State Policy for Expanding Access to High-Demand Jobs:

The Role of G3, GO Virginia, and Virginia's Community Colleges

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Across many states, workforce and economic development policies are typically managed by different agencies, funded through different laws and programs, and driven by different priorities and eligibility rules. This arrangement can result in a fragmented workforce and economic development ecosystem that may have negative impacts for workers and employers alike. For example, workers may need to spend more time navigating different agencies to participate in training and to gain access to important related supports, such as childcare or transportation assistance.

Increasingly, state policymakers are seeking ways to align efforts to meet employer demand for a skilled workforce and to increase access for their constituents to high-demand jobs, particularly those that require less than a bachelor's degree. Aligning efforts between different agencies and funding streams is neither automatic nor simple, but such efforts are important if states are to maximize the value of their workforce investments.

This brief examines two statewide workforce-focused initiatives and efforts to promote their better alignment in Virginia, which has a robust history of using state policy to strengthen workforce quality and align talent development with economic development priorities (see box on next page). We present a snapshot of how the two initiatives—G3 and GO Virginia—interact on the ground, and we describe opportunities for more deliberate and strategic efforts to align their goals and investments.

The research reported here is part of a three-year project CCRC researchers conducted in partnership with the University of Pennsylvania and the Virginia Community College System (VCCS) that focuses on a state-legislated community college last-dollar scholarship program called Get a Skill, Get a Job, Get Ahead (G3). G3 was designed to help more low-income adults enroll in and complete associate degree, certificate, and noncredit occupational training programs in a number of high-demand fields.

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The Virginia Workforce Recovery Project (CCRC, n.d.), part of the Accelerating Recovery in Community Colleges Network, undertakes quantitative and qualitative research to support VCCS's efforts to improve G3 implementation and outcomes.

Research Questions and Key Findings

This brief derives from a request by the Virginia Community College System (VCCS). The system leadership wanted to learn more about whether and how the state's 23 community colleges align their G3 scholarship program with other regional economic development initiatives also targeting high-demand industries and jobs. VCCS was particularly interested in how G3 interacts with Virginia Initiative for Growth and Opportunity (GO Virginia) (https://govirginia.org/), an economic development program passed by the legislature in 2016 to foster private-sector growth and job creation through incentives for regional collaboration by business, education, and government.

Virginia's Workforce Development Ecosystem

Virginia's governors and legislature have long demonstrated bipartisan support for policies to promote the creation of high-demand jobs across the Commonwealth and to invest in workforce quality. The job loss and dislocation caused by the pandemic prompted an ambitious round of state investments in good jobs and talent development. Governor Glenn Youngkin's most recent budget included funding for investments in upgrading the quality of Virginia's adult and emerging workforce. The Virginia Community College System's Chancellor, Dr. David Doré, is committed to a similar agenda. At the 2024 Chancellor's Retreat, Doré highlighted the goal of "improv[ing] service delivery through better alignment with regional economic needs," calling out programs like G3 and FastForward, which awards funding for short-term noncredit credentials.

Virginia has legislated many workforce initiatives over the past decades. In an effort to encourage better alignment and coordination of the state's workforce initiatives, Virginia publishes and regularly updates a workforce ecosystem catalog (Virginia Works, 2024) that describes 69 distinct initiatives and entities addressing four priorities: workforce employment and training (30); business services (13); supportive services for individuals (5); and improvement of the Commonwealth's capability to produce, perform, or deploy workforce development programs and services supporting individuals and businesses (21). The catalog includes both G3 and GO Virginia, the workforce and economic development programs that are the focus of this brief.

While not designed in tandem, G3 and GO Virginia share a similar objective: to improve Virginia's economy through better access to jobs in high-demand industries. CCRC conducted interviews with workforce development leaders at a half dozen Virginia community colleges and with lead staff at six of nine Regional Councils that administer GO Virginia to explore how these programs can be improved through more intentional integration. CCRC also conducted interviews with state officials and reviewed program documents to address these questions:

- How well do G3 and GO Virginia align in terms of goals, strategies, and target populations?

- What are the mechanisms and incentives created by G3 and GO Virginia that encourage regional collaboration in support of high-demand jobs and increased access to those jobs for community college students?

- What are key challenges and opportunities for improving alignment and collaboration across G3 and GO Virginia to benefit low-income adults enrolling in community colleges?

