A Nation in Decline

My friends, I’ve been thinking about this planning retreat for some time now. I’ve been thinking about what’s occurring in the world and how we fit into it.

Today’s headlines are a study in crisis: passenger airplanes shot down; an Ebola outbreak; warfare in Gaza; and, my God, the unexpected death of Robin Williams. What a punch to the gut.

One story keeps catching my eye, however. It’s not as flashy as those others but it’s claiming a lot of victims. I’m talking about a plague, eating away a nation’s economy.

The country I’m talking about is experiencing the highest official poverty rate in fifty years. Nine out of ten people there have seen their incomes decline for the past 13 years. One article I read described it this way:

“Poverty is spreading at record levels across many groups, from underemployed workers and suburban families to the poorest poor. More discouraged workers are giving up on the job market, leaving them vulnerable as unemployment aid begins to run out. Suburbs are seeing increases in poverty… where [people] are coping with a new norm of living hand to mouth.”

Another article about this country goes on to say:

“Four out of five adults will struggle with unemployment, hover near the poverty line, or rely on welfare for at least parts of their lives…pessimism about economic opportunity has reached the highest point since 1987.”

Man, we have some challenges around here but nothing like that, right? It doesn’t sound too good there, does it?

Show of hands: How many of you would want to move to that place? Anyone?

That’s too bad, I guess. You already live there. Those articles describe what’s happening today in the United States.

Just last week, the rating agency Standard & Poor’s said the widening gap between the haves and the have-nots is stunting America’s economic recovery and making it more prone to boom-bust cycles.

I bet I know what some of you are thinking: it’s a good thing we are in Virginia. Our unemployment is lower. Our prospects are brighter and our business climate regularly earns top marks in national surveys.
It’s a funny thing. Virginia was “Exhibit A” in a national Associated Press article about America’s economy. In fact, a Virginian was the poster-child for what it means to have little money and even less hope. Here’s what the article says:

"I think it's going to get worse," said Irene Salyers, 52, of Buchanan County, Va., a declining coal region in Appalachia. Married and divorced three times, she now helps run a fruit and vegetable stand with her boyfriend but it doesn't generate much income. They live mostly off government disability checks.

"If you do try to go apply for a job, they're not hiring people, and they're not paying that much to even go to work," she said. Children, she said, have "nothing better to do than to get on drugs."

She might be right about some of those children. Throughout Virginia, 25,000 students who graduated high school in June are not pursuing any higher education, and they won’t. It’s been that way every year for at least a decade.

I want to begin this planning retreat with a question: how do we align what our community colleges do with what people need today?

It would be easy to say that our Rural Virginia Horseshoe Initiative would be the answer for Irene and the children she mentions. That may be the case but the problem goes deeper. The challenges are bigger.

America’s educational attainment is stuck in the mud, and that is the greatest challenge facing our nation today.

Our community college mission is timeless: We give people the right knowledge and skills so that lives and communities are strengthened.

The needs that inspired our inception have changed. The elected leaders who approved our creation are now figures of Virginia history. The people who first opened our doors have retired. So too have the students we served in those early days.

As we near the 50th anniversary of the VCCS, our challenge is to align our mission with what’s needed now and tomorrow.

**A GRADUATE IN EVERY HOME**

We began talking about that last year, and we’ve been talking about it ever since.
At last year’s Annual Planning Retreat, I challenged us to begin a campaign to end first
generation student status in the Commonwealth of Virginia by the year 2025.

We want to convince every family that yes, your child is not only capable of becoming a college
graduate but he or she simply must become a college graduate.

Think about what it would mean for a future Virginia governor to lead a trade delegation
anywhere in the world and truthfully say, “There’s a college graduate living in every Virginia home.”

Think about what that would mean for Virginia’s existing employers who may be considering
expansion.

Think about what it would mean for every Virginia child to grow up in families unafraid of the
myths and mystique that can make college feel so far away.

I compared our challenge with President Kennedy’s to send a man to the moon and safely
return him to the Earth – a challenge that America accomplished in less than eight years.

They were starting from scratch on that one, and they figured it out along the way.

We have a running start on our challenge, with almost half-a-century of experience.

The Apollo mission, 45 years ago, successfully sent people on a round trip of a half-million miles.

Today, we only need people to drive 30 minutes, or fewer, to visit a campus.

**TASKFORCE APPRECIATION**

My friends, that effort’s begun.

