

The Virginia Plan

State's community colleges confront the need to do more with less

By Robert A. Jones

RICHMOND, VIRGINIA

THE FALL TERM had just begun, and the chancellor of Virginia's community college system, Glenn DuBois, was whizzing toward the Blue Ridge Mountains in the state airplane. DuBois and several aides were headed for two of the system's upland campuses to deliver a message that was both expected and dreaded: Systemic failure was coming for the 40-year-old collection of colleges unless major changes were made.

Strapped into his seat, DuBois leaned toward a visitor and spoke almost conspiratorially about the day's upcoming events. He knew, he said, that some faculty members were skeptical of his reform plans. Many previous reform plans had come and gone. But this time was different, and he was giving himself approximately one hour with the faculty at each college to turn them from skeptics to supporters.

"Our problems are like waves crashing on top of each other. Big tsunamis," DuBois said. "If we don't acknowledge the size of this thing, we are going down. We can't nibble at the edges. Today is my chance to make the case, to give them the whole loaf, to show them what's at stake."

The air of crisis in Virginia has built steadily over the last three years, as it has at most community colleges across the nation. Enrollment has exploded on most campuses, forcing some systems to turn away students for the first time in history. Meanwhile, state governments have drained budgets like vampires in the night.

This double bind has occurred, ironically, just as

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community colleges have begun to receive widespread recognition of their importance in the higher education pantheon.

Far cheaper than four-year institutions, community colleges teach the vast majority of poor, minority and immigrant students in the nation and offer the United States its best chance to regain its lost edge in

educating its young people. President Obama has become a community college cheerleader and recently chaired a White House summit to search for answers to the funding dilemma.

Few states, however, have gone as far as Virginia in confronting the need to do more with less. When DuBois arrives on campuses to make his pitch these days, he brings not only a litany of gloom—\$100 million in budget cuts over

the last two years; an increase of 20,000 full-time equivalent students in the same period—but also his ambitious plan to increase the number of graduates, to get them out the door faster and at lower cost.

Judging the performance of community colleges can be tricky because of their multiple roles, but the traditional measurements suggest Virginia's 23 colleges could use some improvement. Their average graduation rate of 14 percent over the past five years puts them below the national average, as does their 14 percent rate of transferring students to four-year institutions.

The Virginia plan is designed to change those numbers dramatically by 2015. Produced by a team of college presidents and administrators known as the re-engineering task force, it attempts to grapple with some of the unique burdens of community colleges. Here are a few:

- **Unprepared students.** Every year Virginia community colleges assign roughly half of their incoming students to remedial or developmental courses because they are not prepared for college work. Of those, only a small percentage succeeds. The Virginia plan will toss out its old developmental program, replacing it with a model designed to be more individual and productive, and will establish beachheads in high schools to improve the quality of graduates.

- **Jobs.** The flip side of community colleges is vocational job training, and Virginia plans to expand programs that offer customized training for individual employers whose needs are growing. Over the next four years the state promises to double the number of such programs to include 10,000 employers across the state.

- **College dropouts.** At the receiving end of the nation's education ills, from dysfunctional high schools to students without financial resources, community colleges have dismal graduation rates. Virginia is promising to increase by 50 percent the number of students graduating or transferring to four-year colleges, and to increase those numbers by 75



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Jay Paul, Black Star, for CrossTalk



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percent for poor and minority students.

- Life support. New students in community colleges often are bewildered by the complexities they encounter, and student advising constitutes a crucial but expensive support system. Virginia intends to partially replace one-on-one advising with an online system featuring an avatar who will eventually plan course schedules, track student success and even nag when necessary.

Strikingly, Virginia plans to accomplish these goals without an increase in per-student funding from the state between now and 2015. In fact, DuBois believes the situation with state funding is more likely to grow worse than better. On his recent tour, he bluntly told the faculty at

New River Community College near Blacksburg, “I think we’re going to lose another gazillion dollars (in state funding) before it’s all over.”

That’s not to say that Virginia will neglect other possible sources of funds. The revamping plan incorporates a goal of raising \$550 million from a mixture of government and foundation grants and private parties. Already, in fact, Virginia has become something of a darling of the Lumina Foundation for Education and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Several Virginia community colleges, for example, were early participants in Lumina’s Achieving the Dream program, which funds efforts to use quantitative measurements to improve student outcomes. After a hesitant start, Virginia became one of the stellar performers in the program.

Jamie Merisotis, president of Lumina, spoke at Virginia’s annual retreat for community colleges this summer, and told the gathering, “You have reached a level that most of the nation can rightly aspire to. What’s happening here in Virginia is what needs to happen nationally.”

Nonetheless, foundation grants do not provide operating funds, and the crushing budget declines—a 41 percent drop in per-student funding

over the past five years—have left Virginia with the necessity of pulling off what one administrator called “the hat trick”: achieving dramatically more with less.

