

Virginia Voter Attitudes on Higher Education and the Economy

Results of 2021 Public Opinion Surveys



PUBLIC OPINION
STRATEGIES

turning questions into answers

FREDERICK *polls*

GROWTH  4 VA

A Campaign of the Virginia Business Higher Education Council

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SUMMARY

Virginia voters know that higher education in the Commonwealth provides a strong value for the state's investment. Higher education enhances the state's workforce, provides access to good job opportunities, and drives the state's economy.

In contrast to more mixed views about colleges in some other parts of the country, higher education receives broad, bipartisan support in Virginia. This support reflects voters' awareness of the stand-out performance and reputation of Virginia's higher education institutions, the schools' contributions to economic growth and job creation, the value of higher education credentials in the job market, and the consensus among Virginia's business and political leaders to support the higher education system as a vital asset for the state's future.

Repeatedly, Virginians tell us they are more likely to vote for elected officials who support higher education in Virginia and who will invest to ensure it remains affordable and accessible for all Virginia students.

METHODOLOGY

Public Opinion Strategies partnered with FrederickPolls to conduct two separate Virginia statewide surveys. The first survey was conducted during February 23-March 1, 2021, and the second survey was in the field during March 20-28, 2021.

The February survey was conducted among 800 likely 2021 general election voters, and the March survey was conducted among 847 likely 2021 general election voters.

Interviews were conducted online via an advanced online platform. Quotas by region, age, and gender were set to ensure a representative sample and to minimize any weighting after the survey was out of the field.

The credibility interval for the February survey of 800 likely voters is +3.95%. The credibility interval for the March survey of 847 likely voters is +3.84%.



KEY FINDINGS

1. Virginians are aware and proud of the fact that their state has one of the top-performing systems of higher education in the country.

Large majorities of Virginians, regardless of political views, see Virginia’s higher education institutions as valuable public assets that are well run and a sound place to invest public dollars.

Figure 1A. Virginia’s universities, colleges, and community colleges are a valuable public asset of the Commonwealth of Virginia, are well run, and are a sound place to invest public dollars.

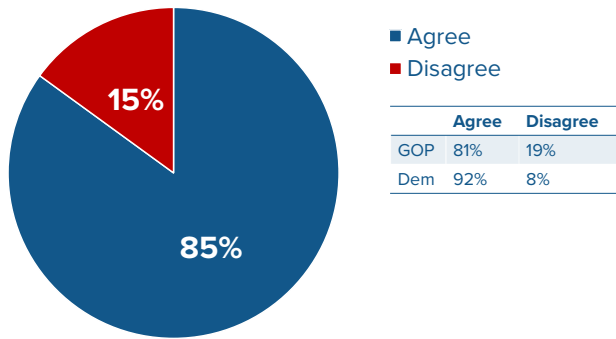


Figure 1B. In your opinion, how proud should people who live in Virginia feel regarding our system of public colleges, universities, and community colleges?

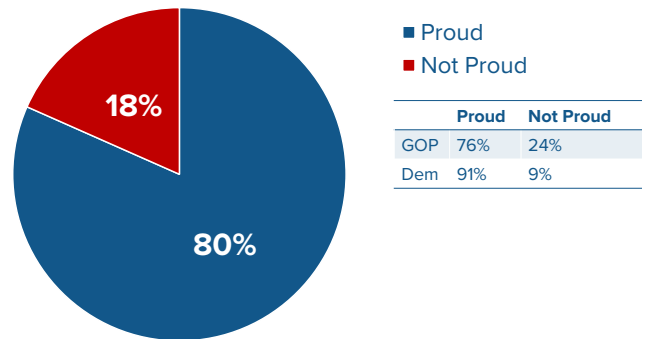
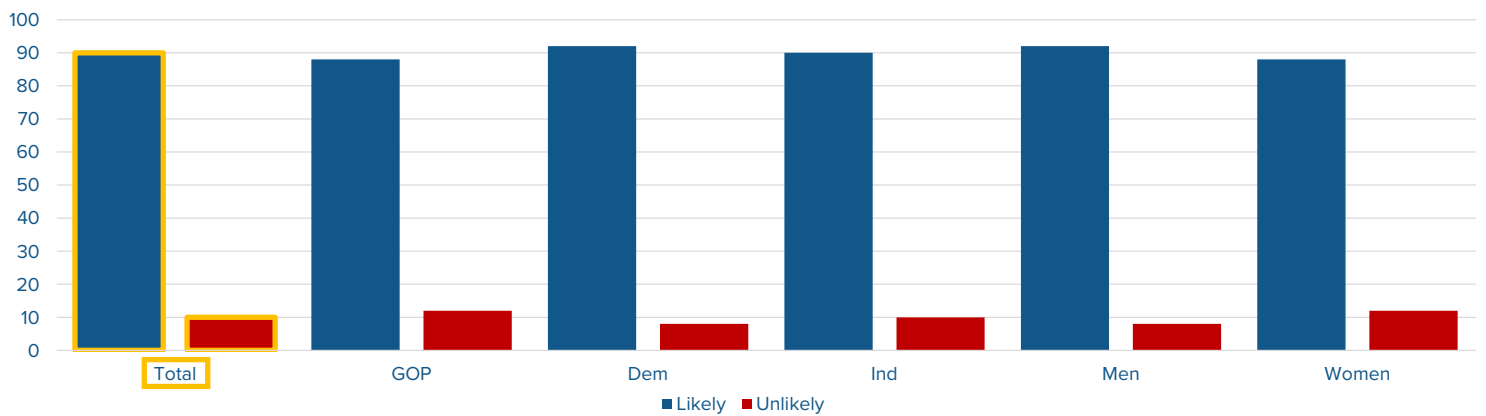


Figure 1C. If you had a son or daughter who was applying to college, how likely would you be to recommend that they consider applying to a public college or university in Virginia as a top choice?





2. In contrast to some states, Virginians express broad, bipartisan support for higher education, linking the system to a stronger economy, better-paying jobs, and problem-solving leadership.

Large majorities of Virginians see college degrees as highly valuable economically. Even when tuition expense and the tight job market are offered as reasons to question the value of a college degree, more than 70% of Republicans and Democrats endorse the college value proposition.

Figure 2.1A. In your opinion, is having a college education still a good value even though it has become more expensive?

