



Innovation in Higher Education Case Study

Virginia's FastForward Credentialing Program

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Introduction

The shifting labor market in the U.S. offers new opportunities for citizens to develop skills and credentials throughout their lives. According to the Center on Education and the Workforce at Georgetown, in the 1970s, only 28 percent of all jobs required some form of postsecondary education or training; today, approximately 80 percent of all jobs do. Many of these jobs are “middle-skill” jobs, those that require some postsecondary education but not a bachelor’s degree.

In response, states are developing a variety of programs that target working adults to meet the growing demand for qualified workers. Virginia’s FastForward is an example of such a program. The first of its kind, FastForward provides a “pay-for-performance” model for funding noncredit workforce training that leads to a credential in an in-demand field. In this model, costs are shared among the state, students and course providers, with course providers reimbursed fully only when the student successfully earns the credential.

FastForward Virginia is a short-term workforce credential program that trains Virginians for top, in-demand jobs across the commonwealth. Most programs take between six and 12 weeks and are built so students can get their education while they work. The program is managed by Virginia’s Community Colleges, with programs based on local business demands. Available credential programs include logistics and transportation, health care, welding and manufacturing, skilled trades, information technology, business and customer service, and education.

FastForward provides benefits to students, businesses and education providers:

- **Benefits to students:** Job applicants with credentials are twice as likely to be hired than applicants without credentials. FastForward allows students to earn short-term certificates in programs that prepare them for in-demand careers with training programs that are designed to meet the needs of working people. Many classes are available at night and on weekends, and students are connected with a FastForward program coach who helps them choose their credential program, navigate the paperwork to apply for funding and enroll in courses, and transition to new careers.
- **Benefits to businesses:** Businesses are eager to hire people with certain skills and industry-recognized credentials, and the FastForward program is responsive to employer needs. Virgin-



ia’s Community Colleges and the Virginia Board of Workforce Development consulted with Virginia businesses to develop the list of high-demand occupations with which to align its programs. The first grant-eligible list was approved July 1, 2016, and included 124 in-demand workforce credential training programs.

- **Benefits to the Virginia Community College system:** This program helps Virginia’s Community Colleges connect more people with high-demand jobs for the future. With renewed interest in and support for short-term workforce credentials, Virginia’s Community Colleges are expanding their training capacity. They are developing new programs and adding classes and class locations to make workforce training more accessible and affordable.

Virginia is 2-1/2 years into administration of the FastForward program. According to the Virginia Community College system, the average age of students enrolled in this grant program to date is 36. The program serves a population that is 66 percent male, two-thirds

of whom have dependents. To date, more than 90 percent of enrolled students have successfully finished their credential courses.

Virginia Policy Context

During the 2016 session, the General Assembly passed [House Bill 66](#), establishing the New Economy Workforce Grant Program. The purpose of the program, as described in the bill, is to create and sustain a demand-driven supply of credentialed workers for high-demand occupations in the commonwealth. This can be done by addressing and closing the gap between the skills workers need and the skills they have, expanding the affordability of workforce training and credentialing, and increasing interest in technician, technologist and trade-level positions. The goal is for current and future Virginia workers to fill the available and emerging jobs in the commonwealth that require less than a bachelor's degree but more than a high school diploma.

FUNDING MODEL

The New Economy Workforce Grant Program was implemented as the Virginia FastForward program. The legislation provides a unique pay-for-performance model for funding noncredit workforce training that leads to a credential in a high-demand field.

- Students are required to pay one-third of the total cost of the program upon enrollment. Students may use third-party funds, such as noncredit financial aid, training vouchers or employer payment to cover this cost.
- If the student completes the training, the state provides one-third of the cost of the program, up to \$1,500, to the institution conducting the training.
- If the student does not complete the program, the student is required to pay this portion of the total cost.
- If the student satisfactorily completes the workforce credential after completing the training, the institution receives the remaining one-third of the cost of the program, up to \$1,500, from the grant program. The combined maximum award to an institution is \$3,000 for completion of training and a credential.

ELIGIBLE PROGRAMS

Funds may be provided to eligible institutions for noncredit training that leads to a workforce credential in a high-demand field. Eligible institutions include community colleges and higher education centers. Eligible noncredit training programs must align with the high-

demand fields set by the Virginia Board for Workforce Development.

STUDENT ELIGIBILITY

The only eligibility requirement for the Virginia FastForward program is for students to be living in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Outcomes to Date

To date, Virginia FastForward graduates have earned 11,138 credentials, with 98 percent of those awarded in Virginia's top 12 occupations. By industry, 32 percent of credentials were earned in skilled trades, 24 percent were earned in logistics and transportation, 20 percent in welding and manufacturing, 15 percent in health care, and 9 percent in education, business and information technology. The majority of FastForward graduates experience a 25 percent to 50 percent wage gain after attaining their credential. In addition, 90 percent of Virginians working with FastForward credentials reported having employer-sponsored health care, 75 percent receive paid sick leave, 85 percent get paid vacation time, 88 percent report better work schedules, and 82 percent are working in their preferred field.

FastForward also contributes significantly to Virginia's overall economy. Based on an analysis of 2,500 available wage records, FastForward graduates earned more than \$81 million dollars last year, a nearly \$15 million increase over their earnings prior to participating in the program. This results in estimated annual income taxes of \$4,004,027 paid by FastForward graduates, according to Virginia Community Colleges.

Conclusion

The state of Virginia is less than three years into the FastForward program, with state legislators increasing allocations each year so that more working adults can participate. Lawmakers allocated \$5 million for the program for the first year and \$7.5 million for the second, and Virginia's community colleges have already tripled how many credentials they've awarded. The FastForward program offers other states a model for cost-sharing among students, institutions and the state. It also showcases an opportunity to improve the standard of living and offer a pathway to the middle class for working adults, provide businesses with prepared graduates and improve the overall strength of state economies.

NCSL contact: [Sunny Deye](#), 303-856-1469



William T. Pound, Executive Director

7700 East First Place, Denver, Colorado 80230, 303-364-7700 | 444 North Capitol Street, N.W., Suite 515, Washington, D.C. 20001, 202-624-5400

www.ncsl.org

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