



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



State Council of  
Higher Education for Virginia



In February 2011, the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV) commissioned a study to analyze Virginia’s adult population (age 25-64) and the programs available to them in support of their educational pursuits. The “Assessment of Opportunities and Models for Adults to Complete the Baccalaureate Degree at Virginia Four-Year Institutions” report 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 to tailor programs to more effectively serve these non-traditional students. The research identifies key findings and makes recommendations to support increased access for higher education by Virginia’s adults.

## Methodology

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SCHEV contracted with the Virginia Tech Office of Economic Development (OED) to conduct three main research tasks to assess adult degree completion programs in Virginia:

1. **Collect and analyze demographic and educational attainment data for Virginia regions.**
2. **Conduct interviews with representatives of adult degree programs at Virginia universities and colleges to identify trends in Virginia’s existing programs.**
3. **Identify best practices and promising strategies for adult bachelor degree completion programs and related services.**

# Data and Key Findings

Existing adult degree completion programs at Virginia institutions serve highly motivated students well, tailoring course offerings and supportive services to student needs. Several programs also offer specialized degree programs that serve the needs of regionally important industry sectors for specific occupations.

Few programs at four-year institutions serve individuals who do not have strong motivation to obtain a degree or a clear path for career advancement.

## **Degree Attainment Rate**

Nearly 36% of working-age adults, age 25 to 64, 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. The relatively high statewide educational attainment rate for Virginia masks significant disparities between regions of the state, and among various demographic groups. Many rural regions and economically distressed urban areas have significantly lower than average rates of educational attainment. This difference is apparent when comparing suburban Falls Church's 74% with several rural regions where less than 10% of residents have earned a bachelor's degree or higher. Generally, bachelor degree attainment levels are higher for

younger adult Virginians (35-44) than older Virginians (45-64). But there is a notable disparity between male and female attainment in the 25-34 age group. Some 41% of young women in Virginia have completed at least a baccalaureate degree compared with 32% of men. Similarly, African-Americans and Hispanics have degree attainment rates significantly lower than the overall rate.

**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.**



## Affordability and Accessibility

Common barriers to degree completion for adult students include cost, lack of proximity to programs, traditional course scheduling, and poor access to support services.

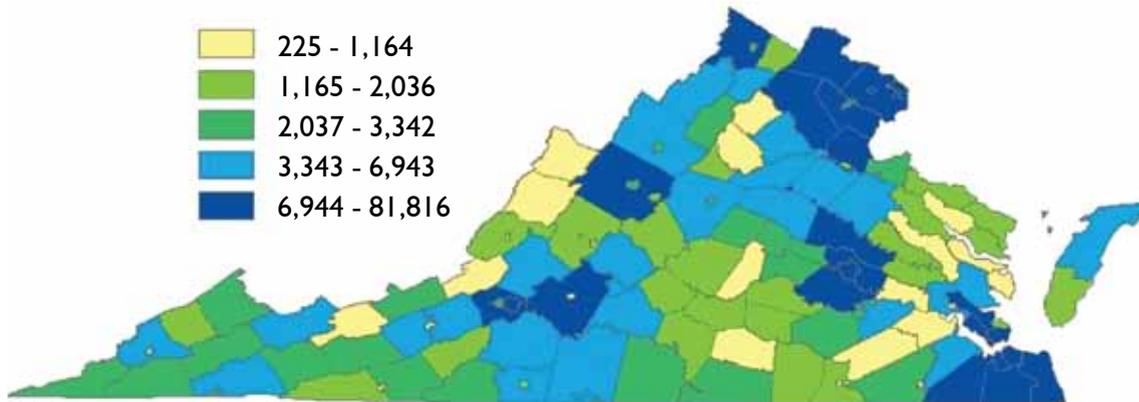
The majority of students enrolled in adult degree programs work more than 20 hours a week, and must schedule coursework around their work schedule and other responsibilities. As a result, over half of

25- to 64-year-old students at four-year colleges enroll part-time, which precludes eligibility for many federal financial aid programs.

**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.**

## “Some College” Population

Count of Virginians with “Some College” Experience, by County



Over 840,000 Virginians (20%) age 25-64 have earned “some college” credit, but do not hold a baccalaureate degree. An estimated 70% of this population has one or more years of college.

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.