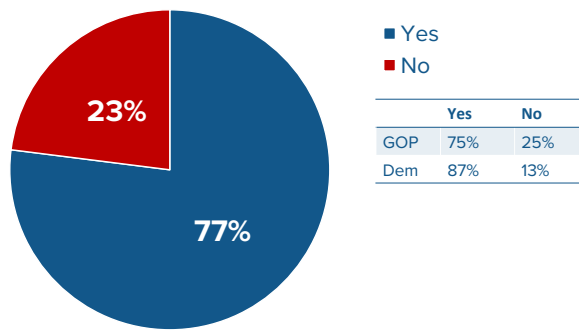
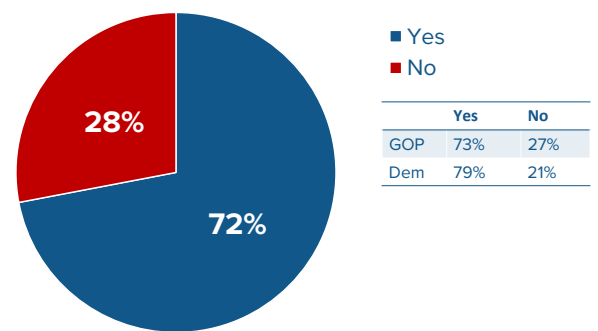


Figure 2.1B. In your opinion, is having a college education still a good value even though some college graduates have trouble finding work in their chosen fields of study these days?



Almost all voters say Virginia's colleges are important to their state and local economies. They understand that without revenues from a growing economy pressures for higher taxes will increase.

Figure 2.2A. How important would you say Virginia's public colleges and community colleges are to improving the state and local economy in Virginia?

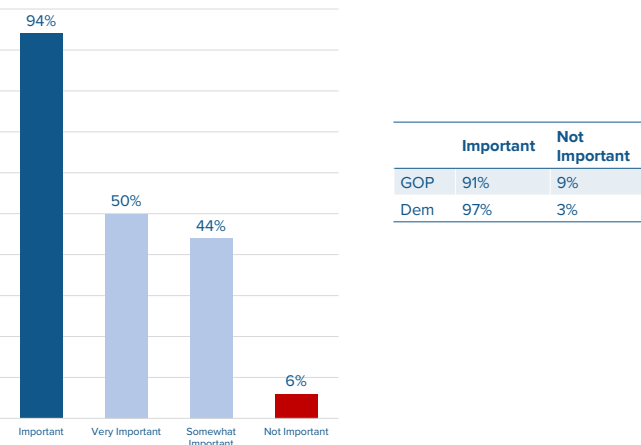
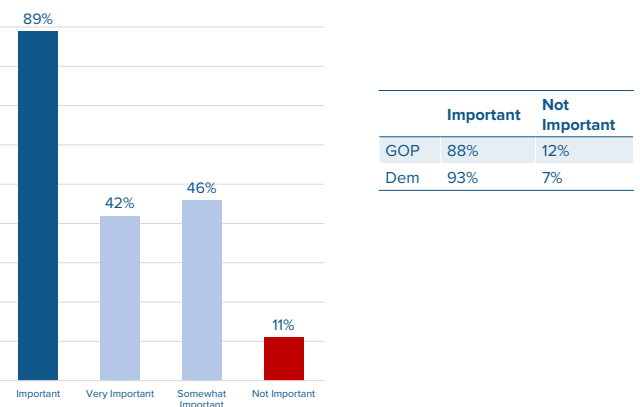


Figure 2.2B. And, since a growing economy produces more revenues for state and local governments without raising taxes, how important would you say our public colleges and community colleges are to keeping state and local taxes low here in Virginia?





Large majorities of Virginians believe higher education is a good investment because it leads to higher-paying jobs and a stronger economy.

Figure 2.3A. Since college graduates on average earn more than twice what non-graduates earn, attending and graduating from a Virginia college or university is a good investment.

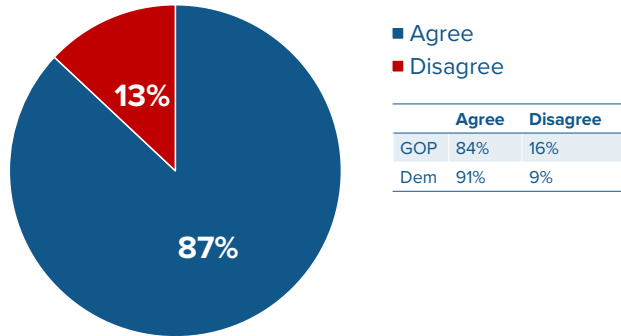
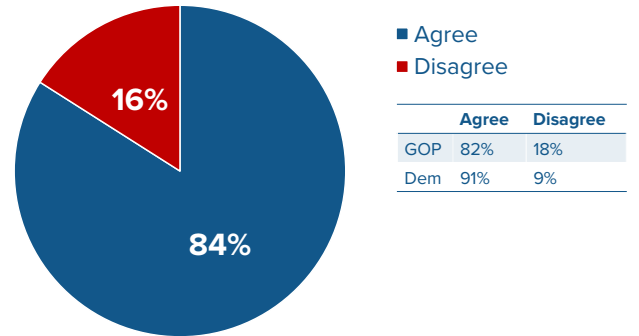


Figure 2.3B. Since, in today's economy, the highest paying jobs generally go to the best educated workers, a greater state investment in Virginia's higher education system will result in higher average incomes for Virginia workers and a stronger economy.



Large majorities say Virginia's colleges and universities help prepare good leaders and good citizens who are practical problem-solvers. Voters also believe higher education institutions play an important role in developing the innovative ideas that help solve today's pressing public problems.

Figure 2.4A. Virginia's colleges and universities help produce good citizens and good leaders by emphasizing ethical behavior, openness to new ideas, collaboration, and practical problem-solving.

