



Virginia's Community Colleges and the Changing Higher Education Landscape

Study resolution

- Directs staff to review how well the Virginia Community College System (VCCS) is adjusting to the changing higher education landscape:
 - use of virtual instruction;
 - student attainment of the skills and credentials to meet the state's workforce needs;
 - opportunities for high school students to gain post-secondary credentials;
 - how other states are adjusting to the changing landscape; and
 - ways to gain operational efficiencies.

Commission resolution (November 7, 2024)

Primary research activities

- Obtained and analyzed data on
 - college and program enrollment;
 - prevalence of online learning and student success;
 - career and technical education (CTE) program participation, completion, and wages;
 - dual enrollment participation and credential attainment; and
 - revenues and spending.
- Site visits to community colleges
- Interviews with VCCS staff, community college staff, and K-12 school division staff

In brief

Academic transfer student enrollment is declining at VCCS colleges, and dual enrollment and career and technical education (CTE) student enrollment is increasing.

Proportion of students taking courses online has increased substantially. Students taking asynchronous online courses tend to be less successful, but the difference is not substantial.

Enrollment in CTE programs is growing. The state's shorter-term CTE credential program—FastForward—is well-designed, but success in meeting wage goals is mixed.

In brief (continued)

About one-third of recent high school graduates participated in dual enrollment courses; very few obtained a credential. Effective CCRV implementation will take additional effort and realistic planning.

Changing landscape warrants at least considering a more regionalized approach to improve efficiency.

In this presentation

Virginia's community colleges

Online learning

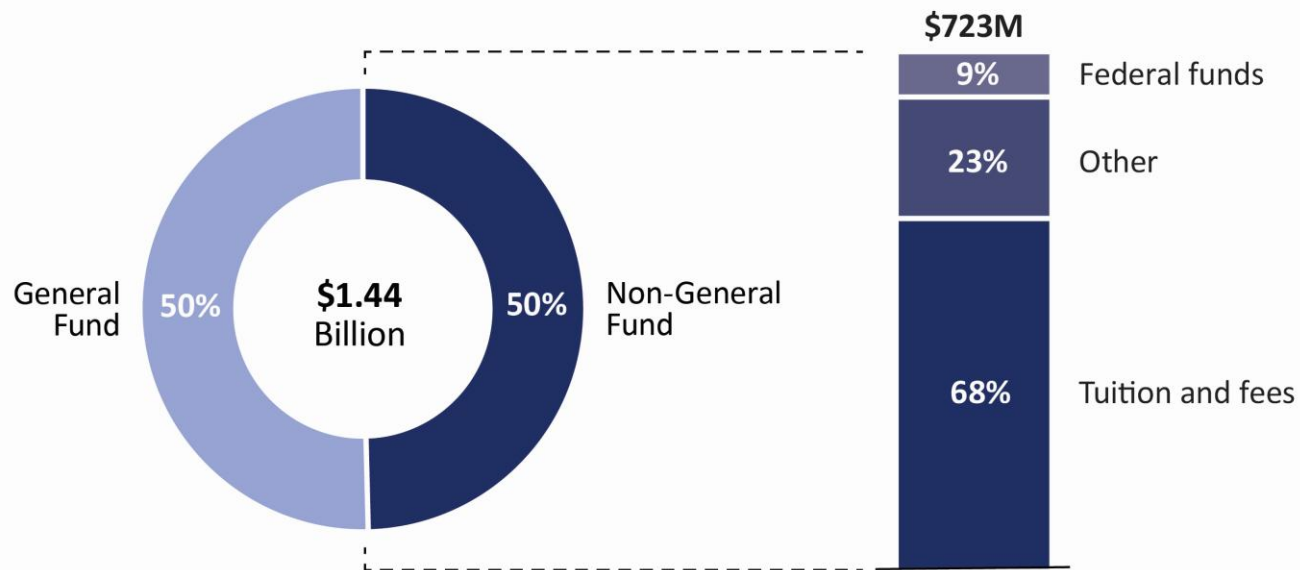
Career and technical education

Dual enrollment

Revenue and efficiency

VCCS is a “system” that is 50% general funded

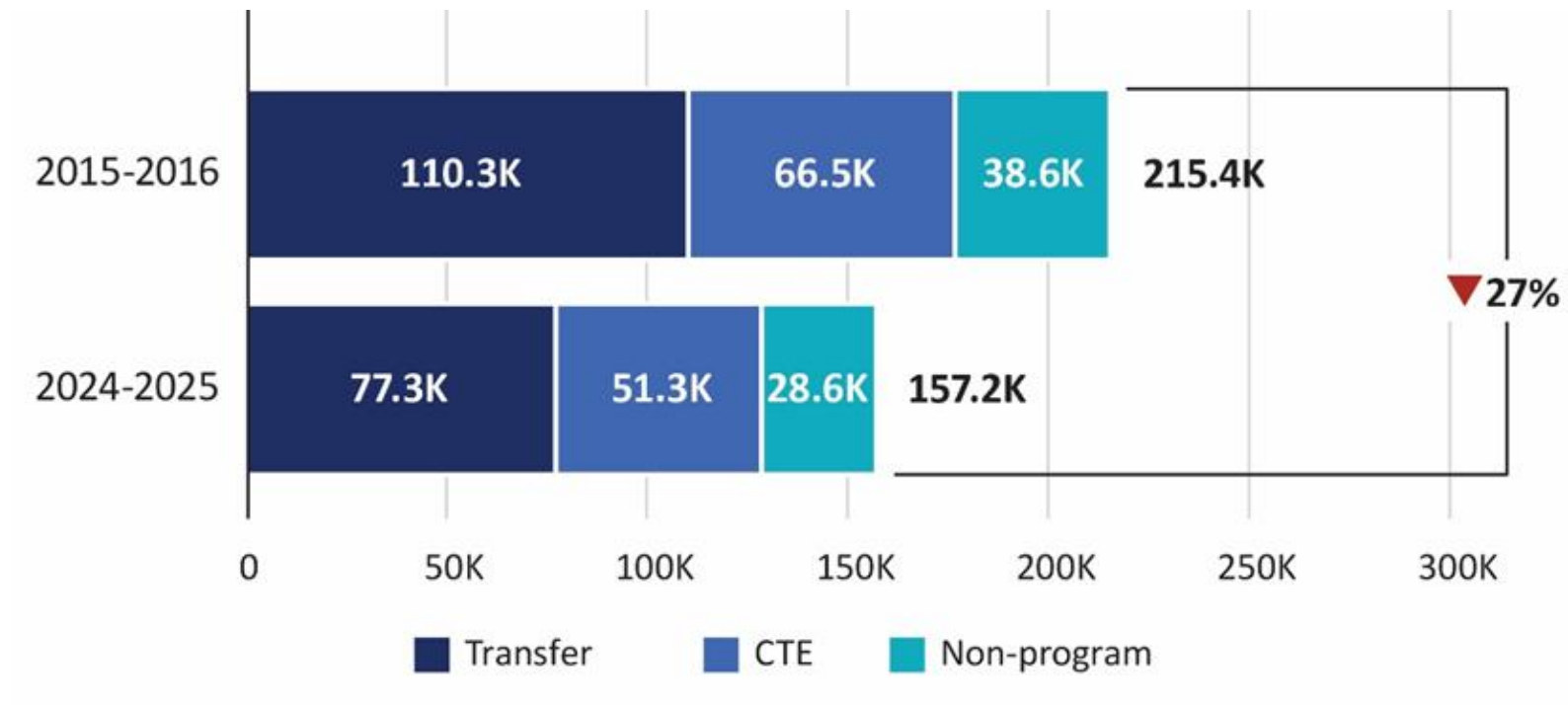
- VCCS includes a state board, system office, and 23 individual community colleges
- VCCS was appropriated \$1.44 billion in FY26, half of which was General Fund



