

Policy Brief

COLLEGE PROMISE

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Virginia's G3 Initiative: A Workforce Development Statewide Promise

BY ELIZABETH NAREHOOD



The state of Virginia recently joined 32 other states and the District of Columbia in signing legislation or executive orders to support its first statewide community college Promise program, Governor Ralph Northam's G3 initiative [11]. G3, which stands for "Get a Skill, Get a Job, Get Ahead," aims to make community college tuition-free with critical supports for low- and middle-income students. Targeting education programs for high-demand careers and embedding wrap-around financial supports for eligible students, G3 has the potential to expand access and success through postsecondary education, serving as a catalyst for community development and economic recovery, especially climbing out of the Covid pandemic. Given Virginia's focus on economic development, G3 is also poised to become a national exemplar, enabling students to earn 2-year community college degrees, 1-year industry and state-approved certificates, meet university transfer requirements to complete the bachelor's degree, and/or, if they choose alternative pathways, pursue short-term training to expedite their entry into or advancement in the labor market.

Background

A key issue of Governor Northam's campaign was establishing tuition-free community college [8], a benefit that is expected to drive the state's economic, social, and civic prosperity. Virginia's Secretary of Labor, Dr. Megan Healy, shared that the governor's "number one priority" was to gain bipartisan support for G3 (M. Healy, personal communication, June 17, 2021). Healy further explained that economic mobility, a key concern for most Virginians, has further proved vital for Virginia's recovery from the recession, exacerbated by the Covid pandemic. G3's financial assistance structure demonstrates the Administration's commitment to building consensus across party lines by developing a "free community college" model that works for both citizens and industries throughout Virginia.

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The Commonwealth of Virginia has historically emphasized economic development as a key driver for new policy creation and the investment of state resources [1]. The state’s robust public higher education system (comprising 15 public universities and 24 community colleges) has been recognized as a cornerstone to building the skilled workforce pipeline to meet the demands of a growing economy. Prior to G3, the New Economy Workforce Credentials Grant, later rebranded as “Fast Forward,” was the first grant program of its kind in the state due to its acknowledgment of non-credit workforce programs as a critical entry point into high-demand fields sorely needed by the state’s businesses [9]. This G3 legislation received overwhelming support from both the Republican majority-controlled legislature and the state’s former Democratic governor, Terry McAuliffe who is running for re-election this month. The effort represents the established bipartisan support behind workforce development initiatives essential to Virginia’s future.

G3 builds upon the success of the New Economy Workforce Credentials Grant by funding non-credit, short-term state-approved training programs, and academic and career credit programs leading to 2 and 4-year degrees in high demand fields, e.g., healthcare, computer science, finance, entrepreneurship, early childhood, and K-12 education, etc. The financial support offered through G3 removes barriers that students encounter all too frequently in the previous cost-share model: G3 offers full community college tuition support and success grants (incentive bonuses) for students that complete a credential of value. This enhanced financial support makes G3 Virginia’s first statewide community college Promise program.

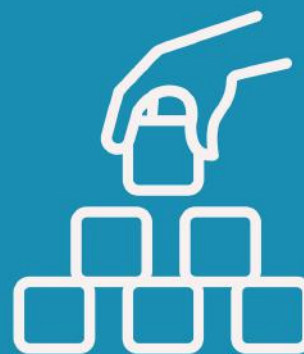
The “free community college” movement is growing exponentially [4], resetting expectations for students and families that community college is affordable and doable. G3 is designed to reduce concerns related to debt, cost, and professional attainment [6]. G3 has the potential to become a proof point for the national conversation that “free community college” delivers a critical return on investment.

G3 Overview

G3 shares similarities with other statewide community college Promise models but also includes customized, data-driven components tailored to meet the demands of Virginia’s unique, diverse population. Building on successful guided pathways research, G3 programs include stackable credentials in specific (meta-major) fields of study.

