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Retooling Virginia's Workforce by Re-imagining its Higher Education System

By [Michael Cecire](#) • Mar 31st, 2009 • Category: [Education](#), [Top Story](#)

In these pages and other places, I have written about ways Virginia can help steer itself through this financial crisis and use the destructive capabilities of this crash as an opportunity to remake itself as the country's future economic engine. A few weeks ago I advocated for a reform of the relationship between worker and workplace to reshape the Commonwealth's economic flexibility and capacity for future growth. I continue to believe that it's in Virginia's best interests to push forward as an innovative state, as a place where government and business is not afraid to push the boundaries and try something *new*. If this happens, great; if not, Virginia will probably rest on its laurels until the inevitable calcification of interests, politics and cash will turn the Old Dominion from a leader into a sick man.

Sounds harrowing, right? What's worse is that reforming Virginia's public sector, land use and appropriations is only a part of the larger equation. Equally, if not more important, are critical investments that need to be made in Virginia's workforce. Without a capable, skilled workforce pipeline, potential employers will simply look elsewhere to hire, invest and expand. And, above all other things, the key to a strong workforce is, an effective education sector. This doesn't just mean good public schools, high schools, or universities or community colleges - it means the development of a dynamic, practical education across the entire spectrum; it's what workforce wonks like to refer to as K through 16 (to include university, K-20 to cover a range of postgraduate certifications).

When I was Deputy Director of Policy at the Pennsylvania Department of Labor & Industry I was struck by two realities. In my work it became clear to me that private industry in the state, and indeed throughout the country, was seeking large numbers of college-educated young people with high technical proficiency. Not PhDs researchers so much as those people whom would most likely graduate from a community college with some kind of certification - metalworking, electrical tech, drafting - in hand. Moreover, they were being routinely offered jobs in the \$40-50k range which was well above the salary I first made out of college, and certainly more than many of my peers made.

But what about all those other folks who did what our parents said we could do and majored in the field they liked? At what point did the bachelor's degree come to mean so little while the stock of the Associate-degree would rise at its expense?

Of course, it's not the Associate degree itself, per se, but the kind of competencies imparted through the technical training format. Many of the students enrolling and graduating from two-year programs, whether from the local community college or a private technical program, develop abilities with highly practical applications such as Geographic Information Systems mapping, culinary arts and paralegal certification. On the other hand, most humanities' four-year programs will produce graduates with high exposure to theory but little in the way of transferable skills. The key difference is vocational training - community colleges train students to work, while the humanities curricula in four-year universities are supposed to teach you to think. Though there may have once been a time when the bachelor's degree conferred enough distinction to put the grad on a successful career path, the cultural phenomenon of having a four-year degree has overtaken the career planning process that should have preceded it. Somewhere along the way the Associate's degree became a ticket to a job and the bachelor's degree a ticket to wine and cheese parties in galleries on First Fridays; it's the stamp of authenticity of the middle-class.

The answer is not necessarily to encourage more college students to instead opt for community college, although that's not a terrible idea either, but to encourage *smarter* career planning. In many ways the answer is already in front of us and existing. In Virginia it is possible to do a two-year degree at a community college for a fraction of the price of a four-year university, earn your Associate's degree, and transfer to one of Virginia's excellent universities. Theoretically, a student could earn a nursing certification in community college, transfer and earn an English degree at a 4-year university and graduate with two degrees to his/her name and job opportunities multiplied. Even if this theoretical student wanted to pursue a career in journalism they have earned the credibility to work as a medical journalist, a health writer or even just to go into nursing, or apply for medical school, etc.

The cultural stigma among certain quarters is strong, which is unfortunate because parents and students could save thousands by going the 2+2 route. But to create a more agile and technical workforce without sacrificing the importance of analysis-intensive coursework, four-year institutions should consider creating these modular curriculums either in-house or in cooperation with the Virginia Community College System. For example, a four-year university could, theoretically, create a matriculation model that pre-accepts students intending to go to community college for a two-year degree; if the student graduates and keeps a certain GPA, they will have automatic transfer acceptance. This could mitigate a lot of the stigma that many middle class students, and especially their parents, have about community college. Also, universities themselves could rearrange their curriculums so that humanities majors could much more easily earn a technical minor - accompanied by some kind of certification - related to their field. For example, anthropology students would be well-served by a minor in statistical analysis or GIS, political

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example, anthropology students would be well served by a minor in statistical analysis or GIS, political science students with public finance, or film studies with graphic design.

The advantages of a modular, tech-paired system are many. Our students could graduate with the degrees they want and the recognized qualifications that will help them get fulfilling jobs in high demand. Would-be entrepreneurs with big ideas but few skills will have what it takes to put their plans into motion. Graduates would have the twin benefits of technical and intellectual and dramatically expand their career and personal options. As a result, Virginia gets a workforce that will be attuned to the needs of the current economy while possessing the breadth of skills to adapt with the changes in the economic landscape. An agile and tech-competent workforce is not a luxury, but a necessity if Virginia is to maintain its position as a national leader in economic growth and build as a resilient, dynamic engine for the national economy.



Michael Cecire is an economic development practitioner living in the Philadelphia area and working with a New Jersey public investment agency. A former Peace Corps Volunteer, Cecire earned his Bachelor of Science in Anthropology from Virginia Commonwealth University and is currently pursuing graduate studies at the University of Pennsylvania. He has published articles with the London Telegraph, MichaelTotten.com, and TCS Daily.

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