working together to promote career development among school children.** I believe we need to expose our youth to the wide range of careers that are available to them. Many students still come to college with no idea about the career pathways that they would like to pursue and those pathways they would like to rule out. Efforts like career coaching, industry tours, career pathways consortia events, and industry oriented summer camp programs are making a huge difference in our region of the state.

In closing, as the father of three daughters who were raised in Virginia, I am so grateful for the wide array of higher education options that young people have to pursue in this Commonwealth. And so I say again to each of you.... **THANK YOU** for the work you do to support Mr. Blake and his staff, thank you for your careful consideration of the policy proposals that come before you, and thank you for taking the time to serve on this critically important council. On behalf of all of the college and university Presidents in Virginia, I can tell you we deeply appreciate your service.

Thank You.