

Accelerated Training Programs Use Innovative Funding Model to Decrease the Skills Gap in Virginia

Virginia's economy has a skills gap, and it's not alone. There simply aren't enough credentialed workers to fill the open jobs in practically every state, according to the National Skills Coalition.

Despite Virginia's low unemployment rates, state leaders knew more work was needed to revitalize its middle class. Rapid decline in industries like coal, tobacco, and textiles left many unemployed and lacking the skills to transition into growing, high-demand fields. Applicants with credentials such as National Healthcareer Association's (NHA) healthcare certifications are twice as likely to be hired, and earn significantly more on average than workers with no credentials. However, the training necessary to earn such a certification was inconvenient, and more often too expensive for many of the people who had the most to gain by pursuing those opportunities to improve their lives.¹

Virginians lose out on over \$1 billion in wages each year because they don't have skills employers need.²

The Virginia Community College System (VCCS), in partnership with other trade associations and industry councils, took action. Together, they devised a plan to expand the number of workforce credentials and certifications needed to close the skills gap, while making the training affordable for those seeking a non-degreed education.

"This wasn't the community college system saying we need something. This was industry saying we need something," said Randall Stamper, assistant vice chancellor, Career Pathways and Workforce Programs, VCCS.

Their solution — the FastForward program — has had dramatic results. The high-demand program has been embraced by Virginia's 23 community colleges and shows signs of long-term gains for program participants and Virginia's entire economy.

"FastForward has changed my life," said program graduate Mercedes Barnes, CCMA, "I can do a lot of things now that I couldn't do before I had this training."



FASTFORWARD PROGRAM OVERVIEW

FastForward is a short-term workforce credential program, training individuals for open jobs across the state. Many of its programs are 6-12 weeks in length, designed so students can continue working while earning their credential — helping Virginians attain valuable skills to fill desirable positions in just weeks, not years.

50% of the job openings in Virginia require some post-high school education, but not a bachelor's degree.³

Virginia's 23 community colleges offer FastForward training courses for 40 different high-demand occupational fields, including healthcare. Because local employer needs dictate what programs are offered, FastForward programs are boasting high job placement rates for their graduates. Many of the programs lead to NHA certifications including:

- Medical Assistant (CCMA)
- Certified Medical Administrative Assistant (CMAA)
- Phlebotomy Technician (CPT)
- EKG Technician (CET)
- ExCPT Pharmacy Technician (CPhT)
- Nurse Aid / Patient Care Technician (CPCT/A)
- Billing & Coding Specialist (CBCS)

Most of the program participants are ages 36+ and have had some sort of schooling but never completed a four-year post-secondary education. Many live in rural areas and are working to support their children. They are looking to get a job, advance their career or create more opportunity to support themselves and their families, and FastForward provides a quick, accessible and affordable option thanks to its unique funding model.

Graduates like Danielle Hill, CCMA, said FastForward opens new opportunities. Danielle always liked helping people, and instead of going to school for years, she trained for six months to become a medical assistant, receiving multiple job offers upon graduation.

“We are seeing tremendous success with students who have a great amount of barriers in their lives,” said Lori Dwyer, VCCS assistant vice chancellor for Workforce Policy. “We’re reaching people who need it most and haven’t previously had this lifeline.”

UNIQUE FUNDING MODEL INCENTIVIZES SCHOOLS & STUDENTS

One thing that makes FastForward so innovative is its performance-based funding model. Both community colleges and students receive incentive to complete the FastForward training program.

Funding for the programs typically breaks down into thirds. Students initially pay one-third of the program cost when they enroll. The state pays the second third of the program cost when the student completes the program. The state pays the college the remaining third when the student earns the industry-recognized credential.