Robert Templin, president of Northern Virginia Community College, and the chairman of the planning team, described the dollar dilemma this way: “If we merely tried to achieve these goals by seeking more state funding, we would need an additional \$300 million. There are few prospects we

would get it. So we must increase productivity by an equivalent amount. There’s really no choice. If we don’t, we begin to edge toward mission failure.”

Following the old business school dictum that problems are merely opportunities in disguise, Virginia has focused its early attention on the sinkhole of all community colleges: the unprepared student. These young people show up at community colleges by the tens of thousands with few academic skills, low self-confidence and dim prospects.

One Virginia study showed that only 16.4 percent of students sent to developmental math classes ever manage to pass a college-level math course. Overall, developmental students graduate or transfer to four-year colleges at half the rate of other students. Discouraged and defeated, the great majority of them drift away from college after a few semesters.

DuBois and the planning team decided that the old system of assessing and handling unprepared students was such a bust that they needed to throw it out and begin afresh. The new system will divide students into three groups—liberal arts, science and job training—that reflect the different course requirements those students will encounter. Each group can then be tested separately and assigned to its own remedial courses.

Moreover, the new assessment tests will tease out students’ skills in various sub-categories, or “modules,” so a student who passes, say, three modules and fails one will only need to take a makeup course in that single module. If it works as planned, the process should operate in a more customized fashion, presumably producing higher success rates, while taking less time.

“Not everyone is required to take the same level of math in college, so why shouldn’t we have an assessment process that reflects that?” asked Templin. “We looked all over the country for a test that worked the way we wanted, and couldn’t find it. So now we’re developing our own.”

David French, a math teacher at Tidewater Community College in Chesapeake for 17 years, said the new approach has created debate among his colleagues, with some fearing that the module approach will divide math into disconnected segments and erode the sense of continuity. But it is clear, he said, that the old system needed to be changed.

“Under the old system, math teaching tended to be a mile wide and an inch deep because teachers did not have time to linger,” said French. “And why on earth would a liberal arts student need to know how to do long division of polynomials?”

When the new system cranks up in about 18 months, Templin and other college leaders will know fairly quickly whether it has succeeded. That’s because the Virginia system has adopted the “culture of evidence” engendered by its Achieving the Dream experience over the last half decade. “Without Achieving the Dream, Virginia would not be in a re-engineering mode today,” said Templin. “It started the conversation about focusing on student success and on using our data to measure the results.”

Among all the metrics used by Virginia, the most closely watched are the “Student Success Snapshots,” issued regularly from Richmond, that give college-by-college results for programs ranging from student retention to graduate job placement. The idea was cross-pollinated from Florida where

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colleges had used it successfully.

All agree that the snapshots, by their regular appearance, have drawn the attention of campus presidents and have gotten the competitive juices flowing. When a snapshot is posted on the system's website, the results for each college are all too easy to see.

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One snapshot, for example, compared results for "distance learning" classes where professors teach through video screens. The snapshot showed that 88 percent of students at Blue Ridge Community College earned a grade of C or better for classes where the instructor was

teaching over a live feed, whereas only 49 percent of students at New River Community College performed as well.

"So college presidents will see numbers in a snapshot and ask themselves, 'Does this measurement mean anything important? And, if it does, how can I change things for the better?'" said Templin.

At Tidewater College, President Deborah DiCroce has used another data pool to transform the school's job training programs. In the past, she said, colleges set up training programs for particular skills and expected them to last forever. But databases on employment in the Norfolk area showed that demand for jobs like truck driving or nursing waxes and wanes dramatically over time.

"So we paid good money to purchase these databases, and now we use them to shape our training programs," DiCroce said. "If the demand for truck drivers is dropping, we know about it and slow down the driver training program. And vice versa, if demand starts to jump up. We now assume that every

program has a shelf life."

The number crunching also allows Tidewater to connect with individual employers who are growing and need skilled employees. In the past year the college has worked with 1,375 local companies to develop training programs specific to their needs, and the college now has 9,000 students enrolled in these customized programs.

Sitting in a light industrial park, next to a medical clinic for children, Tidewater's automotive technology center exemplifies this new wave. Looking nothing like the dark garages that often house auto repair programs, the two-year-old technology center sparkles, its classrooms filled with computers, its repair bays spotless.

The center works in a partnership with Toyota, Honda and Chrysler to train mechanics for dealerships. The manufacturers determine the curriculums for their particular makes and supply new cars to be used as repair guinea pigs. The Tidewater teachers do the rest.

In some cases, said center director Bud Brueggeman, local dealerships pay tuition for individual students and pretty much guarantee employment after graduation. "When we first proposed this facility, some wanted us to put it in a barn at the edge of town. It was the old grease monkey idea. We said, 'No, no, no, if you want Toyota as a partner, you need to have a different kind of place.'"

