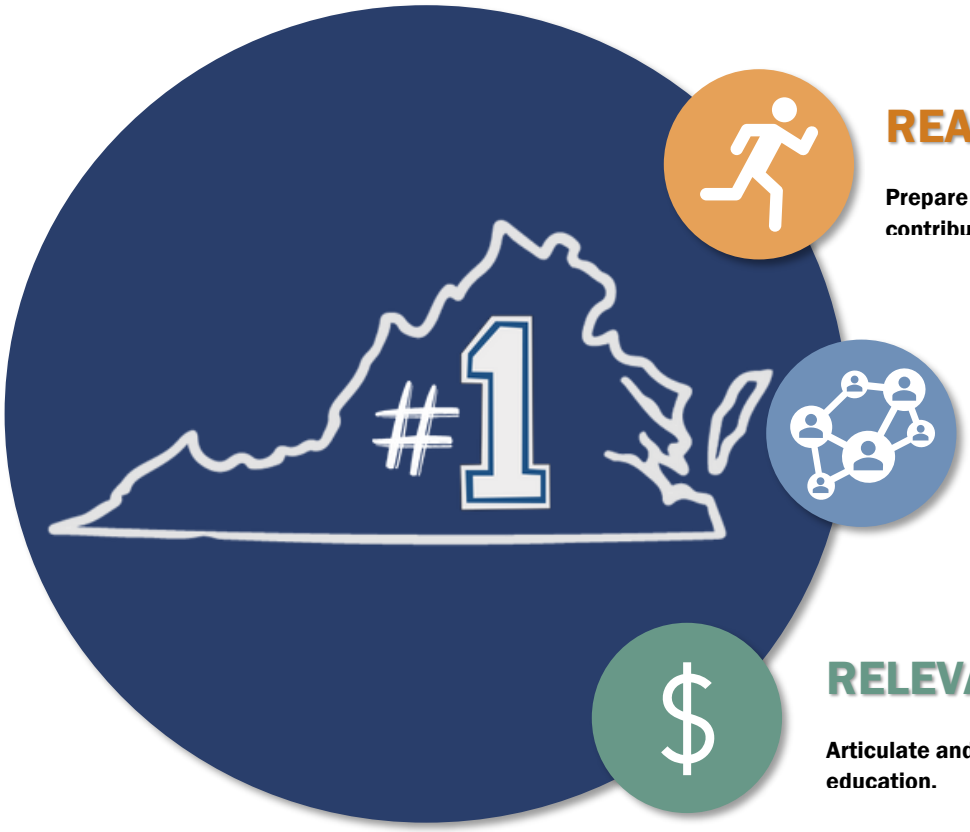
The Virginia Plan for Higher Education

Developing Tomorrow's Talent



READY

Prepare Virginia students to learn, work, contribute & lead.

RESPONSIVE

Align higher education institutions to the needs of students, industry, labor markets, regional economies and Virginians.

RELEVANT

Articulate and emphasize the value of higher education.

Top state for talent — learning to leading

2026-2032

STATE COUNCIL OF HIGHER EDUCATION FOR VIRGINIA

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Developing Tomorrow's Talent: The Virginia Plan for Higher Education

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Virginia's economic future depends on its talent, and higher education plays a central role in developing that talent - preparing students for careers, leadership and civic life. *Developing Tomorrow's Talent: The Virginia Plan for Higher Education* (The Plan) provides a strategic roadmap for Virginia to be the top state for talent - learning to leading. To achieve this vision, the Commonwealth must ensure student readiness, strengthen institutional responsiveness and demonstrate clearly the relevance of higher education, now and in the future.

The Plan was shaped by broad stakeholder engagement and informed by national and state contexts, including the lingering effects of the pandemic learning loss, declining confidence in institutions (including higher education), demographic shifts leading to the "enrollment cliff," affordability pressures and the uncertain impact of changing technologies, including artificial intelligence, on the workforce.

Three goals - **READY, RESPONSIVE and RELEVANT** - guide this plan:

1. **Student Readiness** – Prepare students not only for work but for leadership and civic contribution. This goal can be achieved by ensuring academic preparation, career readiness through work-based learning, and holistic skills such as resiliency, critical thinking and civic knowledge.

2. **Institutional Responsiveness** – Ensure that colleges and universities are able to adapt quickly to changing student needs, labor market demands, demographic realities and societal challenges. This goal can be achieved by expanding mental health support, fostering industry partnerships, creating flexible pathways for non-traditional learners, and strengthening research and innovation ecosystems.

3. **Higher Education's Relevance** – Demonstrate the current, ongoing and future value of higher education by improving access, affordability, transparency and outcomes. This goal can be achieved by providing clear information on costs and aid, expanding alternative pathways and demonstrating higher education's return on investment to Virginians and contributions to the economy and society.

The Plan is designed as a living document—framed by a vision, goals, objectives and strategies with measures to assess progress. By committing to student readiness, institutional responsiveness and demonstrated postsecondary relevance, the Commonwealth will position itself as the "Top State for Talent - Learning to Leading."

THE PLAN

Key Issues

The Virginia Plan for Higher Education serves as a framework for action over a roughly six-year period to address critical issues and emphasizes the future needs for higher education in Virginia. At the outset of the planning process, surveys of SCHEV Council members and stakeholders generally yielded a slate of issues critical to both Virginia higher education and to the Commonwealth as a whole. National and international trends and higher education data validated these issues.

Critical issues identified and ranked from the Council and higher education stakeholder survey responses include:

Virginia Higher Education Issues	Virginia Issues
Talent development and retention (e.g., work-based learning, employer engagement, alternative student pathways).	*Talent development and retention (e.g., outmigration, graduate preparedness, barriers to participation).*
Relevance of higher education and return on investment (relevance to high school graduates, employers' talent needs, research/innovation as an economic engine).	Economy (jobs, inflation, federal policy and funding changes)
Affordability and access (tuition and fees, student educational pathways).	Societal and cultural dynamics (e.g., mental health, political polarization, declining confidence in institutions).
Declining enrollment (enrollment cliff, business model of higher education).	Technological innovation and disruption (e.g., artificial intelligence advancements).
Higher education funding (federal, state and institutional funding models).	
Civil discourse, civic education and civic engagement.	

Note: *Italicized text* = Leading issue (from Council and stakeholder survey responses) for which higher education can play a significant role in addressing.

The most-often cited issue facing Virginia and Virginia higher education pertains to talent – from talent development to employment and retention. For institutions, the challenges are expanding work-based learning opportunities, strengthening employer partnerships and creating alternative student pathways to support diverse learners. For the state, the issue manifests as graduate outmigration, gaps in workforce readiness and persistent barriers to participation in the labor market. Addressing talent development via higher education is therefore inseparable from sustaining Virginia's long-term economic competitiveness.

Closely linked is the question of higher education's relevance and return on investment. Institutions are under pressure to demonstrate value to students, employers and policymakers by aligning educational programs with workforce needs, producing research and innovation that drive economic growth, and ensuring that graduates are well-prepared for evolving industries. These institutional imperatives exist within an economic environment shaped by inflation, rapidly changing workforce demands and significant federal policy and funding changes, which collectively influence both institutional capacity and student outcomes.

Affordability, access and enrollment present additional systemic challenges. Rising tuition and fees, coupled with increasingly complex educational pathways, create barriers for students and families, particularly for those already struggling with food or personal security, poverty and related challenges. These concerns are compounded by demographic shifts leading to declining enrollment, which will strain the traditional higher education business model. At the same time, societal dynamics—such as the prevalence of mental health challenges, growing political polarization and waning public confidence in institutions—further erode trust and present obstacles to higher education's ability to serve students effectively.

Technological disruption, particularly the rapid advancement of artificial intelligence (AI), represents both a challenge and an opportunity. AI and other emerging technologies are poised to reshape instructional delivery, institutional operations and workforce demands, but their long-term implications remain uncertain. Higher education's ability to adapt to and leverage these technologies will be critical for maintaining its relevance.

A final yet critical consideration regarding higher education's relevance and value is its ability to cultivate an informed and engaged citizenry. Institutions must contribute to civic education and foster civil discourse, preparing students to engage meaningfully at every level—from local communities to the broader global stage.

Together, these higher education and state-level issues create a complex operating environment that necessitates a coordinated, forward-looking strategic plan.

From Themes to Framework

Emergent themes, identified from the survey responses and further reinforced by literature and data findings, reflect the critical issues The Virginia Plan for Higher Education must address. Staff organized similar and/or complementary themes to begin to impart a framework for the strategic plan.

Four main categories of themes emerged via this process and serve as the key components for the framework (vision statement and goals)

1. Talent development and retention – Leading issue for Virginia;
2. Students' preparedness broadly;
3. Institutions' alignment to the needs of students, industry, regional labor market and Virginians; and
4. Higher education's pertinence and value to students, families and Virginians.

Terminology Used

As in any statewide plan, the components of "*Developing Tomorrow's Talent*" are inherently broad. Its framework elements are defined and explained visually as follows.

Goals: *What*, in broad terms, Virginia should seek to achieve strategically in and via higher education to advance/thrive over the next six years.

Objectives: ***Why*** the goals are important to Virginia and what critical foci the goals should target.

Strategies: *How*, in specific terms, Virginia should proceed to meet The Plan's objectives and ultimately achieve its overarching theme and goals.

Vision and Goals

Vision: Top State for Talent - Learning to Leading

Work to achieve the three goals will result in the ultimate achievement of The Plan's vision.

Goal One – READY: Objectives related to *students'* readiness.

Goal Two – RESPONSIVE: Objectives related to *institutions'* responsiveness.

Goal Three – RELEVANT: Objectives related to *higher education's* pertinence and value.

Undergirding principle – RESILIENT: Virginia's economic future depends on the resilience of its higher education system and its ability to adapt and remain relevant to students, families, employers and the Commonwealth at large. This includes higher education's responsibility to foster environments that cultivate resilient students who can lead Virginia, the nation and the world into the future.

Endorsed Goal Framework

Goal 1: Ready	Goal 2: Responsive	Goal 3: Relevant
Objectives related to *students'* readiness: 1. To learn (postsecondary readiness). 2. To work (employment/career readiness). 3. To contribute (civil discourse, civic knowledge). 4. To lead (civic leadership, workplace leadership, innovation).	**Objectives related to *institutions'* responsiveness:** 1. To student needs (mental health, basic supports, alternative pathways, etc.). 2. To industry needs (technological and other innovations, alignment to labor market and regional economic needs). 3. To Virginians' needs (higher ed finance, demographic changes). 4. To societal and cultural needs (research and innovation, political polarization, declining confidence in institutions).	**Objectives related to *higher education's* pertinence and value:** 1. To students (sense of belonging/access). 2. To students/parents (affordable and alternative pathways). 3. To Virginians (the broad value of Virginia higher ed, its efficiency and effectiveness).
Supporting Strategies: **1.1.** Establish formal partnerships between VDOE, SCHEV and institutions to align exit and entry standards regarding college readiness. Topics include academic skills, soft skills, life skills, career exploration and SOL alignment to work/careers. **1.2.** Increase collaboration and commitments between Virginia K-12, post-secondary institutions and employers to improve pathway alignment and enhance career readiness via career-focused education and work-based learning (e.g., certifications in high-demand fields, apprenticeships and internships). **1.3**. Incorporate civic knowledge, civil discourse, service-learning opportunities and leadership development into the Virginia college experience – what it means to be part of a community and what it means to lead in an environment of diverse perspectives.	**Supporting Strategies:** **2.1** Expand mental health training and services as well as basic need supports to students, faculty and staff. **2.2.a.** Foster sustainable industry partnerships to co-develop training, re-skilling, work-based learning and credentialing programs. Integrate technological literacy and ethics, especially regarding AI and other advancing technologies, into the college experience. **2.2.b.** Encourage development of agile, responsive, student-centered curriculum policies and audits for faster adaptation to industry shifts. **2.3.a.** Champion innovative funding strategies and efficiencies (e.g., enrollment and infrastructure management) that support affordable access to public higher ed. **2.3.b.** Increase outreach and supports to engage and retain non-traditional students (e.g., adult learners, military, incarcerated, etc.). **2.4.** Establish new and strengthen existing innovation ecosystems around research conducted by Virginia universities to commercialize research discoveries that address societal needs and advance entrepreneurship and startup formation.	**Supporting Strategies:** **3.1.** Implement a cross-sector communication campaign on the value of Virginia higher ed that links existing resources for ease of use; expand access programing (including FAFSA completion, college advising and career coaches for K-12 and college students), as well as enhance the college application process for Virginians. **3.2.a.** Improve transparency to students and families: Provide cost transparency and more consistent financial aid award information and scholarship information, and education earlier in the college decision-making process. **3.2.b.** Promote non-traditional pathways toward credential completion: Credit for prior learning/experience; stackable credentials as package toward completion; consider three-year degree pathways and transfer agreements for high school dual enrollment and advanced placement courses. **3.3.** Improve transparency to Virginians on institutions' outcomes and return on investment, including graduate employment rates and their economic impact.

Vision: Top State for Talent – Learning to Leading

The Commonwealth's ability to sustain and advance its economic competitiveness depends on higher education's effectiveness in developing talent and then retaining those graduates

in Virginia's workforce. To achieve this vision, the state must work toward three compounding goals: preparing students for careers, civic life and leadership; ensuring institutions are responsive to changing demands; and demonstrating higher education's continued and evolving relevance.

The following sections detail each goal, supporting objectives and identified strategies. Appendix A provides a detailed list of potential short-term actions to implement strategies and support the goals and objectives.

Goal 1: Students' Readiness

Prepare students to learn, work, contribute and lead.

Objective 1: Student Readiness to Learn

Student readiness for postsecondary education has been, is and will continue to be a critical issue. Despite post-Covid gains, performance in academic year 2024-25 remained below pre-pandemic levels, with reading pass rates at ~72% compared to ~77% in 2018–19, and math at ~68% compared to ~82% in 2018–19.[1] At the same time, new Standards of Learning (SOL) and higher expectations for achievement have sharpened attention on student preparedness.

Stakeholders across K–12 and higher education consistently express concern that many students are not adequately prepared for postsecondary education or the workforce. Gaps extend beyond academics to include power (human/soft) skills—critical thinking, communication, teamwork, resilience and managing digital distractions—and essential life skills. These competencies are increasingly viewed as integral to success, enabling students to thrive in classrooms, workplaces and communities. Achieving this goal requires sustained collaboration among K–12, higher education, families and employers to extend preparation beyond academics toward holistic readiness for college, careers and life.

Supporting Strategy 1.1

- 1.1. Establish formal partnerships between VDOE, SCHEV and institutions to align exit and entry standards regarding college readiness. Topics include academic skills, soft skills, life skills, career exploration and SOL alignment to work/careers.

Current collaboration exists in the form of lab schools, and VDOE and SCHEV's shared staff position, but no formal collaborative framework with a focus on college readiness exists between these two agencies and higher education institutions. The current VDOE 3E

[1] https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2025/08/27/virginia-sol-scores-pandemic-learning-loss/

Framework (employment, enlistment or enrollment) can serve as the basis for formal partnerships concentrating on student preparedness for postsecondary education, work and life.