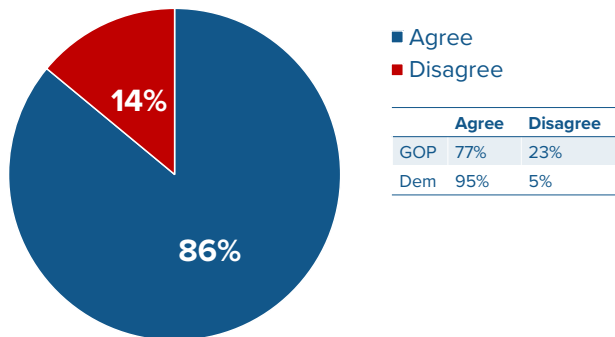
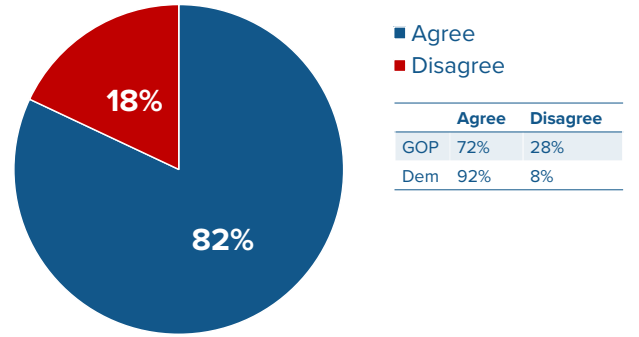


Figure 2.4B. As leaders in research and innovation, Virginia's colleges and universities are helping our state and nation become more resilient and better prepared to address challenges like climate change and future threats to our infrastructure and supply chains for everything from energy and the internet to food and medicine.





Voters see higher education as Virginia’s chief competitive advantage in attracting job-creating businesses and want our next governor to invest in it. They appreciate the key role our colleges, universities, and community colleges play in Virginia’s economic development successes, including winning CNBC’s #1 business ranking and Amazon’s major HQ2 investment.

Figure 2.5A. Virginia recently was ranked by CNBC as the best state for business, and a key reason given for the ranking was our strong educational system, including our colleges, universities, and community colleges. Since these national business rankings have a big impact on where companies choose to locate their facilities and create jobs, how important do you believe it is for Virginia’s next governor and legislature to invest in our colleges, universities, and community colleges? Is it...

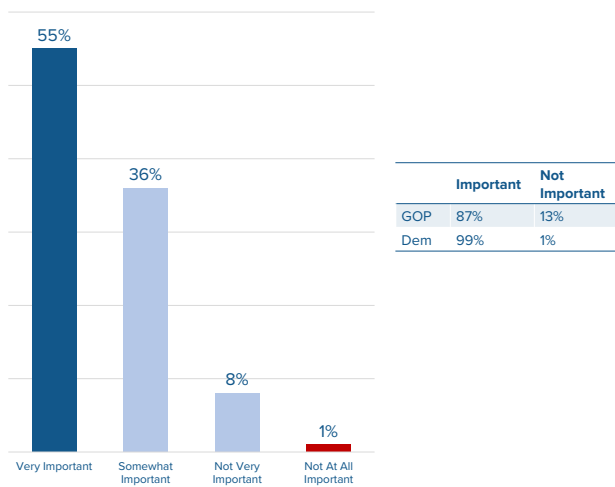


Figure 2.5B. Many states competed recently for Amazon’s large new corporate headquarters investment and the thousands of well-paying jobs it will create. Some states offered Amazon large tax incentives, but the company’s leaders say they instead chose to locate in Virginia because of our top-ranked higher education system and the technology talent it produces. Knowing that our higher education system gives us this kind of competitive advantage in economic development and job creation, how important do you believe it is for Virginia’s next governor to invest in our colleges, universities, and community colleges? Is it...

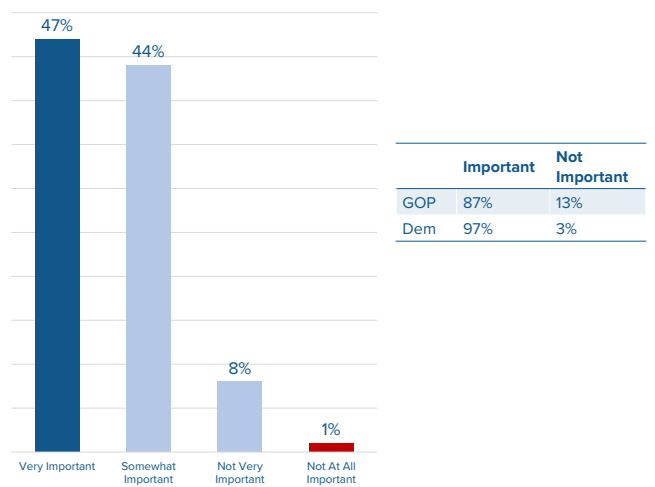
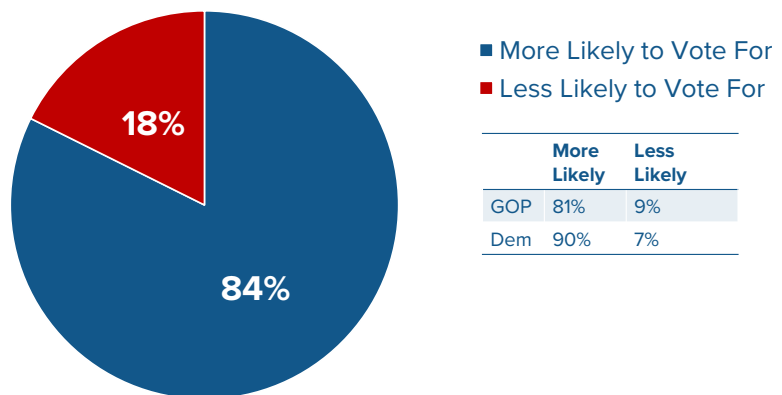


Figure 2.5C. A candidate who says we need to have strong colleges and community colleges in each region of our state, because they improve the quality of life, supply a skilled workforce, and encourage public-private partnerships on research and economic development that attract new businesses and high-paying jobs to the region.





3. Top national rankings and the strong partnership between the state’s colleges and business community are key factors that contribute to bipartisan support for Virginia’s higher education system among voters and political leaders.

Virginians’ support for their higher education system is reinforced routinely by new reports about Virginia colleges and universities’ stand-out performance, including top rankings for quality and value. For example, the “Smart Asset” website has ranked the Virginia higher education system #1 or #2 in the nation for four straight years, citing its top graduation rates and high return on investment.

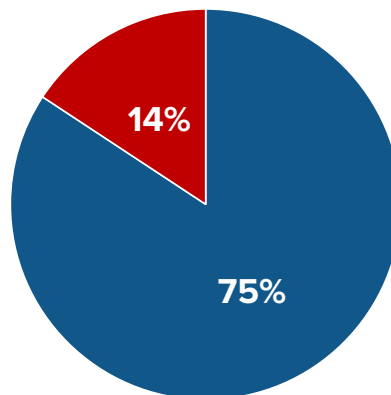
Leading businesses and business organizations have worked closely with the state’s colleges, universities and community colleges, fostering widespread recognition that higher education is a key economic driver for the state.