Key Components of Virginia’s G3 Model

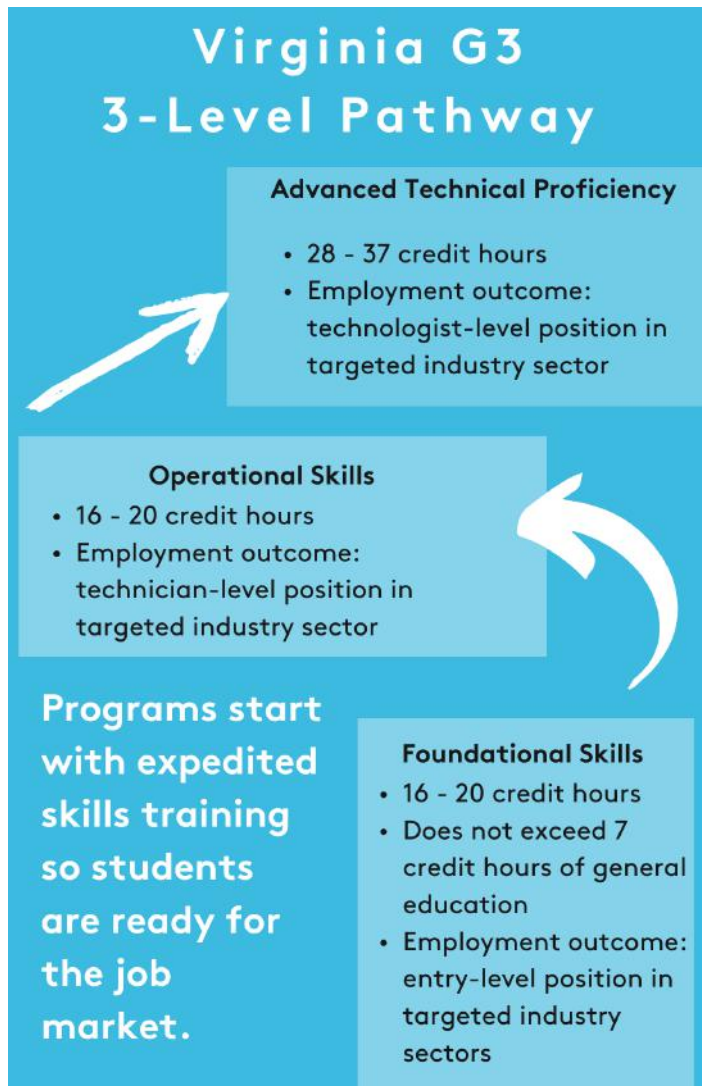
- Highlight programs in high-demand sectors with industry credentials offered early in the sequence
- Industry perspective in curriculum design and approval
- Curricular pathways with stackable credentials with clear articulation between credit and non-credit programs
- Student success grants to finance costs beyond tuition and funding to hire additional advising staff



Community colleges that implemented the guided pathways research demonstrated that students are well able to select and complete a plan of study aligned with their educational and career goals [3]. Meta-Majors provide structure and narrow choices to support student success in broad program streams. They are designed to help students choose their program of study within the first year of attendance, a process that aims to increase completion rates [10]. Students can begin study in a Meta-Major of interest, then narrow their selection to a specific program of study.

For example, enrolling in the Health Sciences Meta-Major can provide students a scope of careers in a variety of health fields such as medical assistance, nursing, or specialized therapy. Students can then make an informed choice on which career pathway is most aligned with their own aspirations and focus their remaining education and/or training on this sub-field.

Due to challenges related to students finding employment post-graduation, the G3 curriculum front-loads industry-recognized credentials early in the Meta-Major sequence. As Central Virginia Community college President, Dr. John Capps, explains, “G3 takes the traditional academic model and essentially turns it on its head. Students learn marketable skills first and then continue their education and earn a degree in the future. Because this model targets high-demand jobs, it is only natural to focus on those skills up-front” (J. Capps, personal communication, June 23, 2021).



G3 programs of study are found in five workforce pathways: healthcare, information technology, and computer science, manufacturing and skilled trades, public safety, and early childhood education. In order for a community college to submit a program for approval to G3, faculty and administrators had to work closely with industry partners to develop a distinctive three-level structure for the curriculum. Not only was the curriculum developed by industries at the local level, but statewide planning meetings were held that convened faculty expertise from across the Commonwealth to develop common competencies and learning outcomes. Community colleges were also required to submit supporting employment demand and projection data within their service area to receive approval for funding support. Secretary Healy added that “not only are the focus areas consistently in high demand, but they were also resilient during the pandemic” (M. Healy, personal communication, June 17, 2021).

Virginia’s G3 is also progressive in its inclusion of wraparound financial assistance to help with the “real” costs of community college attendance beyond tuition such as food, transportation, and childcare. National research validating the increased costs of attending community college indicates that students who live off-campus in nearly one-third of U.S. community colleges and universities are provided \$3000 less in financial assistance than the estimated costs of living in that region [5].



Elizabeth Narehood
Doctoral Candidate
School of Strategic Leadership
Studies
James Madison University, VA

Elizabeth Narehood is currently a doctoral candidate at James Madison University's School of Strategic Leadership Studies. Narehood also presently serves as Title III Project Director for Central Virginia Community College located in Lynchburg, Virginia. Previously, Narehood held roles in workforce development, economic development, and cooperative extension.

Narehood holds a Master of Science in Career and Technical Education from Virginia Tech and Credential of Readiness (CORe) from Harvard Business School. Narehood has a career dedicated to public service and strengthening community vitality through education.

The Virginia Governor's Office completed a statewide analysis to develop Student Success Grants, which are available to students on a per-semester basis. G3 full-time students with federal Pell grants are eligible to receive an additional \$900 per semester and \$450 per summer term. Secretary Healy added that many community college students are working multiple minimum-wage jobs to make a living while also attending community college. Many studies indicate that students who work more than 20 hours per week are negatively impacted in completing their coursework. In response, the Student Success Grant was developed so that students would be able to work less and devote more time to their education, as "G3 was designed to promote economic opportunity and (our) commitment to addressing equity." (M. Healy, personal communication, June 17, 2021).

