“Achieving the Big Goal: The Path to Dramatically Improving Higher Education Attainment”

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Thank you, and good afternoon. I’m pleased to be with you today. I want to thank Chancellor Dubois for that kind introduction, and for inviting me to speak with you.

It’s good to be back in Virginia. As many of you may know, I called the DC metro area home for more than two decades before moving to Indianapolis in 2008 to lead Lumina Foundation, with the last decade spent as a proud resident of the Commonwealth. That’s actually just one of many ties between Lumina and this great state. I’m sure many of you know Dr. Marie McDemmond, a founding member and the current chair of Lumina’s Board, from her impressive tenure as president of Norfolk State University. And of course Dr. Belle Wheelan, President of the SACS Commission on Colleges, served with distinction as president of Northern Virginia Community College and as the state’s Secretary of Education.
Lumina Foundation’s relationship with higher education in this state has included many different connections to the University of Virginia, and it continues today in our partnership with the Miller Center of Public Affairs. Most importantly, Lumina has forged strong and productive partnerships with several community colleges here in Virginia through the Achieving the Dream initiative, a topic I will return to in a moment.

When the Chancellor invited me to speak, he indicated that my presence might somehow serve to “spur you to the next level” in the vital work of increasing student success. Though I was flattered to hear that, I also want to acknowledge that, in many ways, you have already reached a level that most of the nation can rightly aspire to.

What’s happening here in Virginia — particularly in the state’s community colleges — is what needs to happen nationally. In fact, I want to take this opportunity to publicly commend the ongoing work of the “Reengineering Task Force” and the ambitious reform agenda reflected in the system’s new strategic plan. These are good examples of the important and pioneering efforts under way here in Virginia. And there are many others. I am thinking particularly of the Grow by Degrees campaign launched this year by the Virginia Business Higher Education Council and pushed aggressively by Governor McDonnell. This impressive effort is very much aligned with Lumina’s goals, and it
is focused right where it needs to be: on increasing college attainment as the way to ensure the long-term economic and social health of the state and its residents.

I also can’t say enough about Virginia’s sustained and noteworthy participation in Achieving the Dream. Virginia has been an Achieving the Dream state since the very beginning, and it now boasts six participating institutions. Most impressively, all six are “leader colleges” — national exemplars by virtue of their dedicated leadership, their commitment to data-based change, and their broad engagement of stakeholders. [They are: Danville CC, Mountain Empire CC, Northern Virginia CC, Patrick Henry CC, Paul D. Camp CC and Tidewater CC.]

As I think you are certainly aware by now, Lumina has focused all of its energy and resources on the achievement of one ambitious national goal: that **by 2025, 60 percent of Americans will have high-quality college degrees or credentials.** We’re convinced that this goal is both necessary and achievable, and so we’ve made it the driving force of all we do. We’ve organized all of our work around this goal, and we’ve developed a detailed Strategic Plan to achieve it.

Our plan is really a blueprint for what needs to happen in the nation — supported through the work of Lumina and many, many others — in
order to reach the Big Goal of 60% by 2025. Simply put, we suggest that three critical outcomes must happen concurrently:

- First, students must be prepared academically, financially and socially for success in education beyond high school. All three of these areas must be addressed as co-equals. If they’re not, research shows that the path to and through college becomes exceedingly difficult to navigate.

- Second, higher education success and completion rates must be improved significantly. Here the goal is not merely to push students through college, but to help them achieve high-quality credentials that will be useful to them in the 21st century workforce.

- And third: postsecondary institutions and systems must become more productive so they can increase capacity and serve more students.

Lumina has major work under way toward each of these outcomes — and Virginia is certainly in the thick of it.

The Big Goal is clearly national in scope, but we’ve been at this long enough to realize that we must take a state-by-state approach to reach it. After all, real and lasting progress in higher education usually doesn’t start at the federal level and trickle down. And if it bubbles up from the
institutional or system level, it too often does not spread far enough to have dramatic impact. State by state: that’s how we try to get things done. That’s because individual states are typically in the best position to hit the proverbial sweet spot: where change is big enough to matter and small enough to work.