Findings show that G3 and GO Virginia are both focused on strengthening regional economic development and expanding access to high-demand jobs, which creates opportunities for greater alignment of workforce investments in Virginia's economic regions. GO Virginia incentivizes community colleges to become more involved in regional economic development planning and implementation, and it provides opportunities for community colleges to secure funding through partnerships with other regional entities and the private sector. In addition, GO Virginia funds institutional capacity building that colleges may not otherwise have access to. For its part, G3 focuses on subsidizing the cost of attendance for students in workforce training programs in particular fields, though not necessarily in coordination with GO Virginia.

Although G3 and GO Virginia share similar goals, we find that the two initiatives do not always align and, given their mandates and origins, should not be expected to. While collaborating within nine regions is an important policy innovation, doing so presents challenges for some of the state's community colleges. They may be geographically isolated or in a region with few industries, which may make it difficult to develop relationships with relevant employers and institutions.

In what follows, we describe G3 and GO Virginia and analyze how they overlap. Then we present findings and recommendations for VCCS, state policymakers, and college leaders.

What is G3?

Legislated by the Virginia General Assembly in 2021, G3 is a last-dollar scholarship program for students in the Virginia Community College System. To be eligible, students must enroll in a program of study in one of five high-demand fields: healthcare, skilled trades, information technology, early childhood education, and public safety.[1] In addition, students must be eligible for Virginia in-state tuition, have a total household income less than or equal to 400% of the federal poverty level (about $60,000 for a single-person household and $100,000 for a household of three), be enrolled or accepted for enrollment in an approved program at a Virginia public community college, be enrolled in a minimum of six credit hours per semester, and have applied for federal and state financial aid.

During the 2023-24 academic year, the overall budget for G3 was $34.5 million (VCCS, 2024). In that same academic year, approximately $22.9 million in G3 tuition assistance was distributed to 13,648 VCCS students, and over 9,700 credentials were awarded (including to students who began their programs in prior years). Table 1 presents G3 enrollment by program area for the 2023-24 academic year. Since its launch in 2021, G3 has funded over 16,000 students enrolled in workforce training programs in high-demand fields.

Table 1. G3 Student Enrollments by Area of Study (2023-24 Academic Year)

Program Area	Credit Enrollments	Noncredit Enrollments	Total	Enrollment Share
Healthcare	4,365	2,527	6,892	42%
Manufacturing & Skilled Trades	1,663	2,838	4,501	28%
Information Technology	2,627	1,049	3,676	23%
Early Childhood Development	683	0	683	4%
Public Safety	461	65	526	3%
Total	**9,799**	**6,479**	**16,278**	**100%**

Source. Adapted from VCCS (2024).

Note. Students in noncredit programs received Workforce Credential Grants, which are part of the FastForward program, to offset the cost of attendance.

What is GO Virginia?

Also legislated by the Virginia General Assembly, Growth and Opportunity Virginia is a bi-partisan initiative launched in 2016 to promote regional collaboration to grow and diversify regional economies (GO Virginia Foundation, n.d.). The initiative incentivizes collaboration around specific projects, bringing business, education, and government entities together to develop proposals for creating and increasing access to more high-paying jobs. Both G3 and GO Virginia are designed to increase both the supply of skilled workers for high-demand jobs and access to jobs, trades, and professions for which a high demand for qualified workers exists or is projected.[2]

GO Virginia created and funds nine Regional Councils governed by cross-sector leaders. Each Council develops a two-year Growth and Diversification Plan that guides funding criteria for collaborative projects. Applicants submit grant proposals for projects related to four categories of activity: workforce development, site development, infrastructure that supports new start-ups, or support for clusters of related firms. Since its inception, GO Virginia has made 44% of its grants in workforce development, totaling over $48 million (Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development [VDHCD], 2023). For example, GO Virginia made a $439,669 grant to Mountain Empire Community College for the Appalachian Regional Commission Investments Supporting Partnerships in Recovery Ecosystems project, in which the college and partners provide training and support for individuals recovering from addiction.

Table 2. Features of G3 and GO Virginia

Feature	G3	GO Virginia
Year Launched	2021	2016
Annual Allocation	$34.5M (2023-24 academic year)	$30M (2023 fiscal year)
Funding Source	Virginia General Assembly	Virginia General Assembly
Overview	Last-dollar scholarship program targeting low-income adults in high-demand fields	Business-led initiative to promote private sector, high-paying job growth through regional collaboration
Original Target Industries	Early Childhood Education, Healthcare, Information Technology, Manufacturing & Skilled Trades, and Public Safety	Determined by regions based on biannual Economic Growth and Diversification Plans
Governance	Overseen by Virginia Community College System and administered by community colleges	9 Regional Councils governed by a state-level 24-member Growth & Opportunity Board; administered by VA Dept. of Housing and Community Development
Funding Mechanism	Funding allocated to colleges who enroll eligible students to access funds	Regional Councils submit applications to be approved and funded by Board; funding is allocated both per capita and competitively

Research Findings

1. G3 and GO Virginia are both focused on strengthening regional economic development and expanding the number of qualified workers for high-demand jobs, which creates opportunities for greater alignment of workforce investments in Virginia's economic regions.

