

Written Testimony of
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Pursuant to a Hearing on
“The Community College Pipeline to Small Businesses”
Submitted to
The Subcommittee on Innovation, Entrepreneurship, and Workforce Development
Committee on Small Business
United States House of Representatives
November 4, 2021

Good morning. I am Anne M. Kress, President of Northern Virginia Community College, and I would like to thank Committee Chairwoman Velazquez, Subcommittee Chairman Crow, Subcommittee Ranking Member Kim, and all members of the House Committee on Small Business and the Subcommittee on Innovation, Entrepreneurship, and Workforce Development for this opportunity to address the significance of the community college workforce pipeline to small businesses. I am grateful that the Committee and Subcommittee have recognized the powerful role that community colleges play in skilling, reskilling, and upskilling America’s workforce, enabling regional small businesses to grow and thrive and providing individuals with much needed on-ramps to economic and social mobility right in their own communities.

Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA) serves more than 80,000 credit and non-credit students across six campuses and multiple delivery sites—ranging from high schools to military bases—that cover four counties and five independent cities. Even before the pandemic pushed most higher education institutions to offer expanded remote courses, almost 20 percent of our college’s students were enrolled in distance education through NOVA Online. NOVA is one of the largest community colleges in the nation, the largest public higher education institution in the Commonwealth of Virginia, and home to the only stand-alone medical education campus in the Virginia Community College System (VCCS). Our impact across Virginia is unequalled: one out of every three individuals enrolled in the state’s community college system attends NOVA.

Ninety-one (91) percent of NOVA’s students come from our service district, and they reflect the diversity of our region. Over 60 percent of enrollment is comprised of students of color: in Fall 2020, 37 percent were White; 21 percent, Latinx/Hispanic; 17 percent, Asian/Pacific Islander/Native Hawaiian/American Indian; 15 percent, Black/African American; 5 percent; Two or More Races; and 5 percent Other or Unreported (NOVA Office of Institutional Research, Fact Book 2021). NOVA is designated by the US Department of Education as an Asian American Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institution (AANAPISI), and the college also enrolls a population of international students representing almost 120 different countries.

NOVA is dedicated to expanding access to higher education. Each year over 14,000 of NOVA’s students get their start even before they graduate high school: we provide college credit courses at no cost in our local high schools, increasing affordability and accelerating college degrees and certificates. As a military-friendly community college, NOVA is honored to support those who are serving and have served our country. We work with bases within the region to provide access to NOVA courses, degrees, and staff dedicated to their success; have mapped Military

Occupational Specialties (MOS) to our programs to provide veterans with advanced standing in programs; are a partner in the new Naval Community College, offering our Cybersecurity courses and degree; and in an innovative partnership with the U.S. Marine Corps base at Quantico, Marines are assigned duty orders to complete information technology programs at NOVA. Our college also has an active Credit for Prior Learning initiative that ensures adult learners receive credit for their non-academic experience and can move more quickly through NOVA and achieve their academic and career goals. Each of these innovative on-ramps grows the universe of students who can benefit from all that our community college has to offer, strengthening our region's talent pool.

NOVA is a comprehensive community college, offering both university transfer and career pathway programs. Our career pathway programs are directly related to the needs of our local employers; these include small, medium, and large businesses. NOVA recognizes the significant role that small businesses, in particular, play in our region. According to the Economic Development Authority serving our largest county, Fairfax, over 90 percent of the Fairfax businesses are small employers; the US Small Business Administration (2017) reports that this data point holds true across Virginia. To ensure that the voices of these small businesses are included in the development and review of NOVA's career pathway programs, we make an intentional effort to invite them to serve on the Program Advisory Councils that provide input into all career pathway programs. More than 50 percent of our Program Advisory Council members represent Northern Virginia's small businesses, and their active engagement ensures that NOVA understands their workforce needs and can graduate workforce-ready employees.