Objective 2: Student Readiness to Work

Higher education provides numerous benefits to students and society. One of its primary purposes is the development of talent—ensuring students are prepared for employment broadly and for their careers specifically. Early and continuous opportunities for career exploration and preparation—starting in K–12 and continuing through higher education—are essential. Stakeholders across Virginia highlighted this priority during strategic plan input sessions, emphasizing the need for stronger connections between classroom learning and employment/careers and more opportunities for work-based learning. Strong bipartisan support exists in Virginia for expanding internships, apprenticeships, undergraduate research, practicums and other forms of work-based learning.[2] However, many students currently lack access to work-based learning experiences or alternative credentials, leaving them underprepared for transitions after high school or college.[3]

Supporting Strategy 1.2

- 1.2. Increase collaboration and commitments between Virginia K-12, post-secondary institutions and employers to improve pathway alignment and enhance career readiness via career-focused education and work-based learning (e.g., certifications in high-demand fields, apprenticeships and internships).

Expanding opportunities such as industry-recognized certifications in high-demand fields, apprenticeships, internships, micro-internships and other work-based learning experiences can shorten the path to employment and address critical skills gaps.[4] Evidence from both U.S. states and international systems shows that embedding career-focused learning into curricula improves employment outcomes, particularly when reinforced by public–private partnerships.[5] By committing to sustained collaboration and alignment across sectors, Virginia can ensure that students graduate not only academically prepared but also equipped

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[2] https://growth4va.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/20250501-VBHEC-PollResults.pdf

[3] https://www.hrdive.com/news/high-schoolers-dont-feel-prepared-for-post-graduation/750826/; https://resources.youscience.com/2025-post-graduation-readiness-report.html

[4] https://sheeo.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Q4.24-Policy-Report.pdf; https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2024/12/higher-technical-education-in-england-united-kingdom_187bc99e/7c00dff7-en.pdf

[5] Austin, Mark/Austin Global Strategies, LLC. (2025). *International lessons for Virginia higher education reform* [Presentation and report prepared for] the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia.; https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2024/04/reimagining-education-realising-potential_fa0b99ab/b44e2c39-en.pdf

with the practical experiences, professional connections and necessary credentials to succeed in a rapidly evolving economy.

Objectives 3 and 4: Student Readiness to Contribute/Lead

Higher education prepares students not only for careers but also for civic life, equipping them with the knowledge, skills and experiences necessary to contribute and/or lead in their communities and workplaces. Civic knowledge and the ability to engage in civil discourse form the foundation for effective citizenship. In a time of increased polarization, national events in 2025 underscore the urgency of teaching students how to engage across differences, seek common ground and contribute constructively to society. Such competencies not only help students become effective citizens but also effective leaders in an environment of diverse perspectives.

Supporting Strategy 1.3

- 1.3. Incorporate civic knowledge, civil discourse, service-learning opportunities and leadership development into the Virginia college experience - what it means to be part of a community and what it means to lead in an environment of diverse perspectives.

Embedding these opportunities throughout the student journey helps ensure that all graduates, regardless of major or career path, leave college with a sense of civic responsibility and the skills to contribute and/or lead in workplaces, communities and life. Such preparation also aligns with employer demands for graduates who can work effectively in diverse teams, communicate across cultural and ideological divides and demonstrate ethical judgment.

Goal 2: Institutions' Responsiveness

Align to the needs of students, industry, labor markets, regional economies and Virginians.

Higher education institutions' responsiveness is central to its continued relevance and impact. Virginia's institutions must adapt quickly to changing needs—of students, industry, labor markets, regional economies and society. Responsiveness requires agility, innovation and collaboration across sectors.

Objective 1: Responsive to Students' Needs

Students face obstacles that go beyond academics. Rising rates of anxiety, depression and unmet basic needs put persistence and completion at risk.[6] Expanding mental health services and training, as well as strengthening basic need supports, will ensure that students, faculty and staff have the resources necessary to succeed and thrive. Without proper support, students are less likely to complete their studies and transition successfully into the workforce.

Supporting Strategy 2.1

- 2.1 Expand mental health training and services as well as basic need supports to students, faculty and staff.

Supporting strategy 2.1 entails meeting the basic needs of students as well as faculty and staff through various supports. Basic needs typically constitute food and housing security, meaning that students have access to adequate food and housing/shelter. However, as both higher education and its student population are changing, basic needs can include access to health care (including mental health care); digital and computer device access; childcare for students who are also parents; and accommodations for students with disabilities.

Objective 2: Responsive to Industry and Labor Market Needs

Rapid technological change, particularly the growth of AI, will continue to disrupt industries and create new workforce needs. Employers increasingly expect graduates to possess both technical expertise and digital literacy, along with the capacity to adapt to evolving work environments.[7] Arguably, critical thinking in the age of AI will be an even higher valued skill and further validates the importance of a liberal arts education. Virginia institutions must strengthen partnerships with industry to anticipate and respond to labor market shifts as well as meet skill and competency needs. To forge effective, sustainable partnerships, work must occur on both sides of industry and higher education to inform curricular, program and credentialing needs as well as institutions' capabilities to respond to those needs at a faster pace.

Supporting Strategies 2.2

- 2.2.a. Foster sustainable industry partnerships to co-develop training, re-skilling, work-based learning, and credentialing programs. Integrate technological literacy and ethics, especially regarding AI and other advancing technologies into the college experience.

[6] https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org/2025/03/college-students-struggle-with-mental-health/; https://www.luminafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/State-of-Higher-Education-2024.pdf

[7] https://www.americaspromise.org/news/state-of-young-people-2024

- 2.2.b. Encourage development of agile, responsive, student-centered curriculum policies for faster adaptation to industry and technological shifts.

Both higher education and industry will need to think outside of "one-off" and traditional approaches to collaboration, which tend to address very specific needs of specific employers. Sector-wide strategies (both industry and post-secondary) and long-term partnerships are vital to Virginia's economy and ultimately position us as the top state for talent. Technological literacy and ethics must be embedded within these strategies.

Institutions and industries must collaborate rather than compete to meet broad and regional labor market needs. Traditional processes for curricular changes and program development should evolve toward more agile approaches that match the pace of business.[8] Without such adaptation, higher education risks being bypassed as industries develop their own solutions in real time, degrading the opportunity for valuable cross-sector collaboration.

Objective 3: Responsive to Virginians' Needs

Demographic changes, uncertain federal and state funding, and continued affordability pressures require institutions to reassess traditional funding models and how they serve all Virginians. In addition, institutions must be responsive to the broad needs of all students, including non-traditional learners. The projected "enrollment cliff"—a sharp decline in the number of traditional high school graduates entering higher education—makes this responsiveness an economic imperative.[9] To sustain enrollment and meet workforce demands, institutions must expand access and better support all learners including adult learners, military-affiliated students, incarcerated students, indigenous students and non-traditional populations.[10]

Supporting Strategies 2.3

- 2.3.a. Champion innovative funding strategies and operational efficiencies (e.g., enrollment and infrastructure management) that support affordable access to public higher education.
- 2.3.b. Increase outreach and supports to engage and retain non-traditional students (e.g., adult learners, military, incarcerated).

The current—and likely future—climate of fiscal restraint at both the federal and state levels demands that institutions rethink traditional funding approaches and strengthen operational

[8] https://www.nga.org/publications/governors-top-education-priorities-2024/
[9] https://knocking.wiche.edu/
[10] Austin, Mark/Austin Global Strategies, LLC. (2025). *International lessons for Virginia higher education reform* [Presentation and report prepared for] the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia.

efficiencies related to revenue and expenses. Institutions can look to peers for effective models and best practices, including innovative partnerships with industry and the use of AI.

Expanding access for adult learners, military-affiliated students, incarcerated students, indigenous students and non-traditional students is essential for sustaining enrollment and ensuring the development of talent broadly. To effectively serve all students, including non-traditional students, additional resources and supports will be needed, with an eye toward evidence-based approaches and collaboration within and across institutions.

Objective 4: Responsive to Societal and Cultural Needs

Beyond preparing graduates for the workforce, Virginia's colleges and universities advance the Commonwealth's economic competitiveness through research, discovery and innovation. Higher education institutions are uniquely positioned to tackle the world's preeminent challenges—from improving human health to reducing global conflict. By investing in research and translating discoveries into practical applications, Virginia can leverage its universities as engines of both economic vitality and societal well-being.

Supporting Strategy 2.4

- 2.4. Establish new and strengthen existing innovation ecosystems around research conducted by Virginia universities to commercialize research discoveries that address societal needs and advance entrepreneurship and startup formation.

Innovation ecosystems bring together researchers, entrepreneurs, investors and public partners to move ideas from laboratories to real-world solutions. When supported by infrastructure such as incubators, accelerators, research parks and technology transfer offices, these ecosystems stimulate startup formation, attract venture capital and create high-skilled jobs. They also foster public–private partnerships that ensure discoveries are responsive to regional and national needs.

For Virginia, strengthening these systems means strategically aligning institutional research priorities with the Commonwealth's economic development goals and areas of competitive advantage, including advanced manufacturing, energy, biosciences, cybersecurity and defense. It also requires ensuring that faculty, students and entrepreneurs have access to mentorship, seed funding and commercialization pathways that encourage innovation at every level.

By enhancing its innovation capacity, Virginia higher education can not only drive economic growth, but also position the Commonwealth as a national leader in addressing complex global challenges. These efforts reinforce higher education's role as a public good—

producing knowledge, fostering entrepreneurship and developing solutions with broad and lasting societal impact.

Goal 3: Higher Education's Relevance

Articulate and emphasize the value of higher education.

To remain relevant, Virginia higher education must clearly articulate its value, improve access and affordability, and demonstrate tangible outcomes. Students and families question colleges' return on investment (both time and money). Employers express concerns about graduate readiness, and Virginians seek transparency and accountability from institutions.

Objective 1: Relevance to Students (Access/Belonging)

Inadequate advising due to increasing demands on counselors, limited exposure to college pathways, and challenges navigating admissions and financial aid are some of the barriers that make higher education less accessible and, in turn, less relevant. When students are unable to envision themselves as part of the higher education community, both before and after enrollment, they are less likely to enroll and more likely to stop out. With most jobs now requiring some form of postsecondary education, addressing enrollment barriers is not only a matter of access but also an economic imperative.[11]

Enrollment and completion gaps remain pronounced among males, low-income students, and first-generation students, among others.[12] Closing these gaps requires intentional outreach, robust advising, and targeted supports that foster both access and persistence.[13]

Supporting Strategy 3.1

- 3.1. Implement a cross-sector communication campaign on the value of Virginia higher education that links existing resources for ease of use; expand access programming (including FAFSA completion, college advising and career coaching for K-12 and college students) as well as enhance the college application process for Virginians.

This strategy involves a holistic approach to reducing access barriers. A statewide communication campaign would both inform prospective students and highlight the broader value of higher education for all Virginians. Expanded access programming—such as college

[11] https://cew.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/Projections2031-ES.pdf

[12] https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/education-at-a-glance-2024_c00cad36-en.html; https://sheeo.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Q4.24-Policy-Report.pdf

[13] https://www.collegepromise.org/

fairs, campus visits, academic counseling and financial aid navigation—can increase awareness and preparedness, making the path to college clearer and therefore more attainable. Various institutions, including some in Virginia, have implemented direct admissions policies that offer qualified students' automatic acceptance, reducing barriers and signaling a proactive commitment to access. Virginia is well positioned to build on these models and deliver a statewide solution that simplifies access and connects to a comprehensive communication campaign and accompanying resources.

Objective 2: Relevance to Students and Families (Affordability)

Higher education risks losing its relevance if students and families cannot afford to pursue it. Complex financial aid processes, narrow decision-making windows with major financial implications, and confusing postsecondary pathways all create barriers to affordable access and, ultimately, to student success.

Supporting Strategies 3.2

- 3.2.a. Improve transparency to students and families. Provide cost transparency and more consistent financial aid award information, scholarship information and education earlier in the college decision-making process.
- 3.2.b. Promote non-traditional pathways toward credential completion: Credit for prior learning/experience, stackable credentials as a package toward completion; consider three-year degree pathways and transfer agreements for high school dual enrollment advanced placement courses.

Students and their families need clear, consistent and early information on the true costs of higher education and the financial aid available to them. Transparent pricing, predictable aid and flexible degree pathways help students and families make informed choices.

Virginia's Workforce Credential Grant program 2024 Annual Report shows that more individuals are pursuing short-term credentials that are both affordable and lead directly to employment. This trend underscores the importance of articulating higher education's value proposition and its relationship with other educational pathways. Stakeholders contributing to the strategic plan process reinforced this point, calling for greater availability and promotion of alternative routes to completion. These include credit for prior learning—whether from transfer courses, military training or workplace experience—as well as stackable credentials such as micro-credentials that build toward a degree. Stakeholders also expressed consideration for condensing some degree programs into three years and improving the transferability of dual enrollment and AP courses. Together, these strategies would reduce both time and cost to degree, strengthening the affordability and accessibility of Virginia higher education.

Objective 3: Relevance to Virginians (Value and Effectiveness)

Demonstrating higher education's impact requires clear, accessible data on student outcomes and institutional contributions to the economy.[14] Transparency about graduate employment, earnings and the broader societal benefits of higher education strengthens public trust, reinforces higher education's resilience and fosters Virginia's position as the top state for talent - learning to leading.

Supporting Strategy 3.3

- 3.3. Improve transparency to Virginians on institutions' outcomes and return on investment, including employment rates and their economic impact.

While Virginia already collects and reports extensive higher education data, the challenge lies in making the data more accessible, understandable and actionable. Data on outcomes and impacts —at the student, institutional and statewide levels—must be translated into clear, usable formats with which all Virginians can engage to assess return on investment, determine a pathway's value and make informed decisions.[15]

[14] https://growth4va.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/20250501-VBHEC-PollResults.pdf
[15] https://sheeo.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Q4.24-Policy-Report.pdf

Measures of Progress/Success

The themes that emerged from the planning process informed the goals and corresponding measures that will assess the efficacy of The Plan. The following table outlines the north star measure aligned with achieving The Plan's vision along with measures for assessing progress toward and achievement of the goals set forth in this document.

Vision: Top state for talent - learning to leading.

