

# Assessment of Opportunities and Models for Adults to Complete the Baccalaureate Degree at Virginia Four-Year Institutions

In February 2011, with support from the College Access Challenge Grant Program, the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV) commissioned the Virginia Tech Office of Economic Development (OED) to analyze Virginia's 25 to 64 year-old adult population and the programs available to them in their educational pursuits. This study places a specific emphasis on bachelor degree completion programs at Virginia's public and private, non-profit, four-year institutions. These programs allow working adults who have previously earned college credits to re-enter the postsecondary education system and complete their bachelor's degree.

The research in this study is part of a broader effort in Virginia to increase degree attainment by working-age adults by tailoring programs to serve these non-traditional students more effectively. One of the goals of Virginia's 2011 Higher Education Opportunity Act is to increase by 100,000 the number of college undergraduate degrees earned by 2025. Adult learners will play an integral role in building a workforce that is prepared for the top job opportunities in the emergent knowledge-driven economy.

OED conducted research in the following areas to assess adult degree completion programs in Virginia:

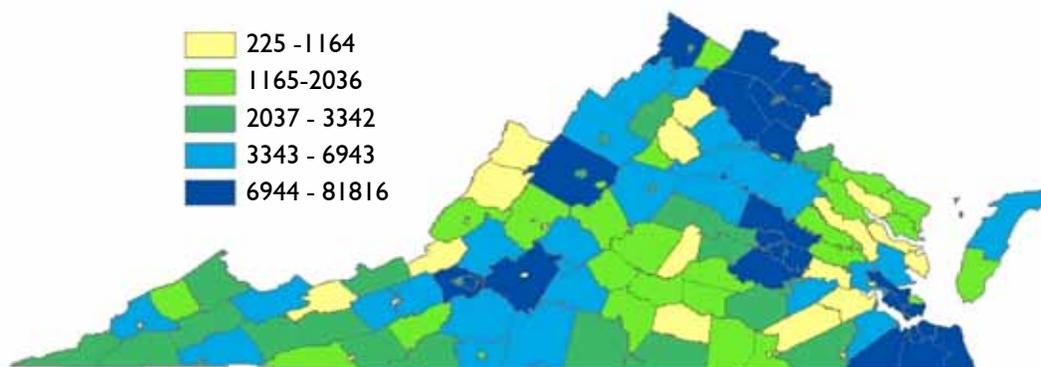
- 1) Collection and analysis of demographic and educational attainment data for Virginia regions;
- 2) Interviews with representatives of adult degree programs at Virginia universities and colleges to identify trends in existing programs; and
- 3) Identification of best practices and promising strategies for adult bachelor degree completion programs and related services.

## DATA and KEY FINDINGS

- **Affordability, proximity to programs, traditional course scheduling, and access to support services are common barriers to degree completion for adult students.**
- **An estimated 66-68% of Virginia's adult students at public institutions submit FAFSA forms, compared to only 43% of adult learners at private non-profit institutions.**
- **Existing adult degree completion programs at Virginia institutions serve highly motivated students well, tailoring course offerings and supportive services to student needs.**
- **Nearly 36% of working-age adults, 25 to 64 years old, in Virginia have attained a bachelor's degree or higher. This proportion is significantly higher than the national average of 29.5%, ranking Virginia 6th in the nation.**
- **Virginia's relatively high state-wide educational attainment rate masks the significantly lower attainment rates of many of Virginia's rural regions, economically distressed urban areas, and disparities among various demographic groups.**
- **Bachelor degree attainment levels are higher for younger adult Virginians (35-44) than older Virginians (45-64), and significant differences exist by gender in the younger age group, with 41% of women age 25-34 having at least a baccalaureate degree compared to 32% of men.**
- **Between 2001 and fall 2009, the enrollment of adult learners increased by 34% with growth occurring primarily in programs at Virginia's private non-profit institutions.**
- **Most working-age adults attend public and private non-profit institutions part-time, whereas 82% of adult students at private for-profit schools attend full-time.**
- **Over 840,000 Virginians (20%) age 25 to 64 have earned some college credit, but do not hold a baccalaureate degree.**
- **An estimated 70% of the "some college" population age 25 and above have one or more years of college and no degree.<sup>1</sup>**
- **Fairfax County (81,816), Virginia Beach (62,255), and Prince William County (42,986) have the state's largest "some college" population pools. Together, these three jurisdictions account for 22% of the statewide "some college" population.**

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. American Community Survey. 3-Year Estimates 2008-2010. Please note this is for population age 25+. Comparable "some college" breakout data currently unavailable for ACS 5-Year estimates and thus percentage may not account for data from counties/cities with populations less than 20,000.

Count of Virginians with "Some College" Experience, by County



# RECOMMENDATIONS

## General

- Designate a state-level position to serve as a central point of contact for institutions that provide adult degree programs.
- Undertake a regionally focused research and engagement pilot project in order to test strategies to tailor degree completion programs to the needs of regional residents and employers.

## Increase Affordability and Accessibility

- Standardize procedures for providing credits for ‘prior work experience.’
- Modify financial aid programs or create new programs which allow eligibility for part-time students.
- Modify curriculum and coursework requirements to shorten completion time necessary for working-age adults.
- Ensure that the counseling services and remedial skills development programs of community colleges and adult education providers prepare participating adult students to meet the admissions standards of four-year institutions.
- Improve the flexibility and “user-friendliness” of articulation agreements between community colleges and four-year universities to respond to evolving industry and occupational outlooks.
- Increase awareness of existing regional facilities with capacity to support distance-learning activities.

## Increase Outreach and Marketing

- Identify students who have earned credits at community colleges or four-year institutions but have not completed a degree.
- Provide students with information on the resources that are available should they choose to return to school to complete a degree.
- Create “one-stop shops” that centralize degree completion resources within higher education centers or in community centers of traditionally underserved communities.
- Promote the use of the Virginia Education Wizard by adult workers and non-traditional students, especially the ‘Careers by Cluster’ and ‘Career Pathway Plans of Study’ functions.
- Identify and engage regional employers in targeted sectors, both public and private.

These recommendations reflect the input of an advisory group made up of Virginia workforce and adult higher education practitioners and support the importance of tailoring program activities and opportunities to respond to Virginia’s regional industry and workforce needs. Report information will be used by the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia and other state agencies and stakeholders to develop and improve resources for Virginia’s adult working population and meet the needs of the Commonwealth’s changing economy and workforce demands. The report summary and full study are available to the public at [www.schev.edu/reports/reportsindex.asp](http://www.schev.edu/reports/reportsindex.asp).

## About the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia ([www.schev.edu](http://www.schev.edu))

The State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV) makes higher education public policy recommendations to the Governor and General Assembly in such areas as capital and operating budget planning, enrollment projections, institutional technology needs, and student financial aid. SCHEV administers a variety of educational programs that benefit students, faculty, parents, and taxpayers, including Virginia’s College Access Challenge Grant Program (CACGP). CACGP is a formula grant program designed to foster partnerships among federal, state and local government entities and philanthropic organizations to significantly increase the number of students who enter and remain in postsecondary education with an emphasis on students and families living below the poverty line.

For more information, please contact Paula Fisher at (804)-225-2612 or [PaulaFisher@schev.edu](mailto:PaulaFisher@schev.edu).



State Council of  
Higher Education for Virginia