

## **The Landscape of Postsecondary Access Resources in Virginia**

According to the Georgetown Center on Education and Workforce, of the 11.5 million jobs added since the recession of 2007-2010, 99% have gone to workers with at least some college education, and almost three-quarters have gone to those with a bachelor's degree or more. Currently, just over half (51%) of Virginians ages 25-64 have a degree or workforce credential, ranking Virginia sixth in the nation for postsecondary education attainment. However, that rate is an average that is not evenly achieved across Virginia. In fact, 42% of Virginia's 133 localities have an attainment rate below 30%. Meeting the growing demand for postsecondary education requires the Commonwealth to identify the gaps in educational attainment needs across the state and to implement strategies to support greater access to and completion of postsecondary education.

"The Landscape of Postsecondary Access Resources in Virginia," a study commissioned by the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia and Virginia529, includes an overview of postsecondary access needs and resources for K-12 students by school division and makes recommendations to improve postsecondary access services, defined as efforts to increase access to all types of training or education after high school. This summary document notes these recommendations and also offers action steps for state, regional and local policy makers to support increased postsecondary attainment.

### **Where are the greatest needs for access resources in Virginia?**

The report classifies all of Virginia's 131 school divisions by need for postsecondary access resources based on levels of economically disadvantaged students and the rate at which high school graduates enrolled in postsecondary education. The result is a chart of school districts' need for college access support and the identification of the gaps in postsecondary achievement between traditional and historically underrepresented students. Divisions with high rates of economically disadvantaged students and low rates of postsecondary enrollment are categorized as having the greatest need for postsecondary access resources.

Forty divisions fell into this greatest-needs group, with 11 identified as having the highest needs in the state — these divisions are referred to as "high need" and the remaining 29 are categorized as "recognized need." As a note, more than half — 24 — of the divisions in the current study would have been categorized as such also in 2011. These divisions are categorized as having "persistent need." The illustration below provides a listing of the divisions identified with high, recognized and persistent needs.

**40 school divisions showing high and recognized need for postsecondary-access resources**  
(based on 2014 data)



**What access services are available and what challenges do providers face?**

In addition to categorizing school divisions based on need, the study identifies services available to students and challenges faced by providers. The study identified that the level and type of access services varied by school division. The median number of access providers was five per division. Three divisions had no provider services; 10 divisions had 11 or more access organizations. Another study that takes into account school size and other external factors such as resources would be needed to determine whether there is a correlation between the number of provider organizations and the rate of postsecondary enrollments.

Access providers cited staff time and funding among the greatest challenges. These constraints limit the reach and breadth of services offered, as well as the ability to provide individualized student support. Other identified challenges included lack of time with or access to students during the school day; transportation to college services or campus visits; difficulty reaching families; and students’ or families’ lack of awareness of the value of postsecondary education.

**Recommendations for increasing postsecondary access services**

1. **Expand support for early awareness and development of postsecondary aspirations beyond high school.** Most access organizations surveyed concentrated on students in high school. While increased services are needed as a student approaches high-school graduation, the need for early planning, particularly in the context of career planning, is needed to ensure students align coursework accordingly.

2. **Enhance efforts to involve parents.** The number of providers indicating parental engagement as a primary service focus increased from 27% in 2009 to 47% of providers in 2016. Sharing creative ideas and strategies from these providers may help further strengthen outreach efforts.
3. **Expand information on and support of SAT/ACT test preparation.** Despite the availability of more test-preparation online resources, current research identifies this as an important area where support is relatively low — not only in test-preparation services but also in avenues for staff to stay current and knowledgeable about changing testing policies as they relate to individual college admissions and scholarship requirements. Almost three-quarters of organizations provided at least some support for test preparation (compared to less than half in 2009), but less than half view it as a primary focus.
4. **Expand communication and cooperation between access stakeholders to help address service gaps and challenges.** Specific recommendations to support greater postsecondary enrollment are provided for schools, higher-education institutions, access providers and community and business groups. The recommendations include creation of more formal agreements between schools and access providers; communication from higher education regarding the admissions process and services and aid available to underrepresented students; collaboration with community and business groups regarding career interests and needs to help guide students in their career exploration and to align these choices with postsecondary options.
5. **Expand communication within the postsecondary access community.** Relatively few access providers reported having consistent opportunities to interact with others in the access community beyond their immediate partners, or to coordinate efforts with other providers. This could support greater collaboration and resource-sharing to help other groups fill services gaps. Umbrella organizations such as the Virginia College Access Network can play an important role in providing opportunities for interaction and professional development.
6. **Expand the use of data to inform program development and resource allocation.** While many organizations use data to track participant outcomes, fewer leverage data on postsecondary success and completion.

### **Action steps for state, regional and local policymakers**

While the report provides the above recommendations to improve the level and quality of access services as a way to close the gaps in postsecondary access between traditional and historically underrepresented populations, the following are specific action steps that stakeholders can take to implement these recommendations.

- **Establish a shared goal and measure to track overall student success and postsecondary credential attainment.** Creating a shared goal and measure that follows students from high school graduation to enrollment in postsecondary to completion of a credential helps develop a shared commitment between secondary and postsecondary

education in student success. This effort can be led a state level with regions and localities identifying specific benchmarks that meet their area needs.

- **Align with existing infrastructure.** Requirements outlined in the Profile of a Virginia High School Graduate create an opportunity at the state, regional and local level to collaborate and identify how resources could be utilized to support identified outcomes and expectations.
- **Support to high-need areas and regional collaborations.** School divisions, access providers, higher-education institutions and other stakeholders in high need areas can work collaboratively to evaluate the recommendations against existing practices. These stakeholders can determine next steps to ensure increased postsecondary enrollments.
- **Demonstrate transparency through communication.** Leverage networks, conferences and trainings -- such as those led by community access providers, school counselors, teachers, principals, superintendents, college admissions and financial aid officers and higher-education institutions -- to share information and provide consistent messaging to students and families about accessing higher education in Virginia.
- **Engage businesses and community organizations regionally.** The community can support college access programming through internships, discounts, supply mini-grants and sponsored college or job-shadowing tours. Efforts to engage businesses and community organizations create relevance to students, particularly those who may not envision postsecondary education as a viable path to a meaningful career.

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