In addition to providing wrap-around support services directly to students, G3 legislation also includes 5 million in funding for community colleges to expand staff with expertise in advising, student success, and wrap-around supports. In regard to this aspect of the legislation, Dr. Glenn Dubois, Chancellor of the Virginia Community college System, said: "We see the G3 advising allocation as a down payment on what we know is a great need for our students and community colleges. We have been able to bring on 60 new advisors with this funding, but we need to have 360 if we want every student to be community college-ready on day one. Our students can be insecure when thinking about their future going to community college. We need to have the staff to support them" (personal communication, July 30, 2021).

Analysis and Recommendations

Virginia's G3 brings together several components that not only remove financial barriers to access but also support the cultivation of an environment primed for student success. Community colleges that have developed programs to qualify for G3 funding must offer students structured academic pathways with stackable credentials, including those that can be obtained through non-credit programming. This curricular framework gives colleges an applied framework for implementing the guided pathways initiative, which calls for flexibility, affordability, and alignment with regional employment trends. Prioritizing industry-recognized credentials as an early "pathways" goal for students enables their short-term success and qualification for entry-level jobs to start their careers with minimal time spent in targeted training [2]. Chancellor Dubois shared that "along with being an access program, G3 is also a workforce development program. G3 is a structured talent development program aimed at (top) employer needs. It took about 3 years to develop the final unique design that was approved this spring and it was overwhelmingly supported by the legislature." (personal communication, July 30, 2021).

Challengers of Virginia's G3 "free community college" initiative point to the low persistence and retention rates of community college students, which is – in the main – due to students' need to work to live and the financial barriers they face. G3 has provided a structural solution for students to get a start, build upon entry-level careers, and acquire relevant on-the-job experience while also continuing their education. Dr. Capps shared, "There is no reason for someone not to take advantage of these high-demand fields. G3 is not only a game-changer for community colleges but also a life changer and an economic development changer." (J. Capps, personal communication, June 23, 2021).

In line with the findings of the Ecosystems of Support and Financial Sustainability for College Promise Populations [7], the G3 legislation recognizes that many student populations have demonstrated financial need beyond tuition support. The incorporation of Student Success Grants into this statewide community college Promise is Virginia's first step toward breaking down barriers to entry while also providing support to address the myriad financial challenges students often encounter when "life happens." Life circumstances such as having to reduce hours at work to take classes, pay for transportation costs when traveling to campus, or purchase internet services much less a laptop, can all be significant barriers to student enrollment, persistence, and completion of their degrees, certificates and/or four-year transfer requirements.

Virginia's G3 expands the wrap-around supports for community college Promise by providing funding for advisors to help students enroll in relevant programs of study while simultaneously supporting community college-wide retention efforts. Community colleges are the most consistently underfunded segment of American higher education, serving the most diverse student populations in the nation (low-income, first-generation, underrepresented minorities, etc.) Specifically, when it comes to student-advisor ratios, the G3 legislation gives its community colleges more funding for advisors based on the size of their student enrollment.

Discussion and Conclusion

The Virginia G3 legislation provides invaluable lessons for our nation's leaders in developing and sustaining statewide community college Promise programs with bipartisan support that prioritizes student opportunity and success. Secretary Healy explained that Virginia continues to be awarded CNBC's annual 'Top State for Business' recognition, a designation it received in 2021 and for the past five years. She clarified that the main reason Virginia has been able to secure the top ranking repeatedly is due to its ability to cultivate and retain talent. Healy explained that G3 is another example of Governor Northam's commitment to education, developing a skilled workforce whose talent pipeline will help Virginia's economic recovery for a vibrant and prosperous future.

College Promise is a national, non-partisan, non-profit initiative that builds broad public support for funding the first two or more years of postsecondary education for hard-working students, and ensuring those students have access to quality educational opportunities and supports.

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The G3 legislation marks the introduction of a model to address equity, the central focus of Opportunity 2027, the Virginia Community college System's new strategic plan. Chancellor Dubois explained that G3 removes price as a barrier, especially for low-income families. "[G3] aligns with Opportunity 2027 which focuses not just on student completion, but on a broad set of goals that bring an equity lens to everything that the system will do moving forward -- from hiring practices to leadership selection, to who are enrolling in our institutions."

President Capps shared his perspective on how the G3 legislation could impact students and colleges in the future: "We know that education is a pathway to a higher standard of living and a key to social equity and equality. We hope in the future that this opportunity will continue to be expanded to other programs of study, including dual enrollment students to help them get a jump start on their education. This is an equity issue. When students or parents must pay, it excludes those that cannot, and many times, those are the students that could benefit from these programs the most." (J. Capps, personal communication, June 23, 2021).

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