Our analysis identifies two major points of alignment: Through G3, there is a growing pipeline of workers for jobs in high-demand fields promoted by GO Virginia, and there is overlap between G3 and GO Virginia in the industries they focus on. For G3, the Virginia Office of Education Economics (VOEE) certifies G3 high-demand fields, and the state legislature determines which programs of study are eligible for G3 funding. For GO Virginia, the Regional Councils determine priority industries through an examination of regional labor market data and other economic data published in a biannual Growth and Diversification Plan. The VOEE also supports labor market analysis for GO Virginia projects.

The state legislature also requires the Virginia Board of Workforce Development (VBWD) to publish and update a High-Demand Occupations List based on scores on measures of (VBWD, 2021):

- The extent to which the job offers good earnings right off the bat in Virginia.

- The extent to which the job offers opportunities for advancement in Virginia.

- How much the job is forecasted to grow over the next ten years.

- The extent to which the job fuels Virginia's economic development strategy.

The emphasis on high-demand fields is also reflected in VCCS priorities. The system's strategic plan (VCCS, n.d.) sets goals for "developing Virginia's talent" that include an increase in graduates in "regionally high-demand fields," and an increase in those who enter "industries with the highest job growth." Both G3 and GO Virginia are designed to help colleges reach these goals.

Manufacturing and skilled trades, healthcare, and information technology are by far the most popular G3 program areas. This is shown both in terms of enrollment numbers (see Table 1) and program completion data. These program areas comprise 38%, 35%, and 19%, respectively, of all G3 program completions (VCCS, 2024). There is substantial overlap between these three areas and those focused on in GO Virginia. In 2023, for example, GO Virginia invested $190 million each in advanced manufacturing and in information and emerging technologies sectors (VDHCD, 2024). A 2023 labor market analysis conducted by VOEE suggests that there is potential for more alignment between workforce programs eligible for G3 and those funded through GO Virginia (VOEE, 2023). Such alignment may influence future Growth and Diversification Plans and Regional Council investments.

2. GO Virginia governance structures incentivize community colleges to become more involved in regional economic development planning and implementation.

GO Virginia is governed at the state level by a 24-member Growth and Opportunity Board representing the governor's cabinet, the legislature, and the private sector. In each of the nine GO Virginia regions, a Regional Council drawn from business leaders, economic development professionals, educators (including community college leaders), and government officials manage strategy and grantmaking. The Councils analyze the regional economy and labor market, identify priority industry sectors, and prepare project proposals for submission to the Board for competitive and per capita project funding. In each region, at least one community college president sits on the Council, creating an opportunity for this institutional leader to engage with private and public sector partners on economic development issues in the region. Community college presidents often encourage college workforce vice presidents and deans to work with Regional Council staff on new project design and partnership agreements. As discussed next, this kind of collaboration has resulted in successful GO Virginia grant applications.

3. GO Virginia provides opportunities for community colleges to secure funding by partnering with other regional entities and the private sector.

Since the GO Virginia's inception, 15 of VCCS's 23 institutions have been lead applicants in at least one GO Virginia–funded project. In 2022, community colleges led new funded projects in five of the state's nine regions. Our review of grants does not show much explicit connection between GO Virginia project development and G3 implementation. But one GO Virginia project we learned about does incorporate G3 funding in its planning.

The Community College Workforce Alliance (CCWA), the workforce development arm of Reynolds Community College and Brightpoint Community College in metropolitan Richmond, has taken the lead in developing and strengthening programs for technical and production talent in biotech, working with other entities to develop skilled training programs and credentials that meet the industry's workforce needs. CCWA Vice President Elizabeth Creamer co-leads the Alliance for Better Medicine's Workforce working group. The Alliance decided to house new biotech programming at Brightpoint and new lab technician programming at Reynolds. In 2023, Reynolds won a $250,000 GO Virginia grant called Advising a Regional Skilled Ecosystem (ARISE) for Life Sciences to support a state-of-the-art learning laboratory at its downtown campus and a new laboratory technician associate of science program. Creamer helped both colleges expand access to new jobs for underserved and low-income youth and adults: The Alliance decided that any new certificate or degree programs resulting from these GO Virginia investments would be designed to qualify as a state-approved G3 or FastForward program, helping to reduce or eliminate tuition and other costs for eligible students. The U.S. Department of Commerce awarded an additional $3.9 million to the partnership in 2025.