A dream team of two-dozen leaders, from across our 23 colleges, has been working together for
the past year. Their job was to create the six-year strategic plan that will follow Achieve 2015, which
expires at the end of the coming academic year.

Blue Ridge President John Downey is the chair of that taskforce. Tidewater President Edna
Baehre-Kolovani is the co-chair. Angeline Godwin and Frank Friedman, the presidents of Patrick Henry
and Piedmont Virginia community colleges also worked on that panel. Thank you for your leadership. I
would also like to thank our State Board members, Robin Sullenberger and Dave Nutter, for their
outstanding contributions, as well as the other dedicated community college leaders and students from across the commonwealth who helped develop this plan.

There is no substitute for the combination of smarts, experience and perspective that all of these people bring to the table. We cannot say thank you enough for your work.

**STRATEGIC PLANNING BASICS**

Before we unveil what they came up with, I want to speak about how we create strategic plans.

We strive for plans that are effective, transparent and focused on critical state needs.

With more than 30-years of higher education experience, I have been part of some plans that were flops. And I have been part of some plans that brought focus to the community college mission and really made a difference.

So, how do you know if a plan is good or bad?

That’s tougher than it sounds, and a lot easier to do afterwards than beforehand. But there are some telling indicators.

**SIGNS OF BAD PLANNING**

Over the course of my career, I have found three common traits – red flags, if you will – that are the hallmarks of bad planning.

The first trait of a bad plan is misplaced priorities. Community colleges shine when they prioritize community needs.

Good plans focus on community needs. Bad plans focus on institutional priorities.

A quick example of that: Let’s say there’s a community college serving a rural county with a low literacy rate. A good plan would identify, articulate and enact strategies to double that literacy rate over, say, five years. A bad plan would be simply to build a new library with enough space on the ground floor to bring in a coffee shop.

The former goes right at what the community needs. The latter feels good for those inside the college but probably won’t help the people they serve.
The second trait of a bad plan is a lack of measurable goals. Where you would expect to see hard targets you find fuzzy and fancy words.

I’ve seen plans that call for an institution to build cohesion. I don’t know what that means. How do you measure that? And if you can’t measure it then how do you know where you are, where you need to be and how much progress you made along the way?

The third trait of a bad plan is that it has too many goals. If a plan has dozens of goals – and I’ve seen some with more than 100 goals – it is too unwieldy and just unrealistic. Trying to look at everything means that you aren’t focused on anything.

Solid plans, I believe, have fewer goals. The whole idea here is to identify, articulate and solve community challenges. Those goals can and should be stretch goals. When they are, they will take time to accomplish.

**STACKABLE PLANS**

The next strategic plan will be the third one that we’ve launched during my time as chancellor. Because we use only measurable goals in our plans, it’s easy to keep score on where we’ve been and what we’ve accomplished.

Even more helpful, I think, is the way that each plan influences the one that follows.

The unfinished work of the Dateline 2009 plan shaped the way we built Achieve 2015.

The challenges revealed by our Achieve 2015 work greatly determine where we go next.

I see them as stackable strategic plans – much like the concept of stackable credentials that is gaining popularity in workforce development. Each strategic plan is its own achievement. Their connectivity, however, allows them to fit into a larger mosaic, and be so much more.

Seven measurable goals made up the plan known as Dateline 2009. We declared success having reached most of them.

Five goal areas, with a total of eight measures, made up the plan that we are in the midst of closing out, Achieve 2015. We will reach the majority of those goals too.
UNFINISHED WORK

So, where do we go from here?

The answer, my friends, comes to us from two different places, though they point us in the same direction.

We began the strategic planning process, as we always do, by conducting a series of town hall meetings across Virginia. We invited people we serve to come talk with us about what they need from their college.

This includes people from within our colleges; K-12 leaders; local business leaders; elected leaders; and in at least one meeting, a curious parent who just happened to see the meeting posted on the college’s calendar and wanted to join the conversation.

Interestingly enough, that mom said a word that we heard time and again at meeting after meeting. That word was “alignment.”

Something’s missing in the way things work. There is a lack of connection between the opportunities offered to people through the course of their life.

No matter how strong of a foundation our K-12 partners help individuals build; no matter how shiny the possibilities seem at Virginia’s four-year universities; no matter how lucrative or promising the careers our employers offer seem, there is no one – no single entity – bringing those things together.

Virginia is desperate for someone to step into that role, to align those options in a way that lets individuals make the most of them.

So, where do we go from here?