The Virginia Business Higher Education Council, has documented the major impact of higher education on the Virginia economy. Among other findings, the group’s 2017 study showed that the public higher education system:

- Adds \$36 billion annually to Gross State Product, contributing more than \$21 in economic activity for every \$1 invested;
- Is associated with more than 167,000 Virginia jobs; and
- Produces nearly \$2 in new state revenue for every \$1 of state expenditure.

Based on this documented impact, a large majority of Virginians in both parties express a preference for candidates who consider higher education to be one of the best investments Virginia can make. (See Figure 3.1)

Figure 3.1. A candidate who says that higher education is one of the best investments Virginia can make because an independent study shows that every dollar Virginia taxpayers spend on our public higher education system generates \$21 of economic output in our state, and the investment more than pays for itself by producing nearly 2 dollars in new revenue for every 1 dollar spent.



■ More Likely to Vote For
■ Less Likely to Vote For

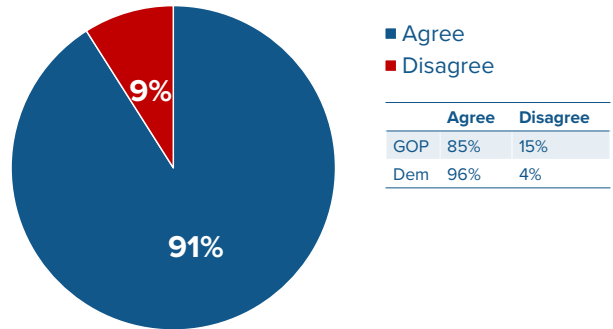
	More Likely	Less Likely
GOP	72%	17%
Dem	83%	11%



4. Voters believe talent is what sets Virginia apart. They see broadening the talent pool and creating pathways to good job opportunities for all Virginians as keys to the Commonwealth’s future.

Voters respond with intensity when asked about the state’s role in developing talent. More than 90% agree — more than 50% agree “strongly” — that providing all Virginians with degrees and credentials that fit their individual aspirations and abilities is “the most important investment our state can make.”

Figure 4.1. Virginia’s future largely will be determined by our success in broadening the pool of talented individuals who are prepared to participate and lead in the new economy. Therefore, the most important investment our state can make is to ensure that every Virginia resident is able to achieve the highest level of education that suits their aspirations and abilities, whether that is a skilled trade certificate, an associate’s or bachelor’s degree, or a graduate or professional degree.



Voters see a continued focus on STEM-H and other high-demand degrees as important strategies for Virginia’s economic future.

Figure 4.2A. Increasing the number of college graduates in science, technology, engineering and mathematics must be a top priority for Virginia’s next governor and other state leaders because it is essential for our national competitiveness and for Virginia’s economic growth.

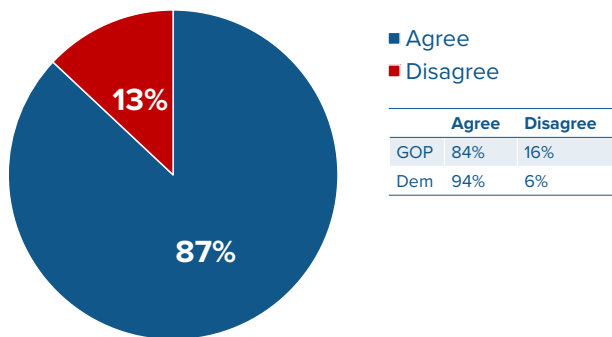
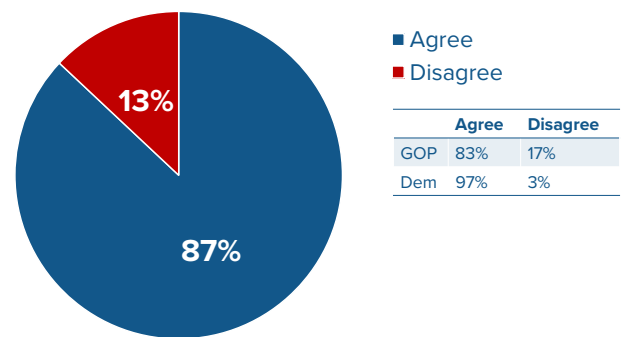


Figure 4.2B. To make Virginia a top state for talent, Virginia’s governor and legislature adopted a bipartisan plan 10 years ago to add 100,000 more college graduates by 2025 focused in high-demand sectors of the economy like science, technology, engineering, and math. This plan is important for the state’s economic future, and our elected leaders should continue to invest in achieving it.





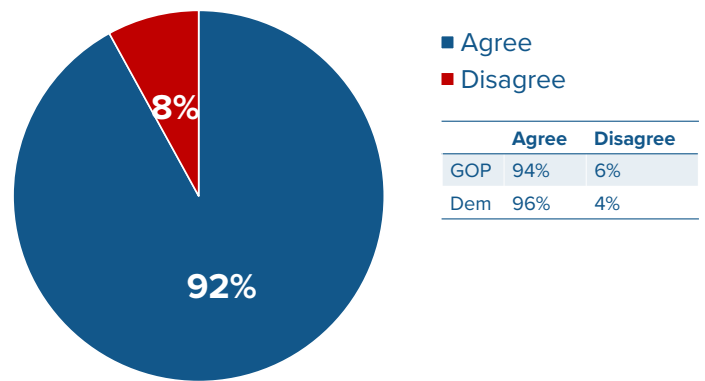
Voters want closer alignment between educational programs and job/career opportunities. They support creation of *affordable talent pathways* that move Virginians' efficiently from learning to earning.

Talent Pathways:

a strategy for post-pandemic higher education innovation that enhances opportunity, equity, affordability, efficiency, and keeps young talent in Virginia:

- ✓ Colleges collaborate with businesses and other employers.
- ✓ Curriculum is aligned to better address employer needs.
- ✓ Students have paid internship experiences or other valuable work-based learning.
- ✓ Leads to full-time job opportunities with a Virginia-based employer.

Figure 4.3. The next governor of Virginia should propose a system of financial incentives that encourages colleges and community colleges to form “talent pathway” partnerships with businesses and other employers so that any student who stays in Virginia will have an affordable pathway to a degree, an internship or co-op opportunity while in college, and a Virginia-based job after graduation.



Voters support creating more talent pathways because they reduce the time and cost of getting degrees and jobs, and they increase the return on investment for students.

Figure 4.4A. A candidate who says Virginia should invest in creating more talent pathways where colleges, community colleges, and high schools work together with businesses to streamline coursework, provide work experience while learning, and reduce the time and cost of getting a degree followed by a full-time job.

