

Higher Education: Urgent push for more degrees

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Advocating a 15-year period of investment, Gov. Bob McDonnell has set a goal of 100,000 more college degrees for Virginians by 2025. Virginia is a relatively well educated state compared with the rest of the nation, ranking sixth in the nation for the percentage of working-age adults having achieved a bachelor's degree or higher.

So why the focus on more college-level degrees?

A highly educated work force will mean more robust growth for the Virginia economy — an economy attractive to industries vested in technology and innovation as well as competing globally.

Recently Virginia Tech completed a study of adult learners in Virginia. These individuals (most of whom are employed and face other obstacles to additional college attendance) will play an integral role in preparing Virginia for our emerging knowledge-driven economy.

One pressing problem in Virginia is that far too few people have pursued education beyond high school. Almost a million working-age adults in Virginia have earned a high-school degree or its equivalent and have no college experience. Close to the same number — 841,000 — have started college but never completed a degree.

A second problem: Virginia's relatively high statewide educational attainment rate masks the significantly lower advanced-degree rates in rural Virginia and in urban areas that are economically distressed. Rates also plummet within certain demographic groups.

The vast swing in rates among working-age adults in Virginia is illustrated by comparing Falls Church's 74 percent with Greensville County's 5 percent of people who have earned a bachelor's or graduate degree. Also, young men (ages 25 to 34) are not keeping up with young women. Some 41 percent of young women in Virginia have completed at least a baccalaureate degree compared with 32 percent of men.

Why are so many people starting degrees but not completing them? Common reasons are financial (the need to make a living while paying for tuition and books), proximity to institutions (colleges are too far away or don't have alternative ways to deliver programs) and course scheduling that provides too little flexibility for both workers and their employers.

The study looked at best practices the state could adopt to encourage more adults to complete degrees. Some key actions:

- Colleges, universities and higher education centers must market themselves more aggressively so that adult learners are aware of their programs.
- Colleges and universities, working with community leaders, must identify students who have stopped attending before degree completion, and provide help, encouragement and, if possible, incentives.
- Employers need to view the adult student as an asset to their business and support workers who seek advanced learning.
- Federal and state policymakers must pursue incentives to increase degree attainment for adult students and ensure that financial aid programs are available to part-time students.
- Colleges and universities must alter the traditional classroom schedule and delivery models to accommodate adult learners' competing time demands and employers' pace of business.

McDonnell's goal of 100,000 more college degrees for Virginians by 2025 complements President Obama's objective of putting the United States first in the world by 2020 in the proportion of residents with college degrees or certificates. To meet these goals, Virginia needs to have policies and programs in place that improve access and success for all

students, especially for those who have the desire to get ahead but might find the traditional environment difficult to manage. Working adults seem to be a particularly attractive group to engage.

We have seen some positive change over the last decade. Enrollment of adult learners, for example, is up 34 percent between 2001 and 2009. Still, there is more we can do. Soon, the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia will be announcing more than \$200,000 in grants to communities and institutions that come up with ideas for achieving one or more of the reforms outlined above.

Virginia serves traditional students well. Now an overriding goal for the state is to help adult learners who are motivated to earn a college degree stay in school and achieve their dreams.