The second place the answers are coming from is the ground that we have covered, or failed to cover, really. Over the past dozen years, under two different strategic plans, we have made progress on credential attainment, but not enough.

Three out of four people who enroll in our academic programs today do not earn a credential with us. Our non-credit workforce training can lead an individual to more than 400 different industry-
recognized certifications. But don’t ask how many people we serve actually earn those credentials. We have no way to know.

We simply must do better.

John Foster Dulles once said, “The measure of success is not whether you have a tough problem to deal with, but whether it is the same problem you had last year.”

We know, thanks to Georgetown University research, that two out of every three jobs in Virginia will require more than a high school education before this decade’s through.

Yet, when was the last time you saw a job posting seeking candidates with, quote, “some college,” end quote?

When was the last time that someone you know scored an interview for a great job because he or she attended – not finished but attended – a college or university?

There’s too much at stake. Pursuing higher education, and for that matter providing it, is too expensive today to let people slide through earning just a bag of credits. That’s not doing anyone any favors. It’s not aligning our talent with our needs. Nor is it aligning people who need jobs with companies that need employees.

Virginia’s Community Colleges must improve our student success numbers, and I’m talking about the number of credentials we put into the economy.

AN AMBITIOUS GOAL

So, where do we go from here?

Our strategic planning taskforce thinks they know. Their draft plan is the focus of this conference.

Their draft plan is brave. It’s bold. It’s concise. Most importantly, it challenges us to make a meaningful difference in Virginia’s quality of life.

The next strategic plan has just one goal. That’s it, just a single goal.

And that goal is to triple the number of credentials awarded annually by the year 2021.
In hard numbers that means we will go from 38,000 credentials awarded last year to no fewer than 114,000 by the year 2021.

This means that student success, in the form of credential attainment, will no longer be among our priorities. It becomes the priority.

Credentials are the alignment Virginia needs. Nothing is more efficient in connecting individuals with knowledge and skills to the in-demand jobs that employers are desperate to fill.

We’re talking about associate’s degrees, sub-associate credentials and industry-recognized certifications. We’re also including the bachelor’s degrees our transfer students earn.

This focus allows us to quantify the impact we have on Virginia in a way that is transparent and understandable. Through it, we can build an unprecedented case for support, whether we’re talking about public investment or private philanthropy. And it offers the people we serve an unprecedented level of accountability.

A BOLD STEP

Uniting behind a single goal represents a big change from the way we’ve done things.

It’s not a step that we – or the taskforce – are taking lightly.

As you would expect, they began their work by looking at practically everything we do. As a whole, the VCCS serves roughly 400,000 people a year with an annual budget of more than $1.2 billion. That’s a lot to consider.

Through the course of their work, though, the taskforce realized a simple truth: many of the things we carefully count and talk about frequently are actually strategies to achieve this larger goal.

At the end of the day, this is what we do. We help people combine time and money to access their dreams. When we succeed, that takes the form of a credential.

Let me ask: Honestly, is there something that can be more important than this?
That’s not a rhetorical question. If there is, bring it up. Raise the question today and throughout the retreat. Raise it through the fall as we carry this plan back through our peer groups and governance structure. The inclusivity of this process is part of its strength.

I will share with you that the taskforce struggled with one question, and that’s the question of counting graduates versus counting credentials. It’s a tough one.

What should we do with those who earn multiple credentials? What should we make of those who earn a credential and then, in addition, an industry certification? Is it fair to count duplication?

They decided, ultimately, that it is fair, so long as we are transparent about it. I agree with that.

My own story is among the reasons that I feel that way.

After I left high school, I earned four postsecondary credentials: an associate’s; a bachelor’s; a master’s; and a doctorate. Each of those degrees opened doors and created opportunities for me that didn’t exist before. And each degree was unobtainable without the one before it.

Here’s the thing: you cannot climb the ladder without using the bottom rungs. And no one knows how high your ladder goes. Often, you don’t even know that until you get to the end.

So long as we do it transparently, I believe it is fair and responsible to measure our impact on Virginia in terms of credentials earned by our students.

**THE NORTH STAR**

In Shakespeare's "Julius Caesar," the title character declares, "But I am constant as the Northern Star, of whose true fixed and resting quality there is no fellow in the firmament."

I like to think of this plan as the North Star for the VCCS. It gives us a frame for what we do. It offers context and focus to the nearly countless moving pieces that we are.

