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# TAKING ROOT: The Virginia Career Pathways System

Workforce Strategy Center

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Workforce Strategy Center (WSC) consults with education, workforce and economic development organizations, employers, and funders to develop strategies that help workers succeed and regional economies grow. We advise state and national leaders on developing effective education and employment policies that complement one another in order to better align public resources with employer demand. As a consulting think tank, we research effective practice and apply what we learn to advance the field. For more information, please visit our website [www.workforcestrategy.org](http://www.workforcestrategy.org).

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## Executive Summary

In 2008, the Commonwealth of Virginia set in motion a process to build a statewide career pathways system. The purpose of that effort was to weave together and align the education, workforce development, and economic development systems at all education and training levels. A career pathways system is an approach by which states align publicly supported services and programs to build a workforce customized to the needs of regional labor markets. By aligning policies and programs, and functioning as the platform for integration and coordination, the system facilitates regional efforts to identify and respond to market demand. Virginia's efforts, undertaken with very little new infusion of funding, soon attracted the attention of other states, and have positioned Virginia to receive investments from the federal government and private foundations.

Virginia initiated the development of a statewide career pathways system in December 2008 through a multi-agency Governor-led Task Force. The Governor's Task Force on Career Pathways System Development (the Task Force) completed the career pathways strategic plan, *Bridging Business and Education for the 21st Century Workforce: A Strategic Plan for Virginia's Career Pathways System*. The Task Force included representatives from the Office of the Governor, Virginia Department of Labor and Industry (DOLI), State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV), Virginia Community College System (VCCS), Virginia Department of Education (VDOE), and Virginia Economic Development Partnership (VEDP).

The process for developing a career pathways system in Virginia offers a window into an effective set of strategies for pursuing statewide and regional workforce development

policies and practices that work. By using a career pathways framework, the Commonwealth has begun a systemic and ambitious process of alignment at the state level, and is rolling out that alignment to regions across the state. This paper provides a national context for Virginia's efforts, documents the Commonwealth's work, and suggests how Virginia's successes and lessons learned may be applied to other states.

The Virginia Career Pathways Initiative has taken hold in the Commonwealth. The initiative has shown results with respect to putting the framework in place to meet the changing needs of the Commonwealth's businesses and residents. Viewing the Virginia experience as a case study, Task Force members and other stakeholders involved in the process have suggested lessons they have learned along the way. State agency heads and others interested in building on Virginia's experience

may benefit from reviewing these lessons.

### Create a Statewide Planning Structure that Balances Agency Authority with Operational Capacity

- **Task Force membership should be comprised of career positions, not political appointees**—The working group that is appointed to develop and implement a statewide system needs to consist of individuals who will be there before and after the governor's term.
- **Agency leadership must be involved in order to gain traction and move forward**—While it is important to have career level individuals represented on the career pathways planning committee, those committee members must be empowered by their agency heads to make decisions for their agency.

■ ***Gubernatorial interest will ensure ongoing support***—This cannot be overstated. In the case of Virginia, the effort began under one governor, but has been sustained under another. The attention given to career pathways by both governors has ensured that cabinet members, agency heads, and Working Group members have stayed on task to produce results.

■ ***Career pathways are industry driven at both the state and regional levels***—It is crucial to involve industry groups and business leaders to help inform system planning and implementation.

■ ***Ensure all partners have some skin in the game***—It is important that each agency involved in a career pathways initiative has a budgetary commitment to the process.

## Career Pathways Planning and Implementation Takes Time and Effort

■ ***Build in the time to learn about Task Force member agencies***—Participation on the Task Force requires that its members understand what their fellow members in other agencies do—their goals, challenges and resources.

■ ***Engage an outside entity to help shepherd the process***—It was important to the Virginia effort to have an outside organization

facilitate the process. As a result, the efforts have not been associated with any one state agency, but a product of the Task Force as a whole.

■ ***Develop a plan to transition from outside facilitator to state leadership***—While an outside facilitator helped lift the Virginia effort off the ground, it was crucial to transition effectively to state leadership and an organizational structure that is now both visible and potentially viable across gubernatorial administrations.