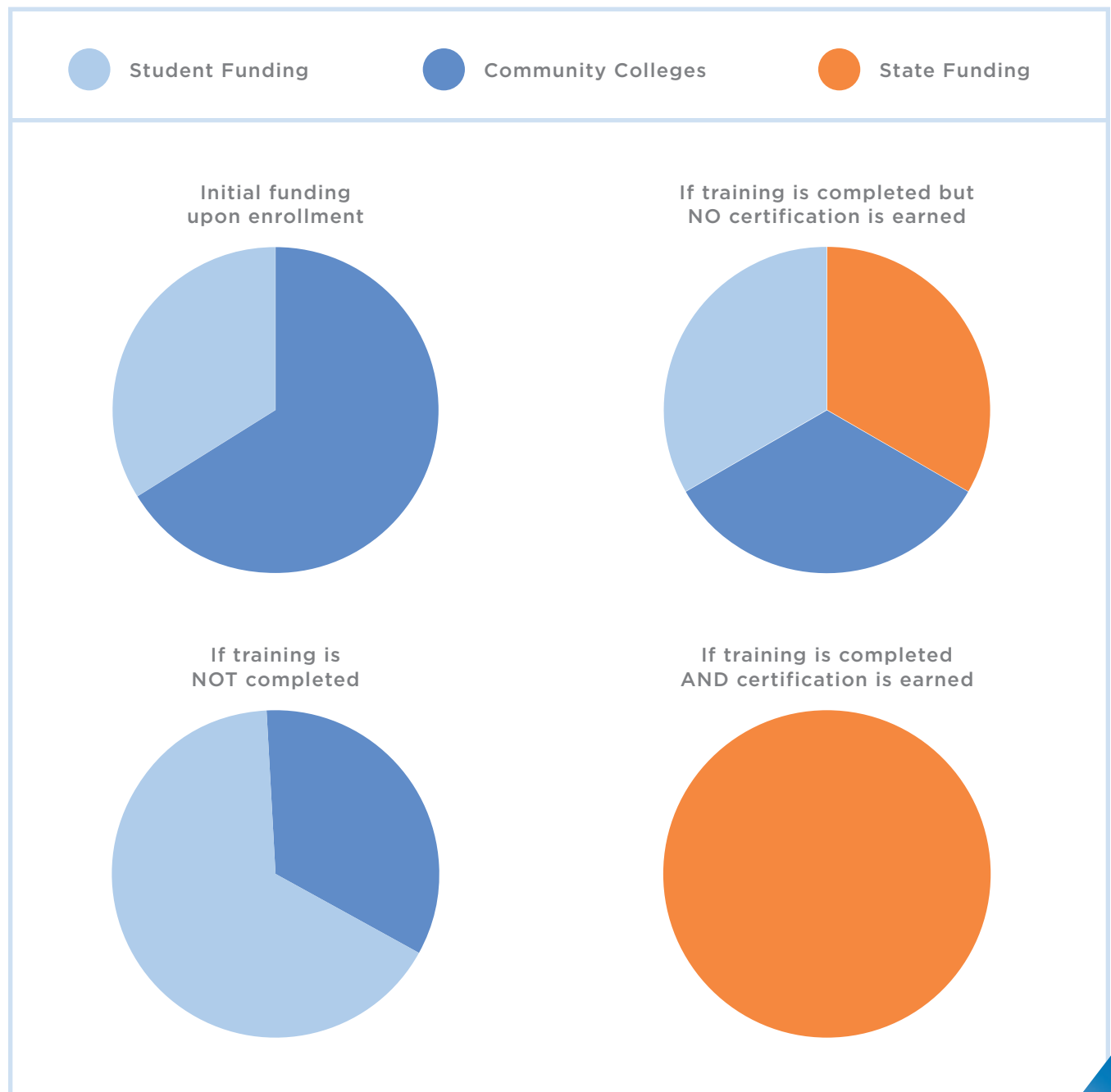
The price of eligible training programs is capped at \$4,500 and state support is capped at \$3,000 per credential. The typical FastForward student, for their part, is charged \$1,000 or less. Many students receive non-credit financial assistance that covers most, and in some cases all, of that cost.

By reducing the out-of-pocket costs to students from several thousand dollars to just a few hundred dollars, FastForward has placed these training opportunities within financial grasp of many more Virginians.

Put simply, for every training completed, community colleges and students are rewarded — which empowers the colleges to expand their programs, encourages them to provide ample support to their students, and motivates the students to succeed.

This innovative “skin-in-the-game” model is helping close Virginia’s skills gap by placing more high-demand credentials into its economy, while ensuring those credentials meet local employer needs. Unsurprisingly, the demand for these training programs has exceeded funding every year since FastForward began; but that’s not stopping colleges from

finding ways to serve additional students. “Our colleges have been really creative to pay for it when the funding has run out,” said Amanda Christopher, VCCS workforce communications coordinator. “There’s more demand than we have the funds to meet.”



REMARKABLE RESULTS

The impact FastForward has had is nothing short of incredible. In addition to earning credentials and the opportunity to achieve a life-changing pay increase, graduates are also gaining a valuable career, often with benefits they didn't have before, like access to health insurance and flexible work hours.

