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Applied Policy Project  
Professor Braithwaite and Professor Friedberg  
10-20-18  
Problem Statement Proposal

**Title:** Addressing Non-Completion and Labor Market Uncertainty in the Virginia Community College System

**Context:**

The Virginia Community College System (VCCS) has the opportunity to be an enormous driver of economic health in Virginia. Each year, they enroll about 100,000 full-time students, and a total of 240,000 students take at least one credit through their system (“Virginia’s Community Colleges,” 2018). Further, with 90,000 high school students graduating from Virginia annually, consistently connecting more of these students to training and higher education could at least partially address Virginia’s localized worker shortages (“Supply and Demand for Virginia in September, 2018,” 2018).

Unfortunately, much of this potential is as-yet unrealized. Three out of four Associate’s degree-seeking individuals in the Virginia Community College System (VCCS) will fail to earn a degree within three years of enrollment, with significant heterogeneity by program and campus. Of those who do graduate with a degree, there is additional heterogeneity in workforce outcomes - and outcomes data available to the public for decision-making are sparse at best (“College Scorecard Data,” 2018). These facts combined may shed light on why a full third of graduating high school seniors in Virginia choose not to attend any form of higher education after graduation (“College-Going Rates of High School Graduates,” 2016).

**Problem Statement:**

Current and prospective students of VCCS are subjected to deep uncertainty about their outcomes after enrolling - both in terms of graduation and employment afterwards - resulting in potentially major inefficiencies with regards to student persistence, college financing, student-program match, and graduate-job match.

**Personal Interest Statement:**

VCCS has already proven to be a phenomenal research partner in their prior work with my advisor, Ben Castleman. They are forthcoming with collaboration, open in sharing goals, data, and analyses, and have expressed strong interest in advancing their evidence-based policy approach.

All that said, this APP with VCCS presents an excellent nexus of my primary interests: (1) education, (2) labor markets, and (3) educational and economic equity.

To speak to the first and third interests, I was previously a public school teacher and spent a significant amount of time working with hopeful first-generation college students from rural Maine. I’ve seen first-hand how transformative post-secondary education can be for students of all walks of life, as well as the numerous barriers that students face along the way to attaining that post-secondary education. As I’ve learned more about the current landscape of research and what we actually know about post-secondary education, I’ve started to see how critical it is that we assist students in making informed decisions about their pursuit of advanced degrees. Otherwise, students risk increased odds of dropping out, financial instability due to loans, and just general emotional

hardship. I am truly excited to be able to assist students in my new home of Virginia with this difficult process through working with VCCS.

To speak to the second interest, my main research interest within education policy is examining teacher labor markets. Working with VCCS, though not teacher-centric, will give me additional experience and perspective in understanding how these markets work. Especially given the complex interplay between higher education and labor markets, learning about any segment of this broad field can only be useful context going forward in my research.

### **Bibliography:**

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