## Effective Communication is the Key to Success

■ ***Develop a strong “elevator speech”***—Career pathways are complicated. They often require a change in the way a state and its localities are doing business. It is crucial to be able to articulate the benefits of the system in a way that all stakeholders—state agency members, employers, industry groups, local agencies, students and parents, jobseekers, and policymakers—can understand.

■ ***Balance the role of the state with the need for flexibility at the local level***—In rolling out the career pathways pilots, the state agencies produced a request for proposals that included requirements such as mandatory partners, the need for gap analysis, and the types of deliverables they sought.

However, the state wanted to ensure that the regions were developing solutions that were tailored to particular needs. For a statewide career pathways system to be effective, this balance of state oversight with regional flexibility is a key to success.

■ ***Involve the regions in the planning as early as possible***—The state planners should establish ongoing communications sessions in the field during which plans for the career pathways system are presented and feedback collected. In that way, when the system is put into place, it will not engender surprise or resistance among regional players, but instead represent a system that includes the buy-in of the regional players.

■ ***Share the results of the efforts beyond the state borders***—Task Force members made the decision to disseminate their Career Pathways Plan to their peers in other states, interested federal agencies, and private foundations. They did this via electronic communications, trade journals and other media, and the delivery of live presentations and webinars. The result has been sustained interest and the attraction of funding to support their efforts.

## Introduction

In 2008, the Commonwealth of Virginia set in motion a process to build a statewide career pathways system. The purpose of that effort was to weave together and align the education, workforce development, and economic development systems at all education and training levels. A career pathways system is an approach by which states align publicly supported services and programs to build a workforce customized to the needs of regional labor markets. By aligning policies and programs, and functioning as the platform for integration and coordination, the system facilitates regional efforts to identify and respond to market demand. Virginia's efforts soon attracted the attention of other states, and have positioned Virginia to receive investments from the federal government and private foundations.

The Commonwealth of Virginia offers a window into an effective set of strategies for pursuing statewide and regional workforce development policies and practices. By using a career pathways framework, the Commonwealth has aligned its agencies at the state level and begun to roll out that alignment to regions across the state. This paper provides a national context for Virginia's efforts, documents the Commonwealth's work, and suggests how Virginia's successes and lessons learned may be applied to other states.

This report is the product of a variety of activities to learn about Virginia's efforts. WSC reviewed reports from the Commonwealth, attended meetings with key practitioners and stakeholders, conducted site visits in Richmond and at three pilot programs. We also conducted interviews with members of The Governor's Task Force on Career Pathways System Development, state

agency leadership, industry, and representatives from national organizations with knowledge of Virginia's work.

### Background

In the 21st century economy, the "war for talent" has been described as the central battleground for businesses.<sup>1</sup> In the context of growing pressure from international competition and the rapid pace of technological change, perhaps the most important resource for businesses is the workforce. As a result, the competitive position of states and regions in the global marketplace is largely dependent on regional talent.<sup>2</sup> States and regions are the keepers of the educational institutions that develop workforce talent. This talent in turn attracts new businesses and supports the growth of existing businesses and emerging industries. By bolstering the public education and training systems, state and regional

<sup>1</sup> Ed Michaels, Helen Handfield-Jones, Beth Axelrod. *The War for Talent*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business Press, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> Richard Florida. *The Flight of the Creative Class: The New Global Competition for Talent*. (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2005).

policymakers can provide the lifeblood for thriving economies.

Virginia as a whole is well-positioned to succeed in the increasingly talent-driven global economy, but not all regions and people within the state are prepared to share in the success. On average, the state has a highly educated workforce and a growing segment of knowledge economy industries, or industries highly reliant on the skills and talents of their workforces. However, the distribution of the educated populace and thriving economic sectors is geographically uneven.

