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Transfer Virginia

Michael Rao and Paula P. Pando column: Counting on community college transfers to shape the next generation of Va. talent

By Michael Rao and Paula P. Pando

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In August, people walked on the Monroe Park campus of Virginia Commonwealth University.

ALEXA WELCH EDLUND/TIMES-DISPATCH

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The pandemic forced our colleges — a community college and a four-year research university — to face a new reality. In just a few weeks, we switched to delivering nearly all classes and services virtually, while starting virus prevention and mitigation protocols and building new supports for our most vulnerable students.

Now we have a chance to reflect on the past year: Just as the pandemic accelerated and exposed many disparities in society, it also magnified problems of access and equity in higher education. The good news: We have seen that solutions are within reach, and all of us have an opportunity to improve economic and cultural prosperity across Virginia.

Key improvements started in 2005, when the commonwealth took an important step to simplifying transfer from two- to four-year colleges. The board of each four-year public college developed transfer and credits requirements that were the same at all institutions within the Virginia Community College System.

That is vital because two-year colleges provide broad access to higher education; most community college students hope to eventually earn a bachelor's degree. Still, the system is imperfect: In Virginia, less than one-third of them ever transfer.

And the completion rates lag for lower-income students and students from historically disadvantaged communities. Thousands of students fall short of their academic goals and are unable to enjoy the financial advantages of a bachelor's degree or higher. Far too many of these students are left behind not because of a lack of effort or aptitude, but because of a confusing and cumbersome transfer system.

This absence of standard practice between two-year and four-year institutions amounts to a “tax” on transfer students in the form of wasted time and money. Yes, a given course may transfer, but does it apply to a degree requirement? Many times, the answer is no.

Students, advising themselves, often take classes that are irrelevant to their eventual four-year program of study. The result: The average community college transfer student will take at least 12 more credits to earn a bachelor's degree than students who

start and finish at four-year colleges, adding thousands of extra dollars of debt. Factor in housing and food insecurity that many community college students face, and you can see why they cannot take on this extra burden.

The pandemic demonstrated that real change in higher education is possible, even if our industry traditionally hasn't moved very fast. Across Virginia, a community of educators from community colleges and public and private universities is working together on transfer to ensure success for all students.

Transfer Virginia, as it is called, embraces the growing need for seamless transfer among the commonwealth's institutions. The group recommends changes in transfer policies and practice that focus on affordability, access, clarity and equity and calls for better advising of transfer students.

As college presidents in Richmond, we know the challenges of transfer all too well. Every year, hundreds of students transfer from Reynolds Community College to Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), often out of a desire to stay local.

Our two institutions are collaborating to address the equity gaps in transfer student success, to ensure transfer students graduate in a timely manner with minimal debt. Examples include the Mellon Pathways to the Arts and Humanities Program and the Howard Hughes Medical Institute Inclusive Excellence Program for math and science.

The programs feature transfer maps for multiple majors at VCU, providing specific guidance on courses to take at a community college as well as advice on financial planning and preparing for a career after graduation. Reynolds students in these pathways receive enhanced advising about course selection and transfer logistics, access to VCU programming and services, and the opportunity to take courses at VCU while still enrolled at Reynolds.

We've seen that transfer students are ready to succeed at four-year institutions. Seventy percent of transfer students complete their bachelor's degree within four years of transfer; 41% of Virginia's bachelor's earners previously were enrolled at two-year colleges.

Still, these students can only thrive if they get to their four-year destination. They need a commitment from academic leaders at the highest levels. They need the continued support of state governments as well as business and industry investment.

During this pandemic, the path to the middle class narrowed for too many Americans. A college degree still offers some of the best opportunities for wages that can sustain a family.

Across Virginia, the next generation of workers is counting on education leaders, state leaders, and the public and private sectors to unleash immense benefits from successful transfers.

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