North Star Goal	Measure	Definition	Baseline	Target by 2032
Top state for talent - learning to leading	**Credentials of Value:** Adults in Virginia's labor force will have credentials of value leading to economic mobility.	Credentials that lead to meaningful career, social and economic benefits and earning more than the median annual earnings of a high school graduate.* Source: Forthcoming from SCHEV	Forthcoming	#1 (state) for credentials of value based on the state index to be developed by SCHEV.
Goal and Objectives	**Measure(s)**	**Definition**	**Baseline**	**Target**
Goal 1: Ready Prepare students to learn, work, contribute and lead. Objectives related to *students' readiness:* 1. To learn (postsecondary education readiness) 2. To work (employment/career readiness) 3. To contribute (civil discourse, civic knowledge) 4. To lead (civic leadership, workplace	**Retention** as a measure of students' readiness for postsecondary education.	Freshman, first time, full-time in college (FTIC) first-year retention rate. Includes two-year, four-year public and private institutions. Source: SCHEV College Outcomes Dashboard ; RT01 report	79.1% (2022-23) grand total all IHEs	Increase rate year-over-year and close gaps between IHEs and types of IHEs.
	Employment as a measure of students' readiness for employment/ careers.	Number of graduates employed one-year post--graduation. Includes graduates from Virginia public, private, two-year and four-year IHEs Source: PSEO data PSEO Explorer - Census Bureau	**Bachelors** (2019-2021 cohort) Total employed: 115,567 **Cert <1 Year** (2016-2020 cohort) Total employed: 20,405 **Cert 1-2 Years** (2016-2020 cohort) Total employed: 16,605 **Associate** (2016-2020 cohort) Total employed: 50,882	Increase total employed within each degree level.

leadership, innovation)			**Cert 2-4 Years** (2016-2020 cohort) Total employed: 202	
Goal 2: Responsive Align to the needs of students, industry, labor markets, regional economies and Virginians. Objectives related to *institutions' responsiveness*: 1. To student needs (mental health, basic supports, alternative pathways, etc.) 2. To industry needs (technological and other innovations), alignment to labor market needs and regional economies 3. To Virginians' needs (higher ed finance, demographic changes) 4. To societal and cultural needs (research/ innovation, political polarization and declining confidence in institutions)	**Completion** as a measure of meeting students' needs. Student supports/services should quantifiably demonstrate improved persistence and completion.	Four-year and six-year graduation rate trends, first-time, full-time in college. Completion at the IHE does not include transfers in state or out-of-state. **Source**: SCHEV Research - College Outcomes (SCHEV) /SCHEV GR-SC01 report / SCHEV GRS04B Report	**Four-year public IHEs** At *four* years – 56% (2018-2019) At *six* years - 70% overall (2018-2019); Gaps between economic cohorts with low-income cohorts having the lowest completion rates. High income – 77% Middle income – 69% Lower income – 55% **Four-year private IHEs** At *four* years – 48% (2018-2019) At *six* years - 56% overall (2018-2019). High income – 62% Middle income – 55% Lower income – 42%	Reduce time to degree and close gaps between economic cohorts and between IHEs.
	Community college success rate as a measure of meeting students' needs. Student supports/ services should quantifiably demonstrate improved persistence and completion.	Community college success rate as measured by five factors in accordance with the Richmond Federal Reserve: Associate degree, transferred, certificate/ diploma, persisted, workforce credential. Basis: full and part-time students, first time at the institution, enrolled anytime during the academic year, degree/certificate seeking, measured four years after student entry. **Source**: First Look: The 2024 Survey of Community College Outcomes | Richmond Fed; SCHEV College Outcomes Dashboard	48.2% aggregate success rate across all five factors (2024). Associate degree attained: 20% Certificate/diploma attained: 6% Workforce credential attained: 1% Transfers prior to award: 11% *Persisted (first to second semester): 68% 2020-21 (2024)	Increase aggregate success rate and across all five factors.

			Persisted (after four years): 10% *Note: Not included in Federal Reserve's Community College Success Rate	
	Workforce alignment as a measure of responsiveness to labor market needs.	Graduates from programs aligned to high-growth occupations. Two-year, Four-year, public and private. Note: Excludes high growth occupations that typically do not require any college education for entry level positions. **Source:** Degrees and Certificates Awarded Report for 2023-24 (SCHEV)	Graduates from programs aligned to high-growth occupations: 42% (2023-2024)	51% (majority) of graduates from programs aligned to high-growth occupations.
Goal 3: Relevant $ Articulate and emphasize the value of higher education. Objectives related to *higher education's pertinence and value*: 1. To students (sense of belonging/access [males, low income, under-represented populations, etc.]) 2. To students/families (affordable and alternative pathways) 3. To Virginians (the broad value of Virginia higher ed, its efficiency and effectiveness)	**College participation rate** as a measure of: Sense of belonging/access; affordability and perceived value of higher education.	Percentage of students who enrolled in any IHE within 16 months of earning a federally recognized high school diploma (Advanced Studies, International Baccalaureate or Standard) as reported by the State Fiscal Stabilization Fund (SFSF) program. **Source**: VDOE C11 report.	64% college participation rate (2023 cohort year; students entering high school in 2019)	75% participation rate

***Note:** The definition of "Credentials of Value" is informed by LUMINA CREDENTIALS OF VALUE. The definition serves as a placeholder while SCHEV works with other stakeholders and learns from other states to craft a definition to measure progress toward The Plan's vision. SCHEV is in the process of developing the definition and methodology/index to measure credentials of value and how Virginia ranks compared to the 49 states.

CALL TO ACTION AND SUPPORTING ACTIVITIES

This Plan represents the collective work and commitment of higher education stakeholders across Virginia. It charts a clear strategic roadmap to realize the vision of making the Commonwealth the "Top State for Talent - Learning to Leading" by 2032. The strategies outlined here are not static; they provide a framework for action.

SCHEV, both the Council and agency, will advance this plan across the Commonwealth and will encourage leaders in state government and higher education to enact its components where relevant and possible in their work. SCHEV Council will identify and endorse a slate of short-term priority initiatives for agency staff to undertake in support of The Plan's goals and vision. These priority initiatives offer one mechanism for SCHEV Council to lead by example with activities supporting The Plan. Additionally, The Plan's framework will inform (in to-be-determined ways) public institutions' six-year plans where appropriate, ensuring alignment between statewide priorities and institutional planning.

Virginia takes pride in its diverse and distinguished higher education system. By uniting higher education stakeholders behind this vision, the Commonwealth will advance excellence, strengthening its leadership in education, workforce development and economic competitiveness. This Plan serves as both a call to action and a commitment to invest in talent and to secure Virginia's future as the nation's model for higher education excellence.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Developing Tomorrow's Talent: The Virginia Plan for Higher Education is the culmination of a collaborative stakeholder engagement process. SCHEV's hope is that all stakeholders involved in the process will see the ways in which their ideas helped to shape The Plan and that those who did not participate directly will still see their needs reflected. The Plan seeks to address the most critical issues facing Virginia that higher education can meaningfully influence. These issues, in turn, shape its vision, goals, objectives, strategies and measures. SCHEV extends sincere gratitude to all the institutions, entities, groups and individuals who helped develop this document. For more details on the planning process, please refer to Appendices B-D.

APPENDIX A: STRATEGY IMPLEMENTATION RECOMMENDATIONS

The following table documents potential short-term initiatives that SCHEV or other higher education stakeholders could implement over a ~two-year period in support of the strategies, goals and objectives of The Plan.

Virginia Higher Ed Goals & Objectives	Supporting Strategies	Potential Initiatives (numbers correspond to supporting strategies)
Goal 1: Ready **Prepare students to learn, work, contribute and lead.** Objectives related to *students' readiness:* 1. **To learn (postsecondary education readiness)** 2. **To work (employment/career readiness)** 3. **To contribute (civil discourse, civic knowledge)** 4. **To lead (civic leadership, workplace leadership, innovation)**	**1.1.** Establish formal partnerships between VDOE, SCHEV and institutions to align exit and entry standards regarding college readiness. Topics include academic skills, soft skills, life skills, career exploration and SOL alignment to work/careers. **1.2.** Increase collaboration and commitments between Virginia K-12, post-secondary institutions and employers to improve pathways alignment and enhance career readiness via career-focused education and work-based learning (e.g., certifications in high-demand fields, apprenticeships and internships). **1.3.** Incorporate civic knowledge, civil discourse, service-learning opportunities and leadership development into the Virginia college experience - what it means to be part of a community and what it means to lead in an environment of diverse perspectives.	***1.1.*** *Testing/assessment of high school students to determine college readiness PRIOR TO senior year to diagnose/remedy any deficiencies prior to HS graduation, particularly in math and English. Potential to use adult education staff as resources to administer testing and any remediation plans/strategies. Consider pre/post assessments for those considering or completing Dual Enrollment (DE) courses.* ***1.2.*** *Expand internships/shadowing hours for students (high school and college) in a field that interests them; pilot and scale innovative models with proven outcomes (e.g., Offering career specific courses that meet core requirements - English course that is tailored to the writing/content need of the career rather than general content; career coaches and champions, K-12 models - academy and lab school models and exploratory courses with career exploration foci).* ***1.2.*** *Implement a state work-study program that focuses on industry-relevant work in and out of higher education settings. Scale industry-led, campus-based work-based learning initiatives.* ***1.3.*** *Scale and strengthen existing efforts to promote civil discourse on campuses, reinforcing Virginia's position as a national leader in this area.*

Goal 2: Responsive

Align to the needs of students, industry, labor markets, regional economies and Virginians.

Objectives related to *institutions' responsiveness*:

1. **To student needs (mental health, basic supports, alternative pathways, etc.)**
2. **To industry needs (technological and other innovations), alignment to labor market needs and regional economies**
3. **To Virginians' needs (higher ed finance, demographic and enrollment changes)**
4. **To societal and cultural needs (research and innovation, political polarization and declining confidence in institutions)**

2.1 Expand mental health training and services as well as basic need supports to students, faculty and staff.

2.2.a. Foster sustainable industry partnerships and commitments to co-develop training, re-skilling, work-based learning and credentialing programs. Integrate technological literacy and ethics, especially regarding AI and other advancing technologies, into the college experience.

2.2.b. Encourage development of agile, responsive, student-centered curriculum policies for faster adaptation to industry and technological shifts.

2.3.a. Champion innovative funding strategies and efficiencies (e.g., enrollment and infrastructure management) that support affordable access to public higher education.

2.3.b. Increase outreach and supports to engage and retain non-traditional students (e.g., adult learners, military, incarcerated).

2.4. Establish new and strengthen existing innovation ecosystems around research conducted by Virginia universities to commercialize research discoveries that address societal needs and advance entrepreneurship and startup formation.

2.1 *Establish formal SCHEV student-centered unit to prioritize and accelerate/support work in this area. Initial work of the unit could include:*

- *Form consultative Student Affairs Advisory committee; develop action plan;*
- *Study/publish best practice (student-perspective not just researcher) in terms of sense of belonging initiatives that show promise/success;*
- *Work with Virginia Higher Education Procurement Consortium (VHEPC) to establish a statewide contract for Mental Health First Aid training across "the system;" and/or*
- *Using legislative levers, move cost of mental health back into insurance systems to correctly align funding source for treatment and assign each student a mental healthcare provider upon entry, with the assumption most will need sustained mental health support.*

2.2.a. *SCHEV-led statewide industry advisory committee/think tanks to engage with VA IHE broadly to inform curriculum, program capacity needs, share trends and industry needs (vs. siloed per each IHE). Or, instead, leverage existing committees/groups to include those convened by VEDP)*

2.2. b. *SCHEV modifications to program approval and productivity review processes; pilot funds for faculty – industry summer externships through V-TOP; embed industry, faculty and staff into industry on a consistent basis (faculty internships, staff exchanges, industry internships into higher ed); incentivize IHEs to adjust internal curricular policies and processes.*

	2.2.b. *Incentivize talent development in key, high demand areas (teaching, nursing, medical, social work, criminal justice) and retention in Virginia (i.e., tuition reimbursement/G3 concept for four-year IHEs). Limit the number of enrollments in low demand career fields. Encouraging students to add minors in such fields and choose alternative majors. Consider this selection in the application/admissions process. (The above essentially aim to "right size" both ends of the spectrum.)* ***2.3.a.*** *Improve planning, advising, transfer and data collection, and implement a common course numbering system for all public institutions.* ***2.3.a.*** *Authorize institutions with a high in-state student population and enrollment capacity the ability to offer reduced tuition to out-of-state students as a talent recruitment and retention strategy. (e.g., NC promise model)* ***2.3.b.*** *Establish partnerships to increase Pell participation for incarcerated students; engage in Prison Education Program (PEP) community of practice through SHEEO and the Vera Institute for Justice opportunity to assess Virginia's needs for Prison Education Program success and sustainability.* ***2.4.*** *Conduct a needs assessment to identify gaps in Virginia's higher ed innovation ecosystem and recommendations to increase Virginia's stature as a leading state for IHE research, commercialization and innovation, serving as an engine for international talent attraction and retention.*

Goal 3: Relevant

Articulate and emphasize the value of higher education.

Objectives related to *higher education's pertinence and value*:

1. **To students – sense of belonging/access (males, low income and under-represented populations)**
2. **To students/families (affordable and alternative pathways)**
3. **To Virginians (the broad value of Virginia higher ed, its efficiency and effectiveness)**

3.1. Implement a cross-sector communication campaign on the value of Virginia higher ed that links existing resources; expand access programming (including FAFSA completion, college advising and career coaches for K-12 and college students), as well as enhance the college application process for Virginians.

3.2.a. Improve transparency to students and families: Provide cost transparency and more consistent financial aid and scholarship information earlier in the college decision-making process.

3.2.b. Promote non-traditional pathways toward credential completion: Credit for prior learning/experience; stackable credentials as package toward completion; consider three-year degree pathways and transfer agreements for high school dual enrollment and advanced placement courses.

3.3. Improve transparency to Virginians on institutions' outcomes and return on investment including graduate employment rates, and their economic impact.

3.1 *Develop and launch, in conjunction with other relevant state agencies, a parent and student-facing portal that facilitates academic and career exploration, as well as direct admissions to Virginia's public and private institutions of higher education.*

3.1 *Introduce legislation requiring public HS juniors to complete FAFSA.*

3.2.a. *Implement and publish an annual statewide study that evaluates cost of delivery of all course types at all levels of public higher education. This information should be used to inform updated funding recommendations to the General Assembly.*

3.2.b. *Change transfer grant requirements to allow students to submit current GPA vs. final so they can complete the application during their final semester of enrollment (along with other potential modifications to transfer grant process as determined by a work group).*

3.2.b. *Innovative funding options to support students on the back end of their educational careers by providing funding to complete certificates, licensing exams, etc. (i.e., via public private partnerships – such as Bon Secours does for nursing).*

3.2.b. *Lead a study on steps necessary for legal immigrants with degrees in home countries to efficiently and effectively meet U.S. degree standards in order to practice in their professions.*

3.3. *Adopt the Success Metric methodology from the Federal Reserve to measure community colleges' performance.*

3.3. *Revise SCHEV six-year planning process to include fact packs, alignment with statewide strategic plan and incorporate return on investment into these activities.*

	3.3. *Via legislation, enable collection of state college gambling revenues and direct a portion to college athletics departments to support student-athletes (scholarships, mental health, academic support). (NC as a model)*

APPENDIX B: PLANNING EFFORTS AND APPROACH

Background

Developing Tomorrow's Talent, Virginia's statewide strategic plan for higher education, and the vision, goals, objectives, strategies and measures contained therein, reflect the national and state contexts and uncertainties existing in 2025. Nationally, shifts in federal policy, declining public confidence in the value of higher education, the looming "enrollment cliff" of fewer high school graduates, and the uncertain impact of changing technologies, including artificial intelligence, on higher education and the workforce all set the backdrop for this plan.