Few GO Virginia projects are as ambitious and large as the Richmond biotech initiative. But in smaller or rural regions, GO Virginia grants can play an important catalytic role, fund critical components, and bring colleges to the table as full partners. Table 3 highlights a few recent GO Virginia projects in which community colleges function as lead partners.

Table 3. Some Recent GO Virginia Projects Led by Community Colleges

Project Type	Community College	Partners	Grant Amount	Highlights
Mechatronics and cybersecurity	Germanna Community College (Region 6)	Virginia Tech	$635,000 with additional $750,000 from county economic development agency, $850,000 from federal government, and a $15 million public-private capital investment	• Dual enrollment and transfer initiative • Trains 20 high school instructors to teach IT, engineering, computer science, and cybersecurity courses.
Welding as a re-entry pathway	Mountain Empire Community College (Region 1)	VA Department of Corrections, Wise Correctional Unit	$100,000 with $50,000 match	• Basic welding certification program • Plan for 6 cohorts of 15 students
Biotech manufacturing	Virginia Western Community College (Region 2)	Fralin Biomedical Research Institute, City of Roanoke, Civica Rx, Phlow Corporation	$500,000	• New certificate program • Facilities in new building in downtown Roanoke

4. GO Virginia funds institutional capacity building that community colleges may not otherwise have access to, and G3 subsidizes the cost of attendance of students—but these activities are not necessarily coordinated.

Community colleges may lack the financial resources to make investments in the facilities and staffing that are required to build out new occupational training programs. Thus, the colleges may not be able to launch new programs or even expand existing programs that are responsive to labor market demand. GO Virginia's grants have helped to address this challenge. GO Virginia grants can fund capital investments in buildings or equipment, the co-development or adaptation of training curricula, and the hiring of instructional staff. Because of state rules requiring the commitment of matching funds from non-state sources, GO Virginia investments must also attract additional funding from private or federal sources.

G3 complements these institutional capacity-building investments by reducing students' financial barriers to enrollment and increasing access to new or expanded programs. However, our analysis suggests that, to date, GO Virginia and G3 are rarely used in coordination. (The CCWA's Alliance for Better Medicine's working group is a notable exception.) And although G3 does provide students advising support, colleges may struggle to offer and/or have students take up wraparound services—like transportation supports, affordable childcare, and food and housing support—that can influence whether students enroll, persist, and complete their chosen programs of study. Recent survey results suggest that over half of community college students have basic needs insecurity and that this affects their program performance (Fletcher et al., 2025). In addition to individual colleges' supports, there are programs across the state that offer services such as childcare. Community colleges in Virginia face challenges similar to public two-year colleges nationally: It is expensive to provide wraparound services and difficult to incentivize students' use of these services, particularly when they need them most. GO Virginia funds have not yet been used for support services, though program administrators are willing to consider such proposals contingent upon their demonstrated capacity-building need and potential as well as their alignment to regional priorities.

5. Opportunities for greater alignment between G3 and GO Virginia investments are many across the state, but effective partnerships are not automatic.

How well the two initiatives mesh depends upon target industry, employer labor market needs, and the actions of regional economic and educational leaders, including community college presidents. As noted above, only certain industries are targets of both programs: at present, these are in manufacturing and information technology-based sectors. In some rural regions, an industry targeted by both G3 and GO Virginia may not generate sufficient employment demand to warrant state investment. Ultimately, a critical variable is the extent to which local community college leaders actively pursue potential opportunities to collaborate and address programmatic and funding needs. Our interviews found noticeable variation in the approach of college presidents and administrators in working with GO Virginia, including: the roles they play in GO Virginia strategy and planning meetings; the extent to which they stress partnership engagement with their own administrators and instructional staff, particularly in workforce divisions; and whether they pivot from traditional practice, often built around the immediate labor market needs of individual employers, toward longer term regional and sectoral development opportunities, which may be challenging to anticipate.

6. While collaborating across entities within state regions is an important policy innovation, it presents challenges for isolated colleges and colleges in regions with few industries.

Many community colleges face geographic and capacity challenges that can compromise efforts to maximize G3 and GO Virginia alignment. Our review of GO Virginia grants found that rural regions often prioritize site development over workforce initiatives because they see an urgent need to bring more high-wage jobs to the area. In regions with few industries, workforce investments often target career exploration in K-12 settings rather than job-specific training. In Region 2, for example, GO Virginia invests in its Tech Talent Pipeline to strengthen STEM opportunities for middle and high schoolers in the rural region in partnership with Virginia Tech and local community colleges.