Several regions of the state including the Southside, Southwest, and West Central regions lag behind the state averages in unemployment, poverty, and educational attainment, which may hinder efforts to attract knowledge-based industries.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, according to the Council on Virginia's Future, the Eastern, Southside, Southwest, Valley, and West Central regions have high school completion rates below the national average. In these regions, more than 25 percent of individuals 25 years and older do not have high school diplomas.<sup>4</sup>

In its 2008 report, the Virginia Adult Learning Panel found that some 587,000 adults from ages 18-64 did not have a high school diploma in 2006; only 32,502 adult learners enrolled in Virginia's adult education and family literacy instructional programs for 2006-2007; and English Speakers of Other Languages accounted for

50% of enrollment in federal- and state-funded instructional programs. "Virginia needs ... to be responsive to the higher skill levels required in today's economy," the report states. "Virginia has to do a much better job of setting and achieving goals for improving adult learners' transition into college, certificate programs and apprenticeships."<sup>5</sup>

The importance of a skilled workforce in contributing to economic success has been consistently voiced from within the business community, especially among knowledge-driven industries. There have been several efforts to build rigorous academic routes in the state, but leaders across the board believe there is always more to be done to prepare students for careers in the key economic sectors of the future.

Virginia took significant steps in the way it manages workforce training in order to better serve citizens and employers. The Governor's 2006 Economic Development Strategic Plan and 2007 Workforce Development Strategic Plan recognized the need to develop a workforce system that responds to both employer and worker needs. Virginia also began to streamline workforce efforts, transferring administration of federal Workforce Investment Act (WIA) dollars and staff support for the Virginia Workforce Council (Virginia's state board for WIA, advising the Governor on workforce development issues, and setting policy and standards for the local

<sup>3</sup> Virginia Performs, <http://vaperforms.virginia.gov/indicators/economy/unemployment.php>, accessed April 11, 2012,

<sup>4</sup> Council on Virginia's Future, <http://vaperforms.virginia.gov>, accessed January 25, 2012.

<sup>5</sup> The Virginia Adult Learning Panel, *Addressing the Education, Skill & Workforce Needs of Adult without a High School Diploma or Equivalent*, September 2008.

Workforce Investment Boards) to the Virginia Community College System.

These early steps led to the creation of a statewide career pathways system. This approach encourages regions to align publicly supported services and programs to build a workforce customized to their specific needs in their labor market. It facilitates regional and statewide efforts to identify and respond to market demand.

### The Virginia Career Pathways System

Virginia initiated the development of a statewide career pathways system in December 2008 through a multi-agency Governor-led Task Force. The Governor's Task Force on Career Pathways System Development (the Task Force) completed the career pathways strategic plan, *Bridging Business and Education for the 21st Century Workforce: A Strategic Plan for Virginia's Career Pathways System*. The Task Force included representatives from the Office of the Governor, Virginia Department of Labor and Industry, State Council of Higher Education for Virginia, Virginia Community College System, Virginia Department of Education, and Virginia Economic Development Partnership.

After researching and examining data and consulting with national experts and state and local leaders in

Virginia, the Task Force concluded the following:

- Education and training systems need to be better aligned.
- Connections to the business community and the labor market need to be strengthened.
- Support services (like the newly established Academic and Career Plans—personalized learning plans required for all public school students) need to be bolstered at all levels of education, particularly in community colleges and adult education.
- Enrollment in and access to post-secondary education and training needs to be increased.
- Education and training needs to become more rigorous to meet the skill demands for 21st century careers.

Based on these findings, the Task Force made the following recommendations to guide the implementation of a career pathways system in Virginia:

- Encourage and facilitate the use of data to strengthen connections to business, inform program development, and measure success;
- Encourage transitions among education and employment systems, programs, and services while allowing for flexibility at regional and institutional levels;
- Expand the provision of supportive services—including

advising and coaching—to increase retention and completion rates among Virginians enrolled in workforce training and education programs;

- Establish sustainability of Virginia's career pathways system as a priority across all relevant agencies and key industries; and
- Establish state and regional leadership and an operational framework to support regional action.

Since the release of the plan, the Virginia Workforce Council adopted the responsibility of statewide leadership and advocacy of the Career Pathways System Development. Agency representatives, in cooperation with the Council's members, are working on action items including: guidelines for one-stop career centers on how they can incorporate career pathways into their delivery of services, guidelines for adult education providers on methods to strengthen transition services for learners, establishment of a Labor Market Information advisory group, and guidelines for increasing the role of registered apprenticeship in advancing transitions.