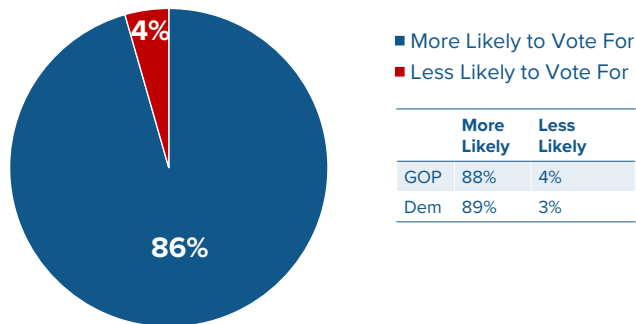
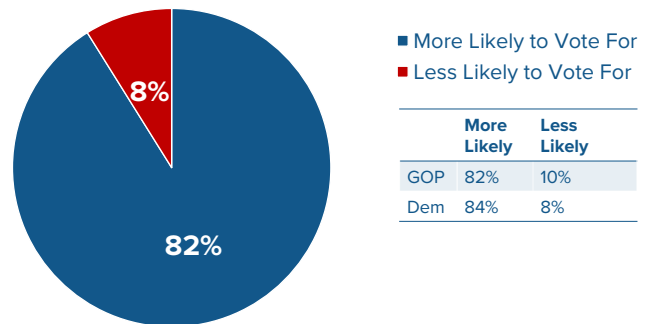


Figure 4.4B. A candidate who says creating more talent pathways here in Virginia will increase the students' return on their tuition investment in two ways: by connecting them directly to a well-paying first job, and by preparing them for lifelong success as resilient workers, critical thinkers, strong communicators, and outstanding citizens.





Voters are concerned that talented young Virginians are leaving their families and communities for better job opportunities in other states. They see talent pathways, especially internships that lead to full-time jobs with Virginia employers, as a key strategy for reversing the outmigration trend and keeping young people in Virginia after graduation.

Figure 4.5A. A candidate who says we need to invest in creating more talent pathways in Virginia because the best way to keep talented young people from moving away from our state after graduation is to connect them to Virginia businesses while they are still in college, such as through internships and co-op programs that can lead to full-time employment in Virginia.

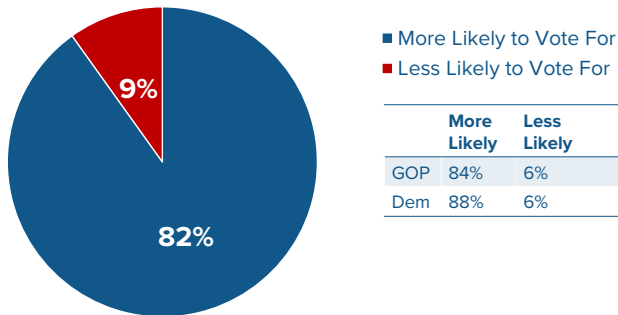
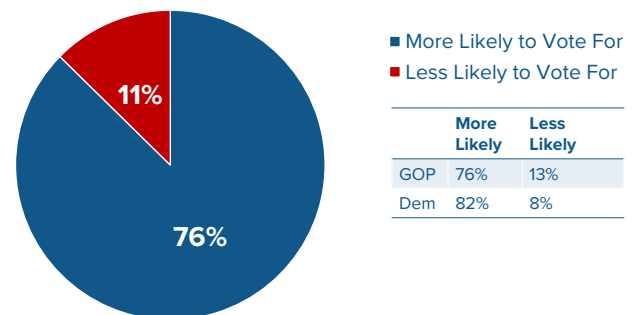


Figure 4.5B. A candidate who says Virginia's main advantage in competing for business investment is our talented workforce, but that advantage is declining because more young people are moving away from our state than are moving into it. Therefore, the next governor should make it a top priority to create talent pathways that provide incentives for students to come to Virginia for college and stay here for work after graduation.



Voters see talent pathways as a way to improve efficiency, reduce cost, and give more students access to internship and job opportunities while completing degrees on time.

Figure 4.6A. A candidate who says colleges and businesses should work together to create more talent pathways in Virginia because partnerships between colleges and businesses help the colleges operate more efficiently, phase out programs that don't lead to good jobs, and produce better results for students at a lower cost.

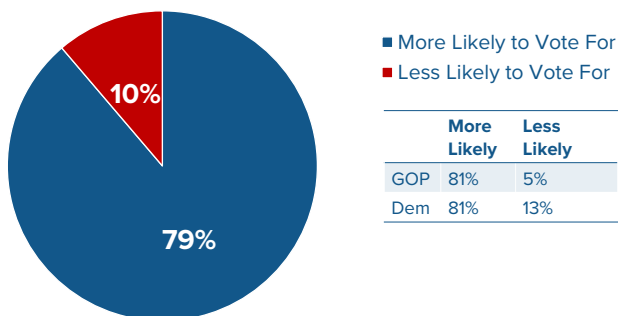
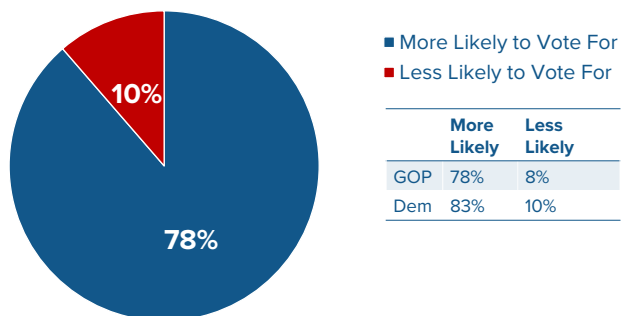


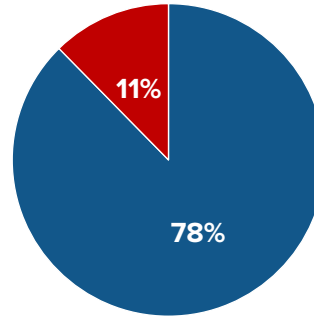
Figure 4.6B. A candidate who says colleges and businesses should work together to create talent pathways using online technology because having the option to work or study online lets more students have internships through which they get work experience and connections to future employers while still completing their degrees on time.





Voters support talent pathways as an effective strategy for giving all Virginians equitable access to education and employment opportunities and for helping the Virginia economy bounce back after the coronavirus pandemic.