Recommendations

As separate statewide initiatives in a broader economic development ecosystem—recall that there are 69 distinct initiatives and entities aimed at improving workforce outcomes across the state—G3 and GO Virginia hold promise as complementary and potentially more coordinated state investments for increasing the supply of high-demand jobs and improving access to those jobs. While they operate with different grant and governance structures, both initiatives are active in some of the same industries and occupations. And both acknowledge the strategic role of Virginia's community colleges in promoting economic and workforce development. State policymakers, VCCS, community colleges throughout the state, and their regional partners can take additional steps to align priorities and strengthen partnerships between different entities participating in these initiatives. We offer three recommendations:

1. **Undertake a collaborative, systemwide effort between VCCS and GO Virginia to help colleges shape the future priorities and goals of the Regional Councils so as to develop more projects that leverage the capacity-building function of GO Virginia and the student affordability components of G3.** As the shape of Virginia's post-pandemic economic and workforce development approach becomes clearer, it is increasingly likely that VCCS colleges will be eager to take advantage of the opportunities that GO Virginia offers. To this effect, system leaders can make a coordinated effort to incorporate more features of VCCS's recent strategic plan (VCCS, n.d.) into future GO Virginia Regional Council planning. Objective 5.3 of the VCCS strategic plan seeks additional annual funding for capacity-building efforts in regionally identified high-demand programs, and it calls for alignment to GO Virginia priorities. This is already beginning to occur: in 2025, VCCS disbursed G3 funds using the GO Virginia regions, and it plans to do the same in 2026. System leaders can accelerate alignment of G3 and GO Virginia efforts by pursuing this goal and may consider annual meetings to coordinate on strategies.

2. **Designate high-demand fields for G3 on a regional rather than a statewide basis— as is done for GO Virginia—in order to be more responsive to economic realities in particular areas of the state.** Economic conditions and development opportunities vary across the state, particularly between urban/suburban and rural areas. Our analysis identifies three high-demand industry groups that are currently common to both G3 and GO Virginia: manufacturing, information technology, and healthcare. However, when determinations about what occupations or industries are in high demand are made at the state level, there is the potential to overlook emerging industries in specific regions, such as precision agriculture in some rural areas, thereby reducing the relative financial

incentives for students to enroll in associated programs of study. VCCS and institutional leaders may want to coordinate outreach to legislators to reconsider what counts as a high-demand field in order to expand the reach and impact of G3 and better align it with GO Virginia planning.

3. **Incorporate more explicit support for students' basic needs.** Barriers to enrollment, persistence, and completion remain significant challenges for students pursuing workforce training. While there has often been less focus on the provision of basic needs and other nonacademic supports for community college students in workforce programs relative to those in transfer programs, colleges in Virginia and elsewhere have begun to expand these offerings to address barriers related to childcare (Northern Virginia Community College, n.d.), transportation (Eastern Shore Community College, n.d.), food and housing insecurity (Cline, 2025; Rowan, 2023), and physical and mental health (Timelycare, n.d.). Like G3 and GO Virginia, many of these assistance programs are funded with public dollars and represent an opportunity to maximize and align public investment in programs and people that directly contribute to the state's economic goals. Notably, GO Virginia administrator interviews we conducted reveal a belief among these leaders that the initiative should entertain proposals for reducing barriers to student participation from colleges and other partners.

Historically, state investments in workforce education and economic development operate distinctly from one another, resulting in missed opportunities to create more efficient statewide workforce development systems. More cohesive statewide approaches to workforce and economic development can not only create stronger employment opportunities but provide students and workers access to the full range of training and support services they need to successfully enter and stay in family-sustaining jobs. Virginia is making meaningful progress toward creating stronger alignment between workforce and economic development initiatives through ongoing investments in G3 and GO Virginia. G3 has created more access to training that helps students secure high-demand jobs, and GO Virginia has increased the number of high-paying jobs and improved access to these jobs in particular regions. Yet leveraging G3 and GO Virginia in tandem may have an outsized impact. As shown in Table 3, there are already examples of how these initiatives can work together to bolster economic development while increasing access to high-demand jobs. There is potential for G3 and GO Virginia to coordinate further to increase opportunities more effectively. This brief can inform those efforts.

Endnotes

1. Culinary & hospitality and engineering were added in July 2024.

2. Much like the Workforce Innovation and Opportunities Act (WIOA), a federal law enacted in 2014, GO Virginia legislation focuses on high-demand occupations. GO Virginia projects (as well as G3 tuition assistance) may complement WIOA-funded workforce development activities.

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