Virginia has repeatedly been recognized as the nation's top state for business - a distinction largely driven by its world-class higher education institutions, which fuel talent development, research and innovation. Put simply, Virginia's economic future depends on the resilience of its higher education system and its ability to adapt. Yet, the above-mentioned factors threaten this standing, underscoring the need for Virginia higher education to be ready, responsive, relevant and ultimately resilient.

The State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV) holds a codified responsibility (§ 23.1-203) to develop a statewide strategic plan (The Plan) for higher education that seeks to address critical issues facing Virginia, specifically those issues higher education can meaningfully influence. The Plan also must reflect statutory goals and identify a coordinated approach with a focus on the future needs for higher education.

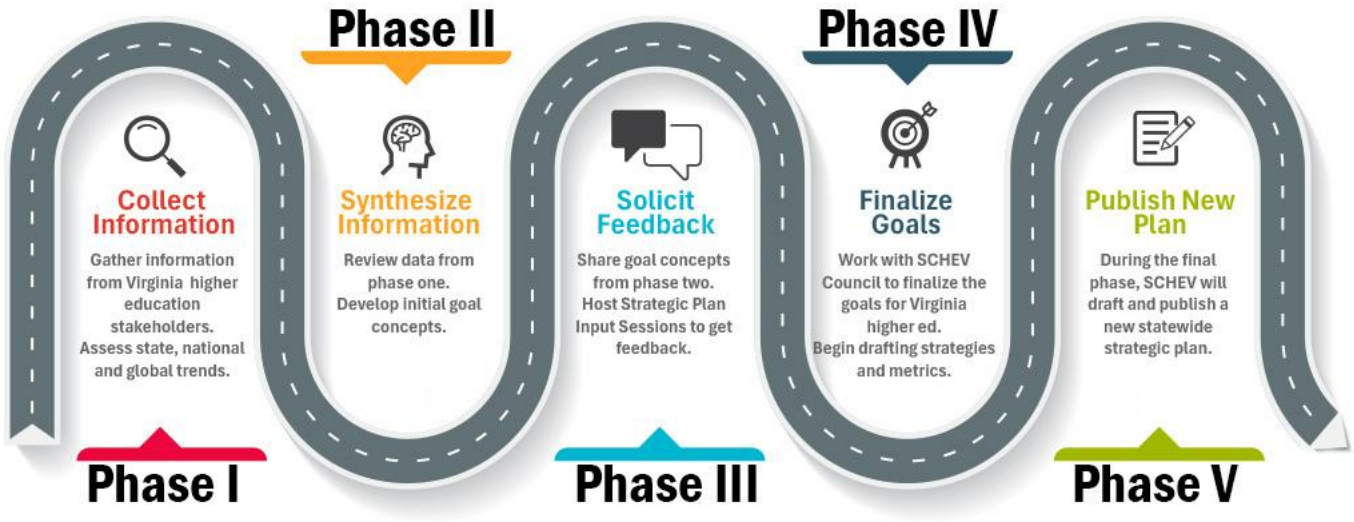
By statute, SCHEV must review and update The Plan every six years to ensure its relevance in addressing critical issues; thus, the timeframe of this plan is 2026-2032. *Developing Tomorrow's Talent: The Virginia Plan for Higher Education* is the latest iteration

and marks a shift to "outcomes" from prior emphases on "inputs" - access, affordability and quality. The emphasis on outcomes is attributed, in part, to declining public confidence in institutions, including higher education. Details about the previous Plan and progress toward its goals are provided in Appendices E and F.

In early 2025, the SCHEV Council launched the development of this Plan, both to meet its statutory charge and, more importantly, to identify and help address the most pressing issues facing Virginia in the coming six years and beyond. The Plan outlines the vision, goals, objectives, strategies and measures of progress that serve as the framework for action. The SCHEV staff developed an intentional and iterative process with initial consideration of national and state trends (Appendix C) as well as broad stakeholder input (Appendix D). Staff conducted a non-exhaustive literature review of state, national, and international issues and trends; analyzed higher education data at multiple levels; and surveyed both SCHEV Council members and Virginia higher education stakeholders. Through these inputs surfaced a slate of consistently identified critical issues facing Virginia and Virginia higher education, which informed the strategic framework set forth in this Plan.

Phased Approach

SCHEV staff followed the phased approach below to complete The Plan. The phase information was available on the SCHEV website and was updated regularly to reflect the active phase. Comprehensive planning information will remain available on the SCHEV website until the next plan is developed.



APPENDIX C: LITERATURE REVIEW AND REFERENCES: HIGHER EDUCATION, WORKFORCE AND DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS (2024–2025)

Prepared for policymakers, higher education and workforce stakeholders

Executive Summary

Recent research from state, national and international sources points to a rapidly shifting higher education landscape marked by declining traditional college enrollment, persistent gaps in access and completion, rising workforce demands and calls for systemic innovation. While public trust in higher education remains relatively strong in some states (e.g., Virginia), national and global data highlight urgent needs for earlier career readiness interventions, alignment of credentials with labor market needs, affordability innovations, institutional reforms and attention to student well-being (VBHEC, 2024; OECD, 2024; Crist, 2025; Watermark, 2024).

1. Public Confidence and Higher Education's Perceived Value

In Virginia, 82% of residents express confidence in public higher education, 90% would recommend Virginia colleges to their children, and 88% view them as a sound investment (VBHEC, 2024). While affordability concerns persist, most still see higher education as a good value—especially when linked to workforce and economic outcomes. Virginia's affordability profile shows a lower-than-average student debt burden relative to income, supported by strong need-based aid programs, though tuition at public universities remains above the national average (SREB, 2021).

Recent national polling indicates a rebound in public trust: the share of Americans reporting "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in higher education rose from 36% to 42% year-over-year (Andrews & Shaffer, 2025). This increase spanned diverse demographic groups and ideological affiliations, signaling a more widespread uptick in sentiment (Association of American Universities, 2025). The rise suggests potential for renewed public backing of higher education initiatives — especially those emphasizing affordability, accountability and practical workforce relevance. However, the increase in confidence remains below levels last seen in 2018.

2. Enrollment and Demographic Shifts

National projections indicate that U.S. high school graduate numbers will peak in 2025 and then decline, with sharper drops in the Northeast and Midwest, and growth concentrated in the South, particularly among Hispanic and multiracial populations (WICHE, 2024). State-level priorities suggest that governors are preparing for these shifts by expanding dual enrollment, career pathways and workforce-aligned programs to attract and retain diverse learners (NGA, 2024).

International data confirm that while educational attainment is rising, participation and outcomes remain uneven, especially for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds (OECD, 2024). The European Higher Education Area (EC, 2024) identifies similar demographic pressures across Europe. Mark Austin's comparative review shows that lower- and middle-income countries (LMICs) are managing enrollment pressures by expanding geographic access, growing short-cycle programs and widening participation for disadvantaged groups—often trading off between broader access and risks to completion quality (Austin, 2025).

3. Changing Postsecondary Pathways

Only 35% of 2024 graduates plan to pursue a four-year degree—down from 55% in 2019—with more opting for direct-to-work or vocational training (YouScience, 2025). A significant readiness gap persists: 72% of recent graduates feel only moderately, slightly or not at all prepared for life after high school, and 70% lack confidence in their career or education plans (YouScience, 2025). The HR Dive/JFF report confirms this readiness gap, noting that half of students have never held a job or internship, and more than a third have never visited a college campus (Crist, 2025). Youth themselves are voicing concerns about readiness, mental health and the role of AI in reshaping both learning and work opportunities (America's Promise Alliance, 2025).

4. Affordability and Student Success

Women now outperform men in tertiary attainment but face persistent wage gaps; low-income and first-generation students also have lower completion rates (OECD, 2024; SHEEO, 2024). The Complete College America (CCA) strategic plan calls for focusing on completion strategies, expanding proven interventions and using data to close performance gaps (Complete College America, 2025). Promise Programs show success in improving affordability, enrollment and persistence by reducing tuition barriers,

particularly for underrepresented and low-income populations (College Promise, 2024).

Governors also are prioritizing affordability as a lever for student success, with Virginia ranking well in need-based aid distribution but still facing access challenges for rural and underrepresented students (SREB, 2021; NGA, 2024). Internationally, Mark Austin notes that LMICs are experimenting with targeted scholarships, tuition subsidies and digital access initiatives (e.g., broadband expansion in Kenya and South Africa) to reduce barriers for rural and low-income populations (Austin, 2025).

5. Workforce Alignment and Economic Impact

States are increasingly linking postsecondary funding to workforce needs, with major investments in healthcare, AI, STEM, teaching and energy sectors (SHEEO, 2024). While labor market outcomes strongly favor those with postsecondary education, skills mismatches remain common (OECD, 2024). Career-connected learning—such as dual enrollment, CTE, apprenticeships and industry credentials—is emerging as a critical tool for shortening the path from education to employment (YouScience, 2025; SHEEO, 2024). Governors nationwide are emphasizing "earn-and-learn" models such as apprenticeships, internships and work-study programs as ways to improve both student readiness and employer retention (NGA, 2024; Crist, 2025).

OECD's *Higher Technical Education in England* (2024b) demonstrates how technical pathways can fill middle-skill gaps. Complementing this, Austin's review of LMICs shows that competency-based curricula, micro-credentials and apprenticeships are being used to improve employability and strengthen industry linkages—lessons Virginia could adapt in scaling CTE and workforce partnerships (Austin, 2025).

6. Institutional Strategy and Reform

Despite clear needs for transformation, institutional reforms in higher education often falter. A recent analysis highlights the top reasons strategy efforts fail, including lack of stakeholder buy-in, poor communication, limited alignment with mission and inadequate measurement of progress (Watermark, 2024). Institutions that succeed are those that:

- Create shared ownership of change across faculty, staff and leadership.
- Align reforms directly with student success and workforce outcomes.

- Use data-driven performance tracking to adjust initiatives over time.
  This evidence underscores the importance of not just what reforms are pursued but how they are implemented and sustained.

7. Policy and Practice Recommendations

Strengthen Early Career Readiness

- Expand access to aptitude-based assessments, CTE programs and internships before high school graduation (YouScience, 2025).
- Increase opportunities for in-person job shadowing, worksite visits and exposure to nontraditional career pathways (Crist, 2025).
- Incorporate student voices into readiness initiatives, addressing mental health and AI's role in learning and work (America's Promise Alliance, 2025).

Expand Affordable Access

- Invest in Promise Programs and other activities to eliminate tuition as a barrier, particularly for underrepresented and first-generation students (College Promise, 2024).
- Use affordability metrics to guide funding and policy decisions, ensuring aid reaches populations with the greatest unmet need (SREB, 2021).

Align Programs to Workforce Demand

- Increase investment in high-need sectors and tie funding to labor market outcomes (SHEEO, 2024).
- Partner with employers to co-design curricula and expand earn-and-learn opportunities (NGA, 2024; Crist, 2025).

Build Institutional Capacity for Change

- Prioritize leadership development, communication strategies and stakeholder engagement to sustain reforms (Watermark, 2024).
- Establish accountability systems that link strategic initiatives to student and workforce outcomes (Complete College America, 2025).

Protect and Communicate Higher Education's Value

- Demonstrate and publicize the economic and civic ROI of higher education (VBHEC, 2024).
- Use transparent data to show how institutions contribute to local workforce and community vitality (SHEEO, 2024).
- Align messaging with governors' stated education and workforce priorities to ensure bipartisan policy momentum (NGA, 2024).

Conclusion

The convergence of demographic change, shifting student preferences, affordability pressures and evolving labor market demands calls for **integrated education-workforce strategies** and **institutional reforms that can scale and endure**. Policymakers, education leaders and institutions must act now to **modernize pathways, close gaps in opportunity and reaffirm higher education's relevance** in a rapidly changing economy.

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Note. Literature review and references generated in part using ChatGPT prompt: "Generate a policy-style literature review of all uploaded reports, publications and other documents/studies with all sources integrated and cited in APA style followed by the complete reference list."

APPENDIX D: STAKEHOLDER INPUT PROCESS

Council Survey

SCHEV began its work on The Plan in late 2024, developing an action plan to include input from all levels of stakeholders. SCHEV staff developed an open-ended survey that Executive Director Scott Fleming issued to the 13 Council members in late January 2025 with a one-week response period. Council members were asked to address the following questions:

- Over the next six years, what are the biggest issues facing Virginia?
- Of the above issues, which can higher education play a significant role in addressing?
- How can higher education address these issues, and how can higher education be supported, improved and/or changed to better address these issues?
- Over the next six years, what are the most likely big issues in/for Virginia higher education?

SCHEV staff analyzed the responses received and identified the following themes:

Key Issues Expected to Impact Virginia that Higher Ed Can Play a Significant Role in Addressing:

- Talent development and retention (e.g., outmigration, graduate preparedness, barriers to participation)
- Economy (jobs, inflation, federal policy/funding changes)
- Societal and cultural dynamics (e.g., mental health, political polarization, declining confidence in institutions)
- Technological innovation and disruption (e.g., AI advancements)

Key Issues Expected to Impact Virginia Higher Education

- Higher ed funding (federal, state and institutional funding models)
- Talent development and retention (work-based learning, employer engagement, alternate student pathways)
- Declining enrollment (demographic cliff, business model of higher education)
- Relevance of higher ed and ROI (relevance to high school grads, research)
- Student supports (mental health and wellness, basic needs, sense of belonging)
- Affordability and access (tuition and fees, alternate student pathways)
- Civil discourse, civic education and civic engagement

Stakeholder Survey

After gathering and analyzing the Council's input, staff used this information to develop a broader stakeholder survey. The stakeholder survey was shared with higher education stakeholders across the Commonwealth to include all those listed in the table below titled: "Types of Stakeholders Represented in the Input Process (Survey and Input Sessions)." Stakeholders were asked to respond to the following:

- Over the next six years, what are the biggest issues facing Virginia? Rank the concepts below from most significant (1) to least significant (4)
  - Talent development and retention (e.g., outmigration, graduate preparedness, barriers to participation)
  - Economy (e.g., jobs, inflation, federal policy/funding changes)
  - Societal and cultural dynamics (e.g., mental health, political polarization, declining confidence in institutions)
  - Technological innovation and disruption (e.g., artificial intelligence advancements)

Key Issue	Percent who ranked the issue number one
Economy (e.g., jobs, inflation, federal policy/funding changes)	44%
Societal and cultural dynamics (e.g., mental health, political polarization declining confidence in institutions)	33%
Talent development and retention (e.g., outmigration, graduate preparedness, barriers to participation)	19%
Technological innovation and disruption (e.g., artificial intelligence advancements)	5%

Key Issue	*Percent by Ranking (second to fourth)* Second	Third	Fourth
Economy (e.g., jobs, inflation, federal policy/funding changes)	32%	19%	5%
Societal and cultural dynamics (e.g., mental health, political polarization declining confidence in institutions)	27%	22%	18%
Talent development and retention (e.g., outmigration, graduate preparedness, barriers to participation)	26%	32%	23%
Technological innovation and disruption (e.g., artificial intelligence advancements)	14%	27%	54%

- Would you add any issues to the above list? If so, please include them below and elaborate as needed.

Summary of responses: Respondents largely mirrored the sentiments of the list provided in question one but with additional emphasis and specificity.