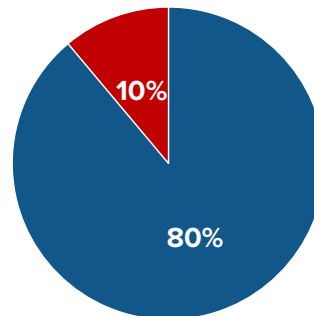
Figure 4.7A. A candidate who says we need to invest in creating more talent pathways in Virginia because they are especially helpful for first-generation and low-income college students who otherwise have trouble getting needed work experience and being considered for well-paying jobs.



■ More Likely to Vote For
■ Less Likely to Vote For

	More Likely	Less Likely
GOP	70%	17%
Dem	90%	3%

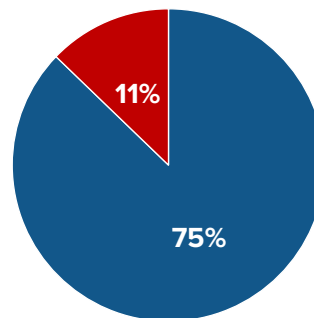
Figure 4.7B. A candidate who says we need to invest in creating more talent pathways in Virginia because they help young people in economically distressed urban and rural areas get access to good education and job opportunities that otherwise they would miss out on.



■ More Likely to Vote For
■ Less Likely to Vote For

	More Likely	Less Likely
GOP	75%	12%
Dem	87%	8%

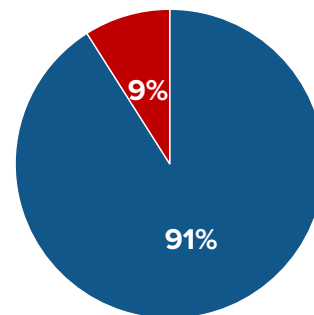
Figure 4.7C. A candidate who says that talent pathways are especially important in recovering from the coronavirus pandemic because they will help the Virginia economy grow by supplying businesses with the well-qualified workers they need.



■ More Likely to Vote For
■ Less Likely to Vote For

	More Likely	Less Likely
GOP	73%	11%
Dem	83%	9%

Figure 4.7D. To help Virginians who are unemployed due to the coronavirus pandemic, Virginia's next governor should concentrate on creating more talent pathways that give unemployed adults an affordable way of upgrading their skills and connecting them to full-time jobs.



■ Agree
■ Disagree

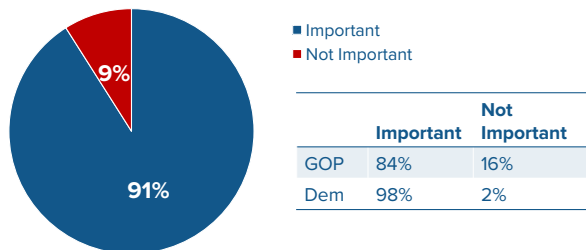
	Agree	Disagree
GOP	89%	11%
Dem	97%	3%



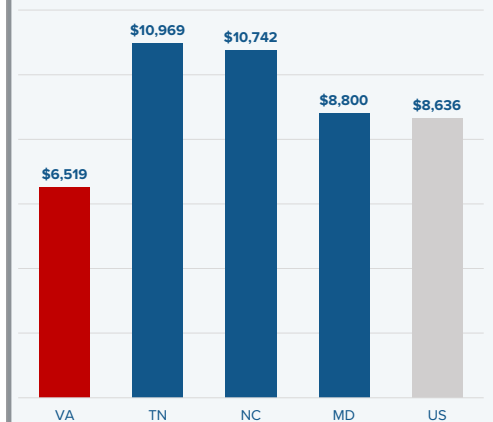
5. Affordability and equitable access for all Virginians remain top concerns of voters and drive support for greater state investment.

Voters recognize that the chronic underfunding of higher education in Virginia is the primary driver of tuition cost, and they want their leaders to make overdue investments.

Figure 5.1A. Currently, tuition at our public universities in Virginia is higher than in neighboring states like North Carolina and Maryland. This is mainly because those states provide much more funding per student than Virginia provides, leaving less to be paid by students and families in those states. For example, Virginia on average currently provides state funding of a little under \$6,000 per student, while the states of North Carolina and Maryland each provide around \$9,000 per student—which is about 50% more than Virginia provides. **Knowing this, how important would you say it is for Virginia’s next governor and legislature to reduce reliance on tuition by increasing the state’s funding of our higher education system?**



State Support of Higher Education Per In-State Student



Bar graph is based on 2020 data released after our surveys were conducted. The newer data shows a widening gap between VA and most neighboring states.

Figure 5.1B. A state law passed in 2011 declared that the state should pay at least 2/3 of the cost of educating Virginia resident students at our state’s public colleges. Now, 10 years later, the state still is paying less than half of that cost, which means that Virginia students and their families must make up the difference through higher tuition. The governor and legislature should meet the 2/3 goal as soon as possible so that our colleges can charge Virginia students less tuition.

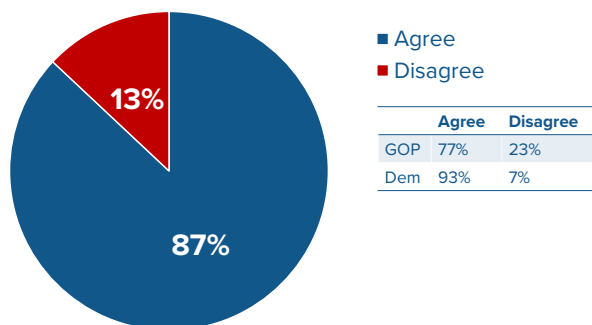
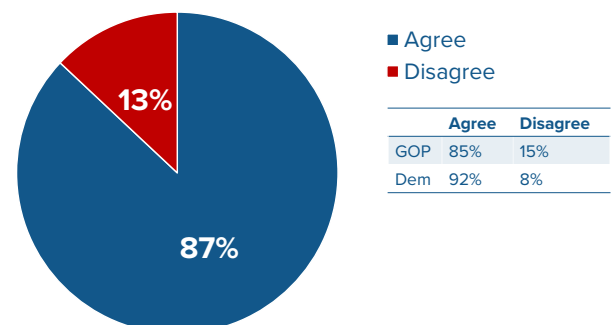


Figure 5.1C. In recent years, the state of Virginia has offered to provide additional funding to public colleges and universities that voluntarily agree to freeze tuition at prior-year levels. In response to this offer, nearly all of these schools have chosen to keep tuition levels frozen in exchange for the additional state funding. This type of voluntary program is an effective way to hold down tuition without sacrificing educational quality or reducing the positive impact our colleges have on the state and local economies.