Let me share with you just some of the non-stop plans and planning that we do:

As public institutions, we work with state lawmakers and their staffs to create multi-year budget plans;

As employers, we must balance the needs for and the needs of a large, diverse, sometimes isolated, and often part-time employee pool for our staffing plans;
As property owners, we tend to well over a million square feet of space as we write and rewrite facilities plans.

As educators, with evolving fields of study and changing student needs, we must continually refresh our academic plans;

As more of our offerings involve being online, we must plan for information technology needs that change constantly;

As difference-makers in economic development, we continually revise our workforce development plans; and

As witness to the episodes of violence across America’s classrooms, we constantly test and challenge our campus safety plans.

You see, we have no shortage of plans and planning. But to get the most out of those efforts, we have to make sure our work connects, not conflicts, with itself.

I haven’t even mentioned the work of the VCCS Reengineering Taskforce and its off-shoot that many refer to as benchmarking.

In that benchmarking process, we examine the functions that we perform that our students never see with an eye toward consolidation and shared services. Spending less money isn’t the goal. Spending more efficiently is. We want to move as many dollars as possible closer to the students we serve.

Our recently concluded VCCS Diversity Taskforce talks about developing the business case for faculty and staff diversity in their final report. For those of you who served on that panel, including its chair, Thomas Nelson President John Dever, well, here’s that business case. We cannot triple the number of credentials earned at our colleges without a faculty and staff that reflects the students we serve.

Smart, dedicated and talented people stand behind all of those panels and taskforces. The ability to look at their work and ask how does this position us to triple the number of credentials our students earn will help us tremendously.

“Make everything as simple as possible, but not simpler,” Albert Einstein said. And I believe that’s what we are doing.
This North Star gives us a way to assess new ideas, large and small, no matter where they come from. We do that by simply asking, “How does this help us triple the number of credentials our students earn?”

**A DOWN PAYMENT**

It’s common at the conclusion of a speech to stand on the shoulders of someone famous and borrow one of his or her great lines.

Ronald Reagan, perhaps, would look at the need for more postsecondary credentials and ask if not us, then who? If not now, then when?

Maya Angelou would remind us that, “All great achievements require time.”

And, Winston Churchill, maybe, would take the most passionate cynics aside and remind them to never, ever, ever, give up.

But with all due respect to those folks, I am moved by the urgency of Irene Salyers. She’s the 52-year old Buchanan lady I mentioned at the beginning of my remarks. Remember, she was the example in a big news story of someone who lives her life, day-to-day, without money or hope.

“If you do try to go apply for a job, they're not hiring people, and they're not paying that much to even go to work,’ she said.’

How different – how much better – could her story be had she earned a postsecondary credential?

Our strategic plan is a down payment on the pledge I mentioned at the beginning of these remarks: seeing a college graduate in every Virginia home by the year 2025.

By succeeding in our next plan, by tripling the number of credentials our students earn, we will be ready to meet that larger goal.

This is what Virginia needs from us. The T-J-21 legislation that became state policy will only get us part way there. Labor economist will tell you that graduating an additional 100,000 people by the year 2025 falls woefully short of what the commonwealth actually needs.
Community colleges helped create America’s middle class. We must play the leading role if we’re going to keep it. We must play the leading role if America is going to up its education game.

Standard & Poor’s, in its warning about the impact of economic disparity on our economy, said there’s only one solution to fixing it – and that’s more education. They cite statistics showing that America’s “educational achievement has stalled in recent decades.” They go on to say:

“The U.S. economy would grow annually by an additional half a percentage point – or $105 billion – over the next five years, if the average American worker completed just one more year of school.”

Let’s take that one step further. I don’t want to help people finish just one more year of school. I want to help them earn one more postsecondary credential.

In terms of population, Virginia is the nation’s 12th largest state. We currently rank number nine in the nation, however, in terms of people living here who hold an associate’s degree or higher.

If we fulfill the promise of this plan – and we will – do you know what it will mean for Virginia? It could place the commonwealth as number one in the nation for credential attainment.

That’s the Virginia I want to live in.

And this is the team that will get us there. Look around the room.

There are some 300 of you here – the senior leaders of Virginia’s Community Colleges. This is the team.

We’ve never had as much talent, experience and passion as we do today.

The importance of our colleges has never been as recognized as it is today.

Not everyone has the privilege to go to work every day knowing that this is the day that I can change a life.

But we do. And we will.

The taskforce would have never proposed such an ambitious plan if they didn’t believe in our colleges and the people who work there. But they do. And so do I.
We are going to change the Virginia narrative one credential at a time – and we’re going to do it together.

Thank you.