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State Noncredit Data Project: Promising Practices from Virginia

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Introduction

The Commonwealth of Virginia has committed to workforce-oriented postsecondary education far more deeply and creatively than most states. Central to the state's strategy is the New Economy Workforce Credential Grant Program (WCG), a pay-for-performance initiative established in 2016 by the Virginia General Assembly to fund noncredit workforce training programs (named as FastForward programs) that lead to an industry-recognized credential in a high-demand field. The Virginia Community College System (VCCS) played a pivotal role in proposing the program and led its implementation, developing infrastructure and processes to support its performance-based funding model. The Virginia General Assembly expanded WCG funding from $5 million in FY 2016 to $22.5 million in FY 2025, reflecting the fast expansion of FastForward program offerings and rising student enrollments.[1]

WCG has shown signs of success in the labor market. An external study found that students who completed WCG-subsidized courses and obtained a credential earned roughly $1,000 more per quarter (an 11% increase) and were 2.4 percentage points more likely to be employed.[2]

Virginia's effective implementation of WCG also represents a successful expansion of its capacity for collecting, integrating, and analyzing data. Similar to most American states, Virginia's pre-WCG noncredit data capacity was rudimentary. But enactment of legislation establishing WCG created an imperative to collect the data needed to validate course and credential completions, as well as an interest in documenting

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[1] State Council of Higher Education for Virginia. (February 2024). *New Economy Workforce Credential Grant.* https://www.schev.edu/institutions/grants/new-economy-workforce-credential

[2] Xu, D., Bird, K.A., Cooper, M., and Castleman, B. (May 2024) *Noncredit workforce training, industry credentials, and labor market outcomes.* EdWorkingPaper No. 24-959. Retrieved from Annenberg Institute at Brown University.

program effectiveness. VCCS rose to the challenge, and eight years later the community college system operates an effective data collection and analysis system that meets its primary needs.

This brief explores the effect of WCG and the program that implements it, Virginia FastForward, on the state's noncredit data system. We examine what drove VCCS to build its data capacity, how it designed and implemented a more robust system, and what other states and systems can learn from their journey.

This policy and practice brief is the first in a series of briefs the Education and Employment Research Center (EERC) will release on promising strategies that policymakers and practitioners are undertaking to strengthen noncredit and nondegree education at the state level.

Background

WCG emerged from a labor market analysis carried out by VCCS in 2015. In a report released that year, VCCS Chancellor Glenn DuBois highlighted Virginia's underinvestment in training for middle-skill jobs -- skills positions that require workers with more than a high school diploma but less than a bachelor's degree.[3] The report estimated that more than 175,000 of these so-called "middle-skill" jobs opened annually in Virginia, with employers struggling to fill these roles. The report proposed a performance-based investment in training for certifications and licenses in high-demand and in-demand occupations.

In 2016, the Virginia General Assembly enacted HB 66, a bill establishing the New Economy Workforce Credential Grant Program.[4] The program provides a pay-for-performance model for funding noncredit programs delivered through the VCCS leading to a credential in a high-demand field. The student pays one third of tuition. If they complete the program, the state pays one third; if not, the student must pay another third of tuition. If the student completes and obtains the related industry credential, the state pays the final third of tuition; if the student does not obtain the credential, the college loses one-third of the tuition. The structure is intended to provide an incentive for completion to both students and institutions.

Notably, WCG is restricted to noncredit programs designated as Virginia FastForward programs, which lead to credentials in high-demand fields. Currently, only one-third of all noncredit offerings and 40% of occupational/vocational noncredit offerings qualify as FastForward programs.[5]

Data Infrastructure Design and Implementation

Responding to the need for member colleges and students to receive WCG subsidies, VCCS developed an expanded administrative data system for all member colleges to submit. This data system includes data on

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[3] Virginia Community College System. (September 2015). *Workforce credentials: The pathway to Virginia's new middle class.* https://rga.lis.virginia.gov/Published/2015/RD226/PDF

[4] House Bill 66, Commonwealth of Virginia. Signed into law March 10, 2016. https://legacylis.virginia.gov/cgi-bin/legp604.exe?161+ful+CHAP0326

[5] Xu, D., et al. (March 2023). *Virginia Community College System Noncredit Data Snapshot.* Education and Employment Research Center, Rutgers University.

FastForward course enrollments, completion, enrollment in credit-bearing programs, funding source, course-level features, and demographic information. The data provides the basis for state institutional subsidies, not only through WCG but also other programs created subsequently such as G3, a need-based financial aid program that supports students in both credit and noncredit programs of study.

A unique challenge that performance-based systems face in noncredit education is confirming credential attainment. In Virginia, the state reimburses colleges for one-third of tuition upon student attainment of an industry-recognized credential. These credentials are typically issued by state agencies with portfolios relevant to a specific occupation (such as truck driving or nursing). VCCS developed agreements with the Departments of Health and Labor & Industry to match student data with licensure data to confirm attainment. VCCS is still working to obtain reliable data on third-party certifications, which remains a challenge, as these are managed by non-government entities with varying data-sharing practices. Colleges currently rely on students to report credential completions, requiring institutional staff to cultivate ongoing relationships after course completion.