Respondents expressed concerns around declining academic rigor, access to affordable housing and health care, climate change and resulting weather events, broad economic pressures and demographic shifts along with resultant impacts on higher education and workforce outcomes.

- Of the above issues, which can higher education play a significant role in addressing (Participants could select multiple options.)
  - Talent development and retention (e.g., outmigration, graduate preparedness, barriers to participation)
  - Economy (e.g., jobs, inflation, federal policy/funding changes)
  - Societal and cultural dynamics (e.g., mental health, political polarization, declining confidence in institutions)
  - Technological innovation and disruption (e.g., artificial intelligence advancements)
  - Other(s) as identified in response to the preceding question

- How can higher education address these issues, and how can higher education be supported, improved, and/or changed to better address these issues?

Survey respondents emphasized that Virginia's higher education system should more closely align with workforce needs through expanded career-relevant programs, internships and industry partnerships. Many called for increased state funding to ensure affordability, maintain program quality and reduce student debt. Respondents also emphasized expanded student support services such as academic advising, mental health care and career guidance. Respondents stressed the importance of flexible, innovative curricula that prepare students for emerging economic demands, as well as improved access for underserved, rural and non-traditional learners. Stakeholders noted the significance of collaboration between institutions, industry and communities in sustaining talent development and addressing statewide challenges.

- Over the next six years, what are the most likely big issues in/for Virginia higher education? Rank the concepts below from most significant (1) to least significant (7)
  - Higher education funding (federal, state, and institutional funding models)
  - Talent development and retention (work-based learning, employer engagement, alternative student pathways)
  - Declining enrollment (demographic cliff, business model of higher education)
  - Relevance and value of higher education (relevance to high school graduates, academic research, return on investment)
  - Student supports (mental health and wellness, basic needs, sense of belonging)
  - Affordability and access (tuition and fees, student pathways)
  - Civil discourse, civic education, and civic engagement

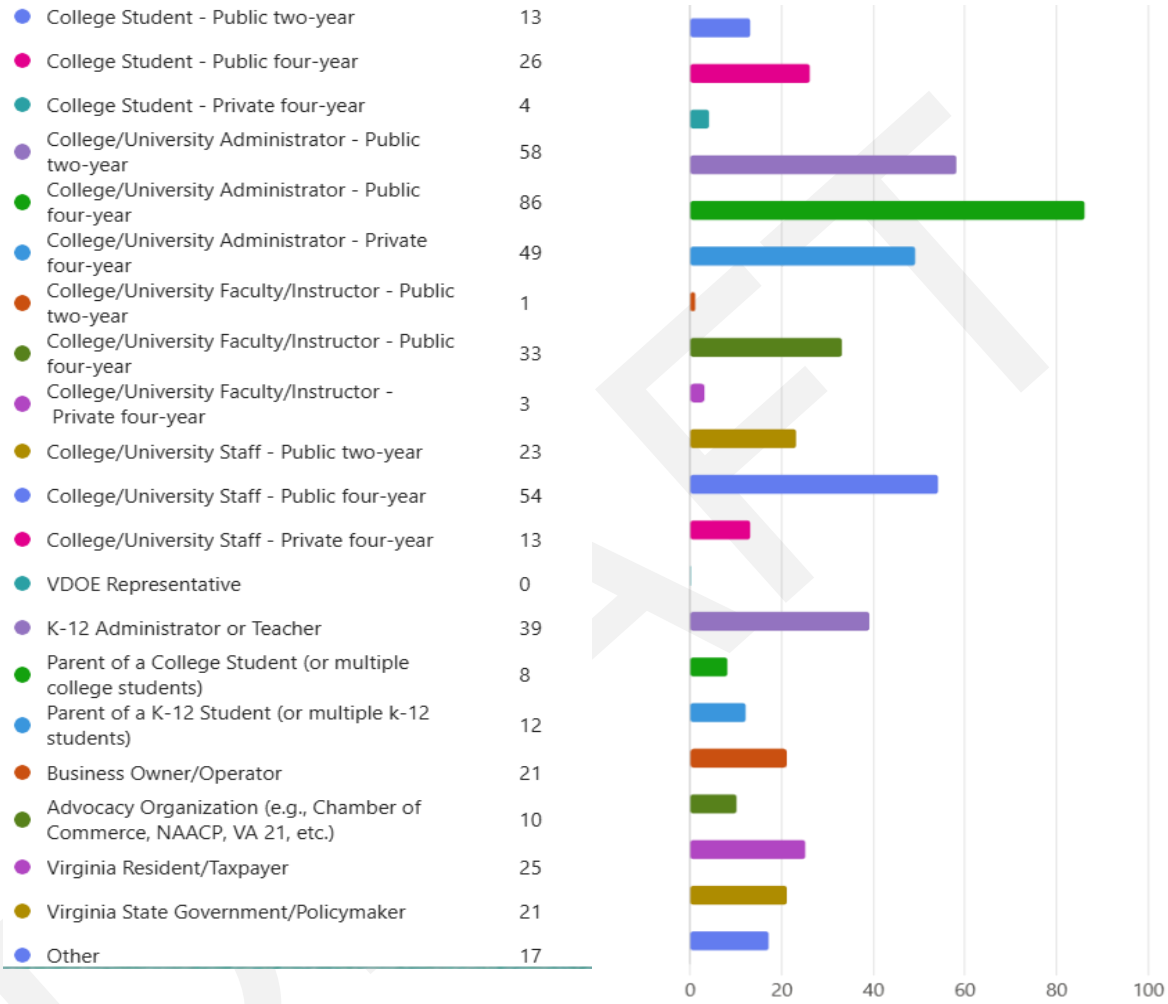
Key issue	Percent who ranked the issue number one
Higher education funding (federal, state, and institutional funding models)	48%
Affordability and access (tuition and fees, student pathways)	15%
Declining enrollment (demographic cliff, business model of higher education)	12%
Relevance and value of higher education (relevance to high school graduates, academic research, return on investment)	13%
Talent development and retention (work-based learning, employer engagement, alternative student pathways)	6%
Civil discourse, civic education, and civic engagement	5%
Student supports (mental health and wellness, basic needs, sense of belonging)	2%

	Percent by Ranking (second to seventh)					
Key Issue	**Second**	**Third**	**Fourth**	**Fifth**	**Sixth**	**Seventh**
Higher education funding (federal, state and institutional funding models)	21%	11%	8%	6%	4%	2%
Affordability and access (tuition and fees, student pathways)	23%	21%	14%	12%	11%	4%
Declining enrollment (demographic cliff, business model of higher education)	17%	17%	13%	15%	15%	10%
Relevance and value of higher education (relevance to high school graduates, academic research, return on investment)	13%	15%	17%	18%	13%	11%
Talent development and retention (work-based learning, employer engagement, alternative student pathways)	15%	16%	20%	17%	17%	11%
Civil discourse, civic education, and civic engagement	5%	8%	9%	10%	15%	49%
Student supports (mental health and wellness, basic needs, sense of belonging)	7%	11%	19%	22%	25%	14%

- Would you add any issues to the above list? If so, please include them below and elaborate as needed.

Summary of responses: As with question two, respondents' sentiments generally mirrored those from the list in the previous question with additional emphasis and specificity. Some of the trending concerns included uncertainties related to the changing federal landscape, rising costs of tuition and fees, gaps in program offerings leading to outmigration, relevance to workforce needs, campus governance related to federal policy changes and safety issues, declining support and resources for research, sustainability efforts on campuses in response to climate change, access for non-traditional students, and more collaboration and resource sharing efforts among institutions. Respondents continued to emphasize the importance of talent development and retention.

- Stakeholder Type



- Institution/Organization Name (If not affiliated with an institution or organization, enter N/A)
- Last Name (optional)
- First Name (optional)
- Email Address (if you would like to be added to our mailing list for important updates)

The survey was open from February 14, 2025, to March 5, 2025, and resulted in 516 responses. Responses helped further define themes to address in the new statewide strategic plan. Many stakeholders took advantage of the open-ended questions which led to additional items for consideration and inclusion in the plan.

The above-mentioned survey results identify several top issues facing Virginia. However, survey data show that talent is the leading Virginia and Virginia higher

education issue that higher ed, itself, can play a significant role in addressing. Therefore, the Plan's framework and ultimate vision focus on talent.

Stakeholder Group Meetings

After analyzing all survey responses to identify and categorize themes and action items, SCHEV staff formed an internal interdisciplinary working group to support the planning process with expertise from a cross-section of SCHEV departments. The working group reviewed the survey analyses and determined three main buckets into which the identified priorities could be categorized. These defining themes are represented below.

Defining Themes	
Themes related to students' preparedness	• To learn (college readiness/preparedness) • To work (career readiness/preparedness) • To contribute (civil discourse, civic engagement) • To lead
Themes related to higher education's pertinence and value	• To students – sense of belonging/access (e.g., male, low-income and underrepresented students) • To students/families (affordable pathways) • To taxpayers (return on investment)
Themes related to institutions' responsiveness and resilience	• To industry needs (AI and other technological disruptions and innovations) • To student needs (e.g., mental health, basic needs, pathways) • To Virginians' needs (funding models, organizational efficiencies and accountability, demographic changes) • To societal and cultural needs (e.g., political polarization and declining confidence in institutions)

From here, the themes went through an iterative process as the SCHEV team gathered feedback from Council and stakeholders across the Commonwealth and brought input back to the working group periodically to discuss and refine. See more details regarding the internal working group in the "SCHEV Strategic Planning Workgroup" section below.

Council Meetings

To start this process, SCHEV staff presented the above themes to Council during the March 2025 meeting held at the Virginia Military Institute. Following Council's feedback during this meeting, the team made recommended adjustments and refined the themes into draft goals and supporting objectives.

SCHEV staff updated Council at each subsequent meeting in 2025, providing additional or modified details each time for Council's reaction. Council engaged in a process similar to the gallery walk described in the "Public Input Sessions" section below. Goals, objectives and/or strategies were listed on a slide, and Council members were able to provide specific feedback for each.

For more details on the items presented to Council, refer to the links below:

Meeting Date	Agenda Book	Related Resources
March 17-18, 2025	March Agenda Book	Discussion of Draft Goals of the Statewide Strategic Plan for Virginia Higher Education
May 12-13, 2025	May Agenda Book	Draft Goals of the Statewide Strategic Plan for Virginia Higher Education
July 15, 2025	July Agenda Book	Continued Discussion of Draft Goals of the Statewide Strategic Plan for Virginia Higher Education
September 15-16, 2025	September Agenda Book	Action on Framework for the Next Statewide Strategic Plan for Virginia Higher Education
October 30, 2025	October Agenda Book	Council Discussion of Draft Strategic Plan
December 15, 2025 (special session)	December Agenda Book	

Public Input Sessions

Following the March Council presentation and feedback, SCHEV moved forward with stakeholder input sessions. Stakeholders engaged in two activities to provide their feedback during both the virtual and in-person input sessions.

Activity One: Gallery Walk

For the in-person input sessions, SCHEV staff created a gallery walk on a wall in the meeting space. The gallery walk consisted of the three goals and accompanying objectives in a column on the right with the categories "Strongly Support," "Needs More Discussion" and "Significant Concerns" in a row across the top. Extending from each the goals and objectives were three sheets of butcher paper on which participants were

asked to place sticky notes to correspond to their ranking of each goal. Participants were asked to include specific feedback on their sticky notes, especially for areas in which they ranked a goal as "Needs More Discussion" or "Significant Concerns."

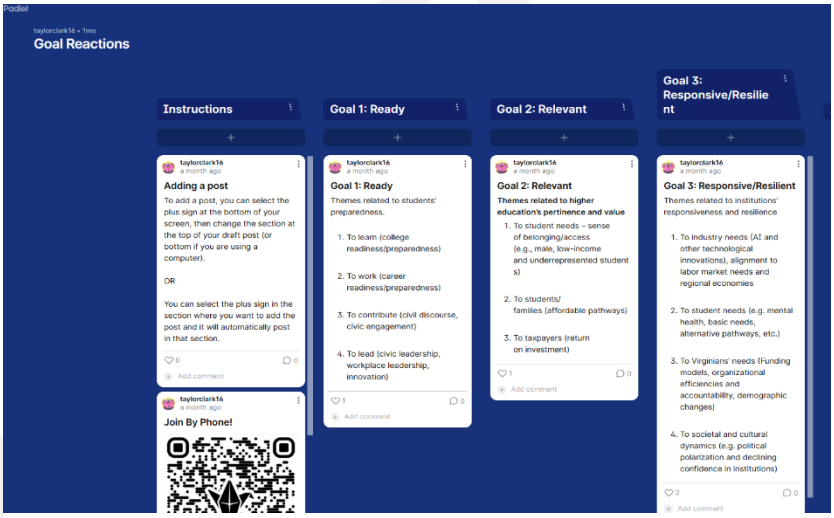
SCHEV staff reviewed the goals and objectives with stakeholders and answered clarifying questions before providing the stakeholders with approximately 10-15 minutes to consider the goals and objectives and offer their feedback on the gallery walk wall. Once participants shared their thoughts on the gallery wall, a SCHEV team member reviewed the input with the group and asked participants to provide any additional context or discussion for their input/feedback. SCHEV staff used input from these sessions to refine objectives and begin developing proposed strategies.

The visual representation below demonstrates the gallery walk concept as it was presented during the in-person input sessions.

	Strongly Support	Needs More Discussion	Significant Concerns
Goal 1: Ready **Themes related to students' preparedness:** • To Learn (college readiness/preparedness) • To Work (career readiness/preparedness) • To Contribute (civil discourse, civic engagement) • To Lead (civic and workplace leadership, innovation)			
Goal 2: Relevant **Themes related to higher education's pertinence and value:** • To student needs – Sense of belonging/access • To students/families – Affordable pathways • To taxpayers – Return on investment			
Goal 3: Responsive/Resilient **Themes related to institutions' responsiveness and resilience:** • To industry needs (AI, etc.; alignment to labor market needs and regional economies) • To student needs (e.g., mental health, basic needs, alternative pathways) • To Virginians' needs (funding models, organizational efficiencies and accountability, demographic changes/enrollment cliff) • To societal and cultural dynamics (e.g., political polarization and declining confidence in institutions)			

Virtual Gallery Walk

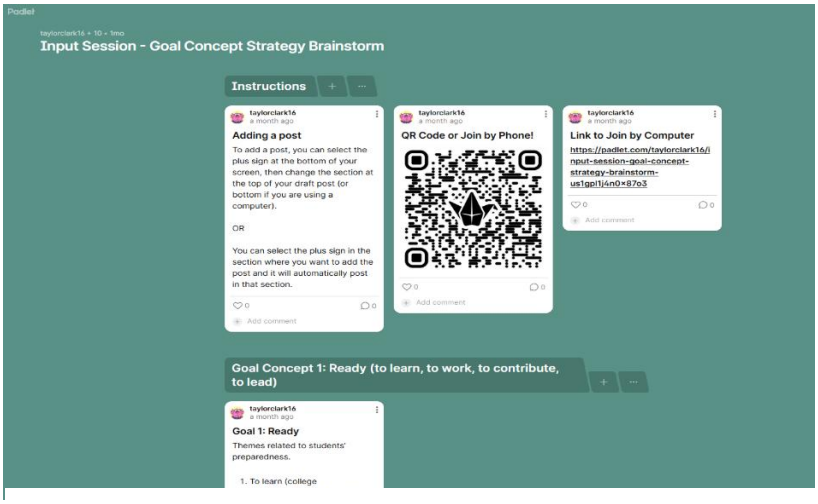
For the virtual sessions, participants engaged in a similar activity using the online platform "Padlet." For this activity, participants were asked to scan a QR code with their phones or follow a link if using their computers. The QR code or link took them to a screen on which they could share their feedback via a "post" on the Padlet. Their posts were organized into three categories, one for each goal. Participants were required to select "Strongly Support," Needs More Discussion," or "Significant Concerns" from a dropdown menu prior to posting any specific feedback for each goal. SCHEV staff analyzed the data both manually and using AI to determine themes and categorize feedback.