Over the past five years, NOVA has graduated an annual average of 6,400 students in career pathway applied associate degrees and an average of 1,300 students in career pathway credit certificates (NOVA Fact Book, 2021). The majority of these students graduated in information technology, health care, and business fields—all directly related to the needs of Northern Virginia employers. But it is the diversity of career pathways represented by these almost 8,000 graduates that speaks to the important partnership between our community's college and our community's small businesses: from HVAC to Horticulture, from Cybersecurity to Contract Management—these programs are demand-driven and reflect the vibrant, vital, and varied businesses across our region.

This year, students seeking these degree and certificate career pathways got an important boost from the Commonwealth of Virginia, a new workforce scholarship program: Get Skilled, Get a Job, and Get Ahead (G3). Students at 400 percent of poverty or below who are enrolled in programs directly connected to regional workforce needs receive last dollar tuition scholarships, and students at the lowest income levels are eligible for additional funding for basic needs to support their retention and completion. The immediate impact of the G3 program in its first year has been substantial. At NOVA, over 5,500 students enrolled in G3 eligible programs in Fall 2021, and in just one semester, our college has already allocated more than three-quarters of the \$4.2M available for G3 funding for this entire academic year. At a time when labor shortages are the topic of the day in every economic development conversation, Virginia's investment in preparing the workforce for regional employers, including small businesses, is certain to yield significant returns for the Commonwealth and the students who are moving into these high-demand fields.

Virginia has also made a parallel investment in non-credit programs that lead to in-demand, industry-recognized credentials: Fast Forward. As the name suggests, Fast Forward programs are short, with most running six to 12 weeks. By design and requirement, all are linked to regional business demands. For example, offerings at NOVA are largely focused on information technology and health care, reflecting the local labor market. In Fast Forward, students are required to pay only one-third of the total cost of the program, and they may qualify for non-credit financial aid through the state (including G3), training vouchers, or employer tuition reimbursement to cover these costs. The remaining two-thirds of tuition in the program is performance-based, incentivizing student completion. The wage gains for completers are significant. An Old Dominion University study of over 4,800 individuals earning credentials through Fast Forward found a 24 percent average increase in wages overall and an even greater return, 28 percent, for those in the lowest income zip codes (“Strong Wage Gains from Short-Term Credentials: Employment Outcomes from Virginia, Louisiana, and Colorado,” Chris R. Glass, December 2019).

The combination of short-term timelines and real wage returns has made Fast Forward a popular on-ramp to workforce readiness for students, especially as we come out of the pandemic and into economic recovery. Enrollment in NOVA’s Fast Forward offerings has grown by over 55 percent from 2020 to 2021 (VCCS Weekly Fast Forward Report, 11/1/2021), with enrollment by Latinx/Hispanic students in these programs increasing by 80 percent over that time, and enrollment by Black/African American students growing by a remarkable 233 percent in this same period (NOVA Office of Institutional Research, 9/16/2021). It is striking that the Northern Virginia populations disproportionately most impacted, personally and professionally, by the pandemic are finding access to new futures through Fast Forward, underscoring the importance and benefit of short-term programs that can demonstrate real wage gains. And, because of the state requirement that all Fast Forward programs be directly linked to local labor market needs, this enrollment growth in short-term credentials provides an accelerated pulse of in-demand workers into the regional talent pool for small businesses.

During the pandemic, at the height of worker dislocation, three local governments in NOVA’s service district—Manassas Park, Manassas City, and Prince William County—turned to our college and to the Fast Forward program to reskill and upskill the workforce. They allocated some of their federal stimulus funding to underwrite the students’ first third of Fast Forward tuition costs in a home-grown program called ELEVATE. Virginia launched a similar statewide effort with a portion of its stimulus funds, Re-Employing Virginians (REV), that supported dislocated workers enrolling in career programs at community colleges. Time and time again, when the need arises for a skilled and reskilled local workforce, community colleges respond. Like NOVA, community colleges across the state and the nation are prepared to partner on workforce solutions that advance regional economies and real families.