Though the process began under Governor Kaine, Governor McDonnell's administration has actively adopted the career pathways approach. For example, Education Secretary Laura Fornash chairs a Career Pathways Executive Committee made up of agency

heads and cabinet members, which meets regularly. She has also personally taken an interest in supporting career pathways efforts from a statewide perspective. Additionally, in March of 2012, Governor McDonnell announced the appointment of a Director of Education and Workforce Development to the Education secretariat. The position provides leadership to Virginia's Workforce Development and Career Pathways System, helping to align efforts between Education and Commerce and Trade. The appointee, Elizabeth Creamer, was formerly responsible for career pathways in the Virginia Community College System, and is an expert on career pathways.<sup>6</sup> Governor McDonnell has also expanded Virginia's career pathways to include public-private partnerships. For example, the

VCCS and its community colleges are pursuing efforts to partner with Goodwill programs in addition to the adult education programs funded through the Office of Adult Education and Literacy (OAEL).

Additionally, Virginia's career pathways plan has received national attention as a model for how states can work together to improve the delivery of services to employers and individuals. This includes presentations about their work to Midwestern states at The Joyce Foundation Shifting Gears Cross-Site Meeting in Chicago, Massachusetts community college stakeholders at the event to release of "The Case For Community Colleges" at the Federal Reserve Bank in Boston, and The National Governors' Association meeting in Virginia, to name a few.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.governor.virginia.gov/news/viewRelease.cfm?id=1177>. Accessed April 11, 2012.



## *From Planning To Implementation*

Virginia has begun a systemic and ambitious process of bringing together career pathways stakeholders at the state level and in regions throughout the Commonwealth. In pursuit of that implementation, Virginia undertook a number of activities to advance the progress against each of the goals set in the original strategic plan. These activities revolved around continuing to align statewide efforts, including expanding the Career Pathways Task Force membership, researching effective models across the country which could be adopted in Virginia, and seeking and receiving outside dollars to support their efforts. Their perseverance and progress is notable, particularly given the challenges of a tight economy and a changing political climate. Examples of the progress and success enjoyed by the Commonwealth are described below.

In February of 2010, the VCCS Foundation received funding from The Ford Foundation to support both a regional roll-out of its career pathways strategic plan and a continuation of its statewide efforts. In June of 2010, the VCCS announced a grant competition for three regionally based \$75,000 grant awards for the 16 month period between August 2010 and December 2011. The purpose of the grant awards was to support development of operational frameworks through which regions can build or improve career pathways systems. Three regional collaborations were selected by the Commonwealth to pilot regional career pathways:

- Peninsula Council for Workforce Development and Thomas Nelson Community College: Development of a Regional Strategic Plan for Virginia Peninsula Career Pathways in Advanced & Precision Technologies in Manufacturing
- Southside Virginia Community College: Development of a Career Advancement Program for Adult Learners
- Southwest Virginia Community College: Career Pathways Development System in Energy Occupations

All three of these pilots met their initial goals and produced regional

strategic plans. Additionally, the Peninsula Council and Thomas Nelson Community College produced a comprehensive set of workforce competencies needed to fill over 11,000 projected job openings in the area's 14 major manufacturing companies, as well as a Website to guide residents on jobs in manufacturing and the regional education and training programs to prepare for those jobs; Southside Virginia brought career coaches on board to serve adult students and developed a handbook for new career coaches; and the Southwest Virginia Community College created new and firm connections to energy employers in their region,

as well as career pathways for four occupations in the energy sector. A full description of these pilot career pathways initiatives may be found in the final grant report.<sup>7</sup> Of note is that the Commonwealth was able to leverage the model for these pilots and the funding from The Ford Foundation to support the selection of two additional sites; one funded through the federal Pathways Out of Poverty initiative and based at Lord Fairfax Community College, and another using Workforce Investment Act Incentive Funds provided to the Western Virginia Workforce Development Board.

Funding of pilot regional roll-outs was just one of many accomplishments. Virginia has made progress toward each of the goals described in the Career Pathways Strategic Plan. This progress is described below.