Rory Lavallee, a 19-year-old trainee from Richmond, said the elegance of the center was startling when he first arrived. He is paying his tuition himself, but the total cost over two years will come to \$8,000, versus \$20,000 for a commercial training program. And pretty soon, he will be a certified Honda mechanic.

"If this place was not here, I couldn't afford to become a Honda mechanic," Lavallee said.

Just as important as quantitative measurements, Virginia administrators say, will be a nearly obsessive introduction of technology. DuBois pushes this theme constantly. "Higher education is one of the last sectors that sees technology as just another cost, rather than a way to increase productivity and actually lower costs," he told the faculty at New River College near Blacksburg. "We need to change that."

Soon, Virginia hopes to lower its costs for processing financial aid applications—and also increase financial aid to students—by centralizing, computerizing and speeding up the application process. Another technology program will beam distance-learning classes from college to college throughout the state. Existing programs such as online tutoring and skills teaching will be greatly expanded.

Usually, when DuBois mentions technology, he also uses the word "scaleable," meaning that a program,



David French, a math teacher at Tidewater Community College, supports the new "modular" assessment approach. "Why on earth would a liberal arts student need to know how to do long division of polynomials?"

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once established, can be expanded at little additional cost. The human-to-human interchanges of teaching and counseling generally cannot be scaled up, he said, but technology changes that.

Nowhere is the enthusiasm for technology and scalability more evident than with the program known as the Virginia Wizard, a new effort that will attempt to convert the laborious and expensive process of student advising into an online experience.

The Wizard begins by administering a career assessment program and then, via an avatar known as Jenny, leads students through college selection, course planning, registration, and possible transfer to a four-year institution. The program was developed through a \$2.5 million federal grant and, if successful, could eventually replace several hundred human advisors that the system otherwise would be forced to hire as a result of increased enrollment.

DuBois loves to anticipate the future of Jenny. Conceivably, he said, she could eventually detect students' errors in course selection, remind them of upcoming exams via text messaging, and even nag them when their class attendance falls. "Getting through college is complicated, and most kids can't do it by themselves," DuBois said. "Jenny could be there 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, and that's something no human can do."

In all, the Virginia plan seems determined to introduce change into every nook and cranny of the Virginia system. DuBois already has placed special counselors inside 150 state high schools to help with college planning, and promoted joint efforts with school superintendents to write more effective high school curriculums. The reform plan also will attempt to redefine the role of adjuncts—the miserably paid and overworked part-timers who form the backbone of the teaching corps at community colleges.

On and on it goes. To spend a day with DuBois is to be assaulted by ideas, plans, programs. His determination, in part, seems to stem from his own personal history. He was raised poor by a single mother and is the product of a community college himself. He has a French name and an Irish face, and his steely resolve is often combined with Irish charm. With faculty members he disarms and cajoles as easily as a Dublin ward heeler.

He has also learned the trick of enjoying himself in the midst of relentless work. A bicycle enthusiast, he once rode his bike more than 700 miles through Virginia's back roads to raise money for foster-home kids to attend community college. On his two-college tour by state airplane this fall, he made hour-long addresses to two campus faculties, met with college presidents, and pressed the flesh with students, all without a break for ten straight hours, and seemed ready for more at the end of the day.

Whether he can transform the culture of Virginia's system remains to be seen. Community colleges have the most complex mission in higher education, teaching quantum physics on one side of campus and truck driving on another.



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Deborah DiCroce, president of Tidewater Community College, has used databases to shape the school's job training programs, based on demand in the community for certain jobs. "We now assume that every program has a shelf life," she says.

They operate remedial high schools during the day and transform themselves into adult education centers at night. And they must do it far more cheaply than full-fledged colleges, because that's all the market will bear.

And because they are so intertwined with their local communities, community colleges can be difficult to change. "Reforms tend to fail at community colleges because the problems are bigger than the colleges themselves. To change the college in an important way, you also have to change the community," said Earl Simpson, a retired English professor in the Virginia system.

But others sense that the sheer magnitude of the current problems is creating a momentum for reform in Virginia and elsewhere. "After talking about reform for so long, we are finally seeing some institutions change themselves across the board, rather than in pockets and corners," said Robert McCabe, executive director of the National Alliance of Community and Technical Colleges. "They are developing new ways of delivering education."

DuBois agrees that momentum is on the side for change. But, returning on the state airplane to Richmond, he argued that Virginia's efforts, contrary to the views of some, are not intended to redefine community colleges and are not intended to offer all things to all people.

"We could be starting honors programs for kids with high SATs," DuBois said. "And we could be offering four-year baccalaureate degrees. A lot of community colleges are doing that, and you'll notice that some have even removed the word 'community' from their names.

"We're not interested in those kinds of programs. Honors kids don't really need us; they'll do just fine. Our programs are aimed at the kids without the money, without the best background, the first ones in their family to show up at college. The simple truth is, those are the kids who need us, and we're going to help them. That's what the change is all about." ♦

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