Padlet activity as presented to virtual participants.

Activity Two: Strategy Brainstorm

For both the in-person and virtual sessions, participants were asked to provide strategy ideas to help achieve each goal via the Padlet platform. Like the virtual gallery walk, the Padlet "board" was separated into three sections, one for each goal. Participants were asked to provide as many strategy ideas for each goal as possible. They were asked then to review what others in their session had shared and respond to those ideas if they wanted to show general support or if they had additional details that could be helpful in employing that strategy.



Padlet activity as presented to both virtual and in-person participants.

SCHEV staff analyzed the data both manually and using AI to determine themes and categorize strategy ideas.

The table below provides details regarding each input session held over the course of several months. The SCHEV team hosted input sessions in a variety of locations across the Commonwealth to support accessibility for the greatest representation of stakeholders to share their ideas. Throughout the stakeholder input process (from survey to input sessions), SCHEV heard from more than one thousand Virginians across a diverse range of stakeholder groups.

Date	Venue	Time(s)	Registrants	Attendees
Mar 20, 2025	Virtual	9:00-11:00	191	143
Mar 25, 2025	Virginia State University	9:00-11:30	11	9
		1:00-3:30	14	6
Apr 18, 2025	Hampton University	9:00-11:30	24	~12
		1:00-3:30	19	~12
Apr 23, 2025	Louisa County High School	9:30-12:00	21	~12
		1:00-3:30	6	3
Jun 3, 2025	University of Mary Washington	9:00-11:30	31	~20
		1:00-3:30	30	~20
Jun 10, 2025	New River Community College	1:00-3:30	7	9
Jun 11, 2025	Southwest Virginia Higher Ed. Center	9:00-11:30	24	15
Jun 13, 2025	Virtual	9:00-11:00	150	98
Total Participants (approximate)				**~359**

Types of Stakeholders Represented in the Input Process (Survey and Input Sessions)

- Advocacy organization representatives (e.g., Chamber of commerce, NAACP, VA 21, etc.)
- Business owners/operators
- Hiring managers/human resources representatives
- Industry leaders
- K-12 administrators and teachers
- Parents of college students
- Parents of K-12 students
- Private four-year college students
- Private four-year college/university administrators
- Private four-year college/university faculty/instructors
- Private four-year college/university staff
- Public two-year college students
- Public four-year college students
- Public four-year college/university administrators
- Public four-year college/university faculty/instructors
- Public four-year college/university staff
- Public two-year college/university administrators
- Public two-year college/university faculty/instructors
- Public two-year college/university staff
- VDOE representatives
- Virginia residents/taxpayers
- Virginia state government officials/policymakers

SCHEV Strategic Planning Workgroup

To help guide the strategic planning process, SCHEV staff also established an internal workgroup. The strategic planning workgroup met five times between February and September 2025 to process and incorporate feedback from Council, public input sessions and other feedback opportunities. The workgroup included 11 members representing six of SCHEV's seven units: Academic Affairs, Strategic Planning & Policy Studies, Policy Analytics, Finance Policy & Innovation, Student Success Opportunities & Engagement and Executive Operations. All meetings were hosted virtually to maximize attendance. The workgroup assisted in refining goal and objective language as well as supporting strategies. In addition to scheduled workgroup meetings, SCHEV staff sought input and guidance from other subject matter experts at SCHEV to include those responsible for data collection and analysis.

Other Stakeholder Group Meetings

SCHEV staff offered updates and opportunities for input to several other stakeholder groups as the plan was under development. Groups generally received information in the same fashion which SCHEV staff presented to Council. Some presentations took the

form of brief updates due to agenda time constraints and others offered more time for collaborative dialogue and input. As with input from Council and public input sessions, the feedback these stakeholder groups provided was incorporated into the draft goals, objectives and strategies for Council's consideration. A list of dates on which SCHEV staff offered updates to each stakeholder group can be found in the table below.

Stakeholder Group	Dates of Updates
Virginia Higher Education Executive Advisory Committee (VHEEAC) (*Formerly called the General Professional Advisory Committee [GPAC])*: an advisory group comprised of the presidents of Virginia's four-year state supported institutions of higher education, the president of Richard Bland College, the Chancellor of the Community College System and several community college presidents.	January 27, 2025 March 24, 2025 April 28, 2025 June 23, 2025
Instructional Programs Advisory Committee (IPAC): consists of the provosts or chief academic officers of the 15 four-year state-supported colleges and universities, the Provost of Richard Bland College, the Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs of the Virginia Community College System and several community college chief academic officers.	January 10, 2025 March 7, 2025 May 2, 2025 July 11, 2025 September 5, 2025
Finance Advisory Committee (FAC): consists of the chief financial officers of the 15 four-year state-supported colleges and universities, Richard Bland College, the Virginia Community College System and several community colleges.	January 6, 2025 April 8, 2025 July 22, 2025
Op Six: In 2015, joint resolutions approved by the House and Senate require that institutional six-year plans align with the statewide strategic plan. The form and manner for the plan is prescribed by Council in consultation with the Secretary of Finance, the Secretary of Education, the Director of the Department of Planning and Budget, the Staff Director of the House Committee on Appropriations the Staff Director of the Senate Committee on Finance and Appropriations, and the Executive Director of SCHEV, or their designees. This review group is referred to as the Op Six.	April 10, 2025 May 22, 2025
Secretary of Education	March 18, 2025 (Council) May 13, 2025 (Council)
Virginia General Assembly Higher Education Sub/committee Chairs and Finance/Appropriations Chairs	June 20, 2025

APPENDIX E: OVERVIEW OF THE PRIOR PLAN (PATHWAYS TO OPPORTUNITY) AND FINAL UPDATE

The previous statewide strategic plan, *The Pathways to Opportunity* plan, was published in January 2021. Its development process was unique as the process took place during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the resultant plan was still inclusive of stakeholder input and addressed both the potential short- and long-term issues associated with the pandemic and social justice issues that arose during that same time. Below are some of the themes that emerged in the development process. Stakeholders said that The Plan should:

- Emphasize the importance of equity as a specific goal and underlying element of The Plan.
- Ensure that The Plan's vision, target, goals, strategies and measures are linked closely.
- Enable clear connections between The Plan and SCHEV's day-to-day work and organizational commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion.
- Adopt deliberate and boldly aspirational goals in light of the pandemic and social justice issues.

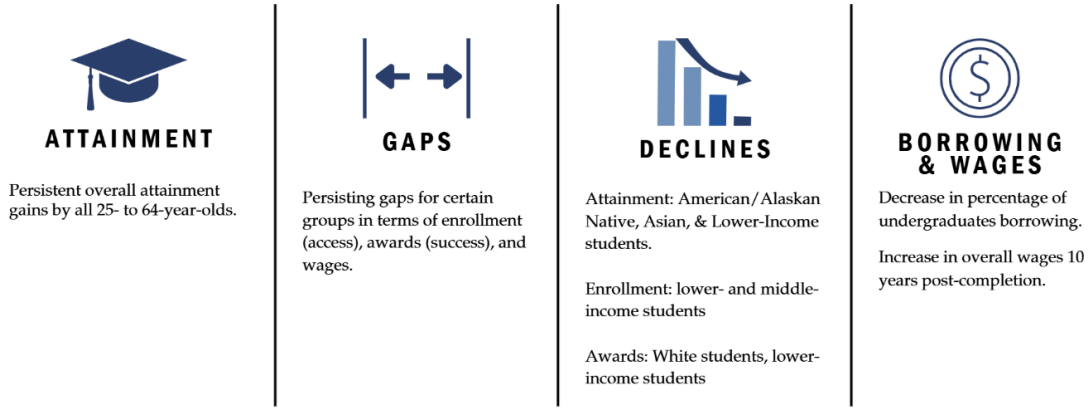
From this input, SCHEV adopted the following framework that served as the foundation for *Pathways to Opportunity: The Virginia Plan for Higher Education*.

Vision/Goals	Measure	Definition	Target
Vision: Best state for education	**Attainment**	**Percent of 25- to 64-year-olds with a postsecondary degree or credential**	**70% attainment by 2023**
Equitable: *Close access and completion gaps*	Attainment	Percent of 25- to 64-year-olds with a postsecondary degree or credential	Close gaps in attainment of selected groups
	Enrollment	Fall headcount of public and private undergraduates	Enrollment reflects Virginia's population
Affordable: *Lower costs to students*	Awards	Undergraduate degrees and credential produced each year	Undergraduate degrees and credentials awarded each year reflect enrollment
	Borrowing	Average debt of graduates	Close gaps in borrowing by selected groups
Transformative: *Expand prosperity*	Wages	Graduates' wages 10 years after graduation	Close gaps in median earnings of selected groups

SCHEV assessed and reported progress to the General Assembly annually. The findings below constitute SCHEV's final progress report for the *Pathways to Opportunity Plan*.

Summative Findings

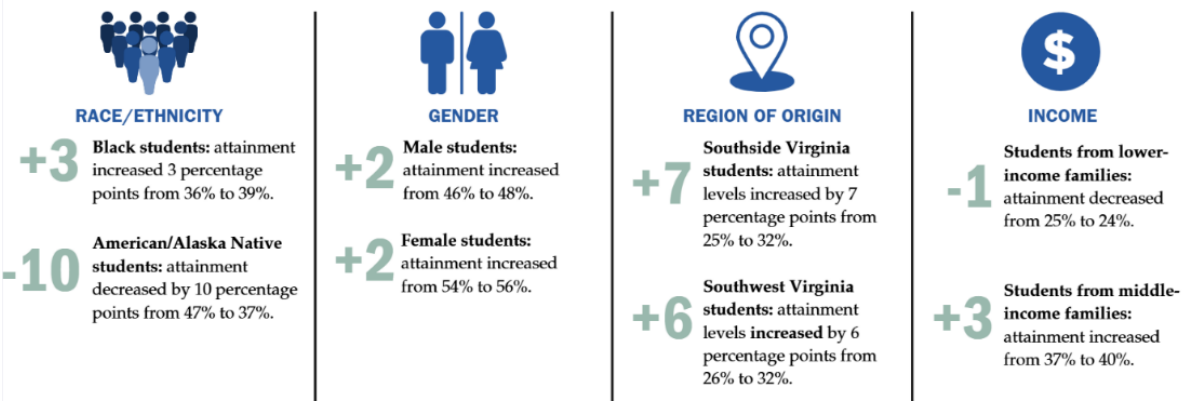
The most recent data (2023-2024) were largely unchanged from the baseline year (2019-2020) data with a few notable changes:



- Gains: Persistent overall attainment gains.
- Gaps: Persisting for certain groups in terms of enrollment (access), awards (success) and wages.
- Declines in: American/Alaskan Native, Asian and lower income attainment; lower income and middle-income percentage of enrolled students; white percentage of enrolled students; white percentage of degrees awarded; decreased percentage of degrees awarded across all income groups.
- An overall decrease in the percentage of students borrowing and increase in overall wages 10 years post-completion.

Attainment

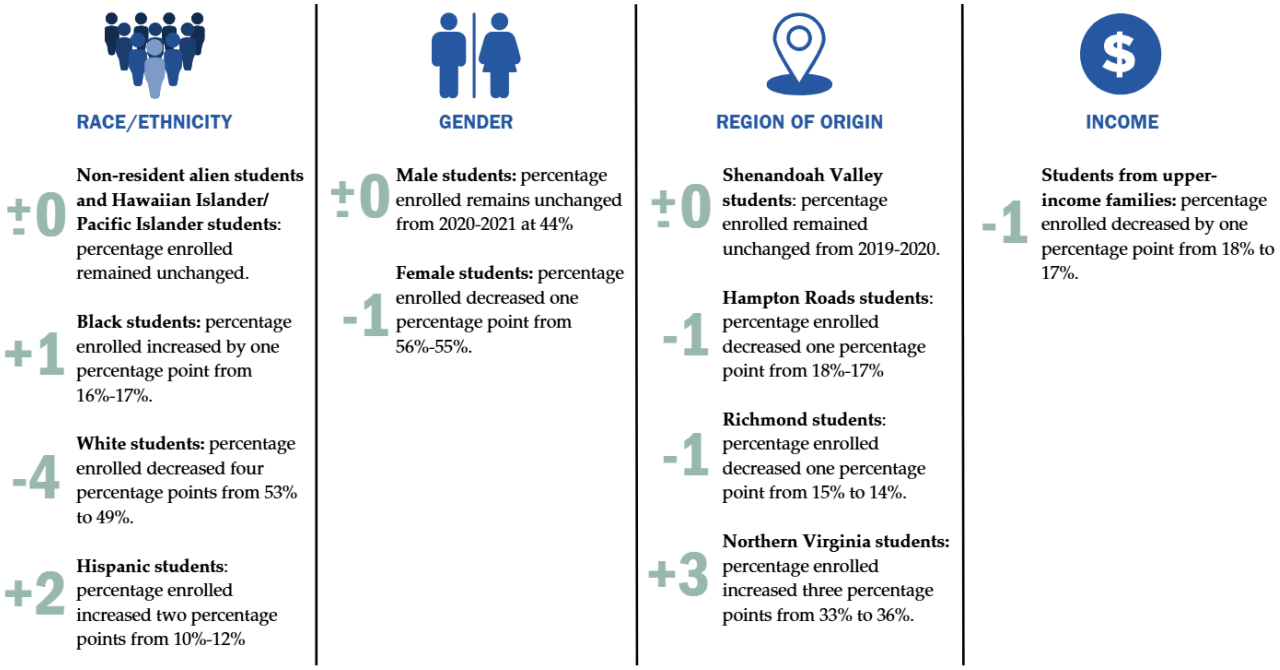
The Plan's attainment measure is defined as the percentage of 25- to 64-year-olds with an associate degree or higher. While total attainment increased three percentage points from 2019-20 to 2023-24, attainment gaps exist in every subgroup (race/ethnicity, income, region and gender). The gaps highlight the breadth and complexity of this issue. Those with the lowest attainment within each subgroup, as well as notable changes or gains, are identified below:



- By race/ethnicity - Black attainment increased three percentage points (from 36% to 39%). American Indian/Alaska Native attainment decreased 10 percentage points (from 47% to 37%).
- By region of origin - Southside and Southwest Virginia increased to 32% from 25% and 26% respectively.
- By income - Lower income decreased one percentage point (from 25% to 24%). Middle income attainment increased by three percentage points from 2019-2020 (from 37% to 40%).
- By gender – Men. However, both male and female attainment increased by two percentage points over the 2019-2020 academic year (males from 46% to 48% and females from 54% to 56%).