To that end, we are working to tailor our investments and policy work in states — to help each state see its particular portion of the Big Goal so they can focus their energy and their efforts most productively. One way to do that is to break down the latest data on college success, to show where achievement gaps are occurring and to urge policymakers and educational leaders to address those gaps. I’ve brought with me today advance copies of a policy brief that shows attainment rates and gaps here in Virginia. It’s one of 50 such briefs that Lumina will soon publish in a national report that we hope will help continue the push for a student success agenda in every state.

The policy brief shows that while the 43% adult degree attainment rate in Virginia is slightly above the national average, it falls far short of where the state—and the nation—must direct its resources. One area where the state could make significant inroads is to encourage the 21% of all state residents who have attended college but never received a credential to return and complete their education. With the state looking
at a projected 820,000 job vacancies in the next decade that will require some form of postsecondary credential as a requirement, the educational skills of these adult workers will be critical. The state’s community colleges are clearly well positioned to meet this need and must play a pivotal role in the Commonwealth’s overall workforce development.

Another critical area that must be addressed is developmental education. I don’t need to tell this knowledgeable audience about the incredibly important work that needs to be done to redesign, rebrand, and improve developmental education. I am fully convinced that more innovative and effective developmental education programs are essential to support the success of the 21\textsuperscript{st} century students who we will need to better serve if we are to reach the Big Goal. I want to commend Virginia’s community colleges for demonstrating a commitment to student success through active and engaged participation in the Developmental Education Initiative, which Lumina is supporting in collaboration with our colleagues from the Gates Foundation.

These and other issues must be seen as top priorities for states like Virginia. As Lumina works to expand its state-based approach, we’re taking a new tack to help states achieve their educational attainment goals. Our objective is to be flexible enough to be able to address the issues that emerge in real time—like adult degree completion and
developmental education—while at the same time being strategic about our goals and how we plan to achieve them. With this in mind we’ve identified four main methods that we see as especially promising in helping us make these connections: **network building, convening, policy advocacy** and **framing**.

If I may, I’d like to talk briefly about each one in turn.

**First, network building.** It has become clear to us that sharing information across all the existing efforts is essential. We’re paying a lot of attention to how to pool information and streamline communication, and I think we are making progress. We increasingly see our major pieces of work — including AtD, KnowHow2Go, our productivity work, and our new efforts to create degree frameworks and define high-quality learning — as networks. We have built networking tools into all of these efforts, and we’re excited about the multiplier effect we think those networks will generate.

**Second, convening.** As I hope you know, Lumina has made a commitment to being an effective convener of diverse voices and key decision-makers in public policy and higher education. We think this can serve as a valuable resource to states, and to many others. A new convening center at our Indianapolis headquarters is nearly ready, and we’re excited about the possibilities it presents. We believe the
convenings we will hold there and around the country will greatly enhance how we frame issues, help us quickly identify promising approaches, provide a space to develop shared strategies, and serve as a starting point for action.

**Third, a renewed focus on policy.** We have decided to work intentionally and intently in the policy arena — particularly, as I said, in the area of state policy. We’ve hired a full-time Director of State Policy, and we’ve committed ourselves to being much more strategic in moving policy from the “good idea” stage to implementation. When we believe a policy approach has been proven — in other words, when the evidence and policy momentum is sufficient to move forward — we will take it public. For example, we believe the evidence is clear that the time it takes many students to complete both Associate and Bachelor’s degrees can be shortened through effective public policy. So we are supporting the implementation of accelerated degree programs as part of our policy agenda.

**Finally, framing.** We believe the Foundation can play a unique role in framing the national and state discussions about higher education. I believe we have done that with the Big Goal of increasing attainment, and I think we use our unique position to frame issues in ways that make
them more transparent to the public and policymakers, and that can lead to new solutions to our pressing needs.