Voters strongly support increased student financial aid, tuition assistance grants (TAG), and funding for HBCUs.

Figure 5.2A. Since social mobility is especially important in our diverse state, Virginia's next governor should work to increase student financial aid so that college is more affordable for low-income and first-generation college students.

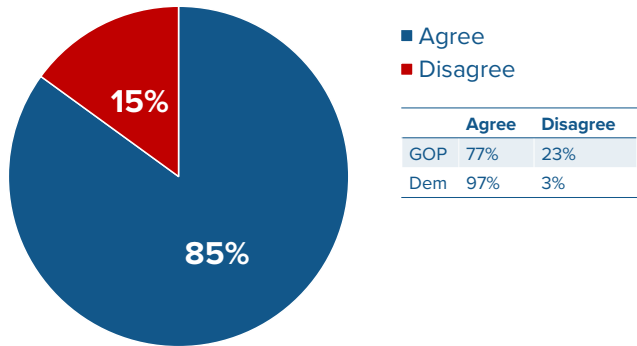


Figure 5.2B. Improving job skills training opportunities for low-income Virginians, especially in economically distressed inner cities and rural areas, by providing increased financial aid for training programs offered at colleges and community colleges in those areas.

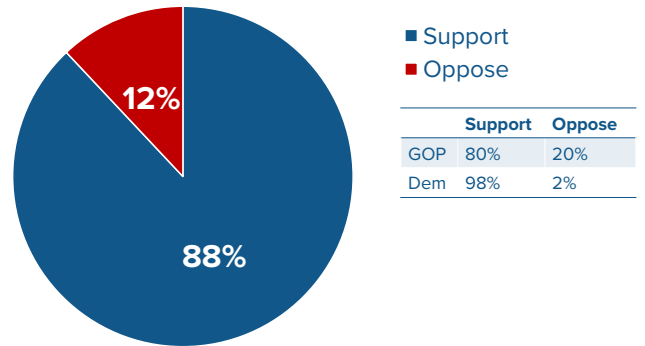


Figure 5.2C. Providing more financial aid so that low- and middle-income students can afford college is an important social investment, because independent studies show that college graduates tend to pay more in taxes, and require less public expenditures on everything from healthcare and unemployment insurance to welfare and incarceration.

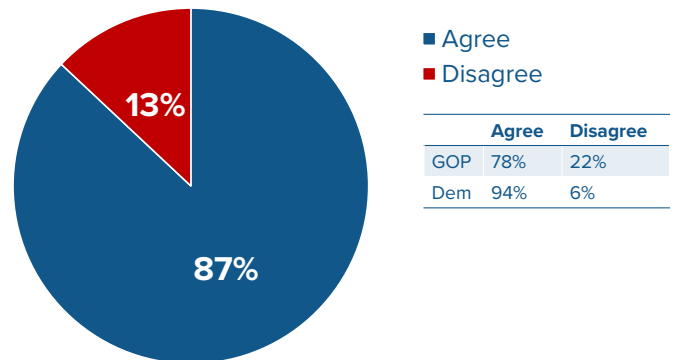


Figure 5.2D. A candidate who says that Virginia's private nonprofit colleges and universities are an essential part of our state's top-ranked higher education system; therefore, Virginia should increase the amount of tuition assistance, also called "TAG" grants, that the state provides to Virginia resident students who attend those private colleges.

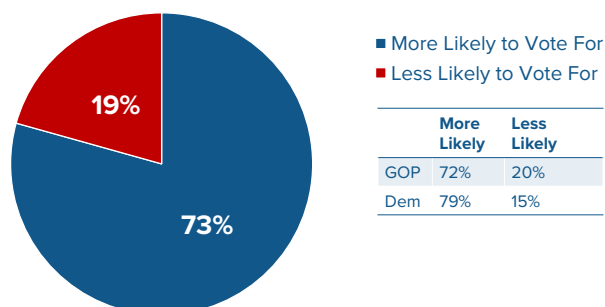
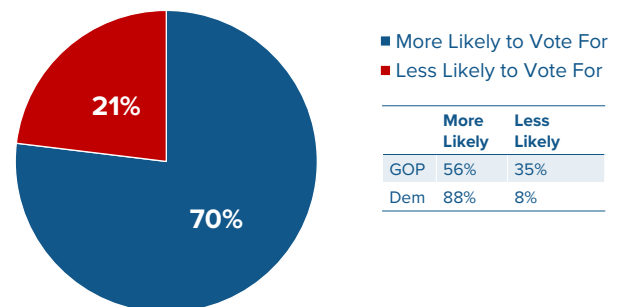


Figure 5.2E. A candidate who says we should invest in Virginia's historically black colleges and universities, also known as HBCU's, because they provide affordable access to a high-quality education for diverse students, including many low-income and first-generation students who otherwise would not have access to higher education's lifelong benefits.





Voters favor reducing reliance on student fees by providing state support for mental health and other support services required by students.

Figure 5.3A. Each Virginia public college and community college should provide high-quality mental health services, funded by the state of Virginia, so that students who face mental health challenges and need help can readily receive it.

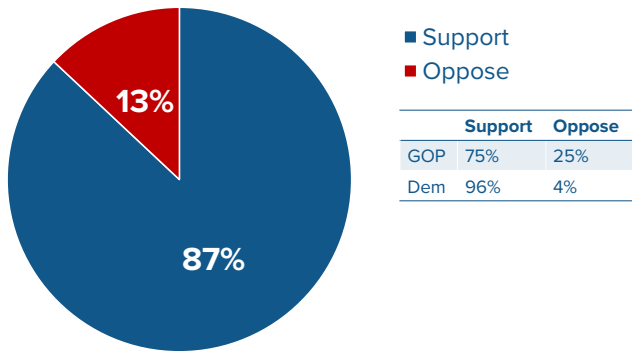
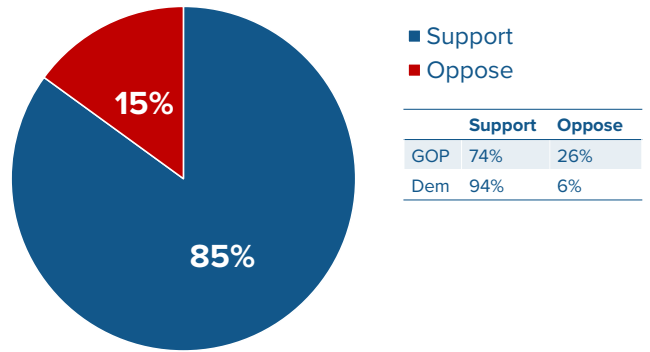


Figure 5.3B. Each Virginia public college and community college should provide a set of student support services, funded by the state of Virginia, that helps address built-in disadvantages faced by low-income, first-generation, veteran, and under-represented minority students so those students can successfully complete certificate and degree programs.