Enrollment

The Plan's enrollment measure is defined as the Fall headcount of public and private undergraduates. The following 2023-2024 undergraduate enrollment gaps continue to persist in comparison to the 2019-2020 academic year baseline data:



- By race/ethnicity – Hawaiian Islander/Pacific Islander and non-resident alien students (unchanged from 2019-2020). White enrollment decreased four percentage points in 2023-2024 (from 53% to 49%) compared to the baseline year. Black enrollment increased by one percentage point compared to the baseline year (from 16% to 17%). Hispanic enrollment increased two percentage points (from 10% to 12%). While the percentage did not change (rounds to zero),

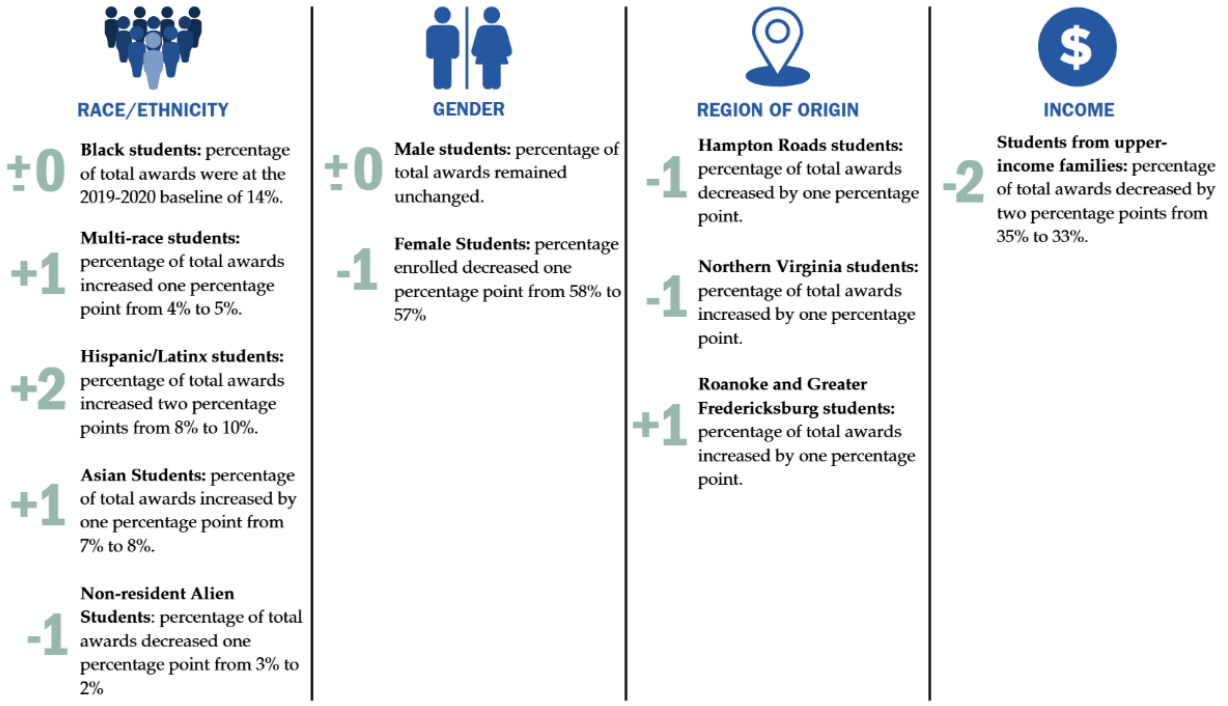
the number of enrolled American Indian/Alaskan Native students decreased from 1,142 to 1,084 (2019/20 to 2023/24).

- By region of origin – Shenandoah Valley (unchanged from baseline). Hampton Roads enrollment decreased by one percentage point (from 18% to 17%) compared to the baseline year. Greater Richmond experienced a one percentage point decrease in enrolled students (from 15% to 14%). Northern Virginia experienced a three percentage point increase in enrolled students (from 33% to 36%).
- By income – Upper income percentage enrolled decreased one percentage point from 2019-2020 (from 18% to 17%).
- By gender – Men (unchanged). Women decreased by one percentage point from 56% to 55%.

Here it is worth noting that in some instances the differences between the percentage of enrolled students and percentage of the population bars are diminishing (suggestive of "closing gaps"). However, the changes are minor (one to two percentage points) and in some cases the result of declining population versus increased enrollment.

Awards

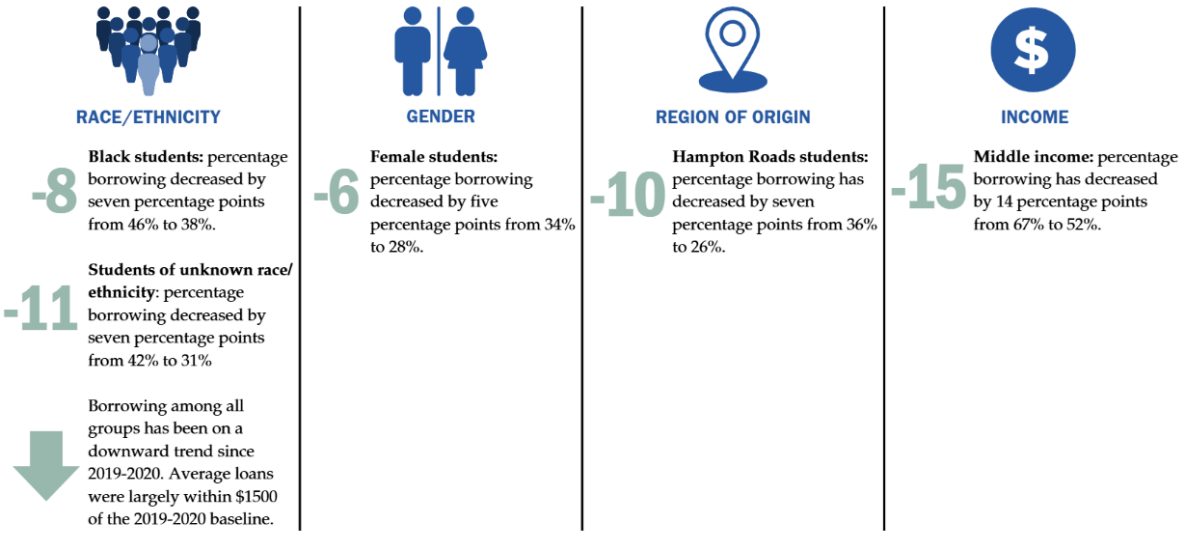
The Plan's awards measure is defined as undergraduate degrees and credentials produced each year. Success gaps may exist when the percentage of total awards is less than the percentage of enrolled students. Identified success gaps may include:



- By race/ethnicity – Non-resident alien decreased one percentage point (from 3% to 2%). Black remained unchanged (at 14%). Multi-Race (increased one percentage point from 4% to 5%, closing the success gap). Degrees awarded for Hispanic/Latinx students increased two percentage points (from 8% to 10%) from the baseline year. Asian increased one percentage point from 7% to 8%.
- By region of origin – The following regions each experienced one percentage point gains: Roanoke and Greater Fredericksburg. Hampton Roads and Northern Virginia each decreased by one percentage point in percentage of awards.
- By income – Upper income decreased by two percentage points from 35% to 33%.
- By gender – Men no change. Women decreased one percentage point (from 58% to 57%).

Borrowing

The Plan's borrowing measure is defined as the average debt of graduates. Those groups with the largest percentage of undergraduates who are borrowing include:



- By race/ethnicity – Black decreased by eight percentage points since 2019-2020 (from 46% to 38%) and Race/Ethnicity unknown decreased by 11 percentage points (from 42% to 31%) compared to 2019-2020. Generally, the percentage borrowing decreased in most every group when compared to the 2019-2020 baseline. Average loan amounts increased but stayed largely within $1,500 of the 2019-2020 base year.
- By region of origin – Hampton Roads. However, the percentage borrowing in Hampton Roads has decreased by 10 percentage points when compared to 2019-2020 (from 36% to 26%).

- By income – Middle income. However, the percentage borrowing has decreased by 15 percentage points when compared to 2019-2020 (from 67% to 52%).
- By gender – Women. The percentage borrowing has decreased by six percentage points when compared to 2019-2020 (from 34% to 28%).

The above groups with the largest percentage of undergraduates who are borrowing remained unchanged from 2019-20 to 2023-24. However, the percentage of students borrowing decreased across the board for each group.

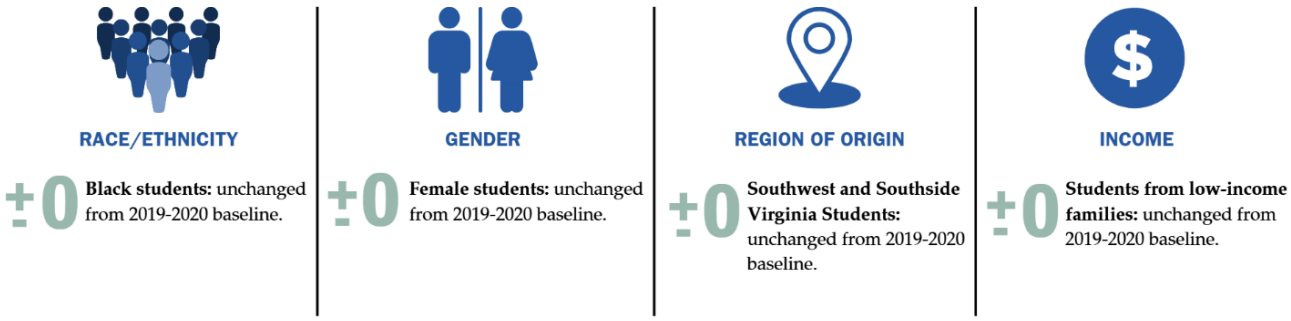
Wages

The Plan's wages measure is defined as graduates' wages 10 years after graduation. The target is to close gaps in earnings of selected groups.

Wages are the individual earnings of graduates, not household earnings, 10-years post completion. While wages signal prosperity in a financial sense, other aspects of prosperity (civic engagement, happiness, etc.) also exist; however, such data are less reliable or are more difficult to access and measure.

Even though wide gaps in wages are not "levers" that higher education can control in terms of long-term outcomes, such gaps are worthy of attention because they persist within each subgroup. These gaps signal that some groups are not experiencing the same social mobility benefits of higher education as other groups.

Those groups with the widest wage gaps include:



- By race/ethnicity – Black (unchanged).
- By region of origin – Southwest and Southside (unchanged).
- By income – Lower income (unchanged).
- By gender – Women (unchanged).

APPENDIX F: FINAL UPDATE ON PRIOR PLAN (PATHWAYS TO OPPORTUNITY) COUNCIL PRIORITY INITIATIVES

GOAL 1 – EQUITABLE: CLOSE ACCESS AND COMPLETION GAPS

Plan Strategy

S1: **Expand** postsecondary opportunities and awareness to Virginians who may not view higher education as an option.

Plan Biennial Initiative

I.1: **Promote Access to Postsecondary Education:** Develop, implement and collaborate on a variety of strategic activities, including marketing, professional development, and direct student and family programming (such as mentoring, summer bridge programs, counseling and advising via GEAR UP), to improve awareness and access to a variety of postsecondary education opportunities for Virginia's low-income and underserved students.

Previously Reported Actions (August 2024)

1. **Level Up Virginia:** Launched the LevelUpVirginia.org (student-and-family-facing) website, highlighting multiple postsecondary pathways, connecting students and families to local college access advisors and providing a calendar of college-going events.

   Created an active social media presence and distributed a quarterly newsletter for both Level Up Virginia (statewide initiative) and GEAR UP Virginia (focused on a cohort of students in 12 of Virginia's high-need school divisions).

2. **SCHEV/VDOE Access Strategic Plan:** Partnered with VDOE staff to host a series of financial aid webinars; mailed 29,000 FAFSA-reminder postcards to low-income families; launched a Virginia FAFSA chatbot; shared FAFSA public service announcements with 60 radio stations; implemented a second year of middle school campus visits (bringing approximately 4,000 middle schoolers from low-income communities onto college campuses); and awarded a $181,575 AmeriCorps planning grant, partnering with University of Virginia to study the feasibility of a statewide college advising corps.

   The GEAR UP Virginia grant served 5,609 students, now in grades 10 through 12, offering tutoring, job site visits, campus visits, financial aid counseling, best match and fit advising, summer camps and family events.

Updated actions to implement initiative (August 2025)

1. **Level Up Virginia**: Staff contracted an external LevelUpVirginia.org website review. Level Up Virginia events expanded to 142 high schools serving 38,504 students (compared to 88 schools in 2020 serving 20,279 students).

2. **SCHEV/VDOE Access Strategic Plan**: SCHEV partnered with VDOE staff to host a series of financial aid webinars; mailed 29,500 FAFSA-reminder postcards to low-income families; replaced the Virginia FAFSA chatbot with a text line monitored by humans; piloted a FAFSA completion portal with 10 high schools (giving them student-level FAFSA completion data for better targeted outreach), shared FAFSA public service announcements with 60 radio stations; implemented a third year of middle school campus visits (bringing approximately 8,000 middle schoolers from low-income communities onto nine college campuses); and partnered with VirginiaCAN and VASFAA to send 28 school counselors and 24 financial aid professionals to state access and financial aid conferences.

   The GEAR UP Virginia grant served 6,220 students, now in grades 10 through 12, offering tutoring, job site visits, campus visits, financial aid counseling, best match and fit advising, summer camps and family events.

Plan Strategy

S2: **Advance** digital access, adoption and literacy as well as high quality, effective remote-learning programs.

Plan Biennial Initiative

I.2: **Support Online Virginia Network (OVN) Market Survey:** Gather insight on Virginia higher education alumni including those who obtained some college and no degree and their interest in completing a degree through OVN.

Previously Reported Actions (August 2024)

1. **OVN/VCU outreach survey and analysis:** Completed by the Survey and Evaluation Research Laboratory at the Wilder School of VCU.

   A total of 243 former Virginia college students that have not completed a degree responded and the full report was forwarded to OVN for their consideration and action.

Updated actions to implement initiative (August 2025)

1. **OVN/VCU outreach survey and analysis:** Completed.

Plan Strategy

S3: Strengthen student support services for persistence and completion: mental health, career services, social, student basic needs, information technology, disability support and other services.

Plan Biennial Initiative

I.3: Develop Resources for Mental Health and Disabilities Supports: Partner to deliver additional resources to institutions and support front line professionals that provide mental health services to students and/or assist students with disabilities.

Previously Reported Actions (August 2024)

1. **SCHEV Mental Health Pilot**: Prepared Annual Report for the General Assembly outlining impacts of the round one Higher Education Mental Health Workforce Pilot Program during its first year (of two years). The report indicates the pilot is increasing counseling capacity and reducing staff burnout at counseling centers.
    - With additional funds from the General Assembly in FY25 and FY 26, issued a Round Two Call for Proposals and selected five pilot programs to receive Round Two grant funds.

