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Introduction

Undoubtedly, there is an inextricable connection between jobs, education and workforce development in Virginia. Although the need for high-volume, high-skill labor cannot be ignored, workforce development as a whole needs to address a need for individuals to work any and all jobs. Education is connected by its sheer ability to encompass post-secondary training and/or degree options that range from technical skill to graduate degree as necessitated by the Commonwealth’s job profile.

These linkages surface time-and-again across efforts to address this issue. A competent and productive workforce is stated as one pillar of economic success according to Blueprint Virginia (DuVal, 2012). The Virginia Manufacturing Advisory Council states an expressed need for improvement to the workforce training delivery system (Kravitz, 2010). And although an education cannot guarantee securing a good job, those seeking jobs will not succeed without one is an argument well made by the Virginia Rural Horseshoe Initiative (Baliles, Chichester, & Harrell, 2013). Summarized neatly by the Virginia Workforce Council’s suggestions for modification of graduation requirements, increasing access to workforce credentials, and partnerships among workforce stakeholders aligned with career pathways (2012), it seems the time is ripe for taking action.

An obviously complicated issue, there are distinct similarities and differences related to workforce development across regions of the Commonwealth. Action taken in specific locations will vary depending on resource allocation and access, and those charged with taking the lead. And yet, we need common ground for talking through these issues as Virginia’s leaders so that a collaborative mindset for the advancement of Virginia results.

Strategic Initiatives, new and existing, will be discussed in this paper as directly related to economic viability. “Community” as a dynamic aspect of life in the Commonwealth will add value to the idea of sustainable workforce initiatives.

Strategic Initiatives Background

There are multiple initiatives and frameworks to consider in a discussion of strategic opportunities and outcomes for the 2013 Virginia Leadership Summit. Background information of several (in no particular order) provides a context for dialog.

Blueprint Virginia: The five pillars for Economic Success are defined by Blueprint Virginia as: 1) competent workforce, 2) intellectual capacity, 3) connectivity, 4) entrepreneurship & innovation, and 5) pro-business climate. Workforce competency and productivity are directly correlated with competition in a global economy. A proposed Advisory Council to advance Virginia’s issues is comprised of industry stakeholder and regional councils (DuVal, 2012).

Rural Horseshoe Initiative: Launched by the Virginia Foundation for Community College Education, this initiative addresses critical needs for the region of Virginia starting on the Eastern shore, sweeping down and across Southside and Southwest, and stretching up the western mountain ranges to the northern tip of the Commonwealth. When viewed apart from the rest of Virginia, an examination of this large geographic area reveals alarming economic and educational trends (Baliles, Chichester, & Harrell, 2013) that warrant immediate and innovative attention.
**StrikeForce Initiative:** Virginia is one of 10 states being added to this initiative of the USDA after it was piloted in three states in 2010 and an additional three in 2011. The aim is to increase partnerships with rural localities and target communities where leveraged resources will be beneficial with increased economic development as one outcome (Dorsett, 2013). In light of Virginia’s recent addition to the list of program states, this is a good time for discussion as parallels exist between USDA persistent poverty counties and Virginia Rural Horseshoe counties.

**VDACS and USDA Economic Research Service:** Agriculture and Forestry are Virginia’s largest industries, contributing almost $80 billion annually to the Commonwealth. Further, skilled workforce in this arena is critical, with nearly 500,000 jobs and more than 10% of all Virginia jobs related to production, value-added, and ripple-effect industries (Haymore, 2013). Nationally, it was reported in April by USDA Economic Research Service, that in 2007, farmer-owned nonfarm businesses employed over 800,000 nonfarm workers and contributed an estimated $55 billion to their local communities’ gross county product (Vogel, 2013). This has interesting implications for business ownership and workforce needs in our rural communities and those on the urban fringe.

**Virginia’s Manufacturing Roadmap 2010 Executive Summary:** Resulting from the Governor’s 2010 Summit on Manufacturing: Tips and Tricks for Job Creation through Commercialization, this report highlights the outcomes of a working summit that convened key decision makers in manufacturing and public sector. In addition to issues and recommendations related to addressing education for occupational certification, economic aspects of doing business in Virginia, and addressing transportation, the final note was that manufacturing must be “marketed, promoted, advertised, and supported” as a backbone of Virginia’s economy (Kravitz, 2010).

**Virginia Workforce Network:** According to the Virginia Workforce Council 2011-2012 Annual Report, the plans overall goals are directly related to workforce and are: 1) expand Virginia’s pipeline of workers for targeted industry sectors, 2) increase the number of individuals completing postsecondary education programs and attaining various workforce credentials, 3) establish career pathways to improve partnerships among workforce development stakeholders, and 4) strengthen data and reporting of Virginia’s career pathways and workforce system (VWC, 2012). Action is executed through innovative workforce network partner programs and private partnerships.

**Community Capitals Framework:** Each generation of people in Virginia react differently to the introduction of new, or loss of existing, industry. Asset development (human, social, built, financial, cultural, political, and natural) can be invested in the name of vital economy, internally to build local capacity, or externally to support development outside of the community (Emery, Fey, & Flora, 2006).

### Call for Action and Integration

When considering both overarching themes and specific aims, engaged and proactive discussion related to workforce development can fall into two distinct categories that may delineate a call to action.

First, there is a need for a professionally trained workforce. It has been noted that Virginia has an admirable articulation agreement between state community colleges and universities. An exemplary means to a skilled professional workforce, dual-enrollment credit in high school that transfers to bachelor’s professional degree programs at a financially viable level for Virginia’s families, is a successful example.

Second, there is a need for large numbers of a technically trained and skilled workforce. Community colleges and secondary career and technical education play a role in fulfilling this labor and manufacturing deficit. The Virginia Rural Horseshoe Initiative offers an opportunity to address the potential for regional training hubs.

Conversation with Virginia’s institutions of higher education must continue, as access institutions may be more equipped to bear the burden of vocational-technical education than those focused on productive pursuits of research and advanced degree work.
In either case, understanding the impact of workforce as an economic driver and social identifier throughout Virginia’s communities is essential. Recognize, for example, that the inception of a large manufacturing hub in a small community does two things: it makes the community more robust with the influx of more jobs and impact on housing, schools, and local business to sustain the new population base, but it also is likely to develop identity synonymous with that production (e.g. Smithfield or Hampton Roads).

**Discussion Opportunity**

Questions to consider for open discussion at the summit might include:

1) How do we define a skilled workforce?
2) Does it have to vary from urban to rural sectors and in-between?
3) Since educational and employment opportunities contribute to community capital, what opportunities exist to explore workforce-specific education in different regions?
4) What opportunities exist for targeted action around the Commonwealth?
5) What concise message related to the wide range of workforce development do we want to carry forward to our next Governor?

**Relevant Citations**