Voters support financial reforms, including tying state funding for colleges to student outcomes and creating a new state reserve to guard against future tuition spikes.

Figure 5.4A. A candidate who says the best way to control college costs and improve results is to continue to restructure the system so that the colleges have more freedom to manage their operations efficiently and are funded based mainly on their success in producing good outcomes for students, including specific factors like the number of students enrolled, graduation rates, and student success in securing good jobs.

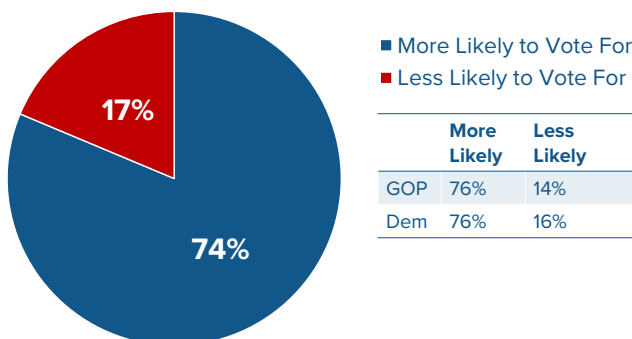
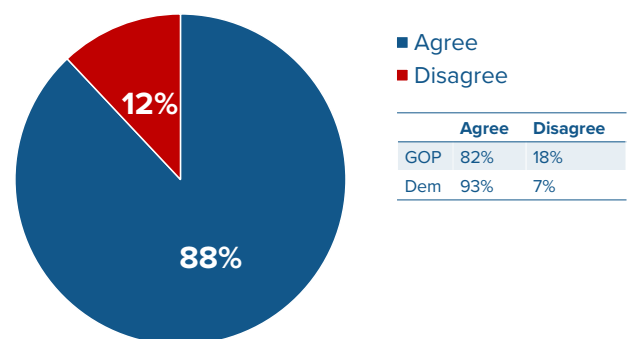


Figure 5.4B. During the 2001 to 2008 period, Virginia experienced budget shortfalls caused by two recessions. To balance the budget, the governor and legislature made deep cuts in higher education funding, and those cuts caused sharp spikes in tuition charged to students. To prevent this from happening in the future, the state should set up a higher education reserve, or rainy-day fund, and put money in it when the economy is growing. That way, students and parents will be protected from sharp tuition increases when there are future economic downturns.





6. Virginians see our college presidents and chancellors as national leaders on higher education innovation. Voters support these leaders' efforts to make our top-ranked higher education system even more effective for students and taxpayers.

Figure 6.1A. Virginia's college presidents are among our nation's leading higher education reformers. They are helping to create a future after the coronavirus pandemic that is equitable and affordable for all students, connects students efficiently to well-paying jobs, and helps meet the economic and other challenges facing our state and nation.

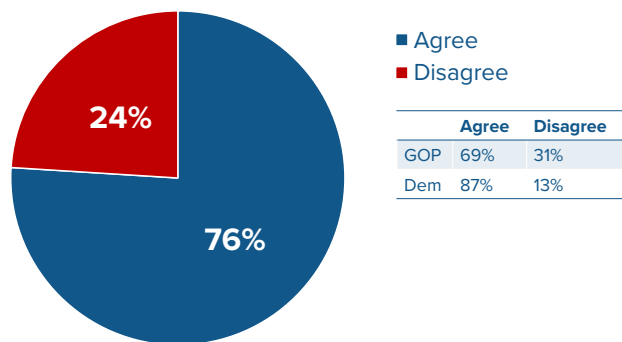
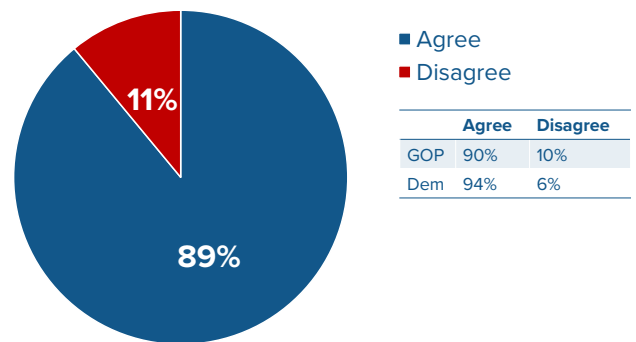


Figure 6.1B. Virginia's colleges and universities have high graduation rates and spend less per degree than neighboring states, but there is much more they should do to become cost-efficient. They should work closely with business partners to adopt more efficient business practices, reduce duplication by sharing administrative and academic resources among the colleges, make better use of advanced technology, and streamline coursework to move students more efficiently through their studies into internships and eventually into full-time jobs.



CONCLUSION

The bottom line in Virginia is that higher education is seen by voters as working extraordinarily well, producing top national results and helping to drive a strong economy with better job opportunities. This in turn produces broad bipartisan voter support for continued investment and initiatives that promise to increase the economic impact and ensure educational and job opportunities for all Virginians.

About Growth4VA

Growth4VA is a broad-based bipartisan coalition of business, education, and political leaders and Virginians from all walks of life who believe that higher education is a crucial economic engine for our Commonwealth. Our coalition is founded by the Virginia Business Higher Education Council and supported by all 16 public colleges and universities in Virginia, the Virginia Community College System, and Virginia's non-profit private institutions. We are promoting investment and innovation in the Virginia higher education system.

About the Virginia Business Higher Education Council

The Virginia Business Higher Education Council (VBHEC) was founded in 1994 by Virginia business leaders on the principle that the prosperity of Virginia and the well-being of its citizens is fundamentally tied to access to a strong system of public colleges and universities. A nonprofit, nonpartisan partnership between Virginia's business community and higher education leadership, VBHEC's mission is to enhance the performance of Virginia's public colleges, universities, and community colleges and their funding by state government so they can produce the greatest possible positive impact on Virginia's economy. VBHEC is committed to educating the public about higher education's crucial role in Virginia's economy, and it strives to secure the support needed for the Commonwealth's colleges, universities, and community colleges to rank among the nation's best.

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