Colleges offer different types of credit and non-credit programs

- Academic transfer
 - College-level credit courses and degrees that can be applied to a baccalaureate degree at a four-year institution
 - Associate degrees
- Career and Technical Education (CTE)
 - Train or retrain workers for success in the workforce
 - Credit - applied associate, diploma, certificate, career studies certificate
 - Non-credit – FastForward

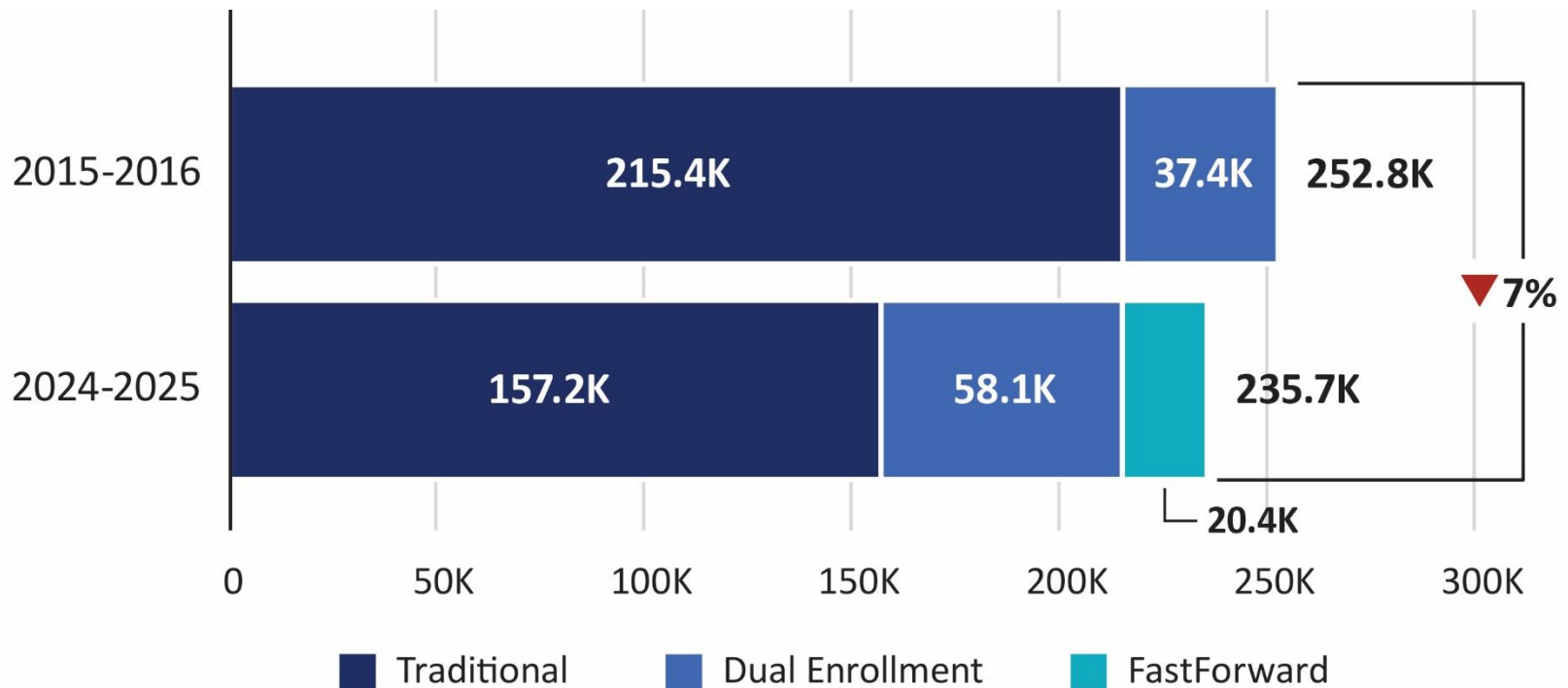
Traditional types of VCCS student enrollment have declined



SOURCE: JLARC staff analysis of VCCS annual headcount enrollment data, 2015–16 and 2024–25.

NOTE: Enrollment represents total headcount, which includes full-time and part-time students.

VCCS enrollment overall has declined, even with dual enrollment and FastForward growth



SOURCE: JLARC staff analysis of VCCS annual headcount enrollment data, 2015-16 and 2024-25.

NOTE: Enrollment represents total headcount, which includes full-time and part-time students.

Changing higher education landscape is affecting community colleges

- Enrollment decline over the last decade, but stabilization and recent increase at nearly all colleges
- Strong student demand for online education
- Skepticism about the value of traditional academic courses and four-year degrees
- Growing interest in technical and vocational training and credentials that directly translate to a job
- Growing interest in college-level coursework among some high school students

