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Opinion: Creating affordable talent pathways crucial to Virginia's economic future

By HOWARD P. KERN and PRESTON WHITE

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Ask a businessperson what the biggest obstacle is to growing his or her enterprise, and chances are the answer will focus on talent. The inability to find qualified employees, whether for highly skilled or less skilled positions, is hurting businesses of all kinds. Worker shortages are frustrating customers, delaying needed projects and holding back our economic recovery.

The pandemic and its economic fallout are partly to blame, but our talent issues go back well before the COVID dislocations. For too long, we have failed to align educational programs and credentials effectively with the needs of employers.

Many young people invest heavily in education but emerge with degrees or credentials that are less in demand and have less income potential than others they could have pursued. Many under-employed adults remain locked in their current jobs, unable to access the additional training needed to equip them for new-economy opportunities. Meanwhile, many employers have well-paying jobs to offer but cannot find workers with the right education and skills to fill them.

There are no simple answers to these longstanding problems, but through our "Growth4VA" program we in the Virginia Business Higher Education Council have been working hard on practical solutions.

Together with partners such as GO Virginia, the Virginia Chamber of Commerce, other business groups and our higher education institutions, we are advancing a plan that will make Virginia the top state for talent and expand job and career opportunities for all Virginians.

The key is to create affordable talent pathways that give young people and adults an array of practical routes from learning to earning, with the destination being a full-time job in Virginia. It begins with close collaboration between business and education, especially in developing repeatable curricula aligned with workforce needs and in providing paid internships or other work-based learning opportunities as a standard part of college curricula.

Paid internships, apprenticeships and other applied-learning programs with Virginia employers produce a triple benefit: making students more work-ready; helping them pay for college; and connecting them early with Virginia employers so they are more likely to stay here after graduation.

When these core elements are tailored to specific regional economies and industry clusters, the resulting pathways can provide clearly marked opportunities for potential employees and a reliable supply of well-prepared workers for employers. This in turn will draw more talent in, fuel business growth, improve our state's attractiveness to investors, and make our economy hum.

These strategies will succeed if Virginia's leaders embrace the vision and seize today's once-in-generations opportunity to invest in it. But our government leaders cannot make it happen alone. Businesses large and small must partner with higher education institutions and other educators in each region to move these innovations forward.

There are encouraging signs this will happen.

Gov.-elect Glenn Youngkin's "Day One" plan emphasizes talent development. In recent remarks to the Virginia Chamber of Commerce, he declared, "We need a statewide vision for building

Virginia's talent supply to ensure it aligns with the current and future needs of employers, not just in Virginia as a whole, but with specific focus on regionally significant industries ... We want to give every Virginian a pathway to a good job...."

Hampton Roads legislators in both parties strongly support business-aligned talent development, and they include the incoming chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, Del. Barry Knight. An accomplished businessman himself, Knight understands the central role of talent in every successful enterprise and the importance of tying key government investments to performance.

Affordable talent pathways are vital for the economic future of our region and state. They can provide opportunity and uplift for everyone, regardless of their circumstances and career interests.

Now is the time to move these innovations and investments forward so Virginia can win the all-important competition for talent.

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