### **Establish State Leadership and an Operational Framework to Support Regional Action**

In order to sustain efforts undertaken and move from planning to implementation, leaders in Virginia recognized the need to formalize their efforts to withstand changes in elected officials and continue to garner support. To that end, in 2009, members of the Career Pathways Task Force sought and obtained Executive Order 96 in 2009, which formally established the Virginia Career Pathways Systems Working Group

(the Working Group) as well as an agency head level Executive Committee to advise and support the efforts of the Working Group.<sup>8</sup> New agency representatives were added to the Working Group and Executive Committee from Department of Social Services, Department of Business Assistance, and Virginia Employment Commission. Additionally, a Career Pathways System Coordinator was hired to support the Career Pathways Working Group, and help to drive forward the goals and recommendations of the multi-year, multi-agency, statewide career pathways plan.<sup>9</sup>

The oversight and operational framework continue to evolve. As indicated above, Governor McDonnell appointed a Director of Education and Workforce Development to oversee career pathways in the Commonwealth. Additionally, the Virginia Workforce Council established a standing Industry Sectors and Career Pathways Committee to advise efforts of the Career Pathways Working Group.

As described above, the Working Group also took steps to implement the career pathways framework in the field. They secured a \$300,000 Ford Foundation grant to support state leadership and three regional career pathways system projects that established regional leadership in advanced manufacturing and green technologies; allied health and corrections; and energy. They

<sup>7</sup> Carl Chafin, PhD and Susan Kooch, "Regional Career Pathways System Grants: Final Evaluation Report". (K and C Associates: Richmond, VA: December 16, 2011.)

<sup>8</sup> Commonwealth of Virginia. Executive Order Number Ninety-Six, 2009. Governor Timothy M. Kaine. Pages 2-4. [http://www.lva.virginia.gov/public/EO/eo96\(2009\).pdf](http://www.lva.virginia.gov/public/EO/eo96(2009).pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Governor's Forum on Postsecondary Credential Attainment by Adult Workers – Progress Report. January 27, 2011.

garnered an additional \$60,000 US DOL grant to support an additional regional career pathways system project in allied health in the Shenandoah Valley region. To make the most of those investments, the Working Group, led by the VCCS, provided professional development for the regional and state career pathways system teams through a statewide professional development institute for career pathways. They also participated in two three-day US DOL Career Pathways Institutes in Washington D.C.

**Establish means to encourage and facilitate the use of data in order to strengthen connections to business, inform program development, and measure success**

Effective use of data has been central to the work in Virginia. The Commonwealth is engaged in two integrated projects to facilitate the use of data in order to strengthen connections to business, inform program development, and measure success. First, state leaders secured a \$1 million grant to enhance Virginia's Longitudinal Database System (VLDS) to include workforce partners. The VLDS "is designed to provide Virginia citizens, researchers, program administrators, and policymakers with a single point of access to educational and workforce training data from multiple, independent sources. The VLDS securely collects a number of education,

credential, employment and wage data elements, and then links these data across entities and over time, providing a complete academic and employment performance history for each student."<sup>10</sup> Virginia also received a \$1 million grant to develop a workforce longitudinal system under the United States DOL's Workforce Data Quality Initiative. These companion initiatives will allow Virginia to develop a system that can support data across Virginia's multiple education and workforce programs. The WDQI in Virginia has five goals and objectives: develop a workforce longitudinal system; develop the capacity to link education and workforce data; improve the quality of workforce data; use data to understand workforce programs and drive improved performance; and promote the system through the development of web-based portals.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to these two projects, the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia promoted data use by conducting a study "to assess adult degree completion programs at Virginia universities and colleges, and identify strategies to improve these programs and related services. This research is part of a broader effort by stakeholders in Virginia's higher education system to increase degree and credential attainment by working-age adults (age 25-64), and tailor programs to serve these non-traditional students more effectively."<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Virginia's 2010 Longitudinal Data Systems Enhancement Grant. (Virginia Department of Education: Richmond, Virginia: November 2011).

<sup>11</sup> Workforce Data Quality Initiative Fact Sheet

<sup>12</sup> Whitney Bonham, Patrick O'Brien, Sarah Lyon-Hill and Gulshan Motwani, "Assessment of Opportunities and Modes For Adults To Complete The Baccalaureate Degree At Virginia Four-Year Institutions". (Virginia Tech Office of Economic Development: Blacksburg, Virginia: October 2011) p.i.