In this presentation

Virginia's community colleges

Online learning

Career and technical education

Dual enrollment

Revenue and efficiency

VCCS colleges typically offer courses in several different formats

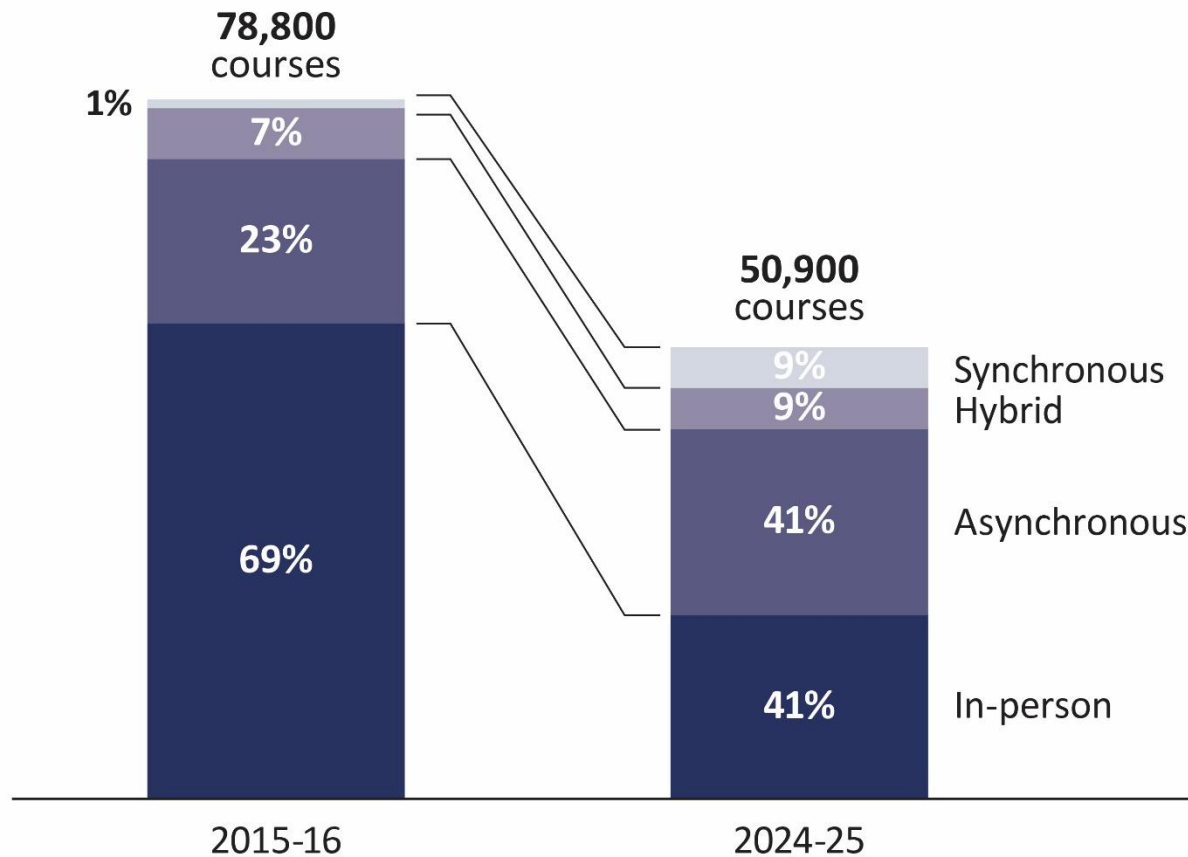
- Asynchronous online: completed on student's schedule and delivered online via LMS with similar requirements as other formats
- Synchronous online: live instruction with an instructor using online video conferencing software (e.g., Zoom)
- Hybrid: A combination of in-person and online instruction; at least half of instruction is online
- HyFlex: students choose to attend in-person or complete work asynchronously week to week

LMS = Learning management system, e.g., Canvas or Blackboard.

Finding

Substantial proportion of Virginia community college education now occurs online.

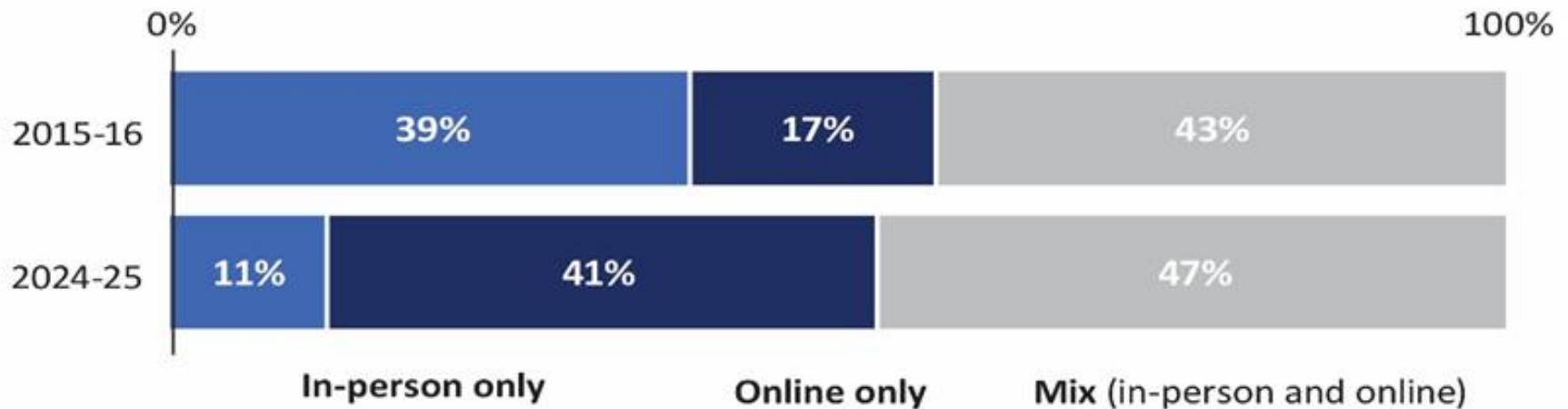
VCCS colleges teach fewer courses overall and fewer in-person courses



SOURCE: JLARC staff analysis of VCCS course and class data, 2015–16 and 2024–25.

NOTE: Excludes dual enrollment and non-credit courses.

Large proportion of students take all courses online



SOURCE: JLARC staff analysis of VCCS course, class, and student data, 2015–16 and 2024–25.

NOTE: Excludes dual enrollment and non-credit students.