Beyond the data needed to obtain state WCG funding, VCCS also sought to document labor market and academic outcomes to provide additional information on program effectiveness. This required development of data partnerships with several state agencies and the National Student Clearinghouse. VCCS developed an agreement with the Virginia Employment Commission (VEC) to track labor market outcomes. VEC provides quarterly reports on the employment and earnings of students who obtained FastForward credentials, which can be compared with pre-enrollment employment and earnings.

Table 1. Data Fields Used by Virginia Community College System for Administration of Virginia FastForward Program

Field	Source	Purpose
Credentials offered	Administrative data	Program eligibility
Enrollment	Administrative data	State reimbursement
Course completion	Administrative data	State reimbursement
Certificate attainment	Administrative data	State reimbursement
License attainment	Dept of Health, Dept of Labor & Industry	State reimbursement
Enrollment and credential awarded outside VCCS	National Skills Clearinghouse	State reimbursement
Employment and earnings	Virginia Employment Commission	Program analysis
Demographic information	Administrative data	Program analysis
Course-level features	Administrative data	Program analysis

Additionally, VCCS collaborates with the National Student Clearinghouse to track the educational progress of FastForward students who transition to credit-bearing programs, both within Virginia and out of state. Through this partnership, VCCS has determined that 13% of all FastForward completers subsequently enroll in credit courses.

VCCS has provided data on WCG-eligible programs to SCHEV and to outside researchers. SCHEV tracked program statistics, cost per student and per-credential cost to the state, completion and attainment rates, and credentialed student earnings. Outside researchers (including a co-author of this brief) have analyzed student demographics, matriculation to credit-bearing study, completion and attainment rates, and credentialed student earnings and employment patterns.

Lessons Learned and Next Steps

Virginia followed a highly intentional process in developing a postsecondary financing initiative for noncredit programs of study. That process included an ambitious strategy for building data capacity to validate the success of students and institutions in meeting performance-based funding standards. Some important lessons can be drawn from VCCS's achievements.

➢ Funding can drive systemic improvement in noncredit data capacity. Little information was reported outside of VCCS prior to enactment of WCG, and that continues to be the case for noncredit programs that do not qualify for WCG. Yet, the performance-based funding structure of WCG created a clear imperative for robust data collection and analysis.

➢ Cross-agency collaboration is valuable, and for some purposes essential. VCCS needs licensure data from other state agencies to document student attainment for funding purposes. In addition, partnerships with the Virginia Employment Commission, SCHEV, and the National Student Clearinghouse yield rich insights into student outcomes, documenting the effectiveness of the program and identifying areas for further growth.

➢ Building data capacity can yield insights that shape practice and policy innovations. VCCS was successful in marshalling data to demonstrate return on investment. But it also received data insights that could shape practice and policy. These insights included the low rate of matriculation to the credit sector; differing rates of completion and credential attainment across program clusters; and differing rates of credential attainment by race/ethnicity and gender.

Building on the successes and lessons learned from WCG and FastForward, Virginia has identified several priorities to further enhance its workforce training initiatives and data infrastructure. These next steps are designed to address existing challenges, improve equity and program outcomes, and ensure the long-term sustainability and scalability of the programs.

Strengthening credential tracking for third-party certifications. While Virginia has made significant progress in verifying credential attainment for certificates and state-issued occupational licenses, tracking third-party certifications remains a critical challenge. These credentials, often awarded by private industry organizations, are key for many high-demand occupations but lack centralized oversight and data collection efforts. Moving forward, VCCS plans to build partnerships with certifying bodies and establish standardized data-sharing agreements to improve tracking. These efforts will enhance the accuracy of credential data, ensuring that FastForward's impact is fully captured, and that accountability is maintained across all credential types.

Addressing equity Gaps through enhanced data analysis. Data collected through FastForward programs has revealed disparities in credential attainment rates across racial, gender, and program-specific lines. Tackling these inequities is a priority for VCCS as it seeks to ensure that all learners benefit equally from workforce training opportunities. The next phase of work involves expanding equity-focused data analysis to identify systemic barriers and implement targeted interventions. By using disaggregated data to better understand the challenges faced by underrepresented groups, VCCS can refine program outreach, design, and support services to create more inclusive pathways to success.

Supporting noncredit-to-credit transitions. FastForward programs are primarily designed to meet immediate workforce needs, but they also have the potential to serve as an entry point for further educational advancement. Despite this potential, transitions from noncredit to credit-bearing programs remain limited. To address this, VCCS has refined a website called Credits2Careers that enables students to see what credits they can receive for their FastForward credentials. This service facilitates their ability to plan their next educational move at a VCCS institution. VCCS is also planning additional steps to strengthen partnerships between noncredit and credit programs, streamline pathways, and provide students with clearer guidance and support for advancing their education. Improved tracking of students who transition from FastForward into credit-bearing programs will provide critical data for evaluating and enhancing these pathways, ensuring they serve as viable bridges to long-term academic and career success.

About the Authors

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EERC Areas of Focus

Community College Innovation	Student Choices and Pathways	STEM and Technician Education	Noncredit Education and Non-Degree Credentials	Education and Labor Market Connections

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