Also notable, in collaboration with the Virginia Workforce Council, the Career Pathways Work Group has initiated the development of an annual report card for Virginia's workforce development system.

**Establish means to encourage transitions among education and employment systems, programs, and services with flexibility at regional and institutional levels**

Virginia workforce and education leaders have emphasized the need to encourage transitions among education and employment systems, programs, and services at a statewide, regional, and institutional level. They have done this by building and adding to the Virginia Education Wizard, “a comprehensive website that allows students to explore careers, search for programs at Virginia Community Colleges, apply for financial aid and scholarships, and access academic calendars for all Virginia community colleges.”<sup>13</sup> Jointly funded by the Virginia Department of Education, Virginia Community College System and the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia and other partners, the Wizard provides information about transfer and admissions agreements from community colleges to four-year institutions.

Another effort to encourage transitions is a new partnership between the Virginia Department of Labor and Industry and the Virginia

National Guard. Through this effort, returning troops are assisted in aligning their military experience with competencies needed for civilian occupations and providing them with credentials valued by Virginia employers.

Additionally, a new form of articulated pathways to an associate and then a baccalaureate degree has been created by Tidewater Community College (TCC) in collaboration with the shipbuilding and repairs industries. The new program provides an avenue for registered apprentices to progress in their companies while simultaneously earning an apprenticeship license and college degree. Unique features of the program include articulation of approximately 40 college credit hours of Apprenticeship Related Instruction (ARI) into the Applied Science Degree in Maritime Technologies at TCC. Portsmouth Public Schools currently offer dual-enrollment courses that count towards the new associate degree and Old Dominion University is developing articulation to connect baccalaureate programs with the new degree.

Perhaps most notable is the effort by the Department of Education Office of Adult Education and Literacy (OAEL). In its five-year strategic plan, OAEL has set career pathways as one of its five goals. Specifically, the plan seeks to “ensure by June 2017 that 100 percent of students enrolled in OAEL-funded programs

<sup>13</sup> [http://www.loudoun.k12.va.us/cms/lib4/VA01000195/Centricity/Domain/123/GuidancePDF/Virginia\\_Wizard.pdf](http://www.loudoun.k12.va.us/cms/lib4/VA01000195/Centricity/Domain/123/GuidancePDF/Virginia_Wizard.pdf) accessed 4/11/2012.

participate in career pathways activities that prepare them with the academic and workforce skills they need to successfully transition into college, careers, and responsible citizenship.”<sup>14</sup>

**Establish the means for expanding the provision of supportive services, including advising and coaching, to increase retention and completion rates among Virginians enrolled in workforce training and education programs**

The original Career Pathways Task Force also took steps to expand supportive services for Virginians using online and on-the-ground methods. They hired a new coordinator of middle college and adult career coaching. They established new transitional specialists in a number of the adult education programs across the state. They expanded the features and number of users of the Virginia Education Wizard, and they sought funding to support additional career coaches.

The Career Pathways Working Group members have continued these efforts. For example, they have initiated the VCCS led adult career coach program. These new coaches, employees of the community colleges, will provide career and educational planning services to adults entering career pathways through community colleges, adult education programs, and One Stop Career Centers. The Working Group

has also initiated a multi-agency planning team to design and offer a statewide Career Coaches’ Academy.

**Establish Sustainability of Virginia’s Career Pathways System as a Cross Agency and Business Priority**

Virginia’s career pathways work has attracted attention as a national model. For example, in October of 2010, the Commonwealth hosted a National Governor’s Association Forum on Increasing Credential Attainment by Working Adults which showcased the career pathways system and regional career pathways projects. The Task Force, led by Secretary of Education Laura Fornash, then secured commitment from Virginia Chamber of Commerce to sponsor a similar forum in the Fall of 2011. Virginia leaders have been asked to share the outcomes of their career pathways system at a number of national venues across the country including the National Governor’s Association, National Career Pathways Network, The Joyce Foundation Shifting Gears Cross-Site Meeting, and numerous national Webinars.