Finding

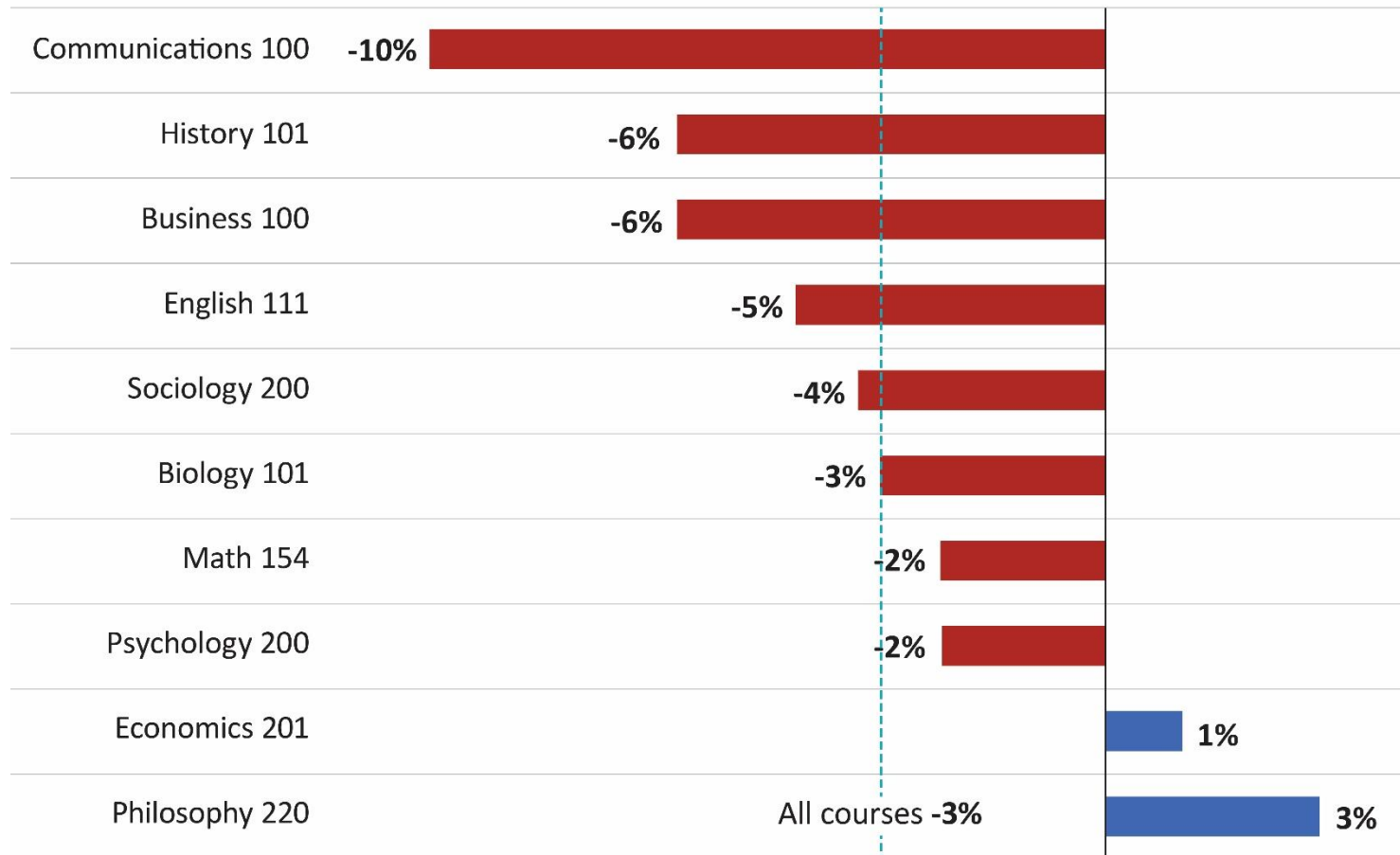
Students tend to be less successful* in asynchronous courses, but the differences are not substantial.

* “Success” was defined as a student earning a grade of A, B, or C or passing a pass/fail course. Failure was defined as earning a grade of D or F or withdrawing from a course.

Student success rates in asynchronous courses are lower, but the difference is somewhat small

- Students are less successful in asynchronous courses than other formats
 - 3 percentage points lower than in-person courses in 2024–25 (73 percent vs. 76 percent)
 - Gap in success has closed over time but remains higher for some courses
- Differences in success rates between the same courses in different formats should ideally be small

In some general education courses, student success rates in asynchronous courses are lower



SOURCE: JLARC staff analysis of VCCS data, 2024–25.

Students retaking courses asynchronously fare somewhat worse than in-person peers

- Students tend to fail retakes more often than those taking a course for the first time
 - 42% of asynchronous students retaking a course were unsuccessful compared with 36% of in-person peers in 2024–25
 - Failing a course retake can have negative effects on students' finances and academic progress

Implementation of key practices to facilitate student success in online courses is mixed

- Community colleges appear to be implementing some practices to ensure online courses are high quality, but colleges do not consistently:
 - require faculty teaching asynchronous courses to receive special training for asynchronous teaching, or
 - have dedicated noninstructional support staff to provide technical assistance to faculty teaching
- System office does not currently evaluate:
 - student success in asynchronous courses compared with students taking other formats, or
 - community colleges' approaches to ensure their asynchronous courses are high quality

Recommendations

VCCS should:

- require students retaking a course asynchronously online that they previously failed or withdrew from to meet with an advisor;
- periodically monitor student success in asynchronous courses compared to the same courses taught in-person, synchronously, and hybrid; and
- work with individual colleges to address the root causes of relatively lower student success in asynchronous courses and implement approaches that could improve success.

Finding

VCCS continues to increase the use of asynchronous courses and has a stated goal to increase online learning but has not determined the appropriate portion of asynchronous courses relative to other course formats.

State board should determine balance between asynchronous courses and other formats

- Shift to greater reliance on asynchronous learning has occurred to varying degrees across individual colleges
- Historically, minimal guidance about proper balance between asynchronous and other course formats
- Asynchronous courses can increase access, but compromise student success at least to some extent

Recommendation

The State Board for Community Colleges should periodically evaluate the use of asynchronous online learning, including

- determining appropriate balance between the number of asynchronous and other course formats and
- establishing policies to guide community colleges' use of various course formats to minimize less successful student outcomes in asynchronous courses.

In this presentation

Virginia's community colleges

Online learning

Career and technical education

Dual enrollment

Revenue and efficiency

Enrollment in CTE, especially FastForward, has grown

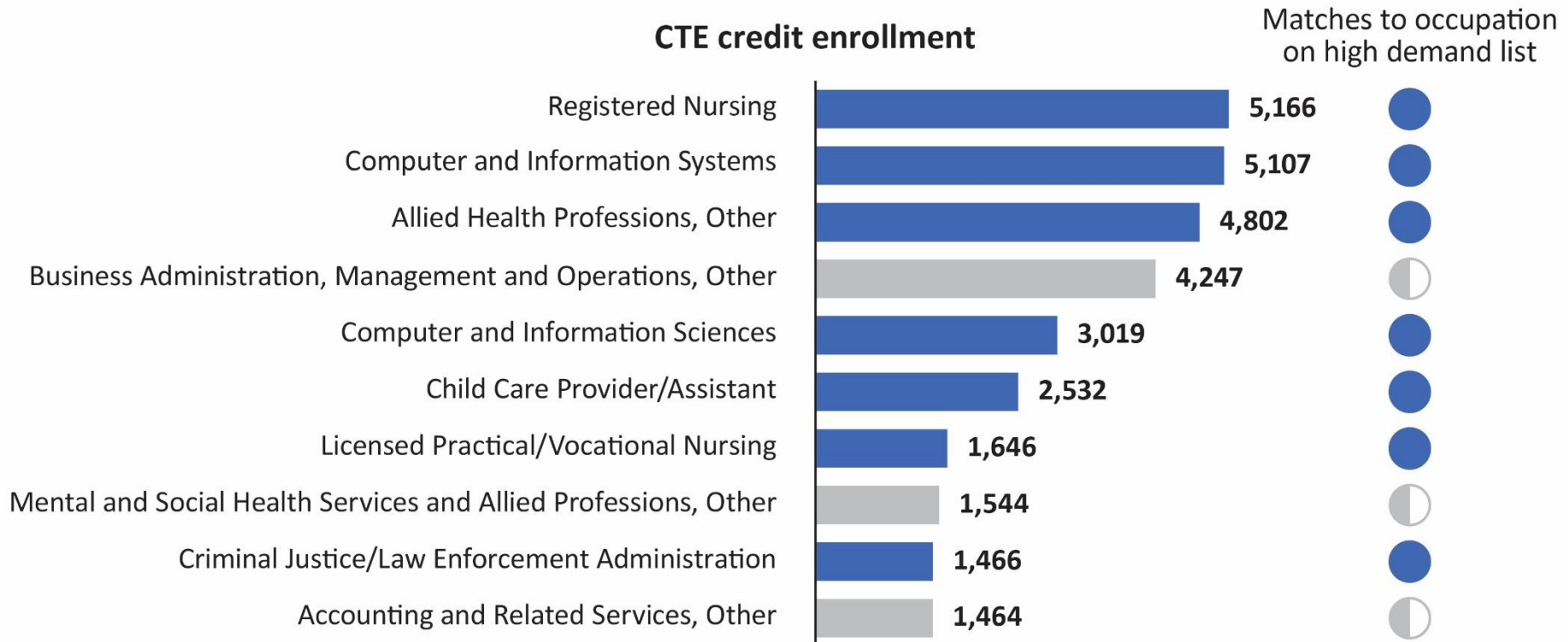
- CTE enrollment grew 8% between 2015–16 and 2024–25 (from 66,500 to 71,700), comprising:
 - Credit programs: applied associate degrees, certificates, and career studies certificates
 - Non-credit: FastForward credential programs
- Most growth is from FastForward, began enrolling students in 2016–17, enrolled 20,400 in 2024–25
 - now accounts for 27% of CTE enrollment
 - program* created to help fill shortages in middle-skill jobs