Let me talk a bit more about this issue of framing. In my view, higher education must be far more focused on the needs of students and less on the needs of higher education institutions. And, what we’re seeing as increasingly important, is that we truly focus on today’s students — the nation’s ever-growing populations of low-income, first-generation, minority and adult students. These individuals — the ones we are calling 21st century students — are the ones who constitute the “real world” on campuses these days.

Today’s 21st century students run the gamut — racially, ethnically, and socially. And referring to them as 21st century students is more than just a semantic exercise. We must recognize them as essential to our future. We must help shift the dialogue from a deficit model to a growth model — one in which all of society sees these students as future leaders, as taxpayers, and as full contributors to the quality of life we all cherish.

Clearly, no one-size-fits-all system of higher education will work for these students. And it won’t serve us as a nation. To reach the Big Goal, America needs all types of students to succeed, and they must succeed in
far greater numbers. That means we need a student-centered system — one that is flexible, accessible, accountable and committed to quality.

And that brings us to the need to explicitly address the quality of higher education. Remember how we stated the Big Goal: It’s not just about increasing degree attainment to 60 percent. There’s an important qualifier there: What’s needed are “high-quality” degrees and credentials. It’s time to move away from defining quality in higher education on the basis of inputs — things like resources, faculty workload, and institutional selectivity — and shift to defining quality in terms of student outcomes, specifically the quality and relevance of degrees and credentials.

There is no question that the global economy has raised the bar for today’s workforce. The trends are compelling and they are clear — in Virginia and every other state: in virtually every major job category, more postsecondary education is critical to job success.

Quality, then, is key. And for me, quality overwhelmingly means well-defined and transparent learning. As higher education leaders, we must spend much greater effort and energy assuring employers, families, and policy leaders that the learning that any college credential represents is explicit and transparent to all concerned. To really shift higher education
decision-making to focus on quality outcomes, we need to explore alternatives to the credit-hour system, especially competency-based formats that involve assessment of prior learning. We also need to assess the wide array of certificate programs and their comparative value in the workplace.

For all of this to happen, we must make meaningful progress in improving the *productivity* in higher education — in order to convince both policymakers and those who work in higher education systems that the rules of the game have changed, and that higher education must become more effective and efficient in serving students and the public.

We know the Big Goal presents an immense challenge, one that requires significant changes in the nation’s postsecondary system. “Business as usual” simply won’t work. For the goal to be reached, institutions — and yes, entire systems and states — must contain costs and reallocate their resources to programs that help more students succeed. They must be rewarded, not merely for enrolling students, but for graduating them from high-quality programs. They must expand and strengthen lower-cost, innovative options for delivering coursework. They also need high-quality data-systems that include student outcome data and that are used top to bottom to make day-to-day decisions about how to serve students more effectively.
So that, in a nutshell, is the path that we see leading to dramatic improvements in higher education attainment for our nation. Stated even more plainly, it’s a who, what, how framework. **Who** we want to see educated by our higher education system are the 21st century students who form the backbone of our economy, our civic well-being, and our collective prosperity. **What** we want them to get is a quality higher education that is well-defined and transparent and is focused on the learning that a degree or credential represents. And **how** we want to get there is through a productive system of higher education that efficiently and effectively delivers higher education to those dramatically larger numbers of people who need it.

I know that much of what I’m saying may not be new to you — and I am absolutely confident that our “who-what-how” message resonates with this audience. After all, community colleges have been operating in this framework for decades. No other sector of higher education has done more to serve the needs of 21st century students. With a long history of working closely with employers, community colleges are experts in providing high-quality, relevant programs. And, having faced funding shortfalls and cutbacks for virtually their entire existence, the nation’s community colleges can probably teach us a great deal about what there is to know about fostering productivity.
So thank you for your good work — and for your renewed commitment to the students and the state you serve so well. Virginia needs its community colleges now more than ever—for the sake of its individual citizens, and for the economic, social, and cultural benefits that all of those citizens will share because of your efforts.

Thank you for your continuing partnership and support, and for the privilege of inviting me to be with you today.

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