# General Recommendations

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**Designate a state-level position to serve as a central point of contact for institutions that provide adult degree programs.**

**This state-level liaison would:**

- **Provide information and assistance to individual institutions seeking to improve adult degree programs.**
- **Increase awareness among working-age adults of options and resources to complete a degree.**
- **Advocate for changes in state policy and legislation that reduce working adults' barriers to degree completion.**
- **Provide leadership and accountability for initiatives that seek to increase credential attainment for target regions and demographic groups.**

**Undertake a regionally focused research and engagement pilot project to test strategies to tailor degree completion programs to the needs of residents and employers.**

**This process will require the following actions:**

- **Identify target populations of residents with 'some college' and assess the characteristics of this population that may have implications for necessary features of degree completion programs and supportive/outreach services.**
- **Identify regionally significant industry sectors and the employment/training needs of firms in these industries. Explore options for creating new and modifying existing regional degree programs to serve these industry needs.**
- **Identify existing regional programs providing adult degree completion and career development services. Determine the adequacy of these programs to meet the needs of employers and target populations.**

The Crater region, Southwest Virginia, and Region 2000 display characteristics that suggest residents and employers would benefit from targeted, regionally focused efforts to identify employer needs for workers with advanced degrees, ensure appropriate degree programs are available, and improve regional services to encourage local residents to pursue degree completion opportunities. A regional approach can be replicated in any area of the state.



# Affordability and Accessibility Recommendations

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**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 occupation dynamics.**

- **Develop career pathways that allow community college students to earn a credential (certificate or associate's degree), as well as apply the credits earned through this process toward a bachelor's degree.**
- **Ensure that articulation agreements allow students to satisfy general education requirements at the community college level, so that students are well-prepared for college-level academics when they progress to a four-year institution, and can focus their time and resources on the courses specific to the bachelor's degree area of study.**

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To view the complete study, please visit:  
**[www.schev.edu/reportstats/  
AdultLearnerStudy2012.pdf](http://www.schev.edu/reportstats/AdultLearnerStudy2012.pdf)**

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**Increase awareness of existing regional facilities with capacity to support distance learning activities.**

- **Create an inventory of higher education centers and community facilities across Virginia that have the existing equipment/capacity necessary to deliver degree completion program courses or services. This resource is especially important for students in areas with few or no four-year institutions nearby. Distribute this inventory to higher education providers across the state, and explore opportunities for providers to offer services at these locations.**



For Marisela Perez, the Bachelor of Interdisciplinary Studies (BIS) at the University of Virginia (UVa) represents the opportunity to fulfill her ambition of being the first person in her family to complete college. “It’s very important to me to set an example for my three children,” she says. “And making progress toward the degree is a source of personal satisfaction.” On the day of her weekly class, Marisela leaves work early and spends a few hours studying at UVa’s Clemons Library before class. “I also stay up late to work after my kids go to bed and study on weekends,” she says, “but it’s well worth it.” Marisela is quick to note that her pursuit of a higher degree is a joint effort. She credits her husband, Gelasio, for his support and encouragement and her employer, Tri-Dim Filter Corporation, for sponsoring her degree program.



# Outreach and Marketing Recommendations

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**Create “one-stop” shops within higher education centers or in community centers of traditionally underserved communities to provide a centralized location for degree completion resources.**

**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.**

- **Assess the types of bachelor’s degrees necessary for their workforce and develop relationships with education institutions that can offer these programs.**
- **Identify opportunities for employers to contribute financially to employees’ education in approved degree programs.**

**Identify students who have earned college credits but have not completed a degree. Provide these students with information on the resources that are available should they choose to return to school to complete a degree.**



[The Adult Degree Program] is perfect for busy, working adults. I completed my degree in just less than three years and graduated in May 2010. It is a wonderful program with wonderful staff and professors who are more than willing to help you accomplish your educational goals. I strongly recommend that anyone looking to start or finish working on their degrees consider ADP.

– *Curtis Jones*

*Mary Baldwin University Student*

**James Houff earned his Bachelor of Professional Studies degree at University of Mary Washington (UMW) while working and raising a family.**

*"The University of Mary Washington has a great reputation, the catalog of classes is great, and the program is perfect for a father of two who has a full-time job. I want to change careers, so this is my ticket to be able to get into the IT field."*

**Roxanne Ehardt of Fauquier County graduated at age 48 with a Bachelor of Professional Studies. She attended UMW while working fulltime.**

*"Since I am in the prime of my life, my thoughts of going back to school were frightening. Once I attended the classes, I realized that most of the students were close to my age and all of us had the same fear and feelings of attending school at our age."*

**Simhah Tamar earned a Bachelor of Liberal Studies degree at the University of Mary Washington.**

*"Attending a traditional university and securing a traditional degree is time consuming. The BLS Program allowed me to take a year off from work, maximize my credits from my associate's degree, and finish my bachelor's degree in a timely manner, thus saving me money in the long run."*



# About This Report

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This publication was developed under the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia's (SCHEV) College Access Challenge Grant Program (CACGP) from the U.S. Department of Education. Contents do not necessarily represent endorsement by the federal government.

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 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.

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To view the complete study, please visit:

[www.schev.edu/reportstats/AdultLearnerStudy2012.pdf](http://www.schev.edu/reportstats/AdultLearnerStudy2012.pdf)

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**This brochure, along with the full report and fact sheet, may be viewed and downloaded at: [www.schev.edu/reports/reportsindex.asp](http://www.schev.edu/reports/reportsindex.asp).**

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