*Created as the New Economy Workforce Credential Grant Program in 2016.

Finding

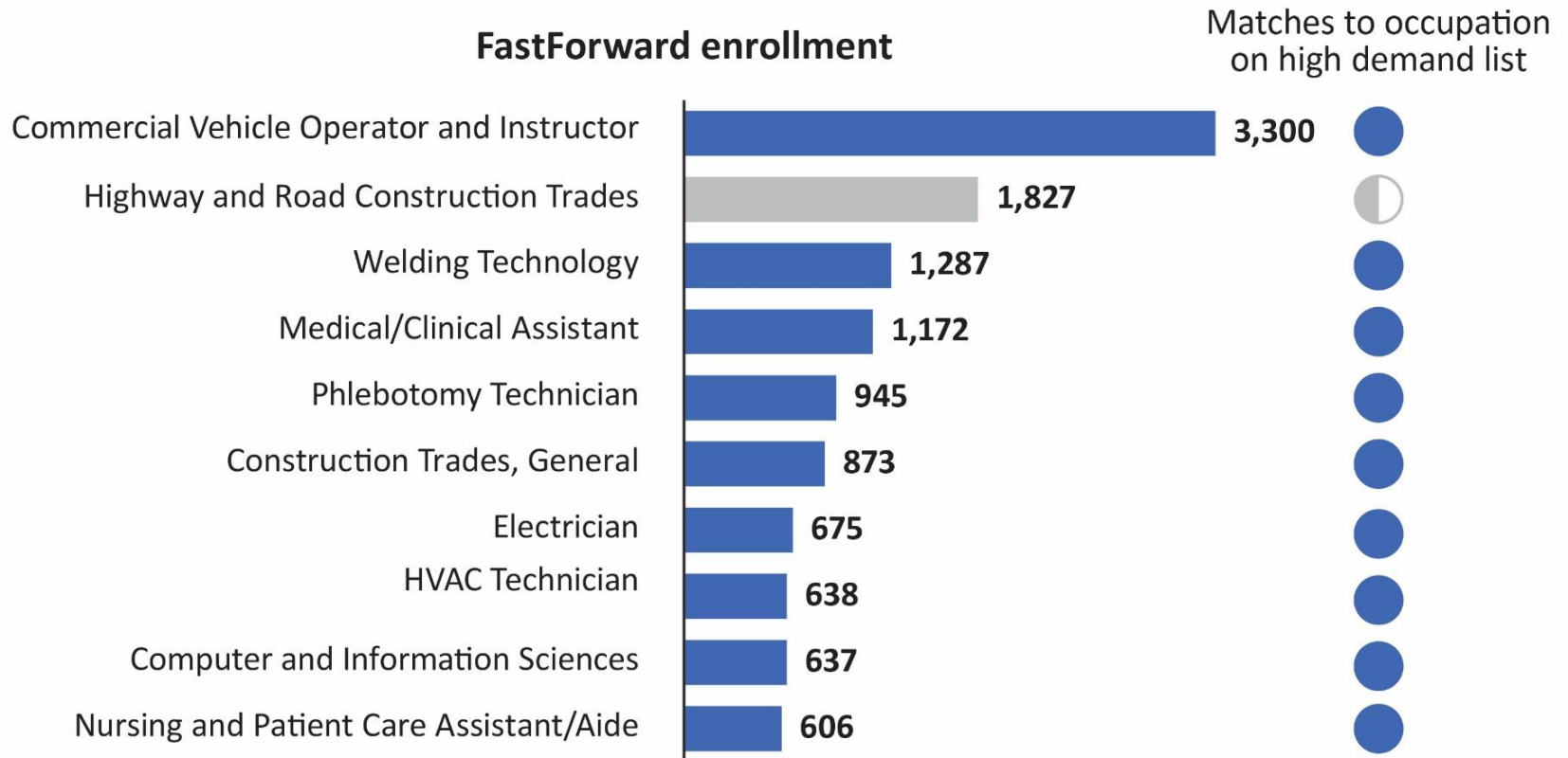
CTE programs are generally well-aligned with high demand jobs.

Most large credit CTE programs directly match high demand occupations



SOURCE: JLARC staff analysis of VCCS CTE enrollment.

Most large FastForward programs directly match high demand occupations



SOURCE: JLARC staff analysis of VCCS CTE enrollment.

Finding

FastForward programs tend to have positive outcomes, at least in the short term.

Nearly all students complete FastForward programs, and the majority obtain a credential

- 95% of students complete their FastForward program
 - Students have financial incentive* to complete program, and programs are short in duration (8–12 weeks)
- 72% of FastForward students report obtaining an industry credential, but this varies by program
 - Credential rates have increased over time
 - VCCS and community colleges are piloting strategies to increase rates

*Students pay only 1/3 of program cost if they complete the program.

FastForward completers generally experience wage gains, but not all make a living wage

- FastForward completers that earned a credential had one-time median annual wage gains of ~\$10,800
- Median wages of FastForward credential earners are \$41,000
 - Above living wage threshold for one adult (\$34,200) but below threshold for one adult and one child (\$48,800)
- Program trains workers for entry-level jobs, so there is potential for wage growth
 - Wage growth analysis limited to 18 months post completion

Finding

Demand for FastForward outpaces funding, and more information about program outcomes would be beneficial.