2. **SCHEV/Virginia Mental Health Access Program Collaborative Training:** Partnered to provide two training webinar(s) to on-campus healthcare professionals to diagnose, treat and manage common mental health disorders: ADHD (January 2024) and Depression/ Suicide Risk (May 2024). More than 60 on-campus healthcare professionals attended each webinar for continuing medical education credits.

3. **Disabilities Access to Higher Education Action Plan:** The Disabilities Access to Higher Education Advisory Committee developed a "Best Practice Guidelines for Accommodation Practices" for institutions to use.

   Staff formed a work group of experts to conduct the study on determining eligibility for accommodations as directed by SB21/ HB509. The report will be submitted to the General Assembly by October 1.

Updated actions to implement initiative (August 2025)

1. **SCHEV Mental Health Pilot:** SCHEV submitted the 2025 Annual Report on the Mental Health Pilot to the General Assembly. As of May 1, 2025, the LCSW/LPC candidates supported through this pilot have collectively served 1,446 individual student-patients and completed more than 8,750 clinical hours. The addition of the candidates has resulted in: (a) decreased appointment wait times for students; (b)

improved staff morale at the on-campus counseling and health centers; and (c) sparked the candidates' interest in continuing to work at the higher education institution(s) post-licensure, two taking permanent positions at the pilot institutions.

2. **SCHEV/Virginia Mental Health Access Program Collaborative Training:** Completed. All training previously completed in 2024.

3. **Disabilities Access to Higher Education Action Plan**: SCHEV, in consultation with the SB21/HB509 workgroup, prepared a report with recommendations from the study. This led to a phase II study bill, HB 1805, currently underway by SCHEV and a different workgroup.

   Concurrently, SCHEV's Disabilities Access to Higher Education Advisory Committee developed and released a series of resources in July in support of the SB 21/HB 509 report: "Best Practice Guidelines for Accommodation Practices" and "SB 21 Student Survey Questionnaire Template."

Corresponding Resources

- *How to use the Best Practice Guidelines*
- *Best Practice Guidelines for Accommodation Practices*
- *Best Practice Guidelines for Accommodation Practices Excel Review Tool*

Corresponding Resources

- *SB 21 Student Questionnaire Transmission Information*
- *SB 21 Student Survey Questionnaire Template*

GOAL 2 – AFFORDABLE: LOWER COSTS TO STUDENTS

Plan Strategy

S4: Align tuition and fees, financial aid and state appropriations such that students have broader access to postsecondary opportunities regardless of their ability to pay.

Plan Biennial Initiative

I.4: **Establish consensus on higher education cost and funding needs:** Build consensus around higher education cost and funding needs in accordance with work done last year (SB 800 2023 budget amendment).

Previously Reported Actions

1. **Technical assistance:** In July 2022, SCHEV published a Cost and Funding Needs Study. The report represented a broad consensus among stakeholders for a framework to measure costs, but its publication failed to produce an operational model.

   Council might recommend that the Commonwealth build on this framework to produce a working model for the next budget cycle, including an evaluation of the current "base adequacy formula," pending the outcomes of a study on institutional efficiency and effectiveness being conducted by the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission (JLARC) and a legislative joint subcommittee on higher education funding policies set to review and improve funding models beginning in December.

Updated actions to implement initiative

1. **Technical assistance:** In the 2023 Special Session, the Higher Education Funding Policies Joint Subcommittee was authorized to review college costs, specifically, (i) prioritize the review of funding related to operations and financial aid; (ii) provide recommendations to improve funding models; and (iii) develop a short- and long-term plan for phased implementation of any recommendations.

   While the JLARC recommendations are now available, the joint subcommittee has not met. Council may consider further research and recommendations with consideration of the JLARC findings and input from key stakeholders and policymakers.

Plan Strategy

S5: Cultivate affordable postsecondary education pathways for traditional, non-traditional and returning students.

Plan Biennial Initiative

I.5: **Establish Pathway Maps as a means to lower the cost to students by ensuring a smooth transition from two-year to four-year institutions:** Create system-wide course equivalencies and complete pathways maps, strengthening pathways to the baccalaureate for transfer students as well as high school students.

Previously Reported Actions

1. **Common curriculum:** Completed work on common curriculum development of 28 disciplines through collaboration between SCHEV, the VCCS, as well as two- and four-year faculty and staff across the state.

   There are two remaining curricula slated to be completed over the next academic year. Additionally, the three-year review process for the first phase disciplines will commence this Fall.

2. **Pathways maps and transfer guides:** Development of student facing transfer guides from completed pathway maps for each disciplinary major continues to grow with approximately 350 transfer guides created and upwards of 100 guides being developed each semester. These strengthen the pathway to the baccalaureate and are made publicly available via the Transfer Virginia portal.

Updated actions to implement initiative

1. **Common curriculum:** The two remaining curricula (music and cinema) will not be completed at this time due to vastly different requirements across the four-year colleges and few offerings at the community colleges. The three-year review for phase one disciplines (business, computer science, education, and engineering) concluded in Spring 2025. The next phase of review will not begin until approximately Spring or Fall 2027 as the community colleges are implementing discipline phases 2-4 in Fall 2025.
2. **Pathways maps and transfer guides:** There are currently approximately 475 transfer guides posted in the Transfer Virginia portal with additional guides awaiting return from the Spring 2025 review cycle.

   Home | Transfer Virginia

Plan Strategy

S6: Update and reform funding models and policies to improve equity, affirm return on investment and encourage increased and consistent levels of state funding.

Plan Biennial Initiative

I.6: **Report on student choices and outcomes to ensure commitment to completion and student success:** Produce report on public and private postsecondary education outcomes and transparently communicate the results. Similarly, assess factors influencing an individual's decision to pursue/not pursue higher education.

Previously Reported Actions

1. **Biennial postsecondary education outcomes report**: The first version of this report is in the planning stages to be completed late in the Spring 2025.
2. **Assessment of college-decision making among high school students:** SCHEV contracted with ODU's Social Science Research Center to survey 631 high school seniors on their decision-making process to pursue or not pursue higher education.

   Key takeaways are: 1) Results for Virginia resemble those from national/other studies, 2) Most frequent reasons for not going to college include cost, perceived value/return on investment, perceived necessity/utility of a college degree, and not enjoying school and 3) Sources of information and messaging may be different for college-bound vs. non-college bound students.

Updated actions to implement initiative

1. **Biennial postsecondary education outcomes report**: Completed.

   https://collegeoutcomes.schev.edu/rdPage.aspx?rdReport=FactPack._Home&inpUNITID=233277&pagecalled=FactPack._Home&rdRnd=30876

2. **Assessment of college decision making among high school students:** Completed; see Council presentation.

Plan Strategy

S7: Foster program and administrative innovations that enhance quality, promote collaboration and improve efficiency.

Plan Biennial Initiative

I.7: **Automate Database for Private Postsecondary Education:** Automate database to improve reliability and increase productivity in regulation of private postsecondary education.

Previously Reported Actions

1. **New database development:** The selected vendor is currently working through the Virginia Information Technology Agency (VITA) Enterprise Cloud Oversight (ECOS) requirements before SCHEV can sign a contract.
2. **Centralized "system of record":** This activity requires the development of the database.

Updated actions to implement initiative

1. **New database development:** After about a year into the VITA process, we found that the original vendor did not meet VITA's SOC II requirements. As a result, we identified a new vendor, completed the information-gathering phase, and have received their proposal. The vendor will now begin working through the VITA ECOS process, which must be completed before we can move forward with an official contract. We have confirmed that the new vendor meets the SOC II requirement.
2. **Centralized "system of record":** No updates at this time.

GOAL 3 – TRANSFORMATIVE: EXPAND PROSPERITY

Plan Strategy

S8: Support experiences that improve students' employment outcomes, income and community engagement.

Plan Biennial Initiative

I.8: **Scale Virginia Talent + Opportunity Partnership (V-TOP):** Scale the Virginia Talent + Opportunity Partnership, launch new V-TOP initiatives that address barriers to work-based learning and evaluate progress/success to expand the statewide effort.

Previously Reported Actions

1. **Statewide staffing agency:** V-TOP engaged 149 small to mid-size employers in fiscal year 2024. Eighty-three students were placed in an internship during the inaugural phase of the program.
2. **Employer Matching Funds**: V-TOP provided more than $50,000 in wage fund matches to small to mid-size employers, supporting 83 students in the program at an average rate of $16 per hour.
3. **Academic Data Governance Workgroup:** Achieved three major outcomes: V-TOP compiled data reflecting three academic years from 2019 to 2022; provided guidance on categorizing credit-bearing internships to ensure consistency in reporting practices; and established a framework of definitions and standards for work-based learning terminology. This work is the foundation for evaluating student internship experiences across the state.

Updated actions to implement initiative

1. **Statewide staffing agency**: V-TOP engaged 248 small to mid-size employers in fiscal year 2025. Two hundred and sixty-three students were hired as interns, ushering in an increase of 216% of students hired as interns compared to the previous year.
2. **Employer Matching Funds**: V-TOP provided more than $700,000 in wage fund matches to small to mid-size employers, supporting 263 students in the program at an average rate of $18 per hour.
3. **Academic Data Governance Workgroup**: In AY 23-24, 24,092 students across 57 institutions participated in a credit-bearing internship. This was an increase of +4.28% from the previous academic year (23,103).

Plan Strategy

S9: Improve the alignment between post-secondary academic programs and labor market outcomes.

Plan Biennial Initiative

I.9: **Establish Criteria for High Demand Jobs:** In cooperation with the Virginia Office of Education Economics (VOEE) and institutions, work to establish criteria to define and incentives to address urgent labor market needs.

Previously Reported Actions

1. **Define "urgent labor market needs:"** SCHEV and VOEE are collaborating on a "Degree Program Alignment Report" that will identify labor market needs in Virginia for any identified potential degree program. The current anticipated timeline for release of the report is 4/1/2025.
2. **Incentive Development:** Awaiting outcomes of JLARC report on the efficiency of the higher education system and Academic Affairs Committee discussions on academic program evaluation priorities.
3. **Develop Teacher Preparation Degree Programs:** Round One, 2023-24, resulted in approval of 12 new education licensure degree programs for four institutions. Round Two will run in 2024-25 and culminate in approval of new degree programs at Council's March 2025 meeting.

Updated actions to implement initiative

1. **Define "urgent labor market needs**:" VOEE has completed its degree program profile for use in SCHEV's new degree program approval process. It is now a required element for any new degree program submitted to Council for approval.

2. **Incentive Development**: Revised program approval process has been implemented. A revised program productivity review process is being developed with anticipated completion by the end of AY 2026. These process revisions must be completed prior to any incentive development.
3. **Develop Teacher Preparation Degree Programs**: Completed – March 2025 Council Meeting.

Plan Strategy

S10: Cultivate a climate of inclusion and innovation through scholarship, research, a diverse faculty and other programming.

Plan Biennial Initiative

I.10: **Foster activities and partnerships that improve students' civic knowledge and their ability to contribute effectively to civic life.**

Previously Reported Actions

1. **Implementation strategies:** Fourteen institutions signed on as members of the 2024-25 SCHEV-Constructive Dialogue Institute (CDI) cohort (all 12 from 2023-24, plus two new ones).

   Implementation has begun at several institutions that have incorporated CDI's *Perspectives* program into their orientation programming for new students.

2. **Community of practice:** Staff led a faculty learning community in Spring 2024 on "Integrating Dialogue Skills into Classroom Teaching," which included approximately a dozen faculty members from two- and four-year institutions.

   Additionally, SCHEV is in regular communication with CDI staff and will coordinate a meeting of Virginia cohort representatives early in the Fall.

3. **Day of Dialogue events**: Completion of May 30 Day of Dialogue at Virginia Tech. Currently working with VMI and the College Debates & Discourse Alliance to offer another day-long program for Virginia educators on September 13, 2024, specifically on how to build a campus debate program using the non-competitive Braver Angels debate model.
4. **Presentations/ongoing discussions on this topic:** March 2024 presentation to Council about an initiative under way at Radford University to assess the civic awareness of incoming students so that university faculty and staff can design civic learning experiences that better meet students' needs.

Updated actions to implement initiative

1. **Implementation strategies**: The SCHEV-CDI cohort had a successful implementation in 2024-25. Slightly fewer than 10,500 students participated in the program in Fall 2024 across the 14 cohort institutions, with an 88% completion rate. This is a substantial increase over Fall 2023, when just under 5,900 students participated with a 74% completion rate. Students in Fall 2024 demonstrated significant improvement on three key metrics: affective polarization, intellectual humility and finding common ground. Unexpectedly (given the previous year's results), students decreased slightly in their sense of belonging and showed no change in negative conflict behaviors. These unusual findings were not unique to Virginia. The CDI research team suspects the November 2024 election may have influenced some of the results, especially considering that some institutions had completed their administration of the program before the election while others were still in process. Outcome findings were generally consistent across demographic groups based on gender, race/ethnicity, political views and sexual orientation.

   Thirteen institutions have opted to continue in the cohort for the 2025-26 academic year.

2. **Community of practice**: A member of the CDI team convened four meetings of Virginia cohort representatives (including SCHEV) in AY25 to share experiences, strategies and concerns.

3. **Day of Dialogue events**: The College Debates & Discourse Alliance training at VMI in September 2024 drew more than two dozen faculty from both four-year institutions and community colleges across Virginia. As a result of that training, at least four institutions have introduced or expanded the use of debates in classroom and co-curricular settings. Three VCCS colleges teamed up to host the first intercollegiate community college debate in the nation in February 2025, involving more than 50 students and faculty.

   The fourth Day of Dialogue on Civic Learning & Engagement was held at Longwood University in May 2025. As in past years, approximately 100 faculty and staff from dozens of institutions across Virginia participated. Responses to the post-event evaluation indicated that attendees were highly satisfied with the program and found great value in the presentations, discussions and networking opportunities.

4. **Presentations/ongoing discussions on this topic**: Council heard a follow-up presentation about Radford's initiative in May 2025.

   Rectors of the public universities heard a presentation by SCHEV staff (Dr. Jodi Fisler) in August 2025 about initiatives related to civic engagement and civil discourse taking place throughout Virginia.

   Virginia continues to participate as an active member of the Civic Learning and Democracy Engagement Coalition's Multi-State Collaborative, which now comprises 20 states.

VA250's commemorations of U.S. independence: As part of VA250's commemorations of U.S. independence, SCHEV has teamed up with VDOE, Braver Angels and the College Debates & Discourse Alliance (itself a partnership among the American Council of Trustees & Alumni [ACTA], Braver Angels and BridgeUSA) to coordinate a series of debates called "The Public Square." Public Square events will use the Braver Angels debate format and will bring together students from two- and four-year colleges, high school students, and local community members to debate timely issues that also touch on such long-standing themes as "a more perfect union" and "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." As of this writing, two Public Square events have been scheduled for Fall 2025, one at UVA and the other at VMI. At least five others are expected to be scheduled in Fall 2026. A culminating debate involving students from across the Commonwealth is being planned for Fall 2026, to be held in the Virginia State Capitol.