

SCHEV Summit on Academic Quality

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Summary comments

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First of all, I would like to extend my personal thanks to Joe DeFilippo and to SCHEV for this opportunity to explore quality and value in Virginia higher education. Many of the current national conversations about higher education are more limited in scope, and leave aside major investigations of what constitutes academic quality. I had the honor of serving as the representative from James Madison University on the planning committee for today's summit, and appreciated the focus on quality and value. Thanks to my colleagues across Virginia on that committee, and especially to the leadership of the Virginia Assessment Group.

This summit is timely—just this morning there is an article in *Inside Higher Ed* describing public discontent with preparation for employment and a *Huffington Post* essay bemoaning the class gap in higher education attainment. Both of these themes have shown up in a variety of ways during today's sessions.

It seems to me that there are three categories of outcomes of higher education that have been part of the evolving national conversation, and that all of them have been represented in the comments we have heard today: student learning, which led to assessment movement; job preparation, which has been particularly important to students and families since the recent economic downturn; and well-being—the sense of a rewarding life well-lived. In her comments at the beginning of today's summit, Secretary Holton reminded us that all students from all backgrounds deserve the opportunity to achieve success in all three areas.

The major themes that I heard today are:

- The need for closer collaboration and partnership between employers and higher education so that students are prepared for the jobs that are and will be available in the Commonwealth.
- Students and their families have great anxiety about paying for college, paying off student loans, finding employment, and making a living. It is a fundamental reality that as state support for public higher education has decreased, the cost to families has grown very quickly. President Sullivan's anecdote about students in a class she teaches brought this home in a moving way.
- Many are concerned about issues of income disparity and differential outcomes from higher education for students from different backgrounds.

I witnessed shared understanding among those in this room that quality higher education must both educate with core disciplinary knowledge that can lead to employment or prepare for graduate school and provide the educational opportunities that Gallup has identified as most meaningful to students throughout their lives. These educational opportunities are very similar to the pedagogies that the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) calls high-impact practices, and examples of such pedagogies were shared by Paul Hastedt in his session. Research sponsored this year by AAC&U with employers has shown that over 90% of employers believe that “a candidate's demonstrated capacity to think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems is **more important** than his or her undergraduate major.” Students who are fortunate enough to have an education founded in these practices for engaged learning have a better opportunity to develop the capacities identified by

employers as most important: written and oral communication, teamwork skills, ethical decision making, critical thinking, and the ability to apply knowledge in real-world settings.

However, and this is very important for all of us to realize, I have the very real sense that many students and parents are working from a fundamentally different understanding of what constitutes quality and value in higher education. It is therefore incumbent upon all of us to honor their anxiety and concern for cost and future employment and also to articulate the vision of quality higher education that we believe is most effective in preparing students for their future careers.

Finally, the student panel made me proud of what we are doing in higher education in Virginia. At the same time, few of the students we heard from had what we might call a “typical” path through higher education. They did not all graduate in six years. Several attended multiple institutions. So, my final comment is to remind us of the importance of maintaining enough institutional flexibility for the many pathways through higher education the students described to us and also of the growing number of adult and returning learners in our higher education institutions.

Thank you. It has been an honor to participate in today’s summit.