Opportunities exist to expand FastForward, but funding is currently constrained

- Job openings in high demand fields (182,400*) far exceed FastForward enrollment (17,400) in FY24
- FastForward growth will plateau in short term
 - FY26 appropriation for Workforce Credential Grant** (\$23.8M) is expected to run out before fiscal year end
- New federal funding may be available through “Workforce Pell”
 - not available until FY27 and would likely require changes to existing programs to meet 150-hour course requirement

*Job openings in occupations aligned with FastForward programs. **Funds most FastForward enrollment.

Additional outcome information could be collected to refine and improve FastForward

- Important to better understand whether
 - program participants work in fields for which they were trained
 - participants' wages grow over a longer time horizon
 - participants are stacking credentials
 - stacking credentials helps participants advance their careers and increase wages
 - strategies can be adopted across colleges to increase credential rates

Recommendation

VCCS should identify opportunities to improve the FastForward program by evaluating whether

- completers obtain and keep jobs in the field for which they were trained
- strategies can be adopted to achieve higher student credential rates
- credentials obtained are desired by employers
- wages increase three and five years after program completion

In this presentation

Virginia's community colleges

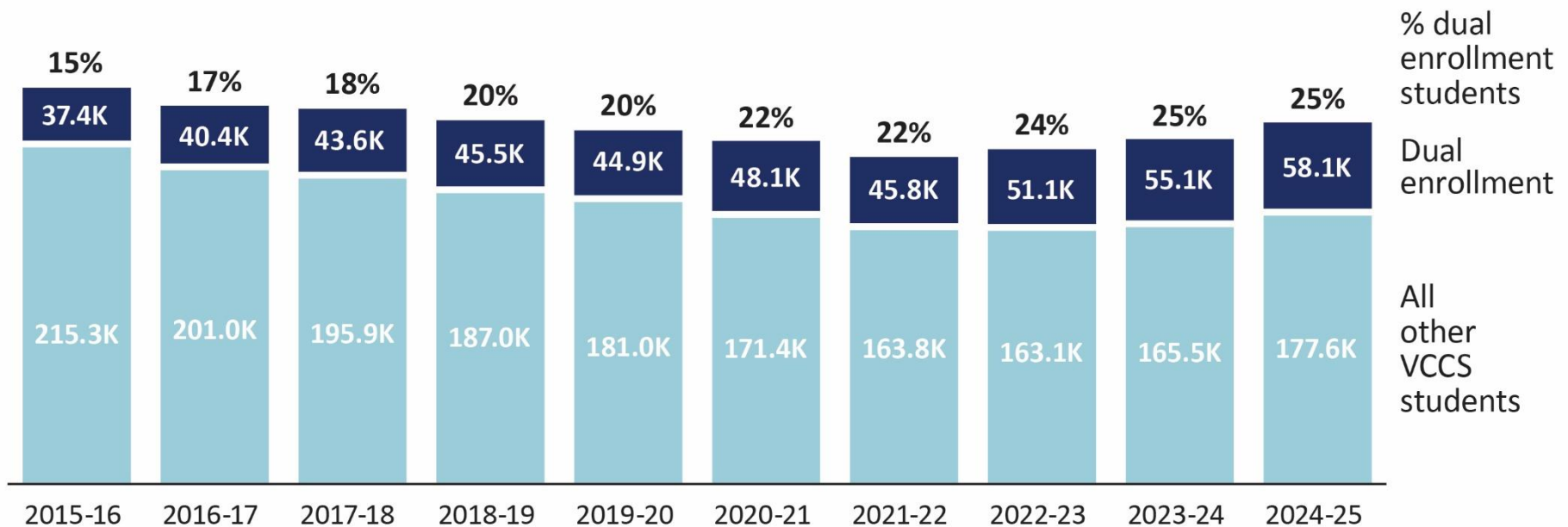
Online learning

Career and technical education

Dual enrollment

Revenue and efficiency

Dual enrollment students are growing proportion of VCCS students



SOURCE: JLARC staff analysis of VCCS annual headcount enrollment by program data, 2015–16 to 2024–25.

Dual enrollment students can earn credentials but report variety of reasons for participation

- Dual enrollment students can earn Uniform Certificate of General Studies (UCGS) & Passport credentials
 - general education curricula that transfer to public 4-year institutions and satisfy general education requirements
 - UCGS = 10 courses; Passport = 5 courses
- Students report variety of reasons for participating in dual enrollment
 - Save time and money on their four-year degree
 - Explore college coursework
 - Increase competitiveness of college applications and increase their GPAs

Finding

Two-thirds of recent high school graduates have not taken any dual enrollment courses. The remaining one-third take some dual enrollment courses, but very few have earned a VCCS credential.

Over 40% of dual enrollment graduates take one or two courses

Graduating dual enrollment students who took...	# students	% dual enrollment graduates	Est. % all high school graduates
1 to 2 courses	14,494	43%	12–15%
3 to 5 courses	9,997	30	8–11
6 to 9 courses	4,987	15	4–5
10 or more courses	4,026	12	3–4
2024 graduates who took any dual enrollment courses	33,504	100%	27–36%

SOURCE: JLARC staff analysis of VCCS student, class, course, and graduation data for high school students graduating in 2024.

Small percentage of high school graduates earn a VCCS credential

Graduating dual enrollment students who...	# students	% graduates	Est. % all high school graduates
earned any VCCS credential (includes UCGS and Passport)	3,034	9%	2–3%
earned UCGS	1,252	4	~1
earned only Passport	626	2	<1
2024 graduates who took any dual enrollment courses	33,504	--	27–36%

SOURCE: JLARC staff analysis of VCCS student, class, course, and graduation data for high school students graduating in 2024.

Finding

Future increased demand for dual enrollment is unclear, but additional effort and realistic planning is needed for effective CCRV implementation.

CCRV goal is to expand access and opportunity to participate in dual enrollment

- Enacted by 2024 General Assembly; many elements effective in fall 2025
- CCRV requires
 - schools/colleges to offer students a pathway to complete UCGS or Passport, and
 - UCGS or Passport pathway courses to be free to students
- CCRV has additional requirements around parental notification, advising, data collection, and planning for the eventual inclusion of CTE courses in the program

Courses being offered tuition-free, and additional courses will be offered online

- VCCS has directed colleges to offer UCGS/Passport courses for free, beginning fall 2025
 - This will be a change for 14 colleges that charged tuition in the previous year
- Colleges are working with school districts to ensure courses for UCGS/Passport pathway are available in all high schools
 - many pathways rely on online courses
 - close monitoring of course quality and student success will be required

Amount of future increase in dual enrollment participation is unclear

- If all eligible students enrolled in dual enrollment, participation would double
- However, some factors could limit future growth
 - Learning loss, lack of demonstrated academic performance, and other advanced course options (AP or IB)
 - Shortage of dual enrollment teachers continues to be an impediment
- Other factors could encourage future growth
 - New K–12 accountability framework
 - Additional CCRV requirements