State funds have been successfully obtained to support a number of career pathways initiatives including the expansion of the Plugged In Virginia program and a statewide Microsoft Academy for high school students. Additionally, the VCCS is partnering with a number of

<sup>14</sup> Virginia Department of Education  
Office of Adult Education and Literacy  
Advancing Work Force Readiness: Adult Education and Literacy for 21st Century Virginia A Strategic Plan for 2012-2017. P. 2.

public and private entities to design career pathways in allied health and nursing, and will jointly seek funding to support their efforts.

The Task Force also sought to bring in additional funding to support the implementation of career pathways. To do so they established a relationship with Virginia Foundation for Community College Education that allows the Career Pathways Task Force to solicit and receive grants. They also redirected WIA Incentive grants to provide two regions (Southside and Roanoke area) with \$75,000 grants in 2011-12 to further develop or initiate career pathways systems in their respective regions.

There are also business-led efforts under way. One statewide initiative, directly tied to career pathways is the Troops to Energy Jobs Pilot. This national pilot program is being implemented in Virginia through Dominion, a large utility company. Dominion is utilizing a career pathways approach to help

returning veterans transfer and build on their military skills and apply them to energy jobs. The Troops to Energy Jobs initiative is one of many activities under the Center for Energy Workforce Development which is actively working with the educational community in Virginia to prepare for workforce shortages in the utility industry across the country.

### Qualitative Changes

In addition to the tangible outcomes of this work, interviews with Working Group members and other stakeholders revealed the more qualitative changes that have become apparent as a result of the career pathways efforts undertaken in Virginia.

Employers observed that it has become easier to engage the state partners and see a sustained effort with them around the table. Working Group members pointed to a change in the way they now do

business. Before embarking on their career pathways plan each agency involved on the Career Pathways Task Force was engaged in the work of his or her agency, focused on the day-to-day. They were not aware of the goals of their sister agencies, or the extent to which the resources of one agency could impact the resources of another. Now, the Working Group member agencies are much more inclined to see their work on education and workforce development as a piece of a larger whole. Individual members described a network that has ensued. They now see funding from one agency to another as a patchwork—they have an understanding how they might support one another. Task force members spoke about the fact that they now know to “just pick up the phone” and call their colleagues to pursue inter-agency work or share information. Because of the work of the Task Force, there has been more cross-agency fundraising to develop programs to support the needs of Virginians.

## Lessons Learned

The Virginia Career Pathways Initiative has begun to take hold in the Commonwealth. The initiative has shown results with respect to putting the framework in place to meet the changing needs of the Commonwealth's businesses and residents. Viewing the Virginia experience as a case study, Working Group members and other stakeholders involved in the process have suggested lessons they have learned along the way. State agency heads and others interested in building on Virginia's experience may benefit from reviewing these lessons as they seek to implement their own systems.

### Create a Statewide Planning Structure that Balances Agency Authority with Operational Capacity

Many of the early discussions in Virginia revolved around Task Force membership. Gubernatorial support for the system began with Governor Kaine, but stakeholders sought to continue efforts with a shift in leadership to Governor McDonnell. On the one hand members need to be available to participate in meetings and move the agenda forward on a day-to-day basis. The members could not be political appointees, but those that would survive a gubernatorial transition. On the other hand, members need authority and the support and commitment of agency heads in order for the work to take hold.

One way to gain that commitment is by encouraging each partner agency to contribute financially to

the success of the career pathways efforts. However small, having this skin in the game will raise the level of importance of the work and involve the engagement of agency heads. Virginia accomplished this by asking Task Force members to supply both in-kind and cash support to their efforts.

Another way to get the attention of agency heads and governors is by seeking industry support. Initially, the career pathways system planning efforts were undertaken with the strong "hands on" support of Dr. Bob Leber, who at the time was president of the Statewide Workforce Council and an executive at Northrup Grumman. His dual role gave him access to both other business leaders and important actors in the state bureaucracy.

Working Group members generalized the lessons as follow:

- **Task Force membership should be comprised of career positions, not political appointees**—The working group that is appointed to develop and implement a statewide system needs to consist of individuals who will be there before and after the governor's term.
- **Agency leadership must be involved in order to gain traction and move forward**—While it is important to have mid-career level individuals represented on the career pathways planning committee, those committee members must be empowered by their agency heads to make decisions for their agency.
- **Gubernatorial interest will ensure ongoing support**—This cannot be overstated. In the case of Virginia, the effort began under one governor, but has been sustained under another. The attention given to career

pathways by both governors has ensured that cabinet members, agency heads and Working Group members have stayed on task to produce results.