"I get to have my weekends off now which I didn't have before. I get to enjoy my family and friends more. I have more time for me. I learned how to put myself first with this new job," Mercedes Barnes, CCMA, said.

Based on survey responses from nearly 700 students who received a credential after FastForward training and were employed⁴:

- 90% obtained employer-sponsored healthcare
- 75% obtained paid sick leave
- 85% obtained paid vacation
- 88% obtained better work schedules
- 82% are working in their preferred field

Lives Transformed



"I was hesitant to go back to school, but once I knew the time and finances would be manageable, I knew I could do this!"

– Kouri, CCMA



"I took the program seriously and put my all into it, because I wanted a real career, not just a job. I wanted to be something more."

– Christina, CCMA



"I'm way more employable now. I've been on multiple interviews and had multiple job offers ... I'm open to the world now!"

– Danielle, CCMA

90%

of students successfully finish
their credential courses⁵

*NHA certifications are part of the healthcare portfolio
of credentials used in the FastForward program.

15-20%

pay increase is experienced
by FastForward graduates
who earn NHA certifications

“The individuals we’ve hired from FastForward have a good skillset, have come from a good program, and we’ve found that they are reliable, good employees. We’ve had a great experience from the program.”

– Melissa Pierce, HR Director, Bayview Physicians Group

When men and women can quickly change their lives and support their families through increased pay and employer-sponsored benefits, not only do employers benefit, but the whole Virginia economy is strengthened. In a letter from Sen. Frank Ruff, published in The Gazette-Virginian, he states that prior to the FastForward training, 20 percent of program participants were on various government benefit programs. Now, they are able to contribute to the state by paying taxes. He writes: “As new numbers continue to be reported, new certifications awarded, wages continue to rise from experience, and the reduced need for government benefits are calculated, these new taxpayers will be a great asset to Virginia.”⁷

LIVES TRANSFORMED

The numbers above are remarkable, but what cannot be wrapped into statistics is the magnitude of the change that occurs in the lives of FastForward graduates. “We have learned that this type of training and these kinds of credentials are in demand and they lead to true careers — not just jobs — and it’s a very quick way to move people out of poverty,” Stamper said.

Virginia’s FastForward accelerated career-training program shows how powerful a partnership between higher education, elected and business leaders, and students can be. When everyone is working toward a common goal of certification, workers can find better job opportunities, employers can find better qualified workers and regional economies can improve long-term.

As Glenn DuBois, Chancellor of Virginia’s Community Colleges says, “FastForward is doing exactly what we intended: improving the lives of Virginians by helping them start, or re-start their careers to meet the challenges of the ever-changing economy.”

Key Takeaways for Decision Makers

- Coordinating program offerings with industry needs closes skill gaps, benefiting graduates and employers.
- Incentivizing outcomes encourages greater program success.
- Short-term training helps those unserved by traditional higher education programs.
- Data collection demonstrating success can justify additional program resources.

RESOURCES

- ¹ FastForward, "What are FastForward Credentials?". May 16, 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=40&v=6_B-K3lShK4
- ² Accenture, Burning Glass & Harvard Business School, "Bridge the Gap: Rebuilding America's Middle Skills". <https://www.burning-glass.com/research-project/middle-skills/>
- ³ National Skills Coalition, "Virginia's Forgotten Middle". Feb. 6, 2017. <https://www.nationalskillscoalition.org/resources/publications/2017-middle-skills-fact-sheets/file/Virginia-MiddleSkills.pdf>
- ⁴ Virginia Community College System, FastForward Blog, "The Benefits of Being a FastForward Graduate". November 27, 2018. <https://www.fastforwardva.org/benefits-fastforward-graduate/>
- ⁵ Virginia Community College System, "What is FastForward?". <https://www.fastforwardva.org/program-details/>
- ⁶ Virginia Community College System, "Workforce Credentials: The Pathway to Virginia's New Middle Class". 2015. <https://rga.lis.virginia.gov/Published/2015/RD226>
- ⁷ Sen. Frank Ruff, "LETTER: Successful game-changer". The Gazette-Virginian. December 12, 2018. http://www.yourgv.com/opinion/letters_to_editor/letter-successful-game-changer/article_ce5517b8-fd8d-11e8-b460-0bc133e1e153.html

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