VCCS and school divisions need to develop a realistic understanding of future demand

- Creating too much dual enrollment capacity is inefficient
 - Effort developing new courses wasted if students not interested in courses
 - Resources used to create unneeded capacity imposes unnecessary burden and workload on school divisions
- Developing realistic understanding of future demand requires
 - Better data about dual enrollment, requiring additional data collection and analysis
 - Effective coordination among VCCS, VDOE, and school divisions

Required planning to incorporate CTE is a work in progress

- CCRV required VCCS and VDOE to establish a workgroup to better incorporate CTE dual enrollment
 - Workgroup met in October 2024
 - VCCS staff describe work to incorporate CTE as ongoing
- VCCS and VDOE will need to prioritize information collection and analysis necessary to meet requirement
- Workgroup required to recommend legislative action needed to better incorporate CTE into the CCRV program

In this presentation

Virginia's community colleges

Online learning

Career and technical education

Dual enrollment

Revenue and efficiency

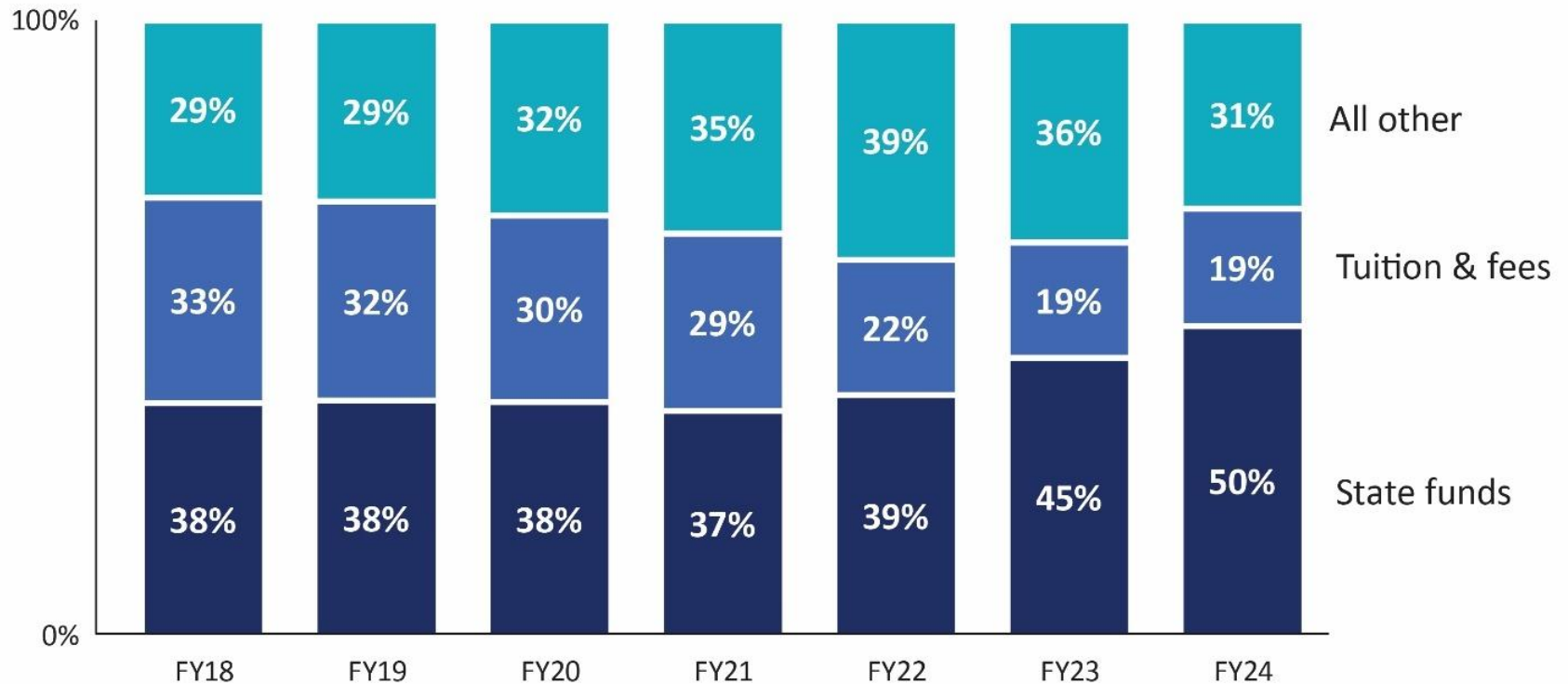
Changing landscape will necessitate attention to revenue sources and efficiency

- Lower enrollment, greater reliance on online learning, and changes in enrollment composition are having implications for the community college system
- VCCS is aware of importance of maintaining efficiency, and has instituted
 - Periodic review of individual colleges
 - Shared services center
 - Budget reductions by colleges facing revenue declines (e.g., staff layoffs)

Finding

Enrollment decline and shifts in program enrollment may necessitate future funding changes.

Lower enrollment and student affordability emphasis have increased reliance on state funds



SOURCE: JLARC staff analysis of VCCS annual financial statements, FY18–FY24.

NOTE: Includes only revenues for the 23 colleges and excludes system office.

Shift from academic transfer to CTE is affecting VCCS historical cost structure

- Historically, VCCS subsidized cost of CTE programs with excess revenue from academic transfer programs
 - VCCS generally charges students the same tuition, irrespective of their program
 - CTE programs typically cost VCCS more than academic transfer programs (\$466 credit hour versus \$242 credit hour)
- Subsidization may not be sustainable over the long term as shift away from academic transfer to CTE continues
- Other states (NC & TX) have begun to change their funding formula to address this dynamic