■ ***Career pathways are industry driven at both the state and regional levels***—

It is crucial to involve industry groups and business leaders to help inform system planning and implementation.

■ ***Ensure all partners have some skin in the game***—

It is important that each agency involved in a career pathways initiative has a budgetary commitment to the process.

### **Career Pathways Planning and Implementation Takes Time and Effort**

Obvious as this headline appears, Working Group members emphasized the need to recognize this reality as states structure their own career pathways process. In particular, in Virginia, it was very important for Task Force and later Working Group members to learn about one another's agencies—goals, challenges and resources. Previous to their career pathways involvement these individuals were often working in silos, not understanding the roles of their sister agencies, and sometimes at odds with one another. By learning about their counterparts, Task Force members were able to identify areas of overlap, which has

eased the way for joint ventures through today.

Task Force members also spoke about the importance of having an outside entity shepherd the process for two reasons. First, facilitating a cross-agency process is not the responsibility of any one individual in any particular agency. One person or entity needs to have as its responsibility the day-to-day activities required to move the career pathways process forward. Also, if the process is to work, it needs to be the product of all of its members. By bringing in an outside organization the outcome of the career pathways process is not associated with one state agency, but a product of the Task Force as a whole. In the Virginia example, Task Force members initially came to the table with different definitions and understandings of career pathways. There was mistrust among the agencies and discomfort in pursuing the partnership. It was the role of the outside entity to smooth out those differences and help Working Group members find common ground on which they could build their system. They pointed to a number of lessons learned in this arena:

■ ***Build in the time to learn about task force member agencies***—

Participation on the career pathways task force requires that task force members understand what their fellow members in other agencies do—their goals, challenges and resources.

■ ***Engage an outside entity to help shepherd the process***—

It was important to the Virginia effort to have an outside organization facilitate the process. As a result, the efforts have not been associated with one state agency, but a product of the task force as a whole.

■ ***Develop a plan to transition from outside facilitator to state leadership***—

While an outside facilitator helped lift the Virginia effort off the ground, it was crucial to transition effectively to state leadership and an organizational structure that is now both visible and potentially viable across gubernatorial administrations.

### **Effective Communication is the Key to Success**

Career pathways involve many different stakeholders at the local and state level and beyond. In the case of Virginia, the Task Force needed to engage their agency heads and Cabinet members. It was crucial to gain the support of Governor McDonnell once he was elected. Additionally, while this effort emerged at the state level, it was to be implemented in regions throughout the Commonwealth. The Task Force members therefore sought the input of regional operators and entities. Finally, to elicit ongoing support, the Virginia Task Force also looked



to disseminate the outcomes of their work to other states, private philanthropy, and the federal government. In so doing, several lessons emerged.

■ ***Develop a strong “elevator speech”***—Career pathways are complicated. They often require a change in the way a state and its localities are doing business. It is crucial to be able to articulate the benefits of the system in a way that all stakeholders—state agency members, employers, industry groups, local agencies, students and parents, jobseekers, and policymakers—can understand.

■ ***Balance the role of the state with the need for flexibility at the local level***—In rolling out the career pathways pilots,

the state agencies produced a request for proposals that included requirements such as mandatory partners, the need for gap analysis, and the types of deliverables they sought. However, the state wanted to ensure that the local regions were developing solutions that were tailored to particular regional need. For a statewide career pathways system to be effective, this balance of state oversight with local flexibility is a key to success.

■ ***Involve the regions in the planning as early as possible***—The state planners should establish ongoing communications sessions in the field during which plans for the career pathways system are presented and feedback

collected. In that way, when the system is put into place, it will not engender surprise or resistance among local players, but instead represent a system that includes the buy-in of the local players.

■ ***Share the results of the efforts beyond the state borders***—Task Force members made the decision to disseminate their Career Pathways Plan to their peers in other states, interested federal agencies, and private foundations. They did this via electronic communications, trade journals and other media, and the delivery of live presentations and webinars. The result has been sustained interest and the attraction of funding to support their efforts.