Additional examples of such innovative collaborations impacting students at NOVA highlight the importance of finding new sources of support to further strengthen the likelihood of career pathway completion and entry into the workforce. A foundation supported by Virginia businesses, VA Ready, now provides Fast Forward graduates who complete their industry-recognized credentials with a \$1,000 bonus, and Bank of America’s \$1M grant to NOVA is

supporting students of color in attaining career credentials in high-demand fields. Our college has also launched the Achieve Career Excellence (ACE) program. In ACE, NOVA pays the certification exam costs for students in information technology programs, ensuring that these graduates are truly workforce-ready on day one. ACE grew out of our close collaboration with regional employers, including small businesses. Recognizing that many NOVA graduates simply did not have the resources required to sit for the certification exams and many businesses could not afford to provide them, NOVA allocated funds to ensure equity in opportunity for the increasingly diverse population in these programs.

Such local and state programs and public/private partnerships offer models for ways in which new thinking about financial supports for community college students, who are almost always local residents with an incentive to stay local and work local, can strengthen the workforce pipeline for small businesses. The results are tangible: in just the past 12 months, NOVA has connected almost 600 small businesses to our students and graduates through our job and internship boards and career fairs. As federal discussions about possible financial aid changes, such as providing Pell-eligibility for short-term workforce programs, Virginia and so many other states are making investments in demand-driven workforce programs and career pathways students today, spurring post-pandemic economic recovery and supporting inclusive and equitable economic futures. Federal investment in workforce programs and short-term training connected to sustaining wage employment, and federal financial aid for the students who need both has been and will continue to be critical to supporting small businesses.

The students who enroll in workforce programs are seeking fulfilling and sustaining careers. So many truly cannot afford to give up their paychecks to jump full-time into a course of study that might last months or years. So, one key to creating inclusive economic pathways is connecting learning and earning from day one through apprenticeships. The first of its kind information technology apprenticeship that NOVA launched just four years ago with Amazon Web Services created a framework that has been expanded across other technology employers, including AT&T and Alarm.com, and has now served over 400 apprentices. Yet small businesses may have capacity challenges in beginning or sustaining apprenticeship programs, so earlier this year, NOVA joined the new Greater Washington Apprentice Network, which has local small businesses thinking anew about the opportunities this “earn and learn” approach provides. Modeled after the Chicago Apprentice Network, it brings together employers and educational institutions, leveraging best practices, providing support services, and other resources—including the apprenticeship frameworks and expertise found at NOVA. Our active engagement in the Greater Washington Apprentice Network is yet another way that our college supports and expands the workforce pipeline, creating a new on-ramp for sourcing local talent at a time when it is in great demand.

Taking a new approach to hiring will be critical for small businesses. NOVA recently collaborated with the Northern Virginia Chamber of Commerce on its inaugural Workforce Index (2021). As part of our service to the community, NOVA provides valuable and detailed web-based labor market data and interactive reports at no cost to regional economic development agencies, industry organizations, and small businesses. With the Workforce Index, our college conducted the labor market research that informed this report, and 86 percent of the responding businesses had fewer than 500 employees. Over a third of respondents reported a shortage of

candidates with the required education or experience, even as almost two-thirds anticipated further employment growth. This is one reason why NOVA just launched a community college first: a Business Engagement Center (<https://www.nvcc.edu/bec/index.html>) that provides a front door to a one-stop-shop for local employers, including small businesses. It offers local employers the chance to be first in line to interview NOVA career pathway graduates and find interns and apprentices—and represents yet another way that community colleges like ours support the businesses at the heart of our regional economies.

This powerful relationship—between community colleges and local employers—has also been at the heart of my testimony today. When community colleges work closely, effectively, and successfully with the small businesses that comprise the majority of local employers, lives are changed for the better and futures are brighter. NOVA and our remarkable faculty and staff are dedicated to the important work of skilling, reskilling, and upskilling our students and advancing Northern Virginia’s businesses with innovative, flexible, and responsive workforce programs, services, and supports. These on-ramps to inclusive and equitable economic and social mobility have always been critical, but post-pandemic, they are, quite simply, essential if the recovery is to reach those with the greatest need and connect them to the employment opportunities that are to be found in our communities’ small businesses. Once again, I thank Committee Chairwoman Velazquez, Subcommittee Chairman Crow, Subcommittee Ranking Member Kim, and all Subcommittee members for their time and their recognition of the transformational impact of community colleges.