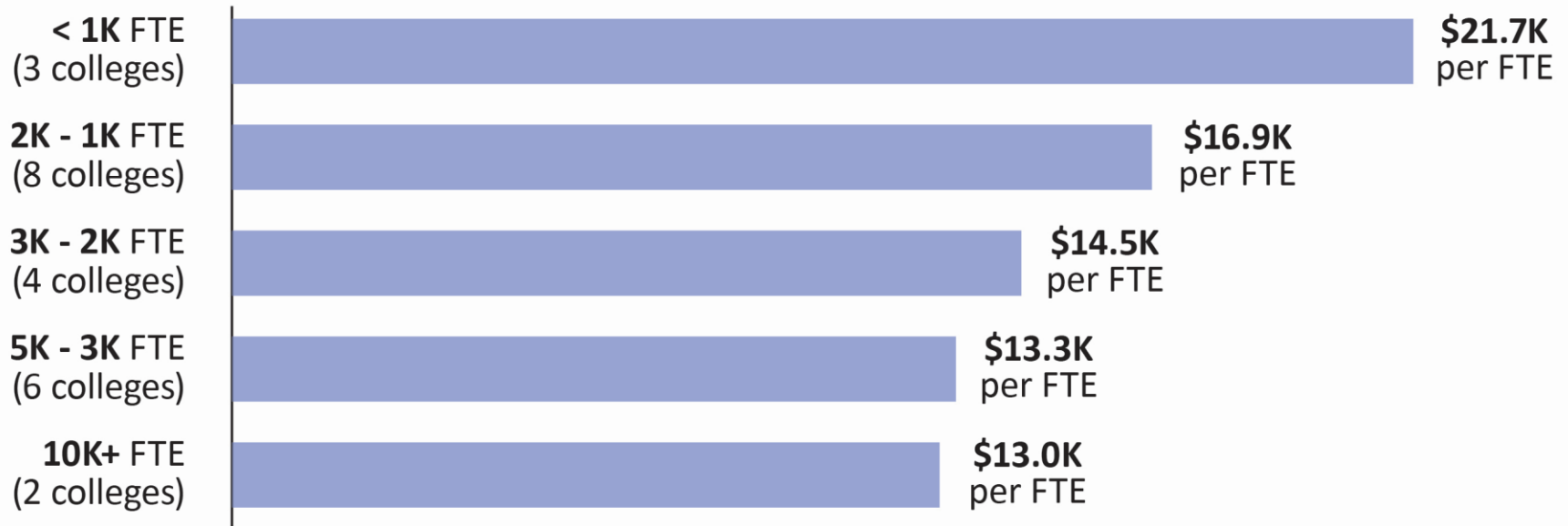
Finding

Small colleges experience a variety of efficiency challenges, and regions with more small colleges spend more per student.

Small colleges have efficiency challenges, some of which are beyond their control

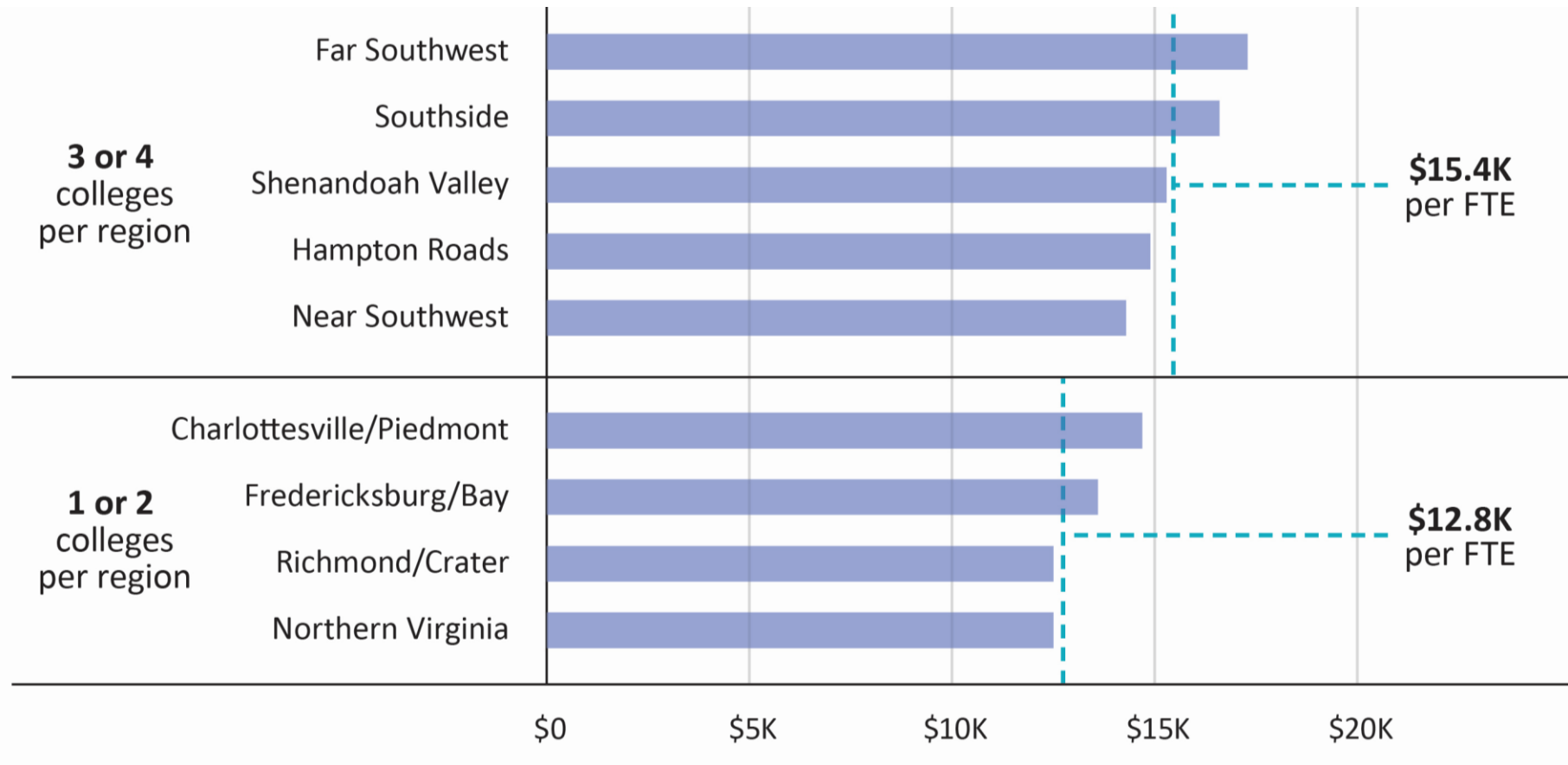
- Colleges located in rural or areas with declining population have lower enrollment
 - Colleges may be located in service areas that are losing population faster than the college is losing enrollment
- Even the smallest college has certain fixed costs (e.g., buildings, president, administrative staff, maintenance)
- Lower enrollment leads to small class sizes and more difficulty generating adequate revenue
- Enrollment decline and reliance on online learning have reduced space utilization, especially at small colleges

Small colleges spend more per student than larger colleges



SOURCE: JLARC staff analysis of VCCS student enrollment data, 2023–24; VCCS financial statements, FY24.

Regions with 3 or more colleges spend more per student



SOURCE: JLARC staff analysis of VCCS student enrollment data, 2023-24; VCCS financial statements, FY24.

Opportunities exist to improve small college efficiency through more regional approach

- Potential opportunities:
 - Regional workforce training programs
 - Regional lead colleges for academic transfer education
 - Regional advising hubs
 - Regional or systemwide administrative consolidation
- Adopting a more regional approach would not necessarily mean the elimination of the physical presence of college campuses in their current locations

Recommendation

The State Board for Community Colleges should direct VCCS staff to initiate a strategic review and propose a plan for how the system can efficiently deliver services, especially in regions with smaller colleges.

JLARC Staff for this report

Justin Brown, Senior Associate Director

Stefanie Papps, Project Leader

Kate Agnelli, Senior Legislative Analyst

Ellen Miller, Chief Economic Development and Quantitative Analyst

Mitchell Parry